

# George Philip Bible Readings

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## PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

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## 1:1

This letter is probably the earliest of Paul's extant writings, sent from Corinth (where he stayed for eighteen months) about AD 50 during his second missionary journey. Timothy had arrived with news from Thessalonica (3: 6-8) telling of the converts who had stood firm in their faith and grown in grace in spite of all difficulties. This seems to have inspired the letter which is full of exultation and confidence. The news brought encouragement to Paul whose journey had been marked by difficulty and suffering, and it may be linked with the vision spoken about in Acts 18:1-17. Never try to make the apostle a superman, as if he were free from all the natural heartaches and disappointments that we know so well in Christian service. There is ground for believing that Paul came to Corinth a very discouraged man (1 Cor. 2:3) for he had been hounded from place to place by the enemies of the Gospel. Imagine then the thrill when he heard that these Thessalonians who had been ministered to for only a few short weeks (Acts 17:1-3) were standing fast and witnessing. He wrote at once to them to encourage them and to add instruction in matters he had not been able to deal with during his brief ministry (1 Thess. 3:10). This letter would, among other things, serve to quell the slander of Paul's person by the vicious Jews (Acts 17:5 and 13) who accused the apostle of abandoning his converts and refusing to return. In all ages the Devil tries to attack the Gospel by discrediting its messengers. All too often we give the enemy far too many opportunities.

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## 1:1

To set the background to the epistle we need the missionary maps at the back of our Bibles, together with Acts 15:36-18:23, to which chapters we will make reference for some days. Two things are to be noted: the continuing battle and conflict of this man as he went on in Christ's service, and the broad strategy of his approach to his work. It was not easy for Paul to be a faithful Christian but his battles did not deter him from going on. Indeed, he recognised that such conflict was an inescapable part of Christian life and service for it was the expression of satanic resistance to the advance of Christ (Eph. 6:12ff). By the gracious encouragements of God, Paul became more and more determined to press on (Phil. 1:20; 3:12-14). In this determined progress he did not fail to exercise his intelligence, and it seems that with quite deliberate intent he always headed for the main centres of population and influence, sometimes bypassing smaller places which would in due time be reached by spiritual recoil. People converted in the cities, possibly during business visits, would return to the towns and villages and become in turn messengers of the Gospel. In the providence of God the work never seemed to get entrenched or institutionalised, but in strategic places there were founded churches that were and continued to be centres of biblical and doctrinal instruction. It worked in spite of human and demonic opposition.

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## 1:1

The story leading to Thessalonica is fascinating. It began with a God-inspired purpose stirring in the hearts of two godly men (Acts 15:36 - 16:5). Almost at once there was a bitter division of opinion, and tension led to the break up of a holy partnership with, no doubt, painfully lacerated feelings and perhaps much secret suspicion. Paul, Silas and Timothy set out, possibly heading for Ephesus, believing that God would guide them. He did. Almost at once they were forbidden to head for the province of Asia. With equal insistence they were barred from their project in Bithynia. How that guidance came we are not told, but the men were quite clear God was forbidding them and they submitted. They did not argue with God about the spiritual needs of these areas (which God was aware of) nor about their responsibility to witness. They allowed themselves to be hemmed in and restricted and driven towards Troas, believing that God knew what He was doing. You can imagine how the Devil would assault their confidence and tempt them to linger, saying they would certainly get converts. But lesser blessing had to give way to the greater blessing which God was purposing, and in Troas negative guidance became positive in the call from Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). It needs little imagination to sense the thrill of the missionaries' hearts as they crossed the sea knowing that they had reached the place of God's appointing. They headed for the chief city (Acts 16:11-15), and found themselves with nothing but a small

group of women. What an anti-climax. Was this what they had travailed, waited and prayed for? Worse was to follow with demonic opposition, persecution and prison (Acts 16:16ff) and in no time ejection from the city. It was by this route that Paul reached Thessalonica, where his ministry lasted only a few weeks. But the range and impact of his ministry are revealed in this epistle. Perhaps it was not until years later that Paul realised how much God had been working when it seemed that everything was going against him.

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## 1:1

That there was a church in Thessalonica was a miracle of the grace of God in the Gospel. Here was a city of commercial and political significance finding in Jesus Christ the answer to its cry for help. Never think that the Gospel message is simply for sub-standard intellects and neurotic misfits who cannot cope with real life. It is a word to all people, including those who have proved the ultimate futility of culture at its best, and of religion that in its establishment has become moribund. Into an alien situation the messengers of Christ came and, preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit, the problem of communication was significantly overcome. As a result there came into being an outcrop of the eternal kingdom of God, which was the group of believing men and women in Thessalonica. The effective instrument in this work of God's Spirit was the preaching of Scripture (Acts 17:2-3; cf. Acts 13:5; 17:10-13; 18:5-11) and the powerful appeal was first to the reason and not the emotions. Paul opened the Scriptures, unfolding, explaining and teaching them, thereby alleging or proving or bringing ordered evidence of a case for Jesus Christ in His glorious salvation. He began his ministry in the synagogue with those who had a religious and scriptural background, and moved outwards from there to the community, declaring, explaining and interpreting God's word. It was the word of the Cross that was preached, a message of salvation from sin, and it was the establishment of non-evangelical religion that spearheaded the opposition.

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## 1:1

Almost every word has a message to our hearts, not least the full glorious title of the Lord, Jesus, Christ which speaks of His divinity, humanity and Saviourhood. The word "church" here seems to emphasise the local group of believers, whereas the phrase "church of God" in 1 Cor. 1:2 suggests the universal and eternal church of which the local fellowship is a part. The word "ecclesia" (church) is basically a secular word signifying the assembly of people with a common life and cause gathered to promote the common aim. In New Testament times each city had its "ecclesia" (town council) in whose hands the well-being of the city lay. So it was with the church in Thessalonica. The affairs of God in the city were in the safe-keeping of that group of believers. What privilege, and what responsibility! But what provision is made for the church! It is in God the Father and the Son. However grim our circumstances may be we need not fear. We may be in the world with all its darkness but we are not the same as the "world" nor part of it. We are, in Christ, marked out by God as unique and distinct and set in a place of total protection (Col. 1:13; 3:3; John 17:14-16; Zech.2:5, 8). To be a Christian is to be a member of the church, and the church lives in God, having a private atmosphere of pure life-giving air. Little wonder Paul speaks of sufficient grace and under-girding peace.

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## 1:1-2

The first verse properly ends with grace and peace and leads right on to the theme of prayer filled with thanksgiving. This alone gives some indication of how deeply, personally and immediately this man was involved in the lives of his converts. His thanksgiving in God's presence was for them all and not for a select few, because it was the remembrance of these converts, what they had been and what they had already become, that made Paul feel again that all the struggle and cost were well worthwhile. He would not remain blind to their faults (indeed this epistle was written to correct some of them), nor would he deny the need for improvement, but in this fellowship of believers there seems to be no instance of glaring contradiction of faith such as in other churches. Can you imagine the thrill and inspiration that would stir the Christians as these words were read to them, the awareness that their minister, absent this long time, was still praying and caring for them and, what is more, was proud of them? Can you imagine what desire that would quicken to become more and more the

servants of Christ together with Paul? But the dynamic direction of these verses of thanksgiving is towards God who had done this marvellous thing in bringing men and women to Himself. What a thrill it is to a whole congregation when people are being converted and showing right from the start evidences that a real work of grace has been worked in their hearts. "She is a different person already," said someone of a friend who had been a Christian for only a few weeks. This is the real thing and it is the Lord's doing. That is why there must be thanksgiving and prayer.

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#### 1:3-4

Paul's thanksgiving was for the unmistakable evidences of true conversion in the lives of the Thessalonians. Their election (chosen) by God was no longer open to question for it was ratified by spiritual character. It was not merely their faith, love and hope that were commended but their work or energy of faith, the toilsome labour of their love and the steadfast endurance of their hope. Faith, which for Paul was always warm, personal trust in the Saviour, became the working basis of their lives and the works of faith became the visible evidence of that inward trust. Issuing from faith is the labour, the grinding toil of self-giving love, that kind of love which does not shrink from demand. It is the kind of love which sent Christ to the cross reflected in lives of Christians in their dealings with each other. It is love which warms all service as well as inspires it and which enables us to go on going on, giving and serving all for the love of Jesus Christ who first loved us. It is not surprising that Paul speaks next of endurance of hope, which phrase signifies steadfast expectation rather than mute resignation. This hope is not merely pious optimism but solid certainty. Faith begets love which is the essential drive and passion for service, and since love cannot be quenched or denied, it leads to endurance of hope which looks for the coming of the Lord. Is there not something here of the inner confidence which faith in Christ can bring, that assurance which not only enables us to give sacrificial service that never lingers to count the cost, but which also enables us to become our own true selves in all the intriguing uniqueness of our personalities? To be saved in Christ is to be set free to become ourselves. What a salvation!

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#### 1:3-4

Paul's heart was thrilled, not because these Christians were engaged in progressive evangelism calculated to make the whole city sit up and take notice, but because they were manifestly growing in grace. Left to themselves without any ministry of spiritual instruction apart from the Old Testament Scriptures, these believers were standing firm. That is the first confirmation of electing grace. Standing fast in Christ, feeding on the Scriptures, and coming together for worship and mutual encouragement, they built themselves up in their faith and so grew in grace, character and conviction. You can take it for granted that such spiritual reality and practical transformation would lead inevitably to witness and soul-winning evangelism, for true faith simply cannot be hidden, neither can it lie dormant and unproductive. These were the proofs that they were in fact chosen by God in Jesus Christ. In spite of the brevity of Paul's stay, the alien atmosphere of secular and religious life, and all the slanders of the Devil, these men and women confirmed their attachment to Christ by the manner of their lives. Verse 4 is gloriously simple yet deeply profound and encouraging. It emphasises to these Christian believers that they were loved by God and chosen by God and this leads on to what follows. We must never fall into the error of escaping from the claims of Christ by saying it cannot be known whether or not a person is numbered among the elect of God. Paul has just said that there are clear evidences one way or the other.

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#### 1:4

Here is a useful passage on the doctrine of election from the commentary by Leon Morris. "Election is one of the great concepts of the Bible, and it looms large in both Testaments. It is often misrepresented. God is pictured as an arbitrary tyrant, damning or saving men without rhyme or reason. Against all such views we must insist that election, as Paul's words imply, proceeds from the fact of God's great love (notice the connection between love and election also in (2 Thess. 2:13). It is not a device for sentencing men to eternal torment, but for rescuing them from it. Election protects us from thinking of salvation as dependent on human whims, and

roots it squarely in the will of God. Left to ourselves we do not wish to leave our state of untroubled sinfulness.

It is only because God first convicts us and enables us that we can make even the motion of wanting to turn from our sins. From Eph. 1:4 we see that this is no afterthought of God, no sudden change in His plans. He has chosen His own from before the foundation of the world. Nothing gives security to the idea of salvation like the concept of election. Salvation from first to last is a work of God." This doctrine should be one of great comfort and it is significant that Paul here simply mentions it without expounding or explaining it. We conclude that it must have been one of the doctrines that formed part of his preaching ministry in Thessalonica. That may be a big lesson for us to learn in terms of our own evangelism.

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## 1:5

When Paul speaks of "our" gospel he is signifying that both he and the Thessalonians had made this message their own, the dynamic basis of their lives, and consequently were able to preach it. This preaching was in word, a reasoned, intelligent and intelligible presentation of the truth in Christ. But it was also with power and unction that were not explained in terms of intelligence, passion, personality or eloquence. It was the power of God actively present and operative, giving the preacher significant liberty and giving the hearers the awareness that this was God speaking, and not merely man. In this way people were gripped, awakened, challenged and converted. But it is not always so in the preaching of the Gospel, and Paul declares that there was a significant connection between the lives of the men preaching and the assurance in the preaching. They were men whom God could trust with the power of the Holy Spirit. When the Word of God is so preached you find not only the general operation of the Spirit of God by which interest is created as people hear the message, you find the effectual call of the Spirit by which people are constrained to respond to Christ. Granted a mystery remains, for in the same preaching some are hardened and some softened (2 Cor. 2:15-17). This is a fact of experience and its deep sadness is seen in many who like and prefer a true Gospel ministry to any other but who are never actually converted. But Paul's emphasis here is on "what manner of men we were"(AV), how we lived among you. And this is the responsibility of all who witness, for it is possible to rob the Gospel of its power by a wrong life and so to become a screen that hides Christ from sinners rather than an instrument by which they are saved (2 Cor. 4:1-5).

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## 1:6-8

Such was the radical work of evangelism done in Thessalonica in Paul's short visit that the new converts became leading figures and workers in the spread of the Gospel. This was the result not only of the apostle's preaching, but also of his manner of life which demonstrated the Gospel. The Word preached became flesh in the life of Paul and his companions, and the Thessalonians, moved by the Spirit, became imitators, not merely followers of these men who brought Christ to them. This lays a tremendous responsibility on Christians, for new converts must be able to look to us safely and to copy our pattern of life in the early stages of their new spiritual experience. This is not in any sense suggesting that a wrong kind of dependence will be created for our one desire is to lead people to Christ and not to ourselves. Young Christians may be beguiled into following after some very unbalanced and even undesirable characters, and discernment must be exercised even by those newly converted. Paul would say that it is generally safe to follow after those men and fellowships by which we were first brought to Christ (1 Cor. 4:15-16; 11:1).

