



A Bible Reading Plan for 1 and 2 Thessalonians

August 7-27, 2017

Mountain Brook Baptist Church
www.mbbc.org



1 & 2 Thessalonians

ABOUT PROJECT 119

Project 119 is a Bible reading initiative of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. Our hope is that every member of our church family would be encouraged in his or her relationship with Jesus Christ through the regular reading of God's Word.

This reading plan will guide you through the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The plan provides you a devotional thought and suggested Scripture reading for each day of the week. On the weekends, we suggest that you re-read the Scripture passages that you have been working through during the past week.

To receive email updates when devotionals are added to the blog, go to www.mbbc.org/blog, click on "Subscribe to Mountain Brook Blog by Email" and follow the instructions. To learn more about Project 119 and to access previous plans, visit www.mbbc.org/project119.

INTRODUCTION

The story of 1 and 2 Thessalonians begins with Paul. Early in Paul's second missionary journey, he traveled to the city of Thessalonica, a city in Macedonia well-located on the Aegean Sea. History tells us that the Thessalonica was a wealthy and prosperous city under heavy Roman influence. The story of Paul's experience in Thessalonica is recorded for us in Acts 17:1-9. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and others spent some time in the city, where they shared the good news of Christ and saw the birth of the church in Thessalonica. Although there were some Jews in the church, many members were Gentile converts who were once pagans. Paul intended to stay longer in Thessalonica, but Acts 17:1-9 tells us that the missionaries were forced out of the city after being accused of "acting against the decrees of Caesars, saying that there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7). Paul's letters to the church there, a congregation dear to his heart, continue the instruction he began while he was there ministering to them. He also encourages them to hold fast in the face of persecution to the hope of the gospel and answers lingering questions they have about the return of Christ.



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WEEK ONE: 1 THESSALONIANS 1-3

AUGUST 7-13

AMY JACKSON

Monday, August 7 | 1 Thessalonians 1

If someone stopped you on the street today and asked you what it meant to follow Christ, how would you respond? While you might have an immediate answer, sometimes questions like that can be intimidating! It's easy to feel nervous about sharing your faith. How do you put words to the miraculous work of God's grace in your life or find a way to express how He has changed you? After all, what is salvation?

I think Paul gives us three action words in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 that give us practical pictures of faith. So what does it mean to follow Christ? First, we turn. When you make a decision to follow Christ, it is a decision to "turn to God from idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). The Thessalonians probably worshipped various Greco-Roman gods before their conversion; while we may not worship the same gods, John Calvin famously quipped that the human heart is an idol-making factory. We were made to worship God - but, in our sin, we worship things that bring us temporary meaning, fulfillment, and happiness - success, money, sex, even ourselves! When we come to see ourselves as sinners, in need of God's grace and redemption, we turn away from our slavery to sin and turn to "the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). We declare that these false gods are no longer our masters.

Second, we serve. When we choose to follow Christ, we begin a new life of service, exchanging the slavery of sin for Christ's good and gentle yoke. We don't live in the spirit of fear - rather, we have received the spirit of adoption as sons of God (Romans 8:14-16). His spirit enables us to turn and serve God and to make the gospel known to the nations through our speech and actions. These believers did just this - the first chapter of Paul's letter shares about how the gospel had rang out across the hills of Macedonia because of their testimony of faith (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8).

And third, we wait. Though we have been saved and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, we still live in a fallen world, where we deal with the effects of sin and the brokenness it brings. So we wait for Christ's return as the sure and blessed promise of the hope we have in Him - that because of His blood, we will be saved from God's wrath on sin, and because of His resurrection, we too will be raised to life!

Tuesday, August 8 | 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Sometimes Mother's Day and Father's Day can be bittersweet. This year, I noticed posts on social media celebrating those days - pictures that children posted of their parents, or pictures that parents posted with the children who made them mothers and fathers. Yet for some, they can be hard days - for people longing to have children, for those whose children are far from home, or for those who have laid parents or children to rest. These days are especially painful reminders of all that has been lost.



