

1 Thessalonians

Chapter 5

The Big Picture

One of the things that apparently troubled the Thessalonian believers and made them concerned about those that had already died is that someone told them that they were already in the Day of the Lord. We understand this to be the case from a reading of 2 Thessalonians 2:2 in which Paul seems to infer that someone misrepresented him in communicating to these believers that they were already in the Day of the Lord. In other words, someone had told them that they had missed the Second Coming of Christ for the Church and were now suffering under the judgments God would bring just before the Millennial Kingdom was established. Paul want's to encourage them and comfort them by telling them that they are not in the Day of the Lord since they are children of light, not darkness. Having dealt with their fears about the Day of the Lord, Paul then encourages them to continue making progress in their spiritual life. He does this with a series of commands, one right after another, which instructs them on the basic disciplines required to live godly lifes. He then closes this letter with some personal requests for prayer.

1 *But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you.*

Paul continues his discussion about the coming of Christ for the Church and the events surrounding the end of the age by mildly chiding the Thessalonians believers. His tone in this verse is one of a teacher reminding his students of a basic truth that has been forgotten. In the case of the Thessalonians this basic truth is regarding the times and the seasons. The first of these words, "times", refers to specific times or events. The second, "seasons" refers to time in its epochal sense. In both cases, whether it is specific times, or epochs, the Thessalonian believers did not need Paul to remind them of the truths he had already taught them.

And exactly what was this truth? It was the same truth Christ told those at his ascension in Acts 1:7, "it is not for you to know the times and the seasons which the Father hath put in his own power." In other words, the specific timing of the Millennium, which is what the disciples were asking Christ at his ascension, is not for us to know. God has given us some general knowledge about these future events, but as to their specific timing he has not chosen to reveal that to us.

Therefore, Paul could not write to the Thessalonians about specific times and events, since there was nothing to write. He could, however, draw their attention to the fact that the persecutions they were experiencing were not the same as those predicted by the Old Testament prophecies regarding the Day of the Lord. Their confusion about the possibility of them being in the Day of the Lord was an easy issue to answer, as one only had to look at the character of the Day of the Lord to determine that it had not yet arrived.

2 *For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.*

Paul mentions the issue at hand in this verse, and that is the Day of the Lord. Evidently, someone had arrived in Thessalonica and taught the believers there that the Day of the Lord had already come (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Paul tries to deal with this issue in this first epistle,

but evidently doesn't put their confusion at ease since he has to write a second letter to deal with the events surrounding and comprising the Day of the Lord.

Paul's attempt in this letter to erase their confusion centers around the understanding that the Day of the Lord is an event which comes unexpectedly and suddenly upon those who say "peace and safety." When everyone thinks that things couldn't get any better, God moves in judgment swiftly, unexpectedly, and suddenly. Furthermore, it is an event which is designed to bring God's judgment on the ungodly. It is not intended for believers, but for those who ignore God's call of grace and persist in their ungodly life styles. The way in which they see the impending judgment of God is identical to that of the false prophets in the final days of the Northern and Southern kingdoms in Israel. As the armies of the Babylonians and Assyrians massed for the captivity of the southern and northern kingdoms respectively, there were many false prophets who told the people not to worry since God would protect them. Their cry of "peace and safety" was drowned out by the armies of God's justice and judgment. Even so during the end of the church age.

Perhaps much of the confusion the Thessalonian believers had regarding the Day of the Lord was due to their intense suffering at the hands of the ungodly. They may have thought that somehow they missed the rapture and were in the final time of God's judgment just prior to the establishment of the Kingdom. We cannot know this for certain, but it may have been the case that this understanding came out of Paul's teaching on Christ's Olivet discourse. In Matthew 24:9-10, Christ warns believers during the Tribulation that the time will come when they will be afflicted, killed, and hated by all men. It may have been the case that this is what the Thessalonian believers thought about their persecutions, that what they were suffering was the persecutions predicted by Christ. Since we know that Christ comes prior to the Tribulation for the church, in their mind they had completely missed the Rapture. This went contrary to their understanding of end time events as taught by Paul during his stay with them.