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## 1:6-8

Take the word conviction ("assurance" AV) in v.5, link it with the suffering and joy in today's verses and you have the fundamental explanation of the powerful example of these believers in v.7 and the outreach of witness in v.8. We have already spoken of the costly conflict of Paul's life of consecration and how this issued in the power of the Spirit attending his ministry. In exactly the same way the Thessalonians, having been converted, found that the Christ who brought them such joy at the same time aroused the hatred and persecution of unbelievers towards them. Far from being robbed of their joy they went on in Christ to make their mark (the literal meaning of the word example or model) for the Gospel wherever they went. They outstripped many

Christians who may have been in Christ far longer, and the quality of their conversion, the living integrity of their lives and the dynamism of their witnessing and preaching trumpeted or thundered ('sounded out') the message of Christ far and wide. There was no need for Paul to tell of God's workings in Thessalonica. The news spread by itself and people knew there was a God mighty to save. Perhaps the Thessalonians were surprised to hear this about themselves, for the best kind of witness is that which is un-selfconscious. They would be encouraged to think that in and through their battles God was using them for His glory. In like manner Paul was heartened to go on in his own work, feeling that the battle was worth it for fruit such as that in Thessalonica. But who will ever know the costly deaths that Paul died in his own experience to be the instrument of God both in conversion and in meeting, stemming, averting and quenching the assaults of the Devil against the infant church in Thessalonica? (Gal. 4:19). We owe more to unknown spiritual helpers than we realise. Be grateful!

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## 1:9-10

It should always thrill us when we hear of God working in some place especially when we hear from a variety of sources of the authentic nature of that work as evidenced by the quality of the converts. Unfortunately we tend to be jealous if the same fruit is not attending our own work, and this is inspired by the Devil to distract us from getting on with our God-given tasks. Paul did not need to tell of his work in Thessalonica, even though he may have been tempted to do so in order to squash the scurrilous slander put out by his Jewish enemies in that city. There comes a time when a work of God is no longer open to question. Its fruit speaks for itself and we do wrong to come down to the level of trying to justify it to people who have no intention of ever being persuaded. Read again of Paul's coming to the city in Acts 17:1-8 and of how they upended the comfortable establishment and of how religious bigots stooped even to enlisting the "corner boys", bad characters, to raise trouble to discredit the evangelists. This kind of thing has never stopped, and in every area where there is a work of God which declares itself to be such a work by the fruitful impact of grace there will be slander. But at the same time there will be the continuing testimony of those who have been truly converted. You do not need to publicise a true work of God; it speaks for itself. What spoke most loudly from Thessalonica was the radical establishment and growth and maturity of such new Christians. This had been no superficial evangelistic flurry. It was a work of true conversion and spiritual establishment which has always the seeds of extension and self-perpetuation in it.

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## 1:9-10

Paul's ministry had a threefold effect among the people. They *turned* to God from idols; they began to *serve* the living and true God; and they *waited* for the coming again of the Saviour from heaven. This links with the threefold thanksgiving in v.3 for their work of *faith*, labour of *love* and patience of *hope*. There is little evidence that Paul ever attacked false religions as part of his ministry. He concentrated on the presentation of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ, received by faith and made dynamic by the indwelling Holy Spirit. It was when men turned in repentance and faith to God that in consequence they abandoned their idols. No doubt as they grew in grace they discovered that things they had at first counted neutral or even helpful were in fact competitors for the love and loyalty of their hearts. These idols had to go. Becoming a Christian is a decisive reorientation of the whole will and life. There is a break with what is not of Christ and the beginning of a new life in which we are servants of the living God, working in Him and with Him, in the fulfilling of His purposes, which are sure from eternity to eternity. Note that service for God stems from and is never separate from fellowship with God, and it is only as we know God, and to the extent that we know Him, that we are able to serve effectively. But however satisfying our service, there will always be an element of restless longing because we are saved *in* hope (Rom. 8:18-25). We will never be, nor have, all we long for this side of eternity. But far from depressing the Christian this fact acts as a spur to hope and maintains the forward look with eager expectation, because the end is the beginning (Phil. 1:20-26; 2 Cor. 4:16-5:9). Never let the Devil cheat you of your inheritance by anchoring you to a world that cannot last.

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**1:9-10**

It is necessary in these last verses to point out the doctrinal nature of the Gospel preached in Thessalonica. We have here saving faith, repentance, discipleship, the resurrection as the work of the Father, the ascension of Christ to heaven from which place He will come again, and the whole doctrine of the wrath of God. This emphasises that apostolic preaching was to a large extent the proclaiming of facts concerning what God had done in history for the salvation of sinners. The urgency of the issue is emphasised by the imminence of the return of Christ, which doctrine we are told is referred to on average once in every thirteen verses from Matthew to Revelation. Never forget Jesus' words, "The Son of man will come at the time you least expect Him," (Matt. 24: 44 NEB). But Paul also preached the wrath of God as a basic part of his gospel (Rom. 1:18ff). The AV speaks of Jesus who *delivered* us from wrath and that speaks of the assured freedom from wrath that is ours in the Gospel. The RSV speaks of Jesus who *delivers* us, high-lighting the continuing experience of the believer in a world in which the wrath of God is constantly operative. God has so ordered the universe and man's experience in it that there are inevitable consequences as a result of sin, and these consequences, mental, psychological and spiritual have to be lived with even within the forgiveness of God. The best translation of v.10 seems to speak of Jesus the *deliverer* and we are pointed right beyond any contemporary operation of God's wrath to the final day of His judgment. Be quite clear that God's wrath is no vindictive outburst of anger such as is seen when men lose control under pressure. "It is the eternal repulsion, by the Holy One, of all evil. Evil shall not dwell with Him." (Denney) We cannot escape the doctrine, which is totally apostolic, but there is escape from the *fact* in Jesus. "He, to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood..... O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be". (Robinson) What a Gospel!

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**2:1-2**

The substance of the first half of this chapter seems to deal with an elaboration of chap. 1:5 but there is a very definite objective in Paul's being so persistent about his ministry in Thessalonica. A mighty work of the Spirit had been done and the fruit remained in spite of satanic opposition. The second stage of devilish activity was to assail, and divide and so try to destroy the work, and this was being done by trying to discredit Paul's character and motives. If this had been merely a matter of personal slander Paul would have been silent (Rom. 12:19; Heb. 12:2-3; 1 Peter 2:20-23), but because the work is at stake Paul faces and answers the charges. Distance and passage of time blur facts and the Thessalonians needed to be reminded of how things had really been. If Paul had been an insincere man, impelled by personal ambition to build up a following, and desirous of making money out of his preaching, would he have gone on in the life that brought him only suffering and rejection by the majority? But even more, had Paul been the rogue some made him out to be, would God have entrusted such power of the Holy Spirit to him in his ministry, by which ministry these Thessalonians had been converted? Of course not! But there is no limit to what evil men will say when convicted and challenged by the Gospel. They will gladly do Devil's work, creating distrust between the shepherd and his sheep, and always seeking to make out that it is the shepherd who is the devil (Lk. 7:33-34; John 7:20; 8:43-50). Misrepresentation is Devil's work. See that we have nothing to do with it!

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**2:3-4**

The word strong opposition in v.2 "contention" (AV) or "hard struggle" (NEB) is literally "agony", and speaks of both inward and outward cost involved in preaching the Gospel in the power of the Spirit. That it was real agony is seen in the accusations which Paul refutes in v.3. His preaching was not based upon deceit, error or delusion, but on historical and spiritual truth. The message of Christ's saving death is not a shady, trumped up fable but fact testified to beyond any shadow of doubt (Acts 26:22-26; 1 Cor. 15:1-12). If we are unsure of our message, preaching only our doubts, uncertainties and vague insubstantial hopes and notions about God, we fail utterly. If the preachers are lost in a fog, you cannot blame the people for not coming to listen! The next charge he refutes is that of uncleanness or base motive (NEB). Some (Denney) suggest that this refers to greed and ambition, but the word used seems to be associated more often with sexual impurity or aberration (Rom. 1:24; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; and Eph. 4:19). In Eph. 5:3-4 there is a searching list of evil things which all belong together. The Jews constantly tried to suggest that Paul and his companions were associated with the same kind

of ritual impurity as marked many of the degenerate pagan systems of worship. Little wonder he called on Christians to abstain from all appearance of evil (5:22 AV). We must never allow ourselves to be misunderstood by being found in compromising situations. The honour of the Gospel is at stake! The word (trick) "guile"(AV) speaks of angling to catch something by means of bait, that is by offering as a lure, something that is not really what it seems to be. The time has come for the Gospel's sake for Paul to expose this evil denigration and he does so in detail and with power.

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## 2:3-4

The true rendering of v.4 shows Paul saying that he and his companions were attested (proved after testing) by God as people who could be trusted with the ministry of the Gospel, and because of this they exercise their ministry to please God who constantly tests their hearts. This is no claim to perfection nor plea to be exempt from constructive criticism. But he claims his call was from God (Heb. 5:4; Gal. 1:1, 10-12) and declares that it was after a stringent apprenticeship training that he was sent out into the ministry. There is a note of wonder in v.4 as Paul thinks of the privilege of being in the ministry at all (Eph. 3:7-8). But there is also the note of having been put to the test by God and *only then* sent out to minister. Think of the fourteen years between his conversion (Acts 9) and his being set apart as a missionary (Acts 13) and Paul's own testimony to this in Gal. 1:15-2:1. This "testing time", going through the mill in comparative obscurity, is paralleled in the story of Moses who for eighty years was being prepared in order to carry out forty years of active and significant service Acts 7:23,30. This was the time when God sifted the man and found him ready and trustworthy. Public service is a very dangerous sphere, especially if God purposes blessing, and it is never right to pitchfork novices into it, not least because there is a Devil waiting to attack. Some young Christians have never recovered from the exalting of spirit experienced when a soul was converted the first time they gave their testimony. That was the beginning and ending of their fruitful service. Spiritual responsibility is given to those who bear the hallmark of God's testing (Matt. 25: 14-30).

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## 2:5-6

From the beginning of this chapter, in defence of his ministry, Paul has made reference to his spiritual credentials, emphasising his submission under suffering, the openness of the lives of himself and his colleagues, open to the scrutiny of God as well as men, and finally their self-denial in respect of both position and payment. They did not use flattering words, insincere compliments and expressions of cordiality they did not really mean in order to win over the Thessalonians to their side. Their concern was to let the truth of God win these people to the side of Christ. His evangelism had never been a cloak to hide ambition and self-seeking. Paul and his companions had no desire to build a little kingdom for themselves, for such covetousness, which would always be hidden if possible, is in fact idolatry (Col. 3:5) since it exalts self above all else. No one could ever have said Paul patterned his activity in a way that would please people or draw their adulation. He was too concerned to see to it that nothing cast a shadow on the glory of the message he brought. Paul might well have stood on his dignity as an apostle, especially as an apostle who declined to exercise his right to the support of the church in material things. But he saw the danger of self-sacrifice becoming pride, and of the temptation to recompense himself by claiming a lordship over others. The working of the Devil is subtle when our voluntary humility can lead to the pride of spiritual pre-eminence. Paul guarded his soul for the Gospel's sake, remembering John 13: 1-17. (See also Phil. 2:1-8).

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## 2:7-8

Read along with these verses Acts 20:17-38 and realise that Paul's manner of life and ministry in Thessalonica were not a unique effort but typical of his whole life. Read also 1 Cor. 9:14-23 to see the self negation of Paul, the involvement of his life and affections with those he ministered to, and marvel at how totally his desire was to give and not to get (cf. Matt. 21:25-28). Read of him again in 2 Cor. 12:14-15. In Eph. 4:1-3, 30-32 you have the same heart-to-heart involvement which is vital in any true pastoral ministry. It is not sentimental or cloying, because the desire is to draw men's life God-ward, nor is it necessarily demonstrative in an extravagant way,

although love must be expressed or else it will die. Read in 1 Cor. 13 and then Romans 5:1-7, and you begin to understand Paul when he speaks of the love of Christ constraining or compelling him (2 Cor. 5:14). If Jesus was willing to come down and to go so far for him, how could he refuse to do the same for others?

