

2 Thessalonians

A Commentary

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There are suggestions that the order of the two epistles has been reversed and this is actually the first of them. Different commentators take different views. As far as it is important at all, I shall assume that the accepted order is correct and that this one has been prompted by the response of the Thessalonians to the first.

Chapter 1

1/2. The greeting is very similar to that in the first letter and it would be wrong to read any significance into the minor variations which occur.

3. As with the first letter, Paul begins with encouragement and thanksgiving. If only believers would do the same today. It is a little strange that he says that he has an obligation to give thanks for the increase in their faith and love. He has referred to these two attributes in his previous letter; had they perhaps been embarrassed by this, only too aware of their failings, and have made some sort of disclaimer of Paul's exalted view of them? But Paul insists that it is only right that he should give credit where credit is due. Relationships depend upon trust and love and, like a river, are never static; they either move forward or they stagnate and dry up. That is so in relationships both with our fellows and with God. It is because both their faith and their love for each other have increased that Paul responds not so much by praising them (although that is a by-product) but in giving thanks to God.

4. In his first letter Paul reports that other believers are speaking of the faith of the Thessalonians (1 Thes. 1:8/9), here he says that he, with Silas and Timothy, are the ones who are proud (literally, 'glory in') to tell other churches of their perseverance (patient endurance) and faith. The word faith, *pistis*, can mean fidelity but, in spite of Paul linking it to endurance, it has been used simply as 'faith' in the previous verse. We all have to face various trials or afflictions (*thlipsis*) but the Thessalonians were also undergoing direct persecution (*diogmos*) for their faith.

5. There is a difficulty here. Is Paul saying that the fact that they are suffering for their faith is evidence of the righteousness of God? It is true that Jesus warned his followers that they would face tribulation and if he, their leader, were persecuted, so they would be also. However, that interpretation seems to be pushing the argument too far. Probably what he has in mind is that it is their enduring faithfulness under persecution which is evidence that God will bring them finally into his eternal kingdom. It is not that they earn their place through their endurance (they are counted worthy) but their perseverance is evidence of their faith. What is more, we grow spiritually much more in having to overcome difficulties than in periods of ease. What motivates them in holding firm is the promise of heaven. They are suffering for their faith in the promise. The Message translation is, "*All this trouble is a clear sign that God has decided to make you fit for the kingdom*".

6. This verse raises a possible problem for a believer. How right is it to harbour feelings of revenge against those who cause us harm? Does not God call us to forgive? Maybe we must not seek to take revenge ourselves but is it acceptable to hope that God will take revenge? To put it another way, is it not true that the reason we are called to forgive is that God forgives? Is it right, therefore, for God to be revengeful? We must not try to get round the difficulty by saying that he is not revengeful. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." [Rom 12:19] We need to bear in mind the difference between the words 'revenge' and 'avenge'. Often the two are used interchangeably but correctly revenge is to

retaliate on behalf of self while avenge is to act on behalf of another or in justice. The vengeance of God relates to the latter.

In order to explain the truth of the atonement Paul often sets out his argument in legal terms. This is helpful but it can encourage a legalistic approach to the understanding of the righteousness of God. The law is only an attempt to make real a deeper truth – an innate need for justice which springs from that righteousness. A simple example will illustrate this. Suppose two people share a prison cell; when the food is brought in, one of them, the stronger, takes it all and allows the other none. The situation is not only unfair, the bully is less than what a human being is meant to be. If he repents and reforms it may be that the weaker and his champions will wave their right to demand punishment; but, if he does not repent and reform, the bully must not be allowed to continue his behaviour. The prison governor must take action against him. He may well forbid the wronged prisoner from taking action himself with the words, “Leave it to me; I will act”. So it is with God. His righteousness requires that he should act to prevent those who cause affliction from continuing to do so. Eventually, if the sinner does not repent, that may involve annihilation.