The Day of the Lord

The Day of the Lord is a phrase used in the Old Testament to refer to a time when God steps into history and judges men. Historically, the destruction of Babylon by the Medes and the Persians was a Day of the Lord (Isaiah 13-14). However, most of the references refer to a future time in which God moves in final and cataclysmic judgment against ungodly men just before the establishment of the Millennial kingdom (Jeremiah 46:10; Joel 1:15, 2:13; Amos 5; Malachi 4:5; Zephaniah 1:14-15; Isaiah 13-14). In the New Testament we find that the Day of the Lord encompasses not only the time of the Second Coming (Thessalonians), but also the end of the Millennium (2 Peter 3). Thus, the Day of the Lord appears to be a general term referring to any time in which God judges men, but specifically refers to the time just prior to the establishment of the Millennial kingdom. Sometimes the phrase used to describe that time is the "great and terrible Day of the Lord."

3 *For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.*

What is it that characterizes the people upon whom the Day of the Lord comes? It is those who fail to discern the gathering clouds of God's judgment and who think that everything will still work out. In Revelation five we are introduced to the first seal, a rider on a white horse who brings prosperity and peace. Evidently, the first half of the Tribulation will be a time of great peace and prosperity. Everyone will think that the utopia man has sought for all throughout history is now his. In this time of great peace, God suddenly moves in judgment catching all the unbelievers in his nets of judgment.

The metaphor used by Paul to describe this suddenness of judgement is that of birth pangs. Christ used this metaphor as well in Matthew 24-25 when he described the sign of his coming and the end of the age. Just as birth pangs come suddenly, unexpectedly, and increase in intensity until the birth of the child, so God's judgment will come suddenly, unexpectedly, and increase in severity until the establishment of the Kingdom.

The Birth Pangs of the Day of the Lord

A comparison of Matthew 24 with the first five seals of Revelation gives us a picture of the birth pangs of the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord.

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| Birth Pang 1 | Worldwide deception (Matthew 24:5) compared to the bloodless conqueror of the first seal in Revelation 6:2. |
| Birth Pang 2 | Wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:6-7) compared to the red horse of the second seal in Revelation 6:3-4. |
| Birth Pang 3 | Worldwide famine and pestilence (Matthew 24:7-8) compared to the third and fourth seals in Revelation 6:5-8. |
| Birth Pang 4 | Worldwide persecution (Matthew 24:9) compared to the fifth seal in Revelation 6:9-11. |
| Birth Pang 5 | Worldwide preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 24:14). |

One final and important point needs to be made about the Day of the Lord, and that is it is a time of God's judgment on unbelievers. Although there may be believers alive during that time, it is not God's intent to judge them, but rather it is his intent to judge the ungodly. The time of the Tribulation is a time when God's wrath is poured out on an ungodly, Christ-rejecting world. No one will escape.

Will The Church Enter The Day of the Lord?

Some deny that the Day of the Lord and the Rapture are two separate events. Amillennialists would argue that the church age ends with the coming of Christ to establish the eternal state. Others believe that Christ comes back for his Church, and establishes his Kingdom at the same time. In both cases, the Church is seen to be alive at the moment Christ returns to establish either the Kingdom or the Eternal State. Is this the case? Will the Church still be here during the Day of the Lord? Consider the following points:

We are told to look for Christ (Philippians 3:20-21), not the Antichrist. If the Church were to be left here during the Day of the Lord, then we would be looking first for the Antichrist, since Christ will not come for us till after the Antichrist has performed his evil.

Where are we in Revelation 4-18? In this section of Scripture which describes the events immediately prior to, and including, the Day of the Lord there is no mention of the Church!

Paul's instructions regarding the Day of the Lord center around the pronouns "they" and "them", not "we" and "us." In fact, a cursory reading of this chapter will lead one to believe that Paul is describing the Day of the Lord as dealing with the ungodly, not the righteous.

Why does Paul draw the contrast between day people and night people? The Day of the Lord is a time when God visits judgment on those of the night, not those of the day. Since we are of the day, we will not be partakers of God's judgment during the Day of the Lord.

The entire reason Paul is writing these instructions to the Thessalonians is that they thought they were in the Day of the Lord. Paul's arguments surrounding the impossibility of this assumes the fact that the Day of the Lord is not a period of time in which the believer will enter.