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The apostle Paul was single and childless all of his life. Yet in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, Paul uses these meaningful parental metaphors to describe his ministry. First, in verses 7 and 8, Paul says that they cared for the Thessalonians in the same way that mothers care for their children. They came to them with gentleness and kindness, with a self-sacrificial love that went beyond sharing the gospel - they wanted to share everything they had with them (1 Thessalonians 2:8). But Paul doesn't just use motherly language to describe their ministry; he also declares that they were "like a father with his children" (1 Thessalonians 3:11) with the Thessalonians. In ancient times, Roman fathers were known to be harsh. Yet Paul and his fellow missionaries were not harsh fathers who easily exasperated their children; rather, they "exhorted...encouraged...and charged [them] to walk in a manner worthy of God" (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

These metaphors might have sounded shocking to the ancient world - to hear a man like Paul describe his ministry as being a spiritual mother to children in the church, or to hear him talk about his role of being a spiritual father as one of exhorting, encouraging, and teaching in a world where fathers were often stern and strict. Yet we are reminded that, in the church, often societal norms are turned upside down. A strong and authoritative man like Paul loved the church tenderly and served as a spiritual parent to many children.

I don't know if Paul once longed for marriage or for children; while he had no biological children, the New Testament shares the legacy of his spiritual children. Those of us who are not fathers and mothers still have the opportunity to be spiritual parents, because all believers (whether we are single, married, divorced, single parents, or empty-nesters) are called to the work of ministry and to build up the church. We all have the opportunity to seek out those who long to be mentored, encouraged, and developed, to show compassion and care to growing believers. Perhaps next year as we celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day, we'll also reflect on those who have been spiritual parents to us - and maybe we'll also reflect on the spiritual children we are leading and encouraging as a part of our ministry at MBBC.

Wednesday, August 9 | 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

Have you ever noticed how people are drawn to epic movies or stories which pit the forces of good against the forces of evil? In 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20, Paul tells us a story of conflict. It's not a conflict between human powers but instead a conflict between the heavenly and demonic realms - between the word of God and Satan. Verse 13 tells us that the Thessalonians had received the word of God through Paul's work. They heard the gospel proclaimed and responded in faith. Now, Paul's words were not his own - he didn't invent them. Rather, the gospel Paul preached was the word of God. Paul was merely the herald of this good news.

But Satan despises seeing the gospel go forth. Paul goes on to tell us that the church in Thessalonica faced suffering and persecution because of their commitment to Christ. Satan's desire is that, through bringing persecution, Christians might renounce their faith. He wants to hinder the spread of the good news in any way he can, and we see this on the pages of Scripture. He entered into the heart of Judas, who would betray Christ (Luke 22:3). He influenced the chief priests, Scribes, and Pharisees, "who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets" (1 Thessalonians 2:17).



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Sometimes, I forget that Satan is at work and that he hates to see God being glorified. Paul is clear here that Satan is the one who hindered their return to Thessalonica. The Greek word for “hindered” or “stopped” here is a military term and paints the picture of soldiers tearing up and destroying a road to halt the enemy army’s advance. Satan tried to literally stop the advance of the gospel in Thessalonica.

And yet Satan is not all-powerful. Though he prevented Paul from returning to Thessalonica, the reports Paul received confirmed that the gospel was still powerfully at work in the church. Even when Paul was imprisoned and in chains, the gospel wasn’t bound (2 Timothy 2:9)! In the words of Leon Morris, “Satan’s power is derivative, and always subject to God’s overruling. But within the limits allotted to him he does hinder God’s servants” (Leon Morris, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*).

This passage is a challenge and an encouragement to me. I’m challenged to be on my guard and to not allow Satan to gain a foothold in my life. He wants nothing more than to cause discord. He delights in us selfishly seeking our own interests. He takes great joy when at the prospect of preventing the gospel from being shared in word or deed. But I’m also encouraged to see that, even in the midst of persecution and Satan trying to undermine missionary efforts, the power of the gospel went forth in Thessalonica and continues to ring out across the world today. God’s word cannot be chained.

