

Study of 1 Thessalonians

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Introductory to 1 Thessalonians

I. The City

You can find the modern city of Soloniki on your map, and when you do, you have found the site of the ancient city Thessalonica. It had originally been named Therma, from the hot springs in the area; but 300 years before Christ, Cassander, king of Macedon, renamed it in honor of the sister of Alexander the Great. It was a free city, with its own government, and it also was the capital city of Macedonia. Thessalonica stood on the important Egnatian Way, Rome's greatest highway.

II. The Church

The record is found in Acts 17:1–15. Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Philippi and traveled thirty-three miles to Amphipolis, then twenty-eight miles farther to Apollonia. It is interesting to note that no ministry was carried on in either of those cities. Their next trip was some forty miles to Thessalonica, where Paul ministered in the synagogue for perhaps three weeks and saw a number of people converted. In the city was a large group of Gentile proselytes (“devout Greeks,” Acts 17:4) in the synagogue, and they responded enthusiastically, along with some of the Jews. This kind of success enraged the orthodox Jews, and they engineered a mob scene to embarrass the Christians and hinder Paul's ministry. The believers thought it best for Paul and his party to leave, which they did, going first to Berea. Paul left his associates at Berea and went alone to Athens. When Timothy joined Paul at Athens, the apostle promptly sent him back to Thessalonica to encourage the new church (1 Thes. 3:1–3). The men finally met together at Corinth (Acts 18:5). Timothy reported on the state of the infant church in Thessalonica. It was from Corinth, about the year a.d. 50, that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. Second Thessalonians was written just a few months later.

III. The Correspondence

The first letter had several purposes behind it: (1) to encourage and confirm the new believers in the things of Christ; (2) to answer false charges made against Paul and his ministry, 2:1–12; (3) to explain that the Christian dead would participate in the second coming of Christ; (4) to warn the Christians against pagan immorality, 4:4ff; (5) to remind the church members to honor and follow their spiritual leaders, 5:12–13; and (6) to warn believers who had given up their jobs and were idle because they thought Christ would soon return, 2:9.

Second Thessalonians was written a few months later. The persecutions against the church were getting worse (2 Thes. 1:4–5) and the people needed encouragement. The “idlers” in the church had not gone back to work (2 Thes. 3:6–12). To make matters worse, the people were confused about the Day of the Lord (the Tribulation), thinking that they were already in it! It is possible that the church had received a counterfeit epistle, claiming to be from Paul (2:1–3) and teaching that the Day of the Lord had already begun. (Note that the phrase “day of Christ” in 2 Thes. 2:2 should be “Day of the Lord,” referring to the tribulation period on earth that follows the rapture of the church.) Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to: (1) encourage the church to persevere in spite of testing; (2) explain the events leading up to the Day of the Lord; (3) warn the busybodies to get back to work. Note that in 2 Thes. 3:17–18, Paul gives his personal “trademark” so that the people could easily detect any forged letters in the future.

Keep in mind that 1 Thessalonians deals with *the rapture*, Christ’s return in the air for the church, while 2 Thessalonians deals with *the revelation*, Christ’s return with the church to the earth, to defeat His enemies and establish His kingdom. “The Day of the Lord” referred to in 2 Thessalonians is that period of tribulation that comes to the earth after the church has been raptured. First Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9 teach clearly that the church will not go through the Tribulation.

1 Thessalonians 1

It is a wonderful thing when a pastor can think of his church and say, “We give thanks always for all of you!” Paul loved the church at Thessalonica; these people were on his heart, and he was concerned for their spiritual welfare. In this chapter, Paul tells us what kind of a church he left in that wicked city. When we see the characteristics of this church, we should examine our own lives and ask, “Am I helping to make my church a model church in the Lord?”