The very fact that Paul describes the Day of the Lord after describing the Rapture should show conclusively that the Church is not part of the Day of the Lord. The event we are looking for is the Rapture, not the Day of the Lord.

4 *But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.*

Unlike those who will be taken by surprise, the Thessalonian believers were told that that day would not overtake them like a thief. Why? Because they are not in darkness. Unlike the unbelievers who live in both spiritual and moral darkness, the believer is a creature of the light. We have understanding as to God's plan in the future, and so events that are predicted by the Scriptures should not overtake us suddenly and unexpectedly. We have prior warning.

The nature of the Day of the Lord is that of judgment. It is a time when God judges the ungodly for their rejection of the truth. The believer is not of that same category since we have accepted God's truth. God's judgment is not for us since we have already been judged at the cross.

5 *Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.*

The reason the Day of the Lord will not overtake us who are believers is because we are not of those for whom that day is prepared. Unlike the person of the night, we are children of light. This is not merely some superficial distinction, but a distinction that goes to the very root of our being. Paul outlines this difference by describing the nature, behavior, and destiny of each.

First, we find the difference in nature between a night and day person in this verse. The person who is of the day is a child of light. Those who are not of the day, are children of the night and darkness. Throughout the New Testament, the phrases "light" and "dark" are often used to distinguish between spiritual life or intellectual awareness. Those who are of the light have spiritual understanding while those of the night are spiritually dead. Many commentators see Paul's usage of light and night in reference to the believer and unbeliever to be descriptive of their nature. Believers are, by nature, children of the light since we have spiritual understanding and life. Unbelievers, by nature, are children of the night since they lack spiritual understanding and are dead in trespasses and sin. Since the Day of the Lord is meant for those who are of the night, the believer need not fear entering that time of judgment.

Light In the New Testament

- 1. Light is a picture of the revelation of God's truth to those in darkness - Matthew 4:16; Luke 2:32; John 12:46; John 12:35-36; 1 Peter 2:9.**
- 2. Light is a description of the character of a Kingdom Citizen - Matthew 5:14-16; Romans 13:12.**

3. **Light is a general description of a believer who is called a “child of the light” - Luke 16:8; John 12:36; 1 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 5:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; Colossians 1:12;**
4. **Light was used as a title for Christ - John 1:4-9; John 8:12; John 9:5.**
5. **Light is a picture of spiritual truth which exposes evil - John 3:19-21; 1 John 1:5-7; 2:8-10.**
6. **Light is used to refer to the effect the Gospel has on the unbeliever - 2 Corinthians 4:4-6; Ephesians 5:14.**
7. **The Lamb will be the light of the New Jerusalem - Revelation 22:5; 21:23.**

Darkness in the New Testament

1. **Darkness describes the general spiritual state of the unbeliever - Matthew 4:16; Luke 1:79; John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35.**
2. **Darkness is used to describe the eternal state of the lost - Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:4; 2:17; Jude 1:6; 1:13.**
3. **Darkness is used as a reference to Satan’s kingdom - Acts 16:18; Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 1:13.**
4. **Darkness is used to refer to the character of the unbeliever - Romans 13:12; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 5:8-11.**
5. **Darkness is used to refer to spiritual ignorance and unbelief- 1 Thessalonians 5:4; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 1:5-6; 2:9-11.**

6 *Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.*

7 *For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night.*

8 *But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation.*

Not only is there a difference in nature between children of the day and children of the night, but there is a difference in behavior as well. Paul describes this difference in nature by using the metaphor of sleep. Children of the night are asleep in the sense that they are unaware of what God is doing around them. They will enter the day of judgment totally unaware that God is moving in judgment against their sin. On the other hand, children of the day are alert and sober. We know what is going on around us as God has given us advance information regarding his plan and purposes. When judgment comes, the child of the light is not unprepared.

In verse seven Paul further describes the nature of child of the night as being that of sleep and drunkenness. Those who are unbelievers are insensitive to the seriousness of their sin. They do not see themselves as God sees them, and are therefore asleep to his divine revelation. Their very being and nature defines them as children of the night.

Unfortunately, although believers are described as children of the light and children of the day, they can act as someone who is a child of the night. Our nature may not be as one who is a child of the night, but our actions are a different story. This is the struggle of the believer. We

are children of the light who are constantly pulled to act as children of the night. Paul describes this struggle very well in Romans 7 where he writes in verses 18-20, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." Paul struggled as a believer to live as a child of the light.