Thursday, August 10 | 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Some things are inevitable. For instance, I’m planning to go watch my beloved Gamecocks play in September. If you’ve ever been to Columbia in September, you know that heat and humidity are inevitable. I might be wishing for a nice fall day, but in reality, I know that it’ll likely be hot and muggy when we watch the Gamecocks play in Williams-Brice Stadium.

In 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5, Paul reminds the Thessalonians (and us!) that for believers, suffering really is inevitable. Paul and the apostles had been separated from the Thessalonians for some time; finally, Paul was able to send Timothy back to check on the church in the midst of their affliction. Paul understood that suffering was a part of life for Christians and wanted to make sure that “no one [was] moved by these afflictions” (1 Thessalonians 3:3). In fact, Paul goes so far as to say that suffering is the destiny for Christians (1 Thessalonians 3:3).

If we’re honest, this isn’t the message we really want to hear, do we? I don’t get giddy about the prospect of pain, suffering, or affliction. I’d rather have things go smoothly and according to my plan. And yet suffering is inevitable for Christians. We follow the path of a man who walked through great suffering because He chose to live in opposition to the ways of the world. One of the themes in Paul’s many letters is in fact the reality of suffering for Christians. Paul walked through many trials and tribulations because of his witness to Christ. He didn’t want believers to wear rose-colored glasses or to be led astray by the enemy; rather, he wanted to prepare Christians for persecution, knowing that following Christ would undoubtedly bring attack and condemnation.



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But Paul also reminds us that suffering shows us God's great power. In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul compares believers to plain and fragile clay jars; yet within these jars are treasures showing "that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). In our weakness, we see God's might and strength. In our weakness, we are reminded of our need for Him. And in our weakness, we are reminded to hold fast to His goodness and to press on "as we look not to the things that are seen but the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Friday, August 11 | 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

After hearing Timothy's positive report, Paul's joy overflows in this prayer in verses 11-13. Often at this point in a letter, Paul might give a doxology expressing his praise. Yet here we have this very personal prayer for the Thessalonians.

There are several parts to his prayer, but one that sticks out to me is his prayer that "the Lord [would] make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you" (1 Thessalonians 3:12). First, we are reminded here that love is not natural. Hate and jealousy are natural though, aren't they? We don't have to teach kids to be envious of one another or to be jealous of someone's toys. And things don't change much for us when we grow up. We might not squabble over Matchbox cars anymore, but even as adults, in our sinful flesh, we are prone to look after our own interests and to value people based on their worthiness or usefulness to us. On our own, we just can't love others well.

Yet Paul gives us good news here by reminding us that our love comes from the Lord! He is the source of any true love we express for others. Our hearts ought to be moved by God's love for us in Christ. He loved us at our worst, in our sin and brokenness and shame. When we begin to grasp the depths of His love for us, this love works in our hearts to help us love others as God loves them: "When the miracle takes place and someone passes from death to life, when someone becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus, then that person comes to see people in a measure as God sees them" (Leon Morris, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*).

Paul prays that this love would "increase and abound" - he wants our love as Christians to do more than just to grow, but to abundantly overflow in every aspect of our lives! This was a challenging thought for me. What would it look like for my love to "increase and abound" in different areas of my life - and not just for people I find naturally very easy to love? How might my love overflow for those who are different than me, who can get under my skin? What about those who have offended or hurt me in the past? I am reminded again that God's love for me doesn't depend on my character, success, or usefulness; He loved me in my sin, failures, and uselessness. *Oh Father, help my love for others to reflect Your love for Your children! Help our love to overflow and abound, that through our love others might come to know You!*

Saturday, August 12-Sunday, August 13 | 1 Thessalonians 1-3

Reread 1 Thessalonians 1-3 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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WEEK TWO: 1 THESSALONIANS 4-5

AUGUST 14-20

AMY JACKSON

Monday, August 14 | 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

It's silly, but we have generalizations about what makes different people happy. For instance, the age-old joke is that the way to a woman's heart is through flowers and chocolate (unless you're like me and disdain chocolate). But what makes God happy or brings Him joy? This seems like a difficult question, but Paul actually gives us two really clear answers in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 as he encourages the Thessalonians how to "walk and please God" - by refraining from sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8) and by continuing to love one another (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12). This is the beauty of our Christian faith, isn't it? We don't have to make guesses at what pleases God or brings Him joy. Scripture gives us an outline for how to live as His blameless children.