I. They Were an Elect People (1:1–5)

The word “church” in the Gk. is *ekklesia*, which means “a called-out group.” The church is not a social club; it is a spiritual organism, an organization composed of people whom God has “called out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). This calling is purely of grace (Eph. 1:3ff). Though we are in the world physically, we are not of the world spiritually (John 15:19). These saints lived in Thessalonica but dwelled in Christ. Paul explains the miracle of this calling in 2 Thes. 2:13–14. God sent Paul and Silas to Thessalonica with the Word of God. The people heard the Word, believed, and were saved. After receiving Christ, they discovered that they had been chosen in Him by God through grace! Read also 1 Peter 1:1–4.

The mystery of God’s election and man’s decision will never be fully explained this side of heaven. Just keep in mind that the Bible teaches both. “How do you reconcile these two truths?” a man once asked Spurgeon. The preacher replied, “I never try to reconcile friends.” These twin truths of election and decision are not contradictory; they

are complementary. As far as God the Father is concerned, we were saved when He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4); as far as the Spirit is concerned, we were saved when we responded to His call and received Christ; as far as the Son is concerned, we were saved when He died for us on the cross.

How did Paul know these people were saved? Because of the evidences in their lives:

A. Work of faith.

When people honestly trust Christ, that faith will be shown by works. Works will not save, but faith that does not lead to works is not saving faith. True Christian faith results in a changed life. See James 2:14–26.

B. Labor of love.

Unsaved people live for themselves (Eph. 2:1–2), but the true believer is willing to toil because of love. He has a new motive for living; he loves Christ and loves others. See Heb. 10:24–25; also Rom. 8:35–39.

C. Patience of hope.

The lost are without hope. Believers have endurance in life's trials because they know Christ is coming again. Believers need not give up in times of trial because they know the Savior is coming to deliver them (1 Peter 1:1–9; 4:12–16).

It has been pointed out that vv. 9–10 parallel these three evidences of salvation: the work of faith (they turned to God from idols); the labor of love (they served the living God); the patience of hope (they waited for Christ to return). Faith, hope, and love are evidences of true salvation (Col. 1:4–5; Rom. 5:1–4).

II. They Were an Exemplary People (1:6–7)

It is wonderful when “hearers” become “followers”! These people heard the Word, welcomed it, believed it, and suffered for receiving it into their lives. The Word imparts faith (Rom. 10:17) and brings joy (Acts 8:8, 39; Jer. 15:16). Having believed, these new Christians followed Paul, associated themselves with a local fellowship, and became examples to all around them. They were not only followers of Paul, but also of the churches (2:14); for in the NT, Christians were expected to be a vital part of the local fellowship. Their testimony reached throughout the whole area and helped lead others to Christ.

III. They Were an Enthusiastic People (1:8)

These people had been saved just a few months. They did not have the instruction most saints today have, yet they were enthusiastic in their witness for Christ. They witnessed by their walk (“examples” in v. 7) and by their talk (v. 8). The verb “sounded out” has the idea of blowing a trumpet. While these saints were waiting for the trumpet to blow to call them home (4:16), they were “trumpeting the Gospel” loud and clear to all their lost friends. Too often we are like the Pharisees, blowing our own trumpets, instead of trumpeting for Christ and the Gospel (Matt. 6:1–4).

IV. They Were an Expectant People (1:9–10)

The second coming of Christ is a basic theme in this book. Each chapter relates Christ's return to a basic Christian truth (see the suggested outline). In this chapter we see that Christ's coming is the blessed hope of the saved. While the lost are blindly worshiping and serving their idols, the saved are serving the living God and rejoicing in the living hope that Christ will come again.

How are Christians supposed to wait for Christ's return? By being busy when He comes (see Matt. 24:44–51). In 5:1–11, Paul warns the saints to be awake and alert, and not to sleep and be drunken, like the people of the world. The blessed hope of Christ's return must be more than a doctrine in our creed: it must be a dynamic in our lives.

How do we know Christ is coming again? God proved Christ is His Son by raising Him from the dead. Read carefully Acts 17:22–34 for Paul's argument. Christ could not come again if He were dead and His body decomposing in a Jewish tomb. We cannot separate the living hope and the living Christ (1 Peter 1:1–5).