Some believers think that because they have such a struggle they must not be truly saved. However, if we read Romans chapter seven right, the very existence of the struggle does more to prove our salvation than it does to disprove it. The person who is of the night is described in these verses by Paul as one who is asleep, that is, one who is insensitive to their condition. The believer is not spiritually asleep, but spiritually awake. They realize what sin is, and struggle to deal with it in their lives. Only the believer struggles with sin.

As children of the day what are we to do? We are to put on the breastplate of faith and love, and our helmet of the hope of salvation. Paul uses these same articles of armor in Ephesians six to speak of our spiritual warfare. Here they are used in the sense of our defense and as a picture of our readiness. A soldier would be of little good if he were asleep at the moment the battle was enjoined. He would be of even lesser value if his armor was off and he were asleep. As believers, we cannot be afforded the luxury of falling asleep spiritually as we need to be ever prepared for our enemy who seeks those he may devour.

A further understanding of these two pieces of armor is that they provide defense against the doubts brought on by Satan and his false prophets. Those believers that do not have on a breastplate of faith and love will be susceptible to doubting their standing before God. Those that do not have on the hope of salvation will never be sure that they will make it to future glory. Without faith, hope, and love, the believer is defenseless against the fiery darts of the wicked one who desires to sap our spiritual vitality and make us spiritually ineffective.

9 *For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ,*

10 *Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.*

Thirdly, as a child of the day, we have a different destiny than that of the child of the night. The destiny of the child of the day is that someday they will obtain the full realization of the salvation that is their's in Christ. As believers we have been given a down-payment in the form of the Holy Spirit, and our natures have been changed, but we have yet to realize the redemption of our bodies and the full expression of what it means to dwell face to face with the Father. Our glorious destiny is that one day we will be in the presence of God as trophies of his grace.

The child of the night, however, has a significantly different destiny. Their destiny is that of wrath. This wrath not only includes the wrath of the Day of the Lord, but the eternal wrath of God as experienced in the Lake of Fire. God knows those that are his, and those that are not his. He will make no mistake. The fear that the Thessalonians had that maybe they would miss the rapture and experience God's judgment in the Day of the Lord is unfounded.

Why is it that we will be spared the wrath of God? It is because our Lord Jesus Christ died for us in order to eliminate God's wrath against us. Christ took the wrath deserved for us in order that we may be partakers of God's mercy and forgiveness. Furthermore, Paul makes it clear that this salvation will be obtained by the child of the light whether they are awake or asleep. This does not refer to spiritual wakefulness or sleepiness as it does in the preceding few verses, but to physical death and life. The child of the light who falls asleep, that is, dies

prior to Christ's coming will not miss anything. Those of us who may be awake, that is alive, will not miss anything either. God knows those that are his, and he will not make any mistakes when it comes to claiming his own.

11 *Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.*

Paul wraps up his argument regarding the fact that the children of the light will miss the coming Day of the Lord by encouraging them to comfort one another. If the child of the light were to go through the Day of the Lord, it would be tough to be comforted. What would be so comforting about facing the wrath of God poured out on the world?

Interestingly, this is exactly what Paul tells the Thessalonians to do about those who were concerned about their loved ones who had died. In verse eighteen of chapter four Paul tells the Thessalonians to comfort one another with the fact that those who died will not miss the rapture nor the promise of future glory and salvation. Now Paul tells the Thessalonians to comfort those that are alive since they will not face the judgment of the Day of the Lord. Whether the believer lives or dies, they will not face the Day of the Lord nor will they miss the full realization of their salvation when Christ comes back for his own.

12 *And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you;*

13 *And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves.*

As Paul nears the end of his letter to the Thessalonians, he turns to the issue of how they are to relate to one another in the church. In these two verses he begins with the responsibility of the people towards those in spiritual leadership over them, and in the next verse with the leadership's responsibility towards the flock, and then with general commands towards all in the church whether they be in leadership or not.