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## 2:7-8

Some texts read, "we were gentle," and some read "we were babes," and it seems best to take both meanings. If Paul is likening the apostles to babes he must mean that they came down to the level of the Thessalonians, speaking in language that they could understand, like a nurse or mother talking baby-language. We are told that too much of this kind of thing is not good for children, and the principle holds good in spiritual things. We guard against children remaining children after they are grown up, but we also guard against producing precocious infants who are made to act like adults, or like what their parents think adults should be. Be quite sure Paul would not accommodate his message to prolonged infancy, dealing only with the milk of the word. That would be to deny the Gospel and produce a church that never got past the spiritual level of gospel "sing-songs". A properly fed and guided child acquires an enormous, healthy appetite which must be satisfied. Paul therefore speaks of being like a nurse and mother, with all the native gentleness, care and pride, concerned to impart a healthy life with a view to future growth. Such a nurse-mother must also strive to provide a context of security in which the child may grow into a balanced personality. There must be no prolonging of infancy or adolescence, nor an equally dangerous precipitation of adulthood. The Christian life is essentially family life in which all ages share, having appropriate duties and privileges, being at different stages of growth (including the parents) and required to make significant allowances as well as demands. But only love can make this possible, and love requires self-giving with the willingness Paul himself displayed towards the Thessalonians.

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## 2:9-12

Having spoken of the tenderness of a mother's love, Paul now speaks of the discipline of a father's love and the rigour of responsibility is very evident. Like all Rabbis Paul learned a trade so that his teaching of others would be free, and in Thessalonica he worked at the heavy trade of tent-making to support himself, and in the rest of his time he preached. Be clear, of course, that both Old and New Testaments declare the right of a minister of spiritual things to be maintained, cf. 1 Cor. 9:1-15. But to claim the right when it might be misunderstood and so hinder the Gospel was far from Paul's mind. He then calls the Christians to remember from their personal dealings with the apostles how devout, righteous, and irreproachable their lives had been. This is to counter the slander bandied about by the Jews who, some suggest, were bitter at losing the support of some influential people from the synagogue. Think of what some ministers say when their young people, tired of empty sermons devoid of spiritual food, go to other churches! But we all must guard against slander, which is sin, by refusing to pass on stories and comments, especially when we have no grounds for believing they are true. "To sympathise with detraction is to have the spirit of the Devil, not of Christ. Never give utterance to a suspicious thought. Never repeat what would discredit a man, if you have only heard it and are not sure it is true; even if you are sure of its truth, be afraid of yourself if it gives you any pleasure to think of it. Love thinketh no evil; love rejoiceth not in iniquity." (Denney) It is all very practical, especially when you are dealing with the reputation of anyone God is pleased to use for the blessing of others. The prophets knew this. Read 1 Chron. 16:21-22, and Isa. 54:17.

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## 2:9-12

Following on the threefold description of their lives, Paul now in v.11-12 gives a threefold summary of the ministry of the apostles. They exhorted, comforted and charged, or they urged, encouraged and testified. Now, a father does this by individual counselling rather than by public address and it is taxing work. If a preacher deals with matters from the pulpit and the word is personal, people say they would prefer to be spoken to privately; but when words are spoken privately they are all too often taken as personal attack and resented, resulting in a breach of fellowship which may take years to heal. The verses suggest a real element of solemnity, and may refer to the very difficult task of speaking to and helping those who are beginning to fall back from true

discipleship. The exhortation is to walk or live lives worthy of God, who is constantly calling us to His Kingdom and glory, which things are present realities, operating and progressing in human affairs, as well as things to be manifested in perfection at the end of time. All that is presently being worked out in us and through us in Christ will finally be revealed, and only then will we fully realise what we have been involved in (2 Cor. 4:14-18; 1 Cor. 13:9-12; 1 John 3:1-3). We must live in the light of this fact which signifies our true identity as part of a royal and eternal kingdom. This being so we must learn the poise and dignity of royal family, for in our persons we represent both the King and His Kingdom. In a practical sense we must remind ourselves that royalty never runs. Walk worthy!

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## 2:13

Having set the glory of the advancing Kingdom of God over against the calumny and opposition of the Jews, Paul now speaks of that instrument by which the work of God is done, namely preaching. This is the means by which God calls people to Himself (Rom. 10:13-18; 1 Cor. 1:17-18, 21-24; 2:1-5). Two different words are translated "received", the first refers to the formal reception of a message delivered, and the second (accepted NIV) to the warm reception of that word, the welcome of the heart. By the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit, and not without it, people listen, follow the argument, reason within themselves, become interested, are convinced that this is more than the words of mere men and then they realise that God Himself is in the Word, speaking to them personally. It is in this way that the Word of the Gospel becomes the power of God unto salvation, and it works to mighty purpose in them that believe. Granted it is a miracle, for we do not know how the Spirit moves, convicting of sin and creating faith in Christ, yet at the same time it is linked with a person's attitude as he hears the Word. Think of Cornelius in Acts 10: 44, who, listening to Peter's words, heard *the* word. What thrill of awe and expectation should mark our attending on the preaching of the Word!

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## 2:13

There are many different ways in which the Word of God can be listened to, and even when it is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit it does not always result in saving faith. Think of the variations of result in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13) and of the statement in Heb. 4:1- 2. Congregations can be exceedingly casual in their listening to preaching, not really allowing it to register. When this happens we are in danger of becoming insensitive to and then incapable of receiving the word preached. It slips away from us (Heb. 2:1) and becomes part of the irrelevant, insignificant background noise of life's experience. Think of Stephen's words in Acts 7:51. The word becomes an instrument of judgment rather than of salvation. But what if this dullness is found in the hearts of believers (Heb. 5:11)? This signifies a very serious spiritual condition which should fill us with alarm, especially if we take Hebrews 6:4-12 seriously. The word we hear is not to be treated as a theme for interesting discussion, for by this attitude we often reduce the word preached to the level of a mere diversion. It is to be received with the obedience of faith and, when it is, the power of God works in and energises the lives of those who believe. "It is the condition of the working of God in men that they continue to exercise faith. Or to put it another way, we cannot live today on the spiritual capital of yesterday." (Morris)

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## 2:14-16

The transformation of the lives of the Thessalonian believers, and the way they had borne severe persecution were the twofold proofs of a genuine work of God in them. The Gospel received had changed them and was still working among them, and even persecution could not quench the fire of conviction. Note that Paul emphasises how their own fellow-countrymen had persecuted them, and this indicates that the Thessalonian church was predominantly Gentile. Note carefully that this tells us that the Jews in Europe, as well as those in Asia Minor and those in Judaea, had by and large remained totally antagonistic to the powerful and gracious advance of the Gospel. It was not a polite antagonism as v.15 makes plain, and many a minister in modern days has found the same virulent hatred against the Gospel as was evidenced in speech and action in the crucifixion of the Lord of Glory, when religious men became like demons of hell in their blind fury and refusal of God's Word. Granted it was not easy for the religious Jews to see their treasured structure of religion being demolished and increasingly

by-passed as irrelevant, its total powerlessness being demonstrated and exposed. But why did they not recognise from the evidences that the work of the Gospel and the results were in fact the work of God? Why did they not rejoice in new, living power coming into their religious situations, to the Jew first? This is the mystery of iniquity manifesting itself in unbelief which refuses to be moved. It is a mystery which brings us to face the operative wrath of God, which solemn truth leads us to think of the tears of God in the face of such unbelief, as we see in Matt. 23:37-39.

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## 2:14-16

We must learn to discern the true dimension of the work we are involved in when the Gospel is being preached. The mystery of iniquity mentioned yesterday and the strategy of Satan, to be spoken of tomorrow, are to be seen as encompassed by the strategy of God who is calling out His own elect unto salvation and at the same time exposing evil and bringing it to judgment. When you trace through the Old Testament the rigorous refusal by Israel of all the prophets, then read Jesus' comment in Matt. 21:33-46 (cf. Isa. 5:1-7) you are bound to be amazed not by the fact of God's judgment, but by the amazing long-suffering of God whereby judgment has been so long delayed. In today's verses you read of men seeking to strangle the preaching of the Gospel lest people should be converted (cf. Acts 13:6-11; 17:5; Matt. 23: 13, 32). When Paul speaks of such men filling up the cup of their sins to the full measure, he is pointing to the aggregate, total effect of their deliberate acts of refusal and rejection. Far from being melted by the cumulative evidence of the Gospel's power, they seem more and more determined to see their opposition through to the end. But God's wrath has come upon them at last, says Paul, as if referring to some present experience of the persecutors. This may be so, but the wrath to come must also speak of the final judgment which Paul seems to speak of here as being already in operation. There is no escape.

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## 2:17-18

Paul is quite clear that the Devil is at work in this situation, as he had been ever since this missionary journey had started with the great rift between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41). But the Devil is never truly conqueror, even although it may seem to be so at any given stage. In spite of all, the church had been established at Thessalonica and then evil men first drove Paul out of the city and then accused him of deserting. Their objective was not primarily Paul, who knew his own heart towards God, but the poisoning of the minds of the new Christians with regard to Paul. That the Thessalonians were tempted to believe the lies seems suggested by the poignancy of v.17, where Paul speaks of himself as being bereaved of them or orphaned from them, and it was with this grief of heart that the apostle was continuing his ministry in other places. An estrangement between a minister and his own children in the faith is a thing of agony which the Devil is quick to exploit. But note how quickly Paul reassures these believers in the most affectionate terms, making it clear that on two separate occasions he had tried to come to them but had been hindered by Satan. Just what the hindrance was we cannot tell, but we can imagine the somewhat shamefaced reaction of the Thessalonians when they realised they had been duped by the Devil to believe ill of the man through whose ministry they had been brought to Christ and established. We have an enemy and our over-intense feelings are too susceptible to his insinuations.

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## 2:17-18

The attacks of Satan sometimes come before a work is started and we must, in discerning his working, seek to understand what he is trying to prevent. At other times the enemy attacks after a work has been accomplished and it is only by sensing the devil's fury at something eternal being snatched from him and hurled against his kingdom that we will be able to stand in the evil day (Eph. 6: 12ff). That Satan was able here to hinder Paul does not mean that victory went to the Devil. Far from it! God always has the last word. Yet at the same time, evil men who do the evil works of the Devil are never guiltless, and we apply here the words Joseph spoke to his brothers: "You meant it for evil but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). If God had needed Paul to be with the Thessalonians he would have been there, through thick or thin. But face the fact is Satan hindered! This was Paul's interpretation of his circumstances and he recognised the evil power at work. How did he know? He had

learned to recognise the enemy in the almost infinite variety of his approaches and in so doing he had learned to know when to resist and press ahead in the defiance of faith, and when to submit and wait for God to clear the way. The word 'hindered' (stopped) used by Paul is basically a military one which signifies the breaking up of a road to render it impassable. If such a thought persuades us we are really at war then this day's meditation will not be wasted.

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## 2:17-18

We cannot in these notes go into a full discussion of the person and work of Satan but some practical instruction can be given. We have an enemy and we must reckon on him. He is a liar (John 8:44), an accuser (Rev. 12:10), an adversary (1 Pet. 5:8), and an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:3,14). He waits for our unguarded hour when we are feeling spiritually secure and complacent and consequently careless about *duty* (2 Sam. 11:1ff) and in a moment he has gained his end. At other times, as with David, he can fill a servant of God with totally irrational and quite unfounded fears (1 Sam. 27:10) following upon times of spiritual crisis and success (1 Kings 19:1-4). What are we to do and how are we to learn to discern good and evil? It will not be done on the perimeter of the spiritual and moral battle! We must learn to know and recognise the lying, seducing voice of evil even when it comes to us through our nearest and dearest, as it came to Jesus so often through Peter (Matt. 16:21-23). Jesus said His sheep would always recognise His voice and would not follow a stranger (John 10:1- 5). Even when we have in measure degenerated in spiritual life, the warning bell rings to signal that all is not well (Gen. 27:22). It is a foolish man who acts in such uncertainty, and a wise man who at all times holds back from extreme reactions pressed on the conscience with *sudden* compulsion. To be made aware of the reality of the enemy and his evil intentions is healthy as well as safe and need not make us afraid. The enemy is conquered and his victor is not only with us but within us (Lk. 22:31; 1 John 4:1-4; Col. 2: 14-15).

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## 2:19-20

These verses are what Morris calls "an excited outburst of esteem for his converts," and it certainly seems that Paul forgets the Devil and all his malicious slander and persecution, counting these things nothing compared with the people in Thessalonica who had been brought to Christ. In a very real sense Paul had lost all for Christ's sake yet he counted himself richer than any on earth. These converts standing in Christ and growing in grace and yet to prove an even fuller witness to Christ and the Gospel were his rewards and riches. These were the returns or dividends he gathered from the investment of all his suffering. This is what makes it worthwhile going on ourselves and urging others to go on. To have a share under God in the salvation of others and to see these young Christians growing up to be significant persons in the ever advancing Kingdom of God is a thrill beyond all others. If these converts were the seal on Paul's ministry now, they would in the day of Christ's coming be his crown of reward. Note how all Paul's life is directed forwards rather than backwards. He sees the promise and possibilities of these converts, not in terms of their usefulness to himself, but in terms of pleasure to Christ in the day of the fulfilment of all His travail (Eph. 5:25-27; Isa. 53:11). Paul calls his converts into fellowship with himself in the light of the glory of Christ's coming. There is no need for us to be ashamed on that day (Phil. 2: 15-18; Dan. 12:3). It is good to live with an eye to the end, and when Christ is the end we shall never want to stop half-way.