Paul had instructed these people concerning the return of Christ and the time of tribulation that God has promised would come on a Christ-rejecting world. But he is careful to point out that the church will not share in that tribulation. The verb "deliver" in v. 10 is present tense—"who delivers us"; or it could be recast as a title—"Jesus, the Deliverer." The church will not go through the Tribulation. Read 1:10 and 5:1–9, as well as 2 Thes. 1 and 2. The next event on God's calendar is the return of Christ in the air, at which time the church will be caught up to meet Him. Then will follow seven years of tribulation on earth. When the cup of iniquity on earth starts overflowing, Christ and the church will return to defeat Satan and His hosts and usher in the 1,000-year reign of Christ (see Rev. 19:11–20:5).

1 Thessalonians 2

Chapter 1 describes the ideal church; chapter 2 provides a picture of the ideal pastor or Christian servant. Paul has told us how the Gospel came to Thessalonica; now he tells us how he ministered to the young believers. This is an outline of Paul's "Follow-up Program," and it explains why most of his converts stayed true to the Lord and why his churches grew. He gives us four pictures of the ideal Christian worker.

I. The Faithful Steward (2:1–6)

What a tremendous privilege to be "put in trust with the Gospel"! (2:4) We often speak of the stewardship of material things, but we need also to remember that every believer is a steward of the Gospel and the Word of God. God gave the message to Paul (1 Tim. 1:11); Paul in turn committed it to Timothy (1 Tim. 6:20), and Timothy was expected to commit it to faithful people in the churches who would then commit it to others (2 Tim. 2:2). The main responsibility of a steward is to be faithful (1 Cor. 4:1–2); and it is on the basis of this faithfulness that we will be tested and rewarded when Christ comes.

In order to be faithful to his or her stewardship, a believer must be willing to suffer. Paul and Silas had been treated shamefully in Philippi (Acts 16:19–24), and they could have made all kinds of excuses for taking a vacation. But they knew that God had entrusted them with the Gospel and that they had to carry the message to other cities. Instead of being fearful, they were bold to proclaim the Good News.

The faithful steward must live to please God, not men (v. 4). It is tempting to compromise the message in order to win friends, but God cannot bless a steward whose message and ministry are not according to His divine pattern. In v. 3, Paul states that his message was not of deceit or error; that is, it was the true Word of God. His motive was pure, and not one of uncleanness; and his method was honest, not guileful (or “baiting the hook” as for catching fish). Verse 5 states that Paul did not resort to flattering people for personal gain. Paul always honored faithful workers and gave praise where it was due; but he did not stoop to flattery to win converts or influence followers. (See Gal. 6:10ff; John 8:29; Acts 4:18–21.)

II. The Gentle Mother (2:7–8)

It seems odd that the man Paul should compare himself to a “nursing mother” in v. 7. (Consider also 1 Cor. 4:14–15 where he states that as a spiritual parent he had “begotten” the Corinthian saints through the Gospel.) In 2:9–13, Paul uses the image of a father, but the main thought here is that of loving care. New Christians need love, food, and tender care, just as a mother would give to her own children. Newborn babes need the milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2) and then must “graduate” to the meat (1 Cor. 3:1–4; Heb. 5:11–14), the bread (Matt. 4:4, and see Ex. 16, the manna), and the honey (Ps. 119:103).

How a mother feeds her child is almost as important as what she feeds it. How important it is that we who are older Christians feed the younger believers lovingly and patiently.

III. The Concerned Father (2:9–16)

Note the “fatherly” ministry of Paul: he labored (v. 9a), he preached (v. 9b), behaved himself (v. 10), exhorted (v. 11), and suffered (v. 14). A father must watch over his family and make sacrifices for their welfare. Children are great imitators, and it is important that “spiritual fathers and mothers” live lives that are exemplary.