The first responsibility Paul outlines is that the Thessalonian believers know who those in leadership are. Spiritual leadership in the church is unique in that it is not obtained by those with leadership qualities, but those with character qualities. Church leadership boils down to character. God is more interested in what a man is spiritual than what he can do organizationally. This is the exact opposite of the world who looks for leadership traits and could care less about the inner character of the potential leader.

We get a picture in verse twelve of how this leadership is recognized by the church membership, and that is because of their labor in behalf of the flock. Put another way, spiritual leadership is borne out of one's labor for God. Only after one has exhibited faithfulness in their ministry are they seen as leaders. Again, this is opposite that of the world since there a person is first made a leader, and then expected to perform the duties of leadership. God, on the other hand, expects one to be a leader before being declared a leader.

Those who are spiritual leaders are seen for their labor among the flock. Spiritual leadership is first servanthood. Christ told his disciples in Matthew 20:25-28, "*But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.*" Christ's point to the disciples is simple - those who aspire

to leadership aspire to servanthood. The higher one rises in spiritual leadership, the more people to whom that leader is called to serve.

A second trait for those in leadership is that they are over the flock “in the Lord.” In other words, God mediates his ministry to the flock through those that have been put into leadership. This has two major ramifications. First, those in leadership need to see their ministry as served out under the Lord’s watchful eye as they must give an account someday of how they fulfilled their ministry. Secondly, those who are under these leaders need to see them as servants of God, and in properly following their leadership they are in fact following Christ. One cannot claim to follow God while at the same time disregarding those placed in spiritual leadership over them.

Finally, it is the character of those in spiritual leadership to admonish the flock. This includes preaching and teaching the word, as well as pointing out sin and error. The job of the spiritual leader is a tough one, and it is made even tougher when those who have been placed into their trust by God disregard their leadership and admonition. When we follow the admonition of those in spiritual leadership over us when they teach us God’s word, we are not following them as much as we are following Christ.

What should our attitude be towards those over us? We are to esteem them very highly because of the work they do on our behalf. We live in an age where submission to those in authority is seen of as weakness. We are told to stand up for our rights and don’t let anyone tell us what to do. This has infiltrated the church to such a degree that those in spiritual leadership are targets for everyone. Instead of showing respect to those in authority, we show contempt. This is a dangerous thing to do as when we show contempt for our spiritual leaders, we are showing contempt to God who placed them over us. It is an honorable thing to show respect for those in spiritual leadership, and many of us are going to have to give an account of just how miserably we failed in this area.

The last thing Paul tells the flock to do is to be at peace among themselves. Why does he put this here? It is because the number one thing that brings sorrow to the hearts of those in spiritual leadership is division and dissention among the flock. Satan works overtime to split the body of Christ, and many of the things we fight and argue over mean nothing in light of eternity. One of the best ways we can honor those in spiritual leadership is to live peaceably among ourselves so as not to burden them with having to deal with a bunch of rebellious flock members.

14 *Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.*

15 *See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men.*

Paul now turns towards those in spiritual leadership with a list of their responsibilities towards the flock. This responsibility takes various forms depending on the person to whom ministry is directed. Although the primary duty is that of admonition, exactly how this admonition is done depends on the subject being admonished. For the purpose of illustration, Paul divides the flock into five groups, the unruly, the feebleminded, the weak, the sluggards, and the evil.

First, the leader’s responsibility towards the unruly is that of warning. The word used for unruly, *ataktos*, was used to refer to a soldier marching out of step or an apprentice that skipped classes for the day. The actions of an unruly person are characterized by defiance and rebellion.

The response of the leader towards such a one is that of warning them of God's judgment on those who refuse to obey his commandments.

Of all the groups mentioned in this verse, this is the most difficult group, and the one that is to be dealt with most harshly. Underneath the concept of unruliness is the notion that the unruly person knows what is expected, they just do not want to do it. This is not a characteristic of one who may be ignorant of that which is right and only needs direction and guidance, this is the characteristic of one who flagrantly and openly refuses to do that which they know is right. God's attitude towards such a one is a strong one - repent or I will judge you! There are those in a church who need to be very directly and strongly confronted about their sin, as they are heading for God's judgement unless they turn around.