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## 3:1-5

The deep feeling and emotional tension of the last four verses of the previous chapter are continued here as Paul expresses even more fully his care for and anxiety over the Thessalonians. He speaks in v.1 of being no longer able to bear the lack of news from the city and of being prepared to be left alone (a strong word, almost meaning to be bereaved) in order to send Timothy to them. These words give a wonderful insight into the humanity of this spiritual giant and reveal how much he depended on the sympathy and assistance of others in his ministry. This was particularly the case in Athens, the intellectual capital of the world where it was anything but easy for the apostle to minister alone (Acts 17:16ff). His anxiety for the spiritual safety of the Christians at Thessalonica was an added burden, weighing him down, just as he had experienced in being concerned with the Corinthians

on another occasion, recorded in 2 Cor. 2:12-13; 7:4-7. But in each case when the news came about these churches it was good news of spiritual progress. And we have to recognise how the Devil had assailed Paul, almost destroying his vital energy in the Gospel, to say nothing of exhausting his emotional reserves, by making him over anxious about his work and his converts. This was bound to distract him from the immediate work in hand and in measure to make him concede victory to the Devil. We must learn to take this enemy seriously.

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### 3:1-5

Note how warmly and with what dignity Paul refers to young Timothy in spite of the disparity in age and spiritual experience. Perhaps it was the intensity of the battle that made Paul so aware of the fact that this was a man to be trusted. At other times, as Barnabas knew, Paul was not the easiest of men to live and work with! But Paul's concern for these believers would certainly be communicated by Timothy and they would know his one desire was to buttress (establish) their faith and to do so by encouraging (comforting) them. This he does in order that in the midst of these afflictions, their own and Paul's, human and demonic, they should not allow themselves to be turned out of the right way. Paul seems to be aware that there would be those who would try to brainwash the Christians with lies, threats or fair words, putting a false interpretation on their difficulties and thereby suggesting that the best thing would be to turn away from Christ. This would be to go back to the dull and dry negativeness of dead religion or the equally barren wastes of humanistic intellectualism. This is a very real temptation and it is all too easy in the middle of difficulties to lose sight of God. This is why Paul seeks to interpret their sufferings in v.3-4, reminding them that right from the start they had been told that this would be a very real part of Christian life and service. How could it be otherwise with a world order of evil (1 John 5:19), a spirit of disobedience in human hearts (Eph. 2:2-3), an organised kingdom of antichrist (Eph. 6:12ff) and an angry Devil (Rev. 12:10-17)?

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### 3:1-5

In the last verse of this section we see how Paul's spiritual anxiety for his converts had become almost dread as he faced the possibility of the work in Thessalonica falling to the ground. We shall see tomorrow that his fears were groundless, and this simply highlights the persistence of the Devil against the preacher as well as the converts. Paul, as well as the Thessalonians, needed the reassurance of Timothy but this did not keep him from being very realistic in his attitude. This is clear from v.5 where Paul seems to face the possibility of temporary failure because of Satanic attack while he is sure that in the long run the work will not prove vain, because it is God's work, not his own, and it had been confirmed by many unmistakeable signs, as he has declared earlier in the epistle. Paul cannot prevent Satan attacking the church at Thessalonica but he can send Timothy whose ministry will counteract the evil influence. We must not be surprised by Paul's thorough dealing with the fact of Satan, which fact seems to have been a real part of his evangelistic ministry. In his own life this man had had to deal with the Devil (2 Cor. 12: 5-12) because of the extent of the spiritual work committed to him by God. It cannot be otherwise with us, especially when our lives give the enemy so much opportunity. In this we are totally different from our Lord (John 14: 30) and it was because He gave the enemy no ground for operation that He was able to meet the full fury of his assault without yielding (Lk. 4:1-13). It is only the man who resists evil who learns the power of evil. But part of the fruit of resisting the assaults of the evil one in the power of Jesus Christ is that suffering makes us ministers of grace to others (2 Cor. 1:3-7).

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### 3 1-5

That Paul's heart and affection were involved in his care for his converts has been spoken of fully. It is the involvement of love which has brought him such anguish and we give two comments on the cost of love.

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung, and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safely in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket safe, dark, motionless, airless it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is

damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell ..... We shall draw nearer to God, not by trying to avoid the sufferings inherent in all loves, but by accepting them and offering them to Him, throwing away all defensive armour. If our hearts need to be broken, and if He chooses this as the way in which they should break, so be it." (C S Lewis)

"This is where sanctification is proved real or counterfeit. We are not asked here about our prayers and earnestness, our spiritual exercises or piety, or our grasp of the doctrines of the faith. What we are asked is: Do we give ourselves away, or do we keep ourselves to ourselves? Some Christians need a broken heart, a cross, a thorn, to make them human and loving. This alone is sanctification. Nothing else matters." (James Philip)

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### 3:6-8

Hardship that brings fruit is bearable but hardship that terminates in its own costliness is demoralising and destructive. When news came of the spiritual standing of his converts it was like a gospel message (that is the literal word used for good news or tidings here) to Paul. What an example this is of the timely interventions of God on behalf of His servants. The hard pressed apostle takes heart to press on with his God-given work and writes at once to tell these believers how much they had done for him. They in turn would be encouraged to go on in faithfulness, surprised perhaps at being of such real use in the work of God, and equally surprised to have been made aware of the battles and struggles of a man whom they might well have imagined to be of such spiritual stature as to be beyond needing help from ordinary believers like themselves. Paul, on his part, not only rejoiced in the fellowship, love, care and loyalty of these Thessalonian believers, but also took heart regarding the whole direction and emphasis of his own ministry. His was essentially a teaching evangelism, an exposition of Scripture as we made plain in the opening notes on this epistle. Right from the start he had got down to the business of doctrinal teaching and preaching. His reaction now is that if people such as these in Thessalonica could be converted and so grounded in the faith that their spiritual life has a self-propagating quality, then this ministry would be valid anywhere. Thessalonica also made plain that Paul's person was valid and acceptable and evocative of love and loyalty. The whole experience was like a resurrection from the dead to newness of life, and Paul felt himself lifted right above his difficulties and ready to go on in the service of Christ, which was his life.

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### 3:9-10

We are not surprised to find ourselves now in the realm of prayer and joy. The exuberance of his joy is noteworthy for it is spiritual joy in God's presence rather than fleshly satisfaction and carnal self-congratulation. There is no question of Paul and his converts forming a mutual admiration society, for on both sides it is recognised that all the blessing is from God and thus all the glory is His alone. This does not in any sense eliminate the need for the expression of gratitude to the human channels of blessing. Gratitude is acceptable to God and to man and to withhold it from either is churlish, to say the least. But Paul does not confuse progress and joy with completeness. He sees his converts as being on the move forward but by no means at the terminus, and therefore his joy is channelled into prayer which is filled with a deep desire to be able to minister again to these believers, to perfect or supply what was yet lacking in their faith. This is not to suggest in a condemnatory sense that they were sub-standard in their Christianity or their service. What is in Paul's heart is that he might bring to completeness or bring into proper condition the faith of these believers, and so confirm and make good the spiritual advance gained and lead them on to even richer and fuller service. This passage alone is a warrant for what we call a teaching ministry, which certainly seems to be part of the will of God for His Church (Eph. 4:11-16). If we ever stop learning we come to the end of spiritual growth and spiritual service. "God is easy to please, but hard to satisfy." (C S Lewis)

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### 3:11-13

Satan has been allowed to hinder and God has used this situation to teach both Paul and the Thessalonians. It would appear that Paul had tried more than once to engineer the situation and make his journey back to Thessalonica possible but this had been frustrated. Now he waits for God to open up the way and send him to

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Thessalonica. He does not think of his circumstances as fortuitous developments but rather as ordered by God Himself, who is a Father to His people. Not as a doctrinal statement on the divinity of Christ or on the Trinity, but as a natural reaction in prayer, Paul links the name of the Lord Jesus Christ with that of the Father in a way he assumes the Thessalonians will understand and accept. This again is an indication of the nature of Paul's preaching. There is no mention of the Spirit, but this is neither surprising nor an indication of lack of knowledge concerning the Spirit's person and work. The Spirit does not draw attention to Himself but is sent forth by the Father through the Son to be the executive power of the purposes of salvation. How we need to be reminded of this when we pray and when we seek to serve. The Holy Spirit is God's only worker, and it is indeed a glorious affirmation to be able to say with conviction and Biblical understanding, "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

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### 3:11-13

Until he sees them face to face, Paul prays for two things for these Christians, namely love and holiness. He prays first for love within the fellowship which serves to edify and mature the Body of Christ, and in so doing it becomes an outgoing love towards all people in a desire to bring them to Christ. If we hesitate to give others love on the ground that they do not deserve it, we must be told that Christ and His apostles gave us love when we were not worthy. Paul does not hesitate to point to his own example, not least because a preacher's message must be displayed in his life as well as his sermons. It is a sure basis of love that delivers from instability and leads on to genuine holiness of life, not holiness which is impeccably but coldly correct, but rather that which is warmly blameless. It is a holiness which attracts rather than repels and it is seen in Jesus but not in the Pharisees. Paul's thought of holiness here is not simply that of ethical and spiritual integrity, without which no man shall see God (Heb. 12:14), but includes the thought of being set apart from common to sacred use as one of God's holy ones (saints). Note that at the end of each chapter so far Paul has emphasised the coming of Christ in His glory. "The instinctiveness with which Paul recurs to this great event shows how large a place it filled in his creed and in his heart. His hope was a hope of Christ's second coming; his joy was a joy which would not pale in that awful presence; his holiness was a holiness to stand the test of those searching eyes. Where has this supreme motive gone in the modern church? Is not this one point in which the apostolic word bids us perfect that which is lacking in our faith?" (Denney)

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### 4:1-2

When Jesus commissioned the first apostles, He commanded them to make disciples in all nations and to teach them obedience (Matt. 28:19-20). This is what Paul did in Thessalonica, and he recalls his ministry now with some degree of personal urgency, but at the same time adopting no superior standing. He speaks as a man in Christ to men and women in Christ, calling them to walk in love and holiness and to do so more and more. Right from the start of their Christian lives it had been made clear to them that discipleship and holiness of life were not optional extras, but the basic confirmations of a true work of grace in their hearts. There is an obligation or compelling necessity for believers to live in this way, for they are no longer their own (1 Cor. 6:19-20). That the Thessalonians had in fact begun to live like this has been recognised right through the epistle, and Paul simply urges them to go on, never settling down to an inferior level of life. Paul is always looking for increase, growth, advance and development, whether in individuals or fellowships. This does not require changes that are impressive or demonstrative, but it does require increase, more and more. This is not to say that development will always be along one particular aspect of life and service, although variety must never have essential contradiction within it. That would lead to disorder, of which God is not the author (1 Cor. 14:33). The various stages of growth and increase on a human level are all complementary, leading to a fully grown, integrated personality capable of responsible action. Youthful enthusiasm which normally sees only the immediate situation must grow in instructed self-control in order to take a long term view. At the same time established conservatism must have an ear to the voice of youth lest it become so detached from actual situations as to be ineffective. The commandments, instructions or charges given are to be likened to the orders passed along a line of soldiers from the captain. This growth we speak of is a fellowship grace rather than an individual one, and it needs clear understanding about basic issues in order to obey. This is Paul's next theme.

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**4:3**

We may be vague about many aspects of God's will for our lives, but this one verse makes a categorical and absolute statement with regard to God's objective in terms of moral purity. Then as now the atmosphere of permissive morality was a constant danger to the witness of Christians who are called to shine as lights in the world. Contrary to the cry of God-denying humanism, the whole testimony of Scripture declares that chastity comes before charity. And the standard set by God (for all people and not only believers as we shall see in v.6) is that of a clear cut break (abstain) from all that comes into the category of moral wrong (the word for fornication gives us the word pornographic). The following verses go on to speak of the sanctity of human relationships and the sin of trifling with another's feelings whether by presumption or reluctance. But here, when the word speaks of the will of God, it indicates not merely the law or standard of God, which in itself could be a desolating thing because of our human weakness, inability and lack of desire, but it refers to the dynamic and effective power of God in the Gospel whereby our lives are transformed. To be a Christian means that this saving power of God is already in fact at work within us to accomplish this end of holiness, which is His will for us. God does not want to leave us victims to the swaying passions and temptations of human nature and circumstances. He is a God of salvation and the reference to His will here is given as much as an encouragement as a challenge. Go to the battle of moral conflict absolutely sure that in it you are not alone. God is enthusiastically working in and with you.