Paul could have claimed his rights as an apostle and required the church to support him (2:6); but instead, he sacrificially labored with his own hands in order to minister to the church. Fathers do not make little children pay for the care that they receive. Paul was also careful to live a life that was holy (to God), just (to man), and blameless (to self).

One of the duties of fathers is to exhort and educate their children, and this Paul did in Thessalonica. He provided individual and personal teaching (“each one of you”) as well as the public ministry to the church. Spiritual leaders dare not depend on their public ministry alone; their spiritual children need personal encouragement and counsel as well. Paul’s three-fold ministry as a father was to: (1) “exhort” or entreat; (2) “comfort”

or encourage; and (3) “charge” or witness, testify. Paul not only taught them the Word, but he encouraged them from his own experiences in the Lord.

The apostle rejoiced over the way his spiritual children received the Word of God. He knew that the Spirit of God would work in their lives if they received the Word and believed it. If we will tie together Phil. 2:12–13, Eph. 3:20–21, and 1 Thes. 2:13, we will see that God works in us through His Word, His Spirit, and prayer.

Finally, Paul warned his spiritual family of the enemies who would persecute them. If Christians become followers of the Lord (1:6) and of the churches (2:14), then they can expect to be persecuted by Satan and his followers.

IV. The Loving Brother (2:17–20)

How Paul loved to call these saints “brethren”! He used the word twenty-one times in his two Thessalonian epistles. (Of course, this also included the sisters.) He saw himself as one of them, a part of the family. In v. 17 he says that he was “orphaned” from them for a short time, like a child away from home. He loved them, prayed for them, and greatly desired to see them again. After all, the test of our spiritual life is not what we do when we are in church with “the family,” but how we behave away from church. Paul was not the kind of church member who “took a vacation” from the house of God.

As mentioned before, each chapter of this epistle ends with a reference to the return of Christ. In chapter 1, Christ’s return is related to salvation; here in chapter 2, it is related to service. Why was Paul able to minister faithfully and lovingly to these saints? Because he saw them in the light of Christ’s coming. He was looking forward to the glorious day when he would rejoice over them in the presence of Christ! Jesus endured the cross “for the joy that was set before Him” (Heb. 12:2); this “joy” is surely the joy of presenting the church to His Father (Jude 24). Paul endured all kinds of suffering for this same joy. Do we rejoice as we contemplate seeing Jesus one day?

1 Thessalonians 3

The key word in this chapter is “establish” (vv. 2–3, 8, 13). New Christians go through times of testing and affliction (vv. 3, 5); and unless they are established in the Lord, they will be upset by the devil. Paul was not satisfied just to have these people saved (chap. 1) and nurtured (chap. 2); he wanted to see them established in the faith (chap. 3), able to walk (chap. 4). After all, little children must learn to stand before they can learn to walk. What means did Paul use to establish these believers in the faith?

I. He Sent Them a Man (3:1–2)

What an asset young Timothy was to Paul! Every Paul must have his Timothy—the younger person who works with the older. Paul knew how to select and train Christian leaders, and Timothy was one of his finest. This young man had proved himself for several years in his own local church (Acts 16:1–3) before Paul enlisted him to be a

helper. Young Timothy (probably a teenager) did not start his ministry by teaching or preaching; he was Paul's "minister" to help him in the tasks of daily travel and living. Actually, Timothy replaced John Mark, who had turned back when the going got tough. Paul's estimate of Timothy is found in Phil. 2:19–24 and throughout his two epistles to Timothy.

God uses gifted believers to strengthen the church (Eph. 4, and see Acts 14:21–23, and 15:32, 41). Paul was willing to be left at Athens alone in order that Timothy might return to Thessalonica to encourage the believers and establish them in the faith. If church members would "adopt" new Christians, encourage them, teach them, and fellowship with them, there would be fewer spiritual casualties. The mature saints in the church must help younger Christians to grow in Christ.