The problem here is that Paul appears to state that God will not simply prevent the afflicter from afflicting; he will deliberately afflict him – give him a taste of his own medicine. In addition to prevention, punishment includes the elements of reformation and retribution. If God afflicts afflictors in order to bring them to reform their behaviour, then such action is potentially beneficial; but if the purpose is held to be retribution, is it correct to attribute that to God? Of course, with him there is no question of the judgement being exercised in bitterness or irritation; simply impassionate justice. Nevertheless, is the ‘tit for tat’ argument, which is all too real for us human beings, appropriate to deity?

There is strength in the argument that a moral universe demands that sin should be punished. However, the dilemma may be summarised in this way. Scripture states: The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. [2 Pet 3:9] There are, therefore, the two alternatives; destruction or reform. We have seen that in eternity evil cannot be allowed to exist and the impenitent evildoer must be annihilated; if that is regarded as punishment of the offender then that is just. If there is repentance then, however difficult it may be for us human beings to forgive, that is the way of God (and, indeed, the only hope we ourselves have), and forgiveness and restoration are also just. What is more, some form of punishment which brings about that repentance may also be just. However, to demand suffering, for the sake of suffering, for a period prior to annihilation, may be a human desire but is it a necessary requirement for the justice of God?

7. At the same time the afflicted will find release, ease or relief. This will happen when Jesus appears. A different word is used from Parousia and commentators differentiate between the ongoing effect of his coming and the immediate revelation of it. It seems that the implication is not that of a battle which may take time to win, but that the appearance of the Lord will immediately cause the affliction of the persecutors and the relief of the saints. That is to say that the coming again of Jesus immediately brings about the end of this age with all its evil.

‘Powerful angels’ is not the best translation; it is a subtle alteration in meaning from the literal ‘angels of his power’. There is a similar distinction in Heb 1:3 between ‘his powerful word’ and the literal ‘word of his power’ – the latter correctly implies ‘the expression of his

power'. So here, it is not so much that the angels are powerful (though, no doubt, they are) but that they are an expression of the power of the Lord.

NIV includes 'blazing fire' in verse 7 whereas in AV it is in v.8. It seems to refer to the revelation of Christ's glory but that glory will be terrible and destructive for all who do not belong to him.

8. Where NIV has 'punishment', AV has 'taking vengeance', which is more correct. There is a debate as to whether or not Paul is differentiating between two groups – those who do not know God (i.e. the heathen) and those who do but do not obey the gospel (i.e. the Jews) or whether these are simply two descriptions of the lost. It is doubtful that Paul is thinking so precisely and probably the latter is the correct explanation. However, in order to obey the gospel a person must have heard it and this raises the question of what will happen to those who have never heard. The Scriptural method of dealing with such a question is simple and direct – do all you can to make certain that they do.

9. Does destruction imply annihilation? Leon Morris states specifically that it does not but that it refers to complete ruin. Some commentators seek to balance the concept of eternal life with eternal death i.e. that both are qualities of continued existence but the former is of fullness and the latter of ruin. However, the text states that the punishment involves being shut out from the presence of God, which raises the question, 'can there be anywhere where God does not exist?' If he created everything, then did he (could he) create a place where he does not exist? If there is not such a place, then surely to be banished from his presence implies extinction. Also, the idea that God, who is love, could tolerate an eternity where he knows that some souls – however evil – are in constant torment is very difficult to conceive. What is clear is that here there is no question of remedial punishment; this is final judgement. Whatever the power that is oppressing the Thessalonians at present, the majesty of God's power is greater by far.

10. Paul has already stated (v.7) that this will happen at the return of Jesus but there he was thinking of the glory of Jesus and of his angels; here he explains that we who believe will be involved in that glory. In Ephesians 3:10 Paul refers to the fact that God's wisdom is to be demonstrated to the spiritual powers at the present time through the Church; now he speaks of the fact that we ordinary human beings will not only reflect his glory but we shall be caught up in it. Occasionally people speak of the celebrations in London at the end of the Second World War – VE (Victory in Europe) day. I was there; I didn't simply watch them as a spectator, I was part of them and experienced the joy. That is what Paul is speaking about; when Jesus comes again it will be wonderful beyond our imagining, and believers, both those whom he brings with him and those still living on this earth, will not be spectators only, we shall be part of the celebrations. Paul wants the Thessalonian Christians to know that they are included because they believed the truth he shared with them.