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**4:3-8**

The end to which all God's desire, power and providence is directed is our sanctification, the conforming of our wills and characters to His own, as seen in Jesus Christ. It is the glory of the Gospel that in Christ we are in fact raised to newness of life, and we must learn in faith to hold to what God has made us in face of all temptations and opportunities (Rom. 6: 1-14). We do not struggle towards victory; we stand in victory and make it a practical reality, not least in the realm of sexual morality. In 1 Cor. 6:15-20 Paul states the basic principle that the body belongs to God, and here, having in v.3 declared the prohibition of immorality, he now speaks of human relationships in which no-one is allowed to make use of another human personality to gratify his desires. All human relationships are to be consecrated to God, especially those in which the deepest emotional feelings and desires are involved. Let no one be guilty of fraud (v.6 - defraud, over-reach, wrong) remembering "that all sexual looseness represents an act of injustice to someone other than the two parties concerned." This is as true in respect of promiscuity before marriage as it is of adultery after marriage. In the former an individual is robbed of something pure and a future partner denied something precious. But before the limit of physical indulgence is reached, there can be gross fraud on the part of both men and women who awaken both love and desire which they have no intention of satisfying in a right way. This is cruelty of a most despicable kind and it is sin against God.

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**4:3-8**

In spite of the protests of the humanists, who are still drawing on the spiritual capital of earlier generations, we must declare categorically in agreement with Scripture that moral indulgence, which brings with it the devaluation of marriage and the despoiling of human relationships, is the fruit of godlessness. The passion of lust (5) is linked inseparably with ignorance of God, which ignorance is without excuse as Paul declares in Romans 1:18-32. But even although society's laws do not condemn such moral evil as is spoken of here, and public opinion both condones and encourages it, the fact remains that God judges it and ordains that it will bring its own reward in this life and the life to come. Remember that Paul is speaking this word primarily to those who make a profession of Christian faith. He gives three warnings against succumbing to this spirit of the age with its laxness and impurity. It brings God's retribution (6), for whatsoever a man sows he shall reap with increase, sooner or later, and the indulgence of the flesh will bring the deadening of personality and spirit. Secondly this sin leads also to rejection of God (8), who is the main Person sinned against, as David discovered and confessed (Ps 51:4). The man who lives loosely treats God as of no account. Thirdly, to live wrongly in this realm is to sin against the Holy Spirit of God who dwells in our hearts and who must be grieved and quenched and resisted and shattered when we yield to the temptations of the flesh. There is no reason why we

should. "Think what Spirit dwells within you!" (Lyte). He must be deliberately subdued if we are to indulge the flesh for He will protest loudly in God's name.

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#### 4:3-8

"The holy law of God, wrought into the very constitution of our bodies, takes care that we do not violate it without paying the penalty .... Sensual indulgence extinguishes the capacity for feeling.... all that remains is the dull sense of incalculable loss. Were there ever sadder lines written than those in which Burns, with his life ruined by this very thing, writes to a young friend and warns him against it?

'I wave the quantum o' the sin,  
The hazard o'concealing;  
But Och! it hardens a' within,  
And petrifies the feeling.'

This inward deadening is one of the most terrible consequences of immorality; it is so unexpected, so unlike the anticipations of youthful passion, so stealthy in its approach, so inevitable, so irreparable. All these sins are avenged also in the will and in the spiritual nature." (Denney) Think of the passage from Bunyan, telling of Christian in the Interpreter's House and how he asked the man in despair how he came to be locked in the cage from which there was no escape. The man said, "I left off to watch and be sober; I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts. I sinned against the light of the word and the goodness of God; I have grieved the Spirit, and He is gone; I tempted the Devil, and he is come to me; I have provoked God to anger, and He has left me; I have so hardened my heart that I cannot repent." Denney comments: "They who do such things do not escape the avenging holiness of God. Even death, the refuge to which despair so often drives, holds out no hope to them. There remaineth no more a sacrifice for sin, but a fearful expectation of judgment."

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#### 4:9-12

Paul makes many references to the content and emphasis of his preaching during his short stay in Thessalonica, and we must be amazed not only by the amount he preached but also by the amount these people from a pagan background actually took in (2:11-12; 3:3-4; 4:1-2; 5:1-2; 2 Thess. 2:1-5; 3:10)., What he emphasises here is the spirit of love that should mark every true fellowship of God's people. It was not merely love that is turned in on itself as if the local congregation, however worthy or blessed by God, was the sum total of God's work. It was love that is expansive, generous, interested and outgoing to all God's people. This grace of true love among Christians is not something that has to be manufactured, and certainly not something to be worn as a veneer of niceness that has no heart to it. It is a natural grace of those who are born of God. To love is an evidence of true conversion, and it is noteworthy that Paul deals with this in close conjunction with his words in the earlier verses concerning personal purity. Love forever stands over against the essential lust of selfishness, and gives warmth and attractiveness to true holiness. There is an icy sanctity that is repellent and a very poor advertisement for Christianity. But there is a love, taught by God, which draws the broken and needy into the light, warmth and safety of the fellowship and in so doing brings them to Jesus. This is what a Christian church should be.

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#### 4:9-12

The casual or even the close observer of the church in our day would not be likely to exclaim, as they did in apostolic times, "Behold how these Christians love one another!" But love is not an incidental or occasional factor in Christian experience, for we "are taught by God to love". It is no human inspiration but is of the essence of the divine work of grace in the soul, and in depth, intensity and outreach it is far beyond reason and calculation. It is an inevitable and irresistible impulse, tender in its care and sacrificial in its practical expression (2 Cor. 8:1-6). Read also 1 John 3:14-19; 4:7-13, 18-21; 1 Cor. 13. But just as love within the family brings blessing and privilege, so it brings responsibilities and restrictions. Think how the advent of children limits the personal freedom of parents. So it must be in spiritual things. There is no use praying for converts if, when they are born of God, we are not prepared to take on the responsibility of spiritual parents to give by love the security

of opportunity for the newborn to grow in balanced development. But there is no such thing as a self-contained family unit in Christ. Wherever Christ's people are found, loving interest must be shown in others and a fellowship is the poorer if it does not have this vital interest, which must grow if we are genuinely Christ's.

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#### 4:9-12

Still concentrating on v.9-10 note the emphasis on *all* the believers in *all* Macedonia and the need to abound more and more in love. It is as if Paul was drawing attention to the constantly increasing work of God that called for more and more love and sacrificial service. Whatever we mean by revival it will certainly demand more and more of that "spare time" that we guard so jealously for our own pleasure. But love, the love of God in our hearts (Rom. 5:5), will constrain us (2 Cor. 5:14-15) to give ourselves for those for whom Christ died. But who are all the brethren in all Macedonia. From Acts 16-18 it would appear that churches were founded only at Philippi, Beroea, Corinth and perhaps Athens (Acts 17:32-34). But these churches were not static and they exercised a ministry of evangelism, no doubt visiting the smaller communities around the main centres of population, and this, together with the independent labours of people like Silas, Timothy and Luke, who were not always with Paul, signifies a work of expansion in the Gospel far exceeding our normal calculations. We are all far too apt to circumscribe God, reducing Him to our own dimensions and assuming that He is only working where *we know* Him to be working. Paul has already spoken of this in 1:7-8 and it should encourage us, especially when we feel that our own particular work is very small. God is working. Lift up your eyes and see, and rejoice, and in your rejoicing begin to pray the Lord of the harvest to send out workers. You may be the first to be conscripted. What a privilege!

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#### 4:9-12

Love has somewhat more to do with hard work than with affectionate demonstration, although there is no excuse for the absence of the latter. It appears that a certain emotional excess and imbalance was affecting the life of the church, and Paul urges the believers to study to be quiet and to mind their own business, instead of hounding each other with words that passed for witness and exhortation. The verse could read, "Let it be your ambition to keep calm and look after your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we ordered you, so that you may command the respect of those outside your own number and at the same time never be in want." (NEB) Some were so taken up with "spiritual things" *talking* about them, that they forgot they were under spiritual obligation to get a job, hold it down and do it well, so that the heathen would not be in a position to slander the Gospel. There are far too many Christians who, under the general term "living by faith", forget the creation ordinance that if a man does not work he has no right to eat (Gen. 3:19; 2 Thess. 3:10). Taking the term "living by faith" at its highest, we must still remember that someone has to work hard to provide the finance by which others can be supported in Christian work. It would be a mighty predicament if everybody decided to live by faith! It would also be disastrous if everyone refused to take their share of spiritual responsibility for the general carrying out of the work and witness of the fellowship. Others would carry, as they often have to do, a double and treble burden. Some are legitimately unable to work as they would like, but able-bodied Christians should count it a part of their witness to work and so to be independent of charity (or the welfare state). In so doing they will provide for themselves and have some extra to give to those in true need.

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#### 4:13-14

Before studying these two verses read the chapter from the beginning to see that Paul is dealing with the kind of life that pleases God, and he does so with two clear emphases. In relation to witness in the world he calls the believers to moral purity and uprightness of character. In this way we become salt to correct corruption in society and light to dispel its darkness. In relation to the church first and subsequently and inevitably to the world, Paul then shows the need for love, that warm grace that enlivens all our Christian service. That there is nothing weak or sentimental about this love is clear from the note on yesterday's verses which spoke of spiritual integrity in respect of daily secular employment. The spirit of independence spoken of, being worked out in the context of holiness and love, will never degenerate from that essential dignity which is ours in Christ. We will

never become coarse or grossly obvious in our charity, for we want to be quiet rather than ostentatious. Neither will we be too proud to accept help when we need it and it is offered, for love is a living thing. In our gratitude for being helped we will never be slow to give help when the time comes. It is emotionalism and spiritual immaturity that lead to imbalance and extravagance, and this is particularly true with regard to the doctrine of our Lord's personal return, to which theme Paul now turns. People had given up their jobs to wait for the imminent return of Christ. Others were distressed as their Christian friends died before Christ returned and they felt they had missed out on blessing. Paul deals with these misunderstandings. But why had such wrong ideas and expectations arisen? Could it not be a work of the Devil following on after a mighty work of the Spirit, such as Thessalonica had seen, trying to confuse and distract the believers by propelling them into attitudes of intense excitement and emotion which, being superficial, are not productive of spiritual fruit?

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#### **4:13-14**

Be quite clear here about the division between those who are in Christ and those who have no hope (Eph. 2:12). All are not saved and those who have never come to Christ in saving faith die to a lost eternity, and this is something we must never forget to proclaim. Think of how people live godless lives or religious lives that hate the word "converted", yet when they die their friends say, 'They are better away', or 'at least they are at rest'. But to die unforgiven is neither rest nor peace, but judgment. To live without Christ is to die without hope and to be for ever alienated from God, who has given His Son to die to save us from judgment (John 3:14-21). But when a Christian dies it is something quite different, and while Scripture does not forbid our feelings of sorrow it makes quite clear that the sorrow is for ourselves and not for the one who has died. Christian faith and fellowship create a true tenderness of heart that makes sorrow a deeply felt pain, even in respect of partings we know to be only for a season. But we must not sorrow like those whose only world is this world, because the facts declare that we should rather rejoice. What are the facts of a Christian's death? He is asleep in Jesus, and consequently with Jesus, which is far better than any life or experience in this world (Phil. 1:23). The sorrow of the mourner is legitimate and necessary, and must be shared by friends rather than be forbidden. But sorrowful mourning for the one who has died, as if their experience was now "dead loss" is forbidden. They are with Christ, and all that had been theirs in faith and in part in this life has now become fact and fulfilment. They are the blessed dead. Why should we sorrow, save only in the longing to be with them who are already with Christ? This is fulfilment, not escape (2 Cor. 5:1-9; 1 Cor. 15:51-57).

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#### **4:13-14**

The fundamental doctrines of the Gospel, particularly the death, resurrection and coming again of Jesus Christ, are articles of faith, and must be reaffirmed in faith in every circumstance of life, not least when death, the last enemy, makes its claim on every child of the human race. In Christ, we believe that death has not the last word, since we believe (there is no *if* about it) that Jesus rose again from the dead. Those who have died in Christ are with Christ, who is alive for evermore (Rev. 1:17-18; Rom. 6:8-9); where Jesus is they are, where He goes they go, and when He comes again they will come with Him. It cannot be otherwise. Nothing in life, death or resurrection has the power to separate us from Christ (Rom. 8:35-39). It follows therefore that there is nothing powerful enough to separate us from our fellow believers, since we are all vitally united to Christ in His death and resurrection. We are in fact more than conquerors, and therefore holy sorrow in bereavement must be lightened by the brightness of facts concerning our victory, which is ours now, even though its full manifestation and realisation are not yet. We need to read 1 Cor. 15:35-57 to grasp just how real a victory is ours. Now, read today's two verses with a new joy and peace in your soul.

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#### **4:15-18**

The total irrelevance of death is seen most clearly in respect of the Lord's return in glory at the final consummation of history. There is a wonderful serenity in Paul as he speaks by the word of the Lord (some unrecorded teaching of Jesus or special word given to Paul to deliver with the Lord's authority) to the effect that some believers will never pass through the experience of death at all. But this does not imply any superiority or

precedence over those who have died. In a moment for some, it will be the resurrection of the body, and for others it will be being caught up, in both cases to be with Christ. To be alive *in Christ* and to have died *in Christ* are the same in eternal terms, for the vital thing is to be *in Christ*. Which particular way will be ours to pass into glory we cannot tell, just as we cannot tell when Christ will come. But our ignorance does not in any way invalidate the facts which we receive by faith as they are revealed to us by Christ through the Scriptures. Note (16) that the return of Christ is a personal coming and not a spiritualised presence, as some suggest, referring the coming to the events of Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit, or even the coming of death to the individual. This latter was a view expressed to the writer of these Notes when he worked in a bank! The *same* Jesus as in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension will come again (Acts 1:9-11). We can count on it, and we must be ready for it.