II. He Wrote Them a Letter (3:3–4)

The believer is built up by the Word of God (2 Thes. 2:15–17; Rom. 16:25–27; and 2 Peter 1:12). Note how Paul reminds them of the Word he had already taught them. He had warned them that afflictions were coming, but they seemingly had forgotten what he had taught them. There is no substitute for the Word of God. The Christian who is ignorant of the Bible is prey to every wind of doctrine and never will be established in the Lord (Eph. 4:11–16). Timothy reminded them of the Word Paul had taught them, and this encouraged and established them.

Read Acts 17:1–4 for a description of how Paul ministered the Word at Thessalonica. He reasoned, which suggests debate or discussion; he opened the Word, which implies explaining its meaning (Luke 24:32, 45); he alleged certain truths, which means he gave evidence for them or laid them out in an orderly way for all to see; and he preached, which means the proclaiming of the Gospel. The pastor and Christian worker must be sure to have a balanced ministry of the Word. It is not enough merely to preach and declare the Word; there must be teaching, proving, explaining. The word "allege" (Acts 17:3) can mean "the setting of a table"; thus the spiritual worker must "set the food on the table" so that every saint, young or old, may reach it and partake of it.

III. He Prayed for Them (3:5–10)

The two-fold ministry of the Word of God and prayer is what establishes a church. If there is all teaching and preaching and no prayer, then the people will have light but no power. If there is all prayer but no teaching of the Word, you may have a group of enthusiasts who have more heat than light! The pastor, Sunday School teacher, missionary, or Christian worker who talks to God about his people, and then talks to his people about God, will have a balanced and established ministry. Christ's ministry consisted of both the Word and prayer (Luke 22:31–32). Samuel ministered in this way (1 Sam. 12:23, and do not forget the last clause); so did Peter and the apostles (Acts 6:4) and Paul himself (Acts 20:32).

Paul's concern was not so much their safety or happiness, but their faith. The word "faith" is used five times in this chapter. Satan is the enemy of our faith, for if he can get us to doubt God and His Word, he will rob us of the enjoyment of every blessing we have in Christ. Paul wanted them to have mature (perfected) faith (v. 10). Faith is not a

deposit that sits within the heart and never changes; it is like the grain of mustard seed that looks small, but contains life and is able to grow. Paul wanted to see these people abounding in love, established in hope, and growing in faith—faith, hope, and love!

There is no substitute for a consistent prayer life. Christians are commanded to pray for one another and for the lost. When there is a combined ministry of prayer and the Word, Satan is defeated and the church is established.

IV. He Reminded Them of Christ's Return (3:11–13)

As we have noted before, the theme of both epistles to the Thessalonians is the second coming of Christ. No truth establishes the believer faster or better than this one. In the midst of testing and tribulation, these believers could assure and encourage themselves with the promise of His coming. When temptations came their way, as they did daily in those heathen cities, they could keep themselves clean by remembering that Christ might come that very day. If weary of laboring and witnessing, they could take on new strength and courage by looking for His return. No truth in the Bible has a greater effect on the believer's heart, mind, and will than the truth of the second coming of Christ.

Read Luke 12:42–48 to see what happens to the servant who forgets the coming of Christ. This man did not say anything openly; he merely said in his heart, "My Lord has delayed His coming!" He did not love Christ's appearing. Is it any wonder this servant backslid and could not get along with other workers?

Paul was anxious that their hearts be established blameless; note also 5:23. Christians are supposed to be blameless and harmless (Phil. 2:15). This does not mean they are sinless, for perfection is not possible until Christ returns. The little child, copying his name on the blackboard, does not perform faultlessly, because he is only a child; but if he does the best he can, he is blameless. If we live up to the light God has given us and seek to grow in Him, we can live lives that are blameless in God's sight. The daily expectancy of Christ's return will help the believer keep his or her life clean (1 John 2:28–3:3).