11. Paul does not doubt that these converts will be saved. God called them to himself and they responded. He is encouraging them to live in such a way that they will prove worthy of the salvation that that calling has given them, and that is his prayer for them.

The second part of this verse has been translated variously in different versions. The AV creates a difficulty by speaking of 'his goodness' in, fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power; when there is no 'his' in the original. Presumably the intention was to ensure that it is *God's* will that is done. NIV corrects this with, by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. But that only confuses the issue because there is no 'yours' either. The NRSV

has, To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfil by his power every good resolve and work of faith.

It is important to remember that true prayer is not getting God to do our will but it is aligning ourselves with what he is already doing and incarnating that on earth. If we are asking him to fulfil what is his will, of course we shall receive what we pray for. If anyone should ask, “Why do we need to pray for what God already desires to do?” the answer is that God works his will on earth only through humankind. From the outset we were appointed his stewards of the earth and, in spite of the fact that we have fallen from his original intention for us, he does not by-pass us, but works through our co-operation.

12. The reference to ‘the name’ of Jesus represents, as elsewhere in Scripture, the whole person – who he is. Just as Jesus was the incarnation of God, so he is to be incarnated in us. We are to be Christ to the world. Paul’s words reflect those of Jesus in his High Priestly prayer: I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. [John 17:22/3] With regard to an alternative reading of the end of this verse see the text note in NIV.

1. In Eph. 5:27 Paul speaks of Christ presenting the church to himself 'without spot or wrinkle'. A wrinkle is simply too much in one place of something that is basically good. The enthusiasm of some Christians for a truth when it is first explained to them often creates wrinkles. It happened with the gifts of the Spirit at Corinth and Paul had to call for order and discipline (1 Cor.12-14). Apparently a similar thing had happened in Thessalonica regarding the truth of the second coming of Jesus which Paul had explained in his first letter (4:13-18). The believers had become so excited that watching for the return of Jesus was dominating their lives and had become unhealthy. They were concentrating on that truth to the exclusion of other truths. Paul seeks to redress that imbalance.

2. He does not want them suddenly or easily shaken or blown off course. The word *saleuo* is used of the action of wind or sea. Nor should they continue in a worked up state of agitation. As a possible cause of such a state Paul warns against believing any reports that he himself is claiming that the day of the Lord has already come. The Revised English Bible puts it well, do not suddenly lose your heads, do not be alarmed by any prophetic utterance, any pronouncement, or any letter purporting to come from us, alleging that the day of the Lord is already here. We cannot know details of the situation that prompted this warning. Were some people claiming that they had seen a letter from Paul or heard a report about him stating that he believed something which certainly he did not?

'The day of the Lord' may embrace a number of events but it is clear that Jesus has not yet returned in glory and, whilst it is possible to enter the kingdom here and now (indeed we must do so), the kingdom has not yet come on earth as it is in heaven. The heresy is prevalent today e.g. some hold that the second coming of Jesus was fulfilled when the Holy Spirit came upon the Church at Pentecost, and all that remains is for us to go to him, not for him to come to earth.

3. Paul strengthens his warning lest they be deceived in this matter by anyone in anyway. There is a difficult construction here which is clear in the Greek but which involves additional words in English (NIV indicates these). Paul is clear 'the day of the Lord' will not come until a massive rebellion against God has occurred. He uses the definite article; the rebellion. Obviously he must have spoken of this to the Thessalonians while he was with them. He speaks of a man of lawlessness or of sin; what does he mean?

No religion exists in a vacuum; it is formulated within a culture and has to be relevant to that culture. That formulation will often be governed by a process of accepting or opposing the teaching, views and actions of society or other religions. Many religions of the time believed in a battle between the forces of good and evil. Paul was writing within this background and so the idea of such a conflict would be familiar to his readers. In some religions the forces of good and evil were equal. Both the Jewish and Christian religions proclaim that there is only one God who is creator of everything; if, therefore, there is a power or person of evil, then it was created by God and initially it must have been good in itself; and so its evil must be a result of some perversion of God's purpose for that creature which resulted in a rebellion against his will. Being a creature, however evil it may become, it cannot be equal with its creator. The title 'Satan' means 'adversary' and he is the supreme opponent of the Lord. Originally he was created as an angel of light but he rebelled, very probably out of pride. He lies behind the evil on earth and has his representatives through whom he works. The principal representative is described in Scripture as the antichrist.