The second group is the feeble-minded. The word used for feeble-minded is *oligopsuchous*, and is better understood as fainthearted. A fainthearted person is one who is always worried about everything. They lack faith and trust in God, and are constantly characterized by an attitude of fear. Their role model is Mr. Fearful in Pilgrim's Progress, who was always worried about missing the celestial city but who, when crossing the river, had one of the easiest crossings known to that time. In the church, the leader's responsibility towards the fearful is that comfort. The word used for comfort, *paramutheaomai*, means to care for, comfort, put at ease, or calm. Those flock members who are fainthearted need someone to calm their fears and assure them that everything will turn out right. They don't need a sermon, and they don't need harsh treatment. A good illustration would be what a parent does for their children during a severe thunderstorm in which they comfort and calm the fearful and crying child.

The third group mentioned by Paul is the weak. This group is characterized by spiritual and moral weakness. They want to do right, but somehow they keep falling into sin and compromise. Unlike the unruly, their desire is to do right, they just can't seem to make it happen. The response of leadership towards this group is that of support. When the weak person falls into sin, they need to be lifted up, and sometimes held up. Paul speaks of this group in Galatians 6 when he writes about those who "*are overtaken in a fault.*" This group is not actively seeking to sin, they just lack the spiritual maturity and strength to deal with temptation. They need to be lovingly confronted and lifted up.

A fourth group is those who never seem to get it. Paul encourages the spiritual leadership in Thessalonica to be patient towards all men. One of the great discouragements of spiritual leadership is to pour your heart and soul into ministry for years to a group of people that never seem to catch on to what is being taught. They sit through sermon after sermon on spiritual growth only to never grow. They are taught how to deal with sin only to never gain spiritual victory. What others learn in their spiritual pilgrimage in a couple of years takes these people decades. How are they to be treated? With patience. It is easy to give up on people when they don't grow as fast as we want them to grow spiritually. We can't do that. Consider Christ who put up with eleven men who always missed the points of his sermons and never caught on to his program until after his death, burial, and resurrection. What would have happened had Christ given up on Peter or James or John. What if Christ had given up on us?

The final group mentioned by Paul is the evil. There are those in the church who are just plain wicked and most likely not even saved. How are they to be treated? They need to have a firm hand not allow them to render evil for evil but rather to do good. The church is no place for personal vengeance or the one who seeks to cause another to sin. Sometimes this takes the form of church discipline, at other times expulsion. However, it is the responsibility of the leadership of the church to protect members of the flock from other members of the flock that would do them harm.

The bottom line in these two verses is that the responsibility of those in church leadership is high. In some cases they have to exhibit a firm hand in preventing evil men from corrupting the flock. At other times they need to comfort those who are overcome of fear. Sometimes they need to lift up the person who has fallen into the same sin for the umpteenth time, and other times they need to sternly warn the unruly to do that which is right.

16 *Rejoice evermore.*

Paul now closes this first letter to the Thessalonians with a series of one-liner commands centered around how they were to conduct themselves in the church. He does not present an exhaustive list, but a representative list centering around the particular situations faced by the Thessalonian church. Because of time and space limitations we will not exhaustively deal with each of these admonitions but rather look at them at a high level, a 10,000 foot perspective.

The first command is that of incessant joy. The Thessalonian believers were facing severe persecutions at the hand of their culture, and the easiest thing for them to lose in that pressure is the joy of their salvation. When we are faced with pain and difficulty, we have a tendency to lash out at those causing us pain or to begin blaming God for our trials. Paul's command here is a testimony to the fact that we can rejoice as believers in the midst of the severest persecution since we have an eternal hope. Christ spoke to the disciples of this in John 16:33 when he told the disciples, *"These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."* In spite of all the trouble the world throws at the believer, we can rejoice since our light afflictions here produce a far more eternal weight of glory in heaven.

17 *Pray without ceasing.*

One of the fundamental disciplines of the believer is that of prayer. Paul's admonition to prayer is that it be done without ceasing. Many take this to mean that we need to pray all the time, however that cannot be what Paul has in mind since if we prayed all the time there would be no time for any other activity of life. Rather than focus on the duration of prayer, I believe Paul is focusing on the atmosphere of prayer. The believer should be able to go to the throne of God at any time without needing to deal with a large list of sin in their life. At all times we need to be in the attitude of prayer so as the events of life occur around us we can quickly whisper a prayer for wisdom and guidance and be heard by God.