1 Thessalonians 4

We move now into the second half of the letter dealing with the practical instructions for these new believers in Christ. The key word is "walk" (4:1, 12), and Paul beseeches them to obey the Word (4:1, 10, 12, 14). The Christian's behavior is compared to a walk for several reasons: (1) it demands life, for the dead sinner cannot walk; (2) it requires growth, for a little baby cannot walk; (3) it requires liberty, for someone who is bound cannot walk; (4) it demands light, for no one wants to walk in the dark; (5) it cannot be hidden, but is witnessed by all; and (6) it suggests progress toward a goal. Paul describes the kind of walk the believer should have.

I. Walk in Holiness (4:1–8)

Here Paul deals with marriage and the home. The marriage vows in heathen cities said nothing about purity, so there was great danger of immorality in the lives of these new Christians. While love and purity certainly prevailed in many heathen homes, the general atmosphere of these city-states (before the Gospel came) was one of lust and selfishness. The Christian has the responsibility of building a Christian home that will glorify God, so Paul begins here.

Immorality is basically selfishness and robbery. Thus Paul exhorts them to live to please God and not themselves. He had set the example (2:4), and now he expected them to follow. He had commanded them, from the Lord, to live in holiness and purity by the power of God. God's will for their lives was that they be sanctified. The word *sanctified* simply means "set apart for a purpose." You can rent the Jefferson Hotel in Washington, D.C. but you cannot rent the White House. The latter has been sanctified, set apart for a special purpose. The believer has been set apart for God; he or she is a saint, a set-apart one. We have the daily responsibility of devoting ourselves more and more to God so that in body, soul, spirit (5:23) we completely belong to Him. Nothing defiles the person more than sexual sin (2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Cor. 6:13–20). People who violate their marriage vows sin against God, themselves, and fellow Christians; God will deal with them in truth.

"Vessel" in v. 4 may refer to the believer's body or to the wife (1 Peter 3:7). In either case, these vessels have been purchased by the blood of Christ, sanctified by the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:9–11), and must be used for the glory of God. To despise God's warnings about sexual sin is to grieve the Spirit and invite chastening. Remember David, Samson, Judah, and other Bible personalities who fell into this sin and paid dearly.

II. Walk in Love (4:9–10)

There was no need to write to them about love; he had taught them about this, and God Himself taught them through the Spirit (Rom. 5:5). Love is one of the birthmarks of the believer (1 John 3:14; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 4:9–12). "Behold, how they love one another!" exclaimed the lost as they witnessed the fellowship of the early church. But it is not enough that we love only those in our own fellowship; like these people in Thessalonica, we must love all of God's people and also the lost (3:12) more every day.

III. Walk in Honesty (4:11–12)

Now Paul talks about the believer's vocation and his contacts with the unsaved in the world. One of the problems in the Thessalonian church was that some people had misunderstood the promise of Christ's return, quit their jobs, and had become "parasites" who lived off the other Christians. See 2 Thes. 3:5–15 for Paul's admonition. "Study to be quiet" (v. 11) literally means "Be ambitious to be quiet." That is, do not fret and worry and involve yourself in the world's activities. "Attend to your own affairs" and therefore stay out of the affairs of others. It is a sad thing when Christians have nothing to do and become busybodies in other peoples' lives. The Christian who does an honest day's work and who is careful to maintain a good testimony will influence the unsaved

(see Col. 3:22–25 and 4:5). Those who do not work, should not eat (2 Thes. 3:10). Let us not practice unscriptural Christian “charity” by taking the Lord’s money to support “Christian loafers” and encourage them in their careless way of life.

IV. Walk in Hope (4:13–18)

This is the classic passage on the rapture of the church. Sorrow had come to the lives of these saints, and they were wondering whether their dead fellow Christians would be left behind at the return of Christ. Paul assures them that their dead will be raised first, and that all the saints will be gathered together to meet Christ in the air. Do not confuse the rapture of the church (meeting Christ in the air) with the revelation of the Lord, that time when He comes with His saints to earth to judge sinners and to establish His kingdom (2 Thes. 1:7–12). The rapture (meeting Christ in the air) can take place at any time; but the revelation (returning with Christ) will occur some seven years after the rapture.