We have to be careful in our interpretation of what Paul is saying. He was a man of his time and he may well have expected the return of Jesus reasonably soon, even if not in his own lifetime. Now, many centuries later, we have seen many men of sin or lawlessness down the centuries. They may be regarded as antichrists; as John writes, “As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.” [1 John 2:18] Here Paul refers to one particular and supreme antichrist – the man of lawlessness. Interpretation of prophecy is very difficult and often (usually?) we cannot be certain of the exact interpretation until after its fulfilment. (For instance it was prophesied that Elijah would come again. Jesus revealed that this was fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist.) Paul speaks of some leader who will surpass all previous ‘antichrists’ in evil and in opposition to God. He is not some angelic being but a man. In spite of the great evil he will do he is doomed to destruction; he will not prevail against God.

4. “He will oppose”, reflects the fact that this man will reflect his master, Satan, who, as mentioned above is the ‘adversary’ of God. Indeed, the REB translates, He is the adversary who raises himself up against every so-called god or object of worship, and even enthrones himself in God’s temple claiming to be God. The reference to God’s Temple does not necessarily imply the literal Temple in Jerusalem, which does not exist at the present time. It may mean that he seeks to usurp the place of God as the one to claim mankind’s allegiance and worship.

5. Paul has been using the ‘Royal “we”’ but here he speaks of his personal teaching on this matter.

6. How important is the word, ‘Now’? Is it just a figure of speech as in the phrase ‘well now’, or does it refer to what is currently happening? NRSV comes down clearly on the side of the latter, “And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes.”

The whole of this section is mysterious; it is almost as though Paul is writing in code. It might be thought that he believes the man of lawlessness is already operating but it would be too dangerous to name either him or the power that is currently restraining him. However, this cannot be so because the whole thrust of his message is that the Thessalonians are not to be unsettled or alarmed by reports that the rebellion is necessarily imminent. (2:1/2). So what is the restraining power? Many commentators believe Paul is referring to the Roman authorities; the world power of the time. If that is so then Paul got it wrong because their dominance has long passed and the antichrist has not yet appeared. Others think it is angelic forces. The truth is that we can make no certain identification. However, one fact is clear; Paul is sure that the restraint will be removed only at the ‘proper time’ (NIV) or ‘his appointed time’ (REB). The Lord is in final control – even of Satan.

7-8. NIV makes good sense of this passage but, in doing so, obscures the original wording. The Greek has the word *musterion* which, although it is translated ‘mystery’, does not carry the meaning we associate with the word today. In Scripture it usually refers to a spiritual truth which cannot be known unless God reveals it. The clearest description of its meaning is given in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16. Here, the REB translates, for already the secret forces of wickedness are at work, secret only for the present until the restraining hand is removed from the scene.

Paul is well aware that Satan is constantly at work but at present he is working under cover. The time will come when the ‘restraining power’ will be removed and the secret

forces will be revealed. Because we cannot be sure just who or what the restraining hand is we cannot even guess at how this will be removed.

There is no definite indication given regarding the length of time when the lawless one will be able to operate openly, but the use of the word 'then' may imply that the full revelation of the antichrist will be followed very shortly by the appearance of the Lord who will destroy him. There are various translations of the two verbs describing this destruction: *analisco* (which KJV translates as 'consume' and the NIV as 'overthrow'); and *katargeo* (KJV and NIV 'destroy'), regarding which Vine comments, "not loss of being is implied, but loss of well being". However, both REB and NRSV translate this second verb as 'annihilate'. Whatever the niceties, there is little doubt that by using both verbs Paul is speaking of destruction. KJV has '*with the spirit of his mouth*'; although *pneuma* is often translated as 'spirit', in its context 'breath of his mouth' is obviously better. Just as a word is a means of self expression, so the breath of his mouth is a personal expression of the will of God. It is interesting that it was when God breathed into 'Adam', he came to life; it is when God breathes out that the antichrist is destroyed. The opening of this verse refers to the revelation of the antichrist; the end of it speaks of the revelation of the Lord Jesus in all his radiance. His appearance is sufficient to annihilate this personification of lawlessness and evil. Paul wonderfully conveys the sheer dominance and majesty of the Lord. The essential truth of this verse is caught by the modern colloquial translation 'The Message': 'But the time will come when the Anarchist will no longer be held back, but will be let loose. But don't worry. The Master Jesus will be right on his heels and blow him away. The Master appears and—puff!—*the Anarchist is out of there.*'