18 *In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

One of the fundamental attitudes of the believer should be that of gratefulness to God for everything. Whenever we face difficulties it is easy to lose our attitude of gratefulness to God and begin to complain. Rather than focusing on what good God has done we focus on the bad. We forget that even if we lost everything in this world, and were hated by all men, and even killed, that would not compare the least bit with the riches we have in Christ in eternity future. Paul puts a proper perspective on this in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 where he writes, *"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."* Even if we endured a lifetime of pain and struggle, compared to the glory we have in eternity it would be nothing! The believer is to be thankful for everything, both good and bad, as we have a loving Father who is working all things out for our own ultimate good and his own ultimate glory.

19 *Quench not the Spirit.*

Another command listed by Paul is our duty towards the process of sanctification in our lives. Spiritual growth is energized by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and when we fall into patterns of sin we stifle that sanctifying work. Paul describes this as quenching the Spirit.

This is a rather vivid picture, as what Paul is saying is that sin in our lives will quickly and violently suspend the process of spiritual growth much like a pail of water douses a flame. I have known many believers complain about the lack of spiritual progress in their lives, only to live in unrepentant patterns of sin at the same time. We cannot live in sin and expect to have the Holy Spirit work powerfully in our lives. It is one or the other, but not both.

20 *Despise not prophesyings.***21** *Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.***22** *Abstain from all appearance of evil.*

These three verses go together as they are talking about a common theme, and that is spiritual discernment. The believer is not to despise prophesyings. The word for despise, *exoutheneo*, means to disregard or discount. The word for prophesyings, *propheteia*, can refer either to prophetic utterings or the written word of God. Putting these two words together says that we are not to disregard the uttered word of God or the written word of God. Too often believers take what God says as just another opinion on the matter. Instead of just another opinion, we need to see God's word as the only opinion that matters.

How is it that we are to determine that which is good and that which is bad when it comes to prophecies (whether spoken or the revealed Word of God)? We are to prove them. How do we prove them? By comparing them with scripture to make sure that they measure up to the standard of divine truth. Whenever we hear a word or message from anyone purporting to speak the Word of God, we are to carefully take what they say and compare it to scripture to make sure what is being said is true. If it is good we are to hold fast to it. If it is bade, we are to abstain, or run away, from it.

One of the greatest needs in the church today is that of discernment. We take what people say to us at face value without every comparing scripture with scripture as the case with the noble Bereans. If someone stands up and uses God talk, Jesus talk, and Bible talk, we assume they are telling us the truth. We cannot afford that. We are warning again and again of false teachers and false prophets who will mislead the church. One of the duties of the elder is to protect the flock from false teachers. And finally, it is the duty of every believer to be a Berean in order to avoid being taught error.

23 *And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.***24** *Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.*

Paul's prayer and parting blessing to the Thessalonians is that they would progress on the path to spiritual maturity in order that they would be blameless at the coming of Christ. Paul did not spend his time praying for physical issues, removal of persecution, or material blessings. Rather, he focused on spiritual issues which alone are truly valuable when we are called to

stand before Christ and give an account of ourselves. Too often we overlook the spiritually valuable for the physically worthless.

How is it that Paul was assured this prayer would be answered? It was because of the faithfulness of God. It is God's faithfulness towards the believer, and not the believer's efforts, that will ultimately assure their standing before God. Why is it that we can grow spiritually? It is because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. How can we gain victory over sin and the flesh? It is because God has given us his Spirit who enables us to do right. The struggle we have in this life is to live up to the calling for which we have been called knowing that in eternity the good work which God because will be fully realized.

25 *Brethren, pray for us.*

Just as Paul prays for the Thessalonians, so he wants the Thessalonians to pray for him. He does not give them a list of prayer requests, but leaves the subject of their prayer to the discretion of the Thessalonian believers. Most likely he did not have to tell them what to pray for as his ministry among them gave them ample knowledge of those things for which Paul desired prayer.

26 *Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss.*

27 *I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren.*

28 *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.*

Paul concludes this letter with his standard closing and benediction. He also includes a command to have the epistle read in all the church so that everyone would hear his message to them. This was not a secret message given only to the leadership, but a letter of encouragement to the entire church body.