Christians are expected to mourn when loved ones die, but they are not to grieve as do the people of the world who have no hope. Certainly Christ expects us to shed tears and feel loneliness (see John 11:33–36) as we go through the valley; but in the midst of our sorrow, there must be the testimony of the living hope we have in Christ (1 Peter 1:3). Note the comforts the believer has in times of sorrow:

A. The comfort that death for the believer is only sleep.

“Sleep in Jesus” in v. 14 is literally “put to sleep through Jesus.” Regardless of how a believer dies, Jesus Christ is there to put him to sleep. Of course, the soul goes to be with Christ (Phil. 1:20–24; 2 Cor. 5:6–8); it is the body that sleeps, not the soul. The word “cemetery” means “a sleeping place”; it is the place where the bodies sleep, awaiting the resurrection.

B. The comfort of heavenly reunion.

The hardest thing about death is separation from our loved ones; but when Christ comes, we will be “together with the Lord” forever. The living saints will not precede those who have died; all will be caught up together to meet Christ.

C. The comfort of eternal blessing.

We shall be “forever with the Lord.” We shall obtain new bodies (1 John 3:1–3; Phil. 3:20–21). Paul says that the body we place in the cemetery is like a seed awaiting the harvest (1 Cor. 15:35–58). Of course, the body turns to dust, and that dust becomes a part of the earth (Gen. 3:19). The Bible nowhere teaches that God raises and unites every particle of the believer’s body. What it does teach is that the resurrection body has identity with the body that was buried. Just as the seed that is planted (and that dies) in the ground has identity and continuity with the seed it produces, so the resurrection body will have identity and continuity with the body that was buried. Resurrection is not reconstruction.

The words “caught up” (v. 17) are full of meaning. They mean: (1) to catch away speedily, for there will be no warning (5:1–10); (2) to seize by force, for Satan will seek to hinder our rapture to heaven; (3) to claim for one’s self, just as the Bridegroom claims

the bride; (4) to move to a new place; and (5) to rescue from danger, for the church will not go through the Tribulation (1:10; 5:9).

1 Thessalonians 5

The final chapter gives a series of admonitions instructing the Christians how to live in the light of Christ's coming. As we read these many exhortations, we see that there were some definite problems in the infant church. Christians were living carelessly; some were not respecting their church leaders; others were abusing the public services; and there was a general need for love and harmony among the saints. These admonitions point out how the local church can live in harmony and purity.

I. Be Watchful (5:1–11)

Paul presents a series of contrasts here between the Christians and the lost:

A. *Light/Darkness.*

Christ's coming, as far as the world is concerned, will be sudden and unexpected, like a thief in the night; but not so for the believer. We are looking for Him to come. Unbelievers are in the dark: their understanding is darkened (Eph. 4:18; 5:8); they love the darkness (John 3:19–21; Eph. 5:11); they are controlled by the power of darkness (Eph. 6:12); and they are headed for eternal darkness (Matt. 8:12). But the Christian is associated with the light, for God is light, and Christ is the Light of the world (John 8:12). The Christian is a child of light (Eph. 5:8–14), though at one time he was darkness itself. The change that was wrought is described in 2 Cor. 4:1–6; Col. 1:13; and 1 Peter 2:9. Since Christians belong to the day, they should live in the light and be ready for Christ's return.

B. *Knowledge/Ignorance.*

Satan likes to keep people in the dark (Acts 26:18). Judas was in the dark (John 13:27–30) and so were Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). The world is ignorant of God's plans because the world has rejected Christ and the Bible. Read Isa. 8:20 to see why even intelligent world leaders are in the dark when it comes to understanding what is going on in the world. They go by appearances and say, "Where is the promise of His coming?" (see 2 Peter 3) But the Christian who reads his Bible and keeps his eyes open knows the way God is working in this world and is not ignorant.