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#### 4:15-18

From Paul's words here we learn that the coming of Christ will not involve what is often called a "secret rapture" of the church. The reference to the shout, the archangel and the trumpet of God certainly signify a majestic, public royal occasion. The shout, some suggest, is the voice of the Lord Himself uttering His command with authority and kindling excitement. Think of Jesus' own words in John 5:28-29; 11:43-44; Matt. 27:50-53. The voice of the archangel may refer to the heralding of the Messianic King. The trumpet very often is associated with times of festivity and triumph in respect of the activity of God (Exodus 19:16; Isa. 27:12-13; Joel 2:1; Zech. 9:14). It certainly makes plain that no uncertainty or limitation now attends the purposes of God. Paul in 1 Cor. 15:50-58 and Jesus in Matt. 24:29-31 both refer to the trumpet sound in relation to the final end of all things, and this is the Day of Judgment. But for those in Christ it is the day of triumph which makes sense of everything (Isa. 25:9). The phrase "be caught up" has the meaning of "a sudden swoop, and usually that of a force which cannot be resisted" (Morris). This could be a frightening picture but for the fact that it is all centred on Christ and involves, as Paul makes clear, a glorious reunion with those who have died in Christ. The phrase "to meet the Lord in the air" has the meaning of a royal reception, the King coming to His own people and the people being presented to their King. Little wonder Paul calls on the Thessalonian believers to comfort and encourage one another with these words.

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#### 4:15-18

The coming of Christ, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting are all subjects worthy of long and detailed study involving references such as 1 Cor. 15:35ff; Phil. 3:20-21; Rom. 8:11, 23; Job 19:25-27; 2 Pet. 3:7-14; and the whole of Matt. 24-25. This is not possible in these notes and as a concluding meditation we give these passages from the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger Catechism:

"The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies."

"The righteous shall be delivered from death itself at the last day, and even in death are delivered from the sting and curse of it; so that, although they die, yet it is out of God's love, to free them perfectly from sin and misery, and to make them capable of further communion with Christ, in glory, which they then enter upon. The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls."

Granted these statements raise many questions and lead to much discussion, but their message is demonstrated in the lives of the heroes of the faith such as Joseph, who gave commandment concerning his bones (Heb.

11:22). Whatever lay in the future for God's people Joseph was determined, by faith, that he was going to share it. Why not?

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### 5:1-3

The fact of the coming of the Lord had been discussed during Paul's ministry in Thessalonica and this gives us cause to consider just how seldom this theme is preached on in our generation, even by conservative evangelicals. (Another grossly neglected theme is that of the Devil and his malign workings in the lives of unbelievers and especially of believers.) But the need in Thessalonica was not for further instruction, nor for a rigidly compiled timetable of events which must ever remain outside man's knowledge (Acts 1:6-7; Matt. 24:32-40), but for the will to live by the facts already known. It is all too easy to remain pre-occupied with the mental information we can gather concerning the Gospel, but our conversion is only proved true when we begin to live lives that are an adornment of that Gospel. Let's face it - a great many people are simply put off Christianity and turned away from Christ by the pious babbling of people whose lives are a disgrace to the name Christian. Paul seems to say here that the glorious Lord will quietly slip alongside you, walking and listening in your company, sifting your attitudes and motives. That is how it was on the road to Emmaus as recorded in Luke 24:13-27. But if we are living in the light of the Lord's coming, this will not seem a devastating thing for the whole of our lives will be lived as in His presence. Yet Paul speaks of people saying words of comforting assurance, persuading themselves that all is well, when suddenly, judgment overtakes them. But it is not really sudden judgment, as the illustration of the woman in travail makes plain. This is the picture of the full time completed in such a way that there is no escape from the issue. It would appear that Paul is saying that it is when the wicked and careless are most at ease that the day of the Lord will overtake them. Be ye also ready, for in such an hour *as ye think not* the Son of Man comes (Matt.24:44,50 AV).

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### 5:1-4

Keep reading in from the beginning of the chapter in order to grasp the full content and application of the truth of the personal return of Jesus Christ. It is without question the day of judgment and Paul is quite clear that this involves the exposure of a division that already exists among men. Note how he speaks of "you" and "they" (people), those who have saving faith in Christ and those who do not, and Paul will go on to contrast these classes of people in categories as radical as light and dark, day and night (4-5). In the fullest sense of the term the unbeliever is "in the dark" with nothing further from his mind than a cataclysm of personal and eternal judgment. This will be the horrific shock of that great day when "destruction" comes on them and they realise their total loss, and absolute separation from God. But the believer, even though his knowledge will always be limited and partial, is still able to grasp the fact and discern the imminence of Christ's coming so that he will not in any basic sense be taken by surprise. Indeed, seeing the event from afar, the believer will order his life in a way totally different from the unbeliever who will be quite incapable of understanding the attitudes and actions of Christians. Even when told, the unbeliever will brush it all away as meaningless nonsense, and the believer will always find in life that he will be somewhat unacceptable in company because he brings into that company an alien and distasteful element. In more ways than one, we will be strangers and pilgrims simply because we see what unbelief cannot and will not see.

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### 5:4-6

There is a kind of life which of necessity people must try to keep out of sight of God, but this should never be true of Christians. Christ coming into a human life is like the shining of a mighty light (2 Cor. 4:6) which does battle with all shadow and darkness. The true Christian must be characterised by light. "There is no darkness in him, nothing to hide, no guilty secret, no corner of his being into which the light of God has not penetrated, nothing that makes him dread exposure. His whole nature is full of light, transparently luminous, so that it is impossible to surprise him or take him at a disadvantage. This at least, is his ideal character; to this he is called, and this he makes his aim. There are those who take their character from darkness, men with souls that hide from God, that love secrecy, that have much to remember they dare not speak of, that turn with instinctive

aversion from the light which the Gospel brings, and the sincerity and openness which it claims; men, in short, who have come to love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil" (Denney). Some people are most at home in murky half-light where all distinctions are blurred and responsibility of decision is evaded. Others feel safest out in the open in the bright light, clear-headed, wide awake and thoroughly sober as opposed to that befuddled condition of drunkenness which exercises its dulling and compromising influence long before men and women are consciously aware of it. Of course, all sorts of things as well as alcohol can produce the bewildered, sleepy insensitiveness that makes moral and spiritual decision impossible. Remember that drunkenness can produce either stupid unconsciousness or a sense of abnormal exaltation. Watch!

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## 5:4-7

Read from the beginning of the . chapter again for we are dealing with deep and practical spiritual truth. The worldly unbeliever, however intellectually astute and competent in his chosen way of life, is described as being asleep during the day. Although he considers himself to be so realistic, he is in fact living in a fantasy, for the total content of his world is in imminent danger of disintegrating and leaving him with nothing. But the believer is not so, for the essence and dimension of his life is eternal in Jesus Christ, and the full realisation of that life is very near, only a hairsbreadth away, and it will break in on him in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Do not think of journeying a very long road and finally reaching eternity; think rather of eternity as just through the wall, and the wall is infinitely thin. This is why we must be wide awake and alert. But Christians do get spiritually heavy, drowsy and every bit as asleep to spiritual issues as worldly unbelievers. Occasionally a sermon gives such people a momentary jolt, but there is all the difference in the world between waking up and getting up. It is one thing to claim to belong to the day, but being asleep in the day is every bit as dangerous as being asleep in the night in terms of spiritual issues. What profit is there in being children of light if we promptly doze off? Cf. Matt. 25:1-13; 26:36-46.

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## 5:8-11

Paul gives two marks of what it means to be awake to God and living as sons of light - warfare and fellowship. The Christian who is awake, discerning the things that differ, and soberly balanced between the extremes of insensitivity and unrestrained exuberance, knows that he waits for his Lord in an alien and unfriendly world. There are spiritual enemies bent on the destruction of his life, and to combat them he needs the faith, love and hope spoken of already in chapter one as active powers in Christian life, each bringing forth some significant fruit of character. Here these three graces are depicted as the Christian's armour. It is interesting to compare the other references to this armour, most fully detailed in Ephesians 6:12ff. and referred to in Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:4. See also Isaiah 59:17 which may be the inspiration of Paul's analogy of the soldier's armour. Our hearts are to be garrisoned by faith and love, both of which words direct our thoughts to a person, namely Christ. Faith in Christ issues in love for Christ, which in turn is manifested in love for Christ's people and for all. What we will not do for duty's sake we will do for love. But when love grows cold a brittle indifference and casual cruelty begin to mark the life and we grow more and more like the worldling with his insensitiveness towards the things of the Spirit. Perhaps it is here that the element of hope operates most strongly, for it lifts up our eyes and thoughts to what is yet to be, about which there can be no doubt, for we are persuaded that Christ is coming. It is the helmet of sure hope that keeps our thinking secure and enables us to bear with, as well as to understand, the divine dissatisfaction in our hearts. The Spirit of God within our spirits urges us on hungrily in expectation of that perfect fulfilment that will be ours in Christ. It is this in part that makes Christian life better and better as it goes on. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain.

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## 5:8-11

If the first element of being awake to God is the girding on of the armour for battle, the second is the coming together in faith and fellowship for building up each other. In the A.V. the word "together" is used twice and the emphasis is certainly on the idea of the mutual responsibility of Christians in respect of growth and progress, over against the tendency for individualism and separatism. It is only in true fellowship that we can safely

exhort, counsel, rebuke and inspire each other, urging each other on in the light of the near return of the Saviour Judge. It is not because we fear penal judgment that we so live, for our appointment by God is to salvation not judgment. It is the thoughts of Jesus' death for us, and of our place with Him in this glorious salvation that are made the inspiration for holy, watchful and realistic living. The reference to "wake or sleep" here is not to our attitude of life as in the earlier verses, but to "living or dead". The salvation we have in Christ is indeed so mighty that nothing has the power to separate us from Him (Rom. 8:35-39), and if this is ours by faith it will be authenticated in experience by the "battle" and the "building" here spoken of. This does not cloud the issue concerning the judgment that there is and will be even for Christians (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10) and the possibility of being ashamed when Christ comes (1 John 2:28). But the emphasis here is on the Christ who will see us through to the end, the Christ who is with us now and who will come for us in the end. It is this dynamic preoccupation with Christ that makes a believer go on in glorious hope.

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## 5:8-11

Paul does not here expand on the theological significance of the fact that Christ died for us, save on the aspect that Christ's death was one in which we were intimately involved and which has brought us into a completely new relationship with God. It is a relationship of both pardon and peace. It is something that neither man nor devil, neither life nor death can break, for it is the work of God not man. The initiative and the power are with God who has broken into our experience in the preaching of the Gospel and effected our response to Christ. But to many the preaching of the Cross is foolishness, something to be despised and rejected in favour of a "do-it-yourself" religion (1 Cor. 1:17ff). The end of such is wrath in the day of God's judgment, which wrath they themselves have chosen in their refusal of Christ. If sinners do not come to Christ as a Saviour they must come to Him as a Judge. If we shrink from the thought of the implacable hostility of God towards all evil, how do we react to the exposure of the impenitent blasphemous hostility of people towards the God who gave His Son a sacrifice for sin (Rev. 6:15-17; 9:20-21; 16:5-11)? The High Priests spat on Jesus and struck Him and no contempt was too great to pour on Him in public derision. Modern actions may be somewhat more refined (camouflaged is a better word) but none the less real. Wrath and judgment are realities and it is high time we were more realistic about them.

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## 5:12-13

The existence of a church in Thessalonica was the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit through the teaching evangelism of Paul. As a church it had already made a massive impact on the community and the country (1:6-10), and yet as a church it was still far from perfect, and indeed in some things more than a little unbalanced. But where God finds basic things concerning Christ and salvation present and authenticated in moral lives He does not wait. He works. This does not mean that wrong things may be allowed to remain or that spiritual defects and shallow misunderstanding need not be remedied. Never conclude that you are perfect because God has used you in His service. On the other hand never think that God can only work in blessing in a church that is totally pure. In many of the "movements of blessing" in the Old Testament, although the people had turned back to God, it was seldom total repentance, and "they walked not as their father David" (2 Kings 14:3). But God blessed and quickened them just as He has done down through church history, pouring out His Spirit in reviving power on churches and fellowships that were far from pure, but were in real earnestness. Paul is here concerned with right order and discipline in the Church, but "rightness" can become a preoccupation to the point of idolatry. Some of the deadliest churches in terms of the saving, sanctifying work of God's grace are those whose doctrine is sound and impeccable. There is truth but no grace; rightness but no life. The Spirit of God has departed. Beware!