9. When Moses worked the miracle of the plagues before Pharaoh, his magicians worked similar miracles by 'their secret arts'. However, they could not keep up as the plagues progressed (Exodus 8:18). Similarly, when the man of lawlessness appears he will have the active power of Satan behind him and will work counterfeit miracles and signs (pointing to a degree of authority) and wonders (causing awe or astonishment) to attract people. Vine comments "A sign is intended to appeal to the understanding, a wonder appeals to the imagination". In this case it is not that the counterfeit power fails; Paul has said it will be destroyed.

10. He will also do everything unrighteous to deceive people into becoming his followers. Those who fall for it are destined to perish. Paul gives an unusual reason for their deception – not simply that they rejected the truth but that they did not love it. This covers a twofold implication. First that they had the opportunity to hear the truth but they did not respond to it; and secondly that it was more than an intellectual decision; their feelings were involved and they did not desire it.

11/12. We meet a difficulty here which occurs elsewhere in Scripture; it may seem that Paul is claiming that God leads people into error – he sends them a delusion. Part of the reason for this is that there is the desire to preserve the truth that God is in control; he is superior to Satan who cannot go beyond limits set by God. That truth is exemplified in the opening chapters of the Book of Job. If he is in control then ultimately everything that happens is due to God. This understanding is reflected in the reasoning of many people, "I cannot believe in God when there is so much suffering in the world". However, if we are to be valued as persons we must be granted free-will rather than operate as pre-programmed robots. If God is love then love is the centre of creation and we are designed to operate in, through and with love. But that involves giving us the freedom to choose not to love if our choice to love is to have any value. Therefore, alongside the truth of the sovereignty of God there is the truth of our free will choice. The delusion sent by God is a corollary to the

choice of those who are perishing not to “love the truth and so be saved” of the previous verse.

The teaching of this verse is that choices have consequences. To reject truth is not an isolated act; it sets our feet on a path which leads downwards. The consequence of sin continues until it ends in judgement. The word ‘condemned’ is krino which means to pass an opinion upon, to determine. The choice not to accept the truth of God but to delight in what is wrong is highlighted by God confirming that choice in sending the delusion. He is simply magnifying what is already wrong, so that the eventual judgement is inevitable.

13. Having given warning of what happens to those who are deceived by the lawless one, Paul rejoices that those to whom he is writing are not in that danger. However, his thanks are directed towards God. Again the sovereignty of God is dominant in his thinking. The fact that they believe and are saved is due to the fact that God chose them. The particular verb Paul uses (haireomai) carries the implication of picking up or taking, as when someone selects one piece of fruit from amongst many. Whatever part in our salvation is due to our free will response to God, Paul is always aware that God made the first move by choosing us (Eph.1:4).

There is a variant reading which changes ‘from the beginning’ to ‘as his firstfruits’ which is adopted by the NRSV - God chose you as the first fruits for salvation. However, the more common reading is in line with Paul’s statement in Eph.1:4 that we were chosen before the foundation of the world.

Salvation is much more than existence continuing through eternity; it has to do with wholeness, and this involves change and development. The Roman Catholic Faith does not make as great a distinction between justification and sanctification as does the Protestant Faith; salvation embraces both. That is implied here in the NIV where our final state of salvation is accomplished through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul speaks of the united work of the Holy Trinity – chosen by the Father, loved by the Lord Jesus and sanctified by the Spirit.