C. *Expectancy/Surprise.*

The unsaved world lives in false security, like the people before the flood (Gen. 6) or the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18–19). Paul gives two comparisons to Christ's coming: (1) the thief, telling of the surprise and unpreparedness of those affected by it; (2) the woman giving birth, telling of the suddenness and suffering involved. When Christ has taken the church out of the world, the Day of the Lord will begin, a seven-

year period of tribulation and suffering for the world. Thus, the Day of the Lord will come to the world as a thief in the night, but will not be so to the believer.

D. Soberness/Drunkenness.

Christians who are looking for Christ to come will stay awake and be alert; they will not become drunken like the people of the world. “Wake” and “sleep” here do not mean “alive” and “dead” as in 4:13–18; they mean respectively “alert” and “careless.” Christians should be living clean, dedicated lives when Jesus comes.

II. Be Respectful to Your Leaders (5:12–13)

The church family must have spiritual leadership, and this leadership is vested in the pastor(s) and deacons. The church may establish whatever organizations it pleases (so long as these groups are organized according to biblical guidelines). The pastor, however, must lead the flock as God directs. Certainly he needs, and wants, the prayers and counsel of the people, especially the elected leaders; but all in the church must respect the leadership that God provides. Christians should: (1) accept their leaders (Eph. 4:7–11; 1 Peter 5:1–5); (2) honor their leaders, recognizing the work they do; (3) love their leaders; (4) and follow their leaders (Heb. 13:7–9, 17, 24). Whenever a church is not united, it is often because the pastor will not take the responsibility of leadership, or because the members will not permit him to lead. Keep in mind that leadership is not dictatorship. The leader sets the example, pays the price, and seeks to help others in Christian love. The dictator uses law, not love; he does not lead, he drives; and his motives are selfish, even if he thinks he is working for the good of the church.

III. Be Mindful of One Another (5:14–15)

It is not enough to have church leadership; there must also be partnership, with each member doing his or her share of the work. First Peter 4:7–11 reminds us that each Christian is a steward of a spiritual gift, and that we must use that gift for the good of others and the glory of the Lord. Paul specifies certain kinds of Christians who need special help: (1) The unruly—the careless who will not be ruled, those who are out of line, must be warned. (2) The feebleminded—the fainthearted must be encouraged. (3) The weak—those not mature in the Lord (Rom. 14:1–5) must be supported until they can walk in the Lord. Our attitude toward all people ought to be one of patience and love, never returning evil for evil (Rom. 12:17–21).

IV. Be Thankful (5:16–18)

“Rejoice, pray, and give thanks” sound like ordinary admonitions; but when you add the adverbs, you have a real challenge: “Rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks.” The Christian who walks with the Lord and keeps in constant communion with Him will see many reasons for rejoicing and thanksgiving all day long.

“Pray without ceasing” does not mean a constant mumbling of prayers (see Matt. 6:7). True prayer is the attitude of the heart, the desire of the heart (Pss. 10:17; 21:2;

37:4; 145:19). When our hearts desire what God desires, we are praying all day long as the Spirit intercedes for us and in us (Rom. 8:26–27).

V. Be Careful in Worship (5:19–21)

“Prophesying” in the early church was the immediate work of the Spirit: the prophet would give the message from God. But Satan is a counterfeiter, so it was necessary to test the messages (see 1 Cor. 12:10; 14:29–33). The danger was that the believers would “go overboard” in emotional abuses or, the other extreme, quench the Spirit by rejecting His revelations. “Prove all things, hold fast that which is good” (v. 21) is the admonition we must heed whenever we hear or read a message from the Word.

VI. Be Faithful in Daily Conduct (5:22–28)

“Appearance of evil” means “every form of evil.” Of course, no saint should allow anything in his life that others could misunderstand and criticize. God is faithful to build us up in holiness if we but yield to Him. Prayer, brotherly love, and attention to the Word of God will sanctify us and keep us ready for Christ’s return.