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## 5:12-13

There was a restless resentment on the part of some in the church because they had been rebuked by their leaders for their shallowness and impetuosity, and this is the problem Paul now tackles. We must know, recognise, respect, realise the worth of those set to be leaders in spiritual things. This does not refer only to

ministers or even apostles, but also to those in the fellowship who significantly and consistently bear the burden of the work, being of sufficient spiritual calibre to do so. To recognise that there are such in the fellowship is to put an end to carping criticism on the part of those who simply do not take their fair share of the spiritual load. Of course, spiritual leadership may not be given up simply because of criticism, for although leaders emerge naturally because of capacity, drive, balance and wisdom, we must also see them as ordained of God though not necessarily in official or formal ordination. They are over us *in the Lord*, (and we often owe them, under God, our conversion and our growth in grace) having both the mind of the Lord and His authority for our good. They, under God, admonish the believers, rebuking them for what is wrong and reminding them of what is expected of them. The right of such leaders to lead is manifest to all, not because of the sheer amount of work they do (disaffected, unteachable busybodies work hard and are never at peace) but because its effect is one of peace and grace. Sheep know a real shepherd. He can be trusted!

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## 5:12-13

"These leaders are the first elders mentioned in the apostolic letters, and we see how early they are distinguished in the fellowship, as well as how wisely they had been chosen, in that the Apostle simply confirms their exhortations to the Thessalonians. He says they are to be known for what they are, leaders serving in the Lord, and to be tested by their service in the Lord, and thus are to be esteemed, rated, regarded, very highly, not in a cold detached way, but in love. To regard a leader in love involves much, for it adds to the quality of respect and obedience, but not in mere affection which can lead to misguided hero-worship, but in the 'agape' of true valuation. They are not thus esteemed for their personal worth, although they will not be personally worthless, but for their work's sake and this, not only because they are called to do the Lord's work, but because of their diligence in doing it. Before a critic tears a leader to shreds he should think not only of the leader's calling, but of his work, and see if that work deserves such criticism. This lifts respect for the ministry above personalities to something more objective, the work of God. The end of all this is that they should live at peace, and the fact that this word of exhortation (in the imperative) is made to all (among yourselves), implies that it does not exclude the elders themselves, who must see on their part that it is a true and spiritual peace they seek for the church, not dictated by self-will or mis-use of their authority." (Wm. Still)

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## 5:14-15

There is a standard of Christian life and service which we are duty-bound to keep up in ourselves and others in the fellowship. We are our brother's keeper and must watch over our fellows as those that must give account (Heb. 13:17). It is this mutual help and encouragement that is spoken of here and the exhortation, though possibly addressed primarily to the elders, also indicates the reasonable responsibility of all the members. We may say that we hold back from this because we fear giving offence, but in doing so we may be allowing sin to run on unchecked, which in the end will cause more harm to the fellowship and the individual than the initial hurt of "being dealt with". Of course, there is a carnal appeal in "dealing with people" and some like it, becoming insufferable belabourers of all within reach, and totally unaware of their own glaring faults (Matt. 7:1-5). In all this matter of mutual discipline there is the constant danger of giving way to the vice of revenge, hence the warning in v.15. Even when we accept a rebuke, recognising it was well warranted, the natural heart of man is tempted to "pay back" and that is why we can be so hard on those to whom we owe most spiritually. It is a great sin. The same cruelty is seen in harshness to those we consider to have "let us down" or disappointed us. This is not the way of Jesus who came not to be ministered to but to minister.

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## 5:14-15

The realism of v.14 is refreshing, recognising the variety of needs presented in varying circumstances of hurt and danger in and to the fellowship. A cursory look at the words in any translation makes it clear that neither exasperation nor indignation will really help the needy. Those who do the counselling must be able to discern whether the wrongdoer was motivated by malice or was simply misguided in their own thinking, by some other ill-willed person, or by the devil. This, together with the danger of personal vindictiveness mentioned yesterday,

makes it wise to allow some time to elapse before we "deal" with a situation to guarantee a measure of detachment. In this way we are more likely to speak the words of Christ in the Spirit of Christ and produce a creative solution in which hurt can be forgiven and forgotten. That this is not weakness is evident by the exhortation to "warn the unruly" (AV) or "admonish the disorderly" or "admonish the idle". The word "unruly" is a strong military term referring to those who break rank and by so leaving their appointed place cause a broken front to be presented to the enemy. To be out of place, out of step, out of spirit in the fellowship is to be a disruptive and disaffecting influence. The suggestion here may not be of "wanton disorderliness, but deliberate unco-operativeness, even the studied idleness of the mischief-maker" (Wm Still). But what if the warning is not heeded and such people make plain that they intend to remain in the fellowship to continue their destructive work? Give the situation to God, whose ways are thorough and inescapable. Rom.12:17-21; 1 Pet. 3:9-12; 2 Thess. 3:6; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 4:14-15 are references to consider well.

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## 5:14-15

True spiritual leadership will always have as much tenderness as sternness, hence the command to "comfort the feeble-minded" or "encourage the fainthearted" (Isa. 42:1-3). Some are prone to spiritual despondency, apt to go to pieces under strain and are temporarily overwhelmed, and such are not to be thundered at and lashed with rebuke but assisted to get on their feet again and encouraged to take a fresh hold on the fundamental assurances of their faith. Think of Jesus' restoration of Peter and remember that some who are outwardly brash and confident are inwardly uncertain and fearful (not least because they are self-centred) and when they come crashing down they suffer agonies of remorse and shame. Of course this may have some connection with the indecisiveness of their thinking, especially about themselves and the truths of the Gospel. Truth is the great corrective to timidity, and when you realise what God has done for you, and will yet make you and do through you, in spite of all you are by nature, there can be a glorious emancipation from this faint-heartedness. Your eyes being now on Christ, the anticipated taunts, sneers and persecutions of others no longer seem so terrorising. Even your own inner disappointments and desolations are no longer so total. This is salvation indeed, and to be able to put fresh heart like this into another soul is true Christian service.

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## 5:14-15

Some think there is no place in the church for "the weak" and tend to despise them. Paul spends much time in Rom.14 and 1 Cor. 8 dealing with this matter. In 1 Cor. 12:22-23 the message is very plain and gives great point to our responsibility for holding on to the weak. These are people who are easily led and influenced by new ideas, new people and new doctrines which seem to promise light relief from the stringency of spiritual discipline. They seem to lack the spiritual will to go on. They can be very taxing, not to say exasperating, especially when their weakness leads them to temptations in the moral sphere to which they succumb. There seems to be a reference back here to chap. 4: 3-8, and the spiritual believer has a responsibility here to hold on to the weak brother or sister, hanging on like grim death if necessary, in the hope that their resolution may be strengthened. We may never know what it has meant to weak souls to know that there were those both strong enough and willing enough to carry them through the crisis. What sorrow of heart there is when such do in fact drift right away and smash themselves on the rocks of experience. Did we do all possible to hold on to them? This is what spiritual strength is for, and there must be no false pity or pride in it. Read Gal. 6:1-5. You may be the next one to be tempted almost to breaking-point (1 Cor. 10:11-13). We need much patience to minister in Christ to others for there are many set-backs and disappointments. But then, Christ has had much patience with us, else we would not be where we are.

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## 5:16

This verse begins a section that could well be called the standing orders of the Christian Church. The command is to rejoice all the time, not only when circumstances and constitution are conducive and contributory. This we can do only because of the unchangeable facts of God's love for us, the privilege of serving Him, the security of our lives in Christ and the certainty of the final issue of victory. Since we know these things we should be the

most cheerful people on God's earth. This is not the same as being one of those "happy Harrys" who joke their way through life but who are dead scared of ever being serious and are in consequence cowardly escapists in spite of all their worldly "joie-de-vivre". True merriment is possible only when people take life, God and self seriously. This involves a lot of hard and honest thinking about the ultimate issues of life and death, time and eternity, and far too many of us never exercise our thoughts save on the most superficial and incidental levels. If we get our thoughts fixed on the greatness of God, the glory of the Gospel and the purposes of grace expressed in such passages as Romans 5:1-10; 8:24-39, then joy will be the unshakeable foundation and inspiration of our lives even when circumstances are most adverse. With God, you cannot lose!

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## 5:17

The joy spoken of yesterday, stemming from our knowledge of God and our constant wonder at His plans and provision for us in Christ, does not lead to a "laissez-faire", a complacent "leave it to God" attitude. That man of joy prays, not in a perfunctory sense of occasional chats with God about his family or problems, nor in the routine of strictly observed times of prayer which, when finished are indeed finished. His praying is his life, so lived in God's company that all his thoughts, desires and burdens are automatically shared with God and related to God for the simple reason that he cannot think of life apart from God. It is, if you care for the phrase, "the practice of the presence of God" but there is nothing calculated or artificial about it, and certainly it is not demonstrative. It is as far removed from the hypocrisy of Pharisees as could be (Matt. 6:1-18). There is no denial here of the need for deliberate seasons of prayer, private and corporate, but these special seasons can never be a substitute for a close walk with God. This requires a stringent sifting and selecting process for there are things we cannot take into God's presence. It will also mean a refining of our specific requests, for there will be things we will feel no constraint to pray for, while at the same time these things being a burden of grief on our hearts are in fact prayer. We do not rebel against the will of God nor do we by generating impassioned prayers change the will of God. That will, being perfect, is yet only partially known to us and the prayer of faith, while earnest and specific, is still seeking to be enlightened. This gives prayer an immediacy of association with God and makes prayer without ceasing an understandable concept.

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## 5:18

It is rejoicing and prayer that lead to thanksgiving since we begin to recognise with a real element of excitement that everything is compelled in the will of God to work out for our ultimate blessing. This is as much true of the assaults of the Devil, the painful mysteries of experience and the struggles of disappointment, as of the kindness of God which we are able to recognise so quickly. If we had the ordering of our own lives there is much we would change for the simple reason that we are creatures of time and sense and we are obsessed with the *immediate* pleasures and pains of life. But God's thoughts concerning us are far more vast, and such is His love for us that He is prepared to go ahead with the execution of His designs even if at any given moment it seems to us that He has abandoned us in unfeeling rejection. That God should be so mightily concerned as this with the likes of us is alone ground for thanksgiving. And if we can but grasp the truth that evil never has the last word then we will begin to thrill to the categorical affirmation of Romans 8:28. This will never make us harsh and unfeeling either with our own cares or those of others. Indeed we will have far greater impetus to minister comfort simply because we trust God and know that He can do no wrong and that He never causes one single unnecessary tear. Even the most baffling tragedy is lightened in this way because our God is One who, in the flesh of true manhood in Christ, plumbed the depth of the mystery of all suffering in the Cross and then demonstrated in the resurrection that the worst men and devils could do in fact accomplished the fore-ordained purpose of grace and salvation. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory in Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-58).

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## 5:19

The three verses following this one are all needed to give a balanced understanding of this word concerning the Holy Spirit, especially in a day when the ecumenical movement's catchword of "The Spirit leading us into new truth" is denying truth, and when the new Pentecostalist movement in the church is narrowing spiritual

experience by preoccupation with one scriptural emphasis. Spiritual enthusiasm is both vital and dangerous, and must always be tested by the objectivity of scriptural teaching rather than by the intensity of subjective experience, even when that experience would appear to have led to a new freshness of Christian life (1 John 4:1-2). It is the truth rightly understood rather than the experience that brings new life. This being recognised we must nevertheless guard against the danger of quenching any authentic movement of the Holy Spirit. In Thessalonica the danger seemed to be that of a wrong and arbitrary damping down and quenching of spiritual enthusiasm and drive by those more stolid and conservative people who had succumbed to the attitude that God would work in certain ways and not in others. This may or may not be related to the ecstatic gifts of the Spirit, dealt with by Paul in 1 Cor. 12-14 where the danger was over-preoccupation rather than quenching. We must be ready to respond to any new movement of the Holy Spirit while keeping in mind that excitement and ecstasy are not a necessary accompaniment to such a moving of the Spirit, and indeed can prove to be a distraction from and competitor against much more important matters of spiritual maturity. A fervent or boiling spirit is a good thing (Rom. 12:11), but steam can drive a train or be spent in blowing a whistle!

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## 5:19

The exact situation in the church which evoked this exhortation is not clear. "Stop quenching the Spirit" is a call applicable to lazy idlers (4:11), to those tending towards easy morals (4:3-7), and to those willing to listen to the wicked slanders on Paul's person and motives in spite of God's manifest blessing (chap. 2), as well as to those who sought to curb the more emotional and ecstatic exercise of spiritual gifts. Unthinking compulsions in any given direction are as contrary to the Spirit as prejudiced reluctance, and undisciplined enthusiasm can do as much harm as stifling rigidity. If the two factions become locked in competition and criticism there will issue nothing but distraction from the work of God and this also quenches the Spirit. Enthusiasm makes mistakes and needs correction but at least it is alive, though it is its livingness that makes it open to counterfeit influences. The man born of the Spirit and indwelt by that Divine Person in His completeness is still in the position of having to wage constant war against the temptations of pride and ambition, and if he gives way to these things he quenches the Spirit. Now no authentic inspiration or utterance of the Spirit must be quenched, for the Spirit is free to move and work as He will. But it is no work of the Spirit to distract from Christ, to reduce the life of the church to disorder, or to create an elite company of "specially gifted" believers whose sense of superiority makes them thoroughly unattractive.