14. The way that the choice of God is worked out is that he calls his chosen through the preaching of the good news. At first this good news is something apart from the hearer; it is outside his or her experience. On accepting it, however, it becomes part of their experience because it is more than a fact to be regarded as true. Thus it belongs to them and they belong to it and so it becomes ‘our’ gospel for them just as it is already for Paul, Silas and Timothy. (See 1 Thes. 1:5)

Whilst salvation involves the wholeness of the individual and the internal change this requires, it embraces the reality of participating in the glory of Jesus. The KJV has ‘obtaining of the glory’. It is interesting that NIV uses the word ‘share’ to translate the same word which it translated as ‘receive’ in 1 Thes. 5:9 (on which see note). On our spiritual journey each of us may have occasional glimpses of the glory of Jesus but it is yet to come in its fullness. It is the certain hope of sharing in that glory which spurs us on to persevere in this life.

15. Life is not easy, so often it is unfair. There is so much wrong with this world, as Paul has explained in the previous verses. But because the reward is there, awaiting those who keep the faith, we need to stand firm in the truth we have received. There is much we do not understand at present, but we have sufficient truth to see us through if we hold to it. So Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what he taught them while he was with them and

what he has added in his letter (presumably 1 Thess.). But the word he uses, *paradosis*, makes clear that his teachings were not his own thoughts. They are traditions – truths he himself received and handed on. We who believe must not add to or take from the doctrines of our Christian faith. Those doctrines will have to be interpreted and applied within cultures and circumstances which differ; but the doctrines themselves are sacrosanct – to be received and handed on.

16/17. Paul has dealt with the matter which was his reason for writing and closes this section with a prayer for his readers. His wording reveals his personal relationship with and confidence in God, both Father and Son. It is the Son who brought him to the Father. Perhaps the 'who' refers to the Father alone, but grammatically it can refer to both. Certainly both Father and Son love us and encourage us, as evidenced by the cross. Remember that the Christian hope, which is the ground of our encouragement, is as certain and sure as a fact of history. It is just that in our current dimension of time it has not yet happened. It is this certainty which makes the encouragement eternal. The encouragement and strength is to relate to absolutely everything we do because, in Paul's economy, the whole of life is to be lived for God.

Chapter 3

1. All learning should be a partnership between teacher and pupil and this should be seen particularly within the Church. The teacher should have authority and that authority should be recognised by the pupils, but the authority comes from the truth he proclaims. He has the knowledge which the pupils receive, but as a person he is not superior to them. With all the authority which has been revealed in what he has written, Paul is humble and asks his 'pupils' to pray for him. From what he writes, it is obvious that he is going through a tough time. It seems that where he is at present (Corinth) the word of God is not being received as readily as it was amongst the Thessalonians. He longs for it to 'run freely' and may have in mind Ps. 147:15 He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.

2. Acts 18:12-17 describes the sort of thing that Paul was up against. In that case the opposition was specifically the Jews. Paul describes them first as *atopos* which is literally 'out of place' (Vine translates 'men capable of outrageous conduct'), and *poneros* which is actively bad or evil – it is the same word which NIV translates as 'evil one' in the next verse. These people were hindering the work of propagating the Gospel and Paul seeks prayer that he may be set free from them.

The phrase, "not everyone has faith", could mean "not everyone believes in God" or even "in Jesus Christ", but in context it is much more likely to mean that not all who profess faith exercise it and so, in effect, they are faithless. In which case, Paul may be saying, "The people who are opposing me are not the pagans but those who claim to believe in Yahweh (the Jews)".

3. Nevertheless, even if these self-professed believers prove faithless, God remains faithful. It is interesting that although Paul began this section by asking for prayer for himself and refers to the attacks he is suffering from those who oppose him, he does not say that God will strengthen him, rather that he will strengthen them. It seems that subconsciously Paul is far more concerned about those he seeks to serve than himself – what a wonderful disposition to have. Both the KJV and the NKJV say that the Lord will establish them. This could imply that the Lord will set them in a fortress, but the reference to guarding or protecting implies that he is present and personally involved in keeping them safe.