Paul's first command would have been counter-cultural in a world ruled by mythology and pagan worship where almost literally "everything went" - from temple prostitutes to child sacrifice. Yet Paul commands believers to control their bodies "in holiness and honor" (1 Thessalonians 4:4). Paul has a lot to say about sexual ethics, especially in his letters to the churches at Corinth and Rome. And here in 1 Thessalonians, Paul ties our sexual ethics with Christian love and our witness to the world. By respecting God's design for sex within the covenant of marriage, we show our love for one another. Any kind of sexual activity outside of the marriage covenant is sin against our own bodies, but it's also sin against others - against current or future spouses, children, and families. Paul encourages believers not to "transgress and wrong his brother in this matter...for God has not called us for impurity but in holiness" (1 Thessalonians 4:8).

Second, Paul explains that we please God through continuing in our love for each other. This hasn't been a foreign concept for the Thessalonians, but Paul urges them to "do this more and more" - to continue to abound in love. Specifically, his prayer is that this love would transform their actions - that they would "aspire to live quietly...to mind [their] own affairs, and to work with [their] hands" (1 Thessalonians 4:11). I think these are helpful instructions for us today to love others by living quiet lives. Often we are far too preoccupied with other's sins and too little occupied with our own. Rather than being busybodies who are meddling in other people's business and engaged in gossip, we ought to be people who are concerned first and foremost about our own sin and our walk with the Lord. We love others well when we have a right view of our own sin and need for the Lord. And this love is a witness to outsiders, a testimony of God's transforming work in our lives.

Tuesday, August 15 | 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

When you were a child, did you ever get sick and have to miss school? I hated the feeling of sitting in math a few days after having a cold and feeling like I had missed out on some important concepts while I was out sick! It's a silly analogy, but this is what happened to the Thessalonians. The apostles had to leave early and weren't able to complete their course of instruction; for this reason, the Thessalonians had some lingering questions about several significant matters - one of them being death. As believers passed away, they were



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tempted to “grieve as others who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). I’m sure Paul would have preferred to give this teaching face-to-face, but given their current situation, passing along this instruction by letter would have to suffice for now. This is good news for us, because Paul gives the Thessalonians three hopes that continue to comfort Christians centuries later.

The first hope we have is the hope that those who are dead in Christ are with God and are in His presence. Not even death can separate us from God’s love (Romans 8:38-39). Our grief is real and raw in the face of death, especially because we know that this is not how things were supposed to be. Yet we have comfort in knowing that not even death can separate believers from God; for Christians, absence from the body means presence with the Lord.

The hope of resurrection is our second hope. The truth of the gospel infuses real hope into the deepest and darkest pains of death. Because Christ died and was raised to life, everything is changed. Our grief is temporary and we don’t grieve as those who have no hope because we trust that death is not the end for those found in Christ. Our fate is linked with Christ’s fate: because He was raised to life, we will also be raised. Death has no final victory over God’s children. One day, Christ will return and we will be raised to life.

Our final hope is death cannot eternally separate believers from one another. The gift of Christ’s return is that we will be with Him forever and will be given new resurrection bodies - and the icing on the cake is that those who are alive when Christ returns will “be caught up together with [the dead in Christ]” (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Now, Paul knew the reality of death and the ache of loss. For this reason, he commanded the Thessalonians “to encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). In the midst of life’s brokenness, let these hopes be your echo - that sickness, sorrow, and even death are not the end. That none of these things can separate us from God’s love. That one day, we will be made like Christ. And one day, we will be reunited with all of God’s children and will live in a place where death truly is no more. Allow these words to give you hope even on the darkest days - that these days are not the end.

Wednesday, August 16 | 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

The Thessalonians had a lot of questions about death, but they also had concerns about Christ’s