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## 5:20

Prophecy is the bringing of the word of God to men whereby the will of God is made known to men and because of this it must not be despised. When we come together to hear the Word of God we must come prepared to be examined as well as inspired, and whatever part of our life and experience we are not prepared to submit to the scrutiny of the Word must remain suspect. Of course there are true and false prophets whose utterances must in like manner be put to the test of the general tenor of Scriptural teaching both as to doctrine and practice. But if we are not to despise prophesying we must see to it that we attend on the proclamation of God's Word with a real anticipation that God will have put a word into the preacher's heart and mouth that will be real, enlivening and edifying. Men are quickened in their rational and moral natures by the Spirit of God to speak to the people of God for edification, exhortation, instruction in righteousness, and such men are among God's gifts to His church. For this reason we are counselled not to set up our privately held opinions as the ultimate test of conduct but to allow our lives to be both taught and sifted by holy men sent from God whether or not we recognise such men personally as being "sound". It is all too easy to listen only to preachers with whom we know we will agree. This is to have a closed mind, usually accompanied by a cold heart, an unteachable spirit and a preoccupation with one aspect of Christian truth to the exclusion of all else.

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## 5:21

To set the highest store by the prophetic ministry of the Word of God does not mean that everyone claiming the prophetic spirit is to be accepted and followed without our critical faculties being exercised through the Holy

Spirit. This is how people are led away into the most extravagant excesses and heresies, unfortunate and sometimes disastrous digressions, which in fact proclaim spiritual immaturity (Eph. 4:11-16). It is part of normal Christian life to discriminate between true and false, base and worthy, primary and secondary considerations. This should be one fruit of the Spirit in the context of a living ministry of the Word of God leading to spiritual maturity (Heb. 5:12-14). But note very carefully that the testing of all spiritual exercises, including the proclamation of the Word, is not in order to denounce the defective (although that may be necessary at times) but in order to hold fast to what is good. What is of the good Spirit will be unifying, edifying, seemly, moral, practical, biblical and have its dominant note the exaltation of Christ. It will lead to fellowship and mutual help and a desire to be right with God. The spurious will be quarrelsome, divisive, harsh, denunciatory and man will loom large. This is to be rejected.

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## 5:22

Two aspects of Christian witness concern us here, especially in the light of Paul's earlier exhortation in 4:2-7. It is not enough to maintain an inner integrity with regard to evil in its many forms. We must not only make a clean break with the suspicious, the underhand and the tainted, but must do so in a way that leaves no lingering doubts in the minds of other people, especially the ungodly who will judge the validity of the Gospel by what they see, or think they see in our lives. In a world where the shady is common-place and the immoral has become the accepted thing, it is incumbent on each believer to guard his public behaviour. Whatever our protestations, the world will judge that we go to places and do things for exactly the same reasons as they do, and often they are quite right! Far too many Christians sin vicariously, loving the thrill, through the films they watch, the books they read, the places they go and the clothes they wear. God knows and is not deceived. Read 2 Cor. 6:15-7:1; Rom. 6: 12-23. The other aspect of witness concerns a show of "holiness" with all the attendant holy language and pious clichés which revolts and offends interested unbelievers because it simply does not ring true. Talk of salvation goes badly with smug self-satisfaction, and holy language ill becomes those who are bone-lazy. Only the real thing makes any impact at all.

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## 5.23

This is prayer inspired by the thoughts of moral holiness in the previous verses, and it emphasises that only God Himself can bring about this sanctification of life which in turn brings peace to the individual and the fellowship. The essential thought of sanctification is that of being set apart for God and of course it involves the character of the one so set apart. Be holy as I am holy (1 Pet. 1:13-16). This setting apart for Himself is exactly what God has done for us in our conversion, transporting us into a new realm of life, and giving us a perfect salvation (Col. 1:9-15; 2:6-7, 9-10). It is this whole, complete salvation which God, by His indwelling Spirit, in the context of His over-ruling providence, will work out for His children, refusing to leave His work unfinished (Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13). If we go on to read Phil. 3:7-14 we see at once that Paul is not speaking to the Thessalonians about the eradication of sin from the redeemed personality in this life. That will never be. The war goes on to the end. But sin has affected every part of human personality, vitiating, tainting and thwarting it. This is what is meant by the term "total depravity"; it is not the idea that as sinners we are as bad as we could be since we know what we might be and might become but for God's grace. As saints of God, His saving power in Christ invades the whole personality reclaiming and renewing what was broken in order to restore in man the image of God which was blighted in the Fall. This speaks of the immense possibilities for us and for God, as God's original intentions become historical and eternal realities by the power of the Gospel. Amongst other things, entire sanctification means the emergence of truly *human* men and women. Less than this is not sanctification in the Biblical sense.

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## 5:23

When Paul refers to spirit, soul and body he is not giving a sermon on the nature of man, but speaking in prayer concerning the whole of man being preserved entire and without deviation for God. The three-fold constitution of personality seems to refer to man in his relationship to God, his own rational life, and his bodily involvement

in the world. Soul and spirit are sometimes said to be interchangeable terms in their Biblical use. But Heb. 4:12 makes a distinction between the "soulish" experiences which may refer to those movings of the feelings which, though more than physical, are not "spiritual" in the sense of being inspired by God's Holy Spirit. These notes are not the place for discussing Paul's psychology but we simply mention the existence of what would be called the "psychic" element of human personality and experience (spiritualism, for example) which is not to be thought of as essentially Christian. Many spiritual wrongs would be avoided if Christians would keep clearly in mind that there are other spirits than the good Spirit of God! We all know what we mean when we speak of the sanctification of the body with all its appetites and inclinations, neutral in themselves, and all their potential for holy living or profanity. But there is more to life than that which is bodily, and modern "hippie" language speaks much of the need for finding "soul" as a corrective to the debasing power of rank materialism. But man may find "soul" without finding God, and he finds it a barren thing. It is only when the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ breathes into a man's dead soul that he becomes alive. Until this happens we are not really alive at all.

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### 5:23

The sanctification of the body is spoken about a great deal in the Bible and these references may help: Heb. 10:22; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Cor. 6:12-20; 9:27; Phil. 3:21; Rom. 6:12-13; 12:1-2. It is a wise Christian who understands his body, not pampering, idolising, indulging or scourging it, but setting guard over its avenues of weakness lest Satan gain advantage. The inward life of man, be it called soul or spirit, with all its powers of thought and imagination must likewise be consecrated to God, for if these are contaminated and incited to evil it will not be long before the body expresses these thoughts and imaginations in action. Guard the springs of thought by the power of the indwelling Christ (Phil. 4:4-9). The roving imagination must be made captive; the inventive spirit must be channelled to holy ends; the affections must be given expression only in directions pleasing to God; the conscience must be disciplined and instructed and made sensitive towards God so that our crooked thinking will no longer be able to make sin seem permissible. The same principle of open-heartedness towards God in the holy things of worship applies. How easily gold becomes dim and silver becomes tarnished (Lam. 4:1-2) and how easily holy words of devotion become casual. How we need the quickening of the Holy Spirit. If you feel all this is too demanding note that it is to the God of Peace that Paul addresses his prayer. It is in full-ranging sanctification that God coheres our personalities, banishes discord, makes us creatures of wholeness and enables us to be at peace with ourselves and others. This indeed is good news.

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### 5:24

Imagine Paul pausing at the end of v.23 as if he anticipated some objection or as he pondered the astonishing range of salvation and its fruits. Then in the stillness, answering the hope stirring in the hearts of the believers, he gives expression to his confident assurance in today's words. God is faithful. God is gracious. God is in earnest. God has begun and God will complete, refusing to be discouraged even by a thousand falls. This effectual calling by God, spoken of already in 1:4 and 2:12, is the ground of Paul's confidence. And the encouragement of his heart stems from the fact that there is ample evidence that God is already carrying out His purposes, since these Thessalonians *have* been called in the Gospel and *have* responded to Christ. The rest of the story is all a matter of time, albeit with a fair degree of battle and struggle (Rom. 8:28-39). Where would all our good resolutions, efforts and hopes be if they were not backed up mightily by the unwavering faithfulness of the living God of salvation? But there is no shadow of turning with God, and He is a doer rather than a mere theorist. Read John 10:27-29, and be very, very glad.

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### 5:25

What a verse! What a cry from a minister to his people! The response of the Thessalonians would signify the extent to which they have grown in grace and grasped the fundamental issues of Christian service. Never think of the mighty men of God as being in some unique way self-sufficient, going on and on in their spiritual work, giving and giving until, virtue gone out of them, they feel spent, yet somehow are able miraculously to go on still, without help. The men God uses are men of like passions as we are and subject to the strains and

exhaustions of spiritual service more than most. They look for help to those who have received bountiful blessing from God through their ministry and echo this stark request for prayer. It is found on Paul's lips many times, Rom. 15:30; Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3; 2 Thess. 3:1; Phil. 1:19, as well as here. It is only natural and is certainly right in God's sight that a spiritual father, counsellor and friend should look to his own children in the faith to give him this kind of support and fellowship in service, but often it is simply not forthcoming. At least that is the impression given to many preachers who go on and on for years ministering with faithfulness and a real measure of power and blessing in the Scriptures but never finding the slightest expression of gratitude, never made aware of human care or concern, and feeling an isolation that seems to indicate indifference. This is not pleasing to God. Brethren, pray for us!

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## 5:26

If spiritual gratitude must find expression in prayer, not least because of the sense of debt owed, then in like manner spiritual fellowship must find worthy expression. There is a sweetness of affection in Christ which may be expressed in tender terms and still in its expression remain pure, holy and blessed. What Paul speaks of here is the normal family greeting, natural and spontaneous, and it is given to all the members of the family as the verse makes plain. Paul is not advising the Christians how to behave in church nor is he giving any encouragement to overt familiarity however expressed, for such behaviour is an offence to God and an embarrassment to men and women alike. The trouble with so much expression of love and care, especially in terms of physical contact, is simply that it is not an *expression* given to the other person but rather a sensation or satisfaction *received* from them. In one specific sphere of human relationships the phrase "I love you" can often means simply, "I love me and want you". This is not love, whatever name we give it, and it is not healthy. But the carefree, uninhibited expression of Christian affection is pure and seemly. If there is one realm in which Christian testimony is sorely needed it is in that of human relationships, in private and in public, to reinstate affectionate care which has been so debased.

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## 5:27-28

The solemn injunction that the letter should be read publicly in a meeting of the Christian fellowship seems to suggest that some of the leaders might not have been prepared to allow such public airing of the matters raised by way of teaching and rebuke. Perhaps some of the elders were afraid their personal authority and standing might be questioned. Paul's solemn exercise of his apostolic authority here is not intended to reaffirm his personal position in order to keep the Thessalonians perpetually "his men", under his tutelage. Nor was it a challenge to the local leadership of the church who carried the burden of the continuing work, and not without blessing and progress (1:8-10). It was in order that there might be a free discussion and understanding of the whole range of truth being given to the church. To create an elite group within the church to whom is given the real meat of the Gospel is as dangerous as it is unfaithful to the Scriptures. This is one of the great errors of the Church of Rome in that it has kept power in its own hands by keeping the full range of Biblical truth from the people. Perhaps part of Paul's concern was that some might be absent from the gathering when the letter was read and so miss the blessing and comfort it was meant to bring. This reveals the true heart of a pastor and links wonderfully with his earlier protestation regarding his care for them (2:7ff).

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## 5:28

These words of benediction are so familiar we often miss their glorious meaning. Paul began this letter speaking of grace and he finishes with the same theme of grace that seeks, finds, plans and keeps. "Whatever God has to say to us - and in all the New Testament letters there are things that search the heart and make it quake - begins and ends with grace. It has its fountain in the love of God; it is working out, as its end, the purpose of that love. I have known people take a violent dislike to the word "grace", probably because they had often heard it used without meaning; but surely it is the sweetest and most constraining even of Bible words. All that God has been to man in Jesus Christ is summed up in it: all His gentleness and beauty, all His tenderness and patience, all the holy passion of His love, is gathered up in grace. What more could one soul wish for another than that the grace

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of the Lord Jesus Christ should be with it?" (Denney) It is by God's free and spontaneous grace that we are saved (Eph. 2:4-8). It is by God's grace that we are provided for bountifully (2 Cor. 9:8 AV). In every experience of life we are promised that grace will be sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9). It is by the grace of God that we are what we are (1 Cor. 15:10). But grace does not allow us to live as we please (Rom. 6:1-2). We must see to it that we do not frustrate the grace of God (Gal. 2:21).

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