It is not clear from the original whether Paul is saying that the Lord will protect them from evil (neuter) or the evil one (masculine). From the context it is almost certainly the latter and the NKJV amends the KJV in this regard.

4. There is the possibility that this could mean that Paul has confidence in the Thessalonians. However, most translations take it to mean that his confidence is in the Lord that they are already doing and will continue to do the things which Paul charges (literally, 'hands on' or 'passes on' – implying that he has already received these instructions himself, presumably from the Lord) them to do. He has already said something similar in 2:15 so perhaps here he has in mind the instructions he is about to give in v.6 ff.

5. Paul is undergoing persecution (v.2) and, no doubt, he draws on the love and strength of God but his thought is not for himself but the Thessalonians. His desire is that they also should experience that love and strength. So here is a prayer that the Lord (that is Jesus) will direct or guide their hearts (that is they themselves in the depth of their being) into divine love and endurance. As so often with such a phrase, there is the question of whether it is God's love and perseverance for and with them, or their's for him. But that problem is resolved if we take it in a deeper sense. The believer is in Christ and Christ is in the

believer. We have entered into a spiritual realm of fellowship with God so that his life is in us and ours is lost in him. Whatever we go through, nothing can separate us from the love God has for us (Rom 8:39); that thought should strengthen us to persevere; but so should our love for him.

With regard to 'perseverance', Vine says that there are three possible interpretations. i) our faithfulness in waiting for his second coming, ii) that we might be as patient in our sufferings as Jesus was in his, iii) that Jesus is patient in awaiting the consummation of his victory so we should be equally patient in awaiting it. He suggests the following paraphrase: "the Lord teach and enable you to love as God loves, and to be patient as Christ is patient."

6. Paul now turns to the problem of idleness. He had referred to it in his first letter (1 The. 5:14) but, obviously, it had not been resolved and here he deals with it at greater length. It may be that the reason these people would not work for their living (or, at least, the reason they gave) was that they expected the return of Jesus to be imminent and they were concentrating on preparing for that. It can be argued that the very best way to prepare for it is to be about the work of God which from the outset was "*be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it*" (Gen. 1:28) and, when he put man in the Garden of Eden, "*to work it and take care of it*" (Gen. 3:15).

Paul speaks with the greatest authority he can muster – in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; but he tempers it by referring to his readers as his brothers. He tells them to keep away from or avoid these idle believers. The word he uses is *stello* which, Vine states, is used of furling sails, hence to withdraw into oneself. This raises the problem which every believer must face and which Jesus summarised in his high priestly prayer, My prayer is *not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one*" (Jn. 17:15). We are not of the world, we are of the kingdom, but we are sent into the world to proclaim that kingdom and draw others into it. Jesus mixed with tax collectors and sinners. How can unbelievers know the love of God unless we show it to them? Yet we are not to condone wrong behaviour. Paul is to explain the purpose of this withdrawal in vv. 14/15.

The word translated 'idle' in NIV is *ataktos* which is a military term indicating to break ranks or be insubordinate. J.B. Phillips translates it as 'undisciplined' but the great majority of versions take it as meaning lazy or unwilling to work. The word 'teaching' is *paradosis* and implies 'tradition'. See the note on this word in chapter 2 v.15.

7-8. Christian leaders know that they set an example to their flock but few today would dare actually to say 'follow my example'; we are too aware of our own fallibility. Paul, however, does so here. Admittedly he is referring to the past, something already completed – the example he set while he was with them. He did not behave in an undisciplined manner (the verb he uses is *atakteo*, closely related to adjective used in the previous verse). From its context it is obvious that he is referring to the unwillingness to work. He claims that he "did not eat any man's bread" but the meaning is wider than that. He did not sponge off anyone but paid his own way. He had referred to this in 1 The. 2:9, but in a different context; here he cites it as an example to be followed. From his description he worked very hard indeed.

9. It is interesting that although Paul did not accept financial support from the believers, he clearly states that he had a right to do so. The word 'right' (*exousia*) is the same as is used in John 1:12 where those who believe in the name of Jesus are given the right to be children of God. Barclay states that the Jewish law laid it down that a Rabbi must take no

pay for teaching and, therefore, every Rabbi must have a trade. Paul's claim that he had a right to financial support reveals his independence of mind. Of course, in Thessalonica he was not acting as a Rabbi –expounding the law to his group of practising Jews; he was a missionary far from home and he was acting as an evangelist proclaiming the Gospel to pagans. There are still occasional arguments raised by some believers that their ministers should be self supporting and there may well be circumstances where this is unavoidable. However, there are many advantages in having a leader who is set free to devote all his or her time to the ministry (not simply expounding Scripture, but conducting funerals, and serving in other ways) and, unless they have private means, they must be supported by their flock. In my experience most paid ministers work far longer hours than those who provide that support. There is no question of them being idle. However, Paul makes it clear that the reason he did not make use of this right was that he deliberately chose to set an example.

10. The word 'even' is little more than a stronger use of the word 'and'. It is used as a link – perhaps here, "What is more". The tense of the word 'commanded' or 'gave you this rule' implies that it was a constant part of Paul's teaching, not an isolated remark. We do not know whether he was quoting a well-known maxim or whether this rule was his own creation. As to the rule itself, this must relate to the act of will; it is the deliberate decision not to provide for oneself with the inevitable corollary to rely on others to do that for you. It cannot be applied to those who are too young, too old or too incapacitated to work, nor to those who long to work but can find none.

11. The word idle is once again *ataktos* (see note on v.6). NIV brings out the play on words 'busy/busybodies'. It seems that, not content with not working themselves, they were trying to encourage others to adopt the same behaviour – presumably on the grounds that the return of Jesus could be expected any moment. To put the best interpretation on it, it may be that their intention was not just to stop work, but to prepare themselves to be in a fit state to meet the Lord. See the note on v.6.

12. In verse 6 Paul claimed to be speaking in the name of Jesus when he gave his command; here he still commands but does not claim so much as to be speaking for Jesus as to being a fellow Christian, albeit their teacher. 'To settle down' translates a word meaning an inner quietness. It seems that these people were over enthusiastic about the impending return of the Lord and Paul instructs them to calm down and get on with daily living which means that they must work and earn their own food rather than depend upon the support of others.

13. This instruction, addressed to the rest of the believers, would seem to be so obvious as hardly to be worth saying. Leon Morris suggests that it may well be that the 'idlers' had so annoyed the rest of the community by their refusal to work, that relationships were being strained.

14. The word translated 'obey' is *hupakouo* which Paul used in v. 1:8. It means to listen or pay attention to and then to act upon it, hence to obey. The word 'note' is *semeioo* which has to do with a sign or mark. It would be taking it too far to think Paul is actually suggesting that a disobedient idler should be physically branded but it is strong word and means 'mark him well'. Paul goes further and instructs that this 'marking' should have some effect on the person involved – they should be isolated (literally 'do not mix with'). But the offender is not to be put out of the fellowship; the exercise is for a positive purpose – that he may experience a sense of shame.

15. The word 'warn' is *noutheteo* which has to do with the mind. Thus it refers to instruction rather than punishment. Those who err in this matter are to be regarded as brothers in need of correction in their thinking. (See note on v.6)

16. Let me quote what I wrote in the commentary on 1 Thes. 1:1:- Peace is not simply the absence of anything that would cause problems or stress; it is the positive bringing about of total wellbeing and involves wholeness and fulfilment; in body, soul and spirit. Paul prays that his readers may know this peace as a constant experience whatever the situation and circumstance in which they may find themselves. For this to be so requires the indwelling presence of God through his Holy Spirit, and so he adds that to his prayer for all them – including those whom he has just criticised.

17. It was Paul's custom to dictate his letters to a scribe but sign each personally. Here he lays stress on the authenticity of his signature, possibly because of the 'false' letter which was reportedly being circulated (cf. 2:2).

18. Paul ends the letter as he did his first letter to these Thessalonians Christians but adds the word 'all'. Taken with the inclusion of the same word in v.16, it seems that he is making a point of ensuring that those he has just criticised appreciate that he still regards them as his brethren in the Lord.

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January

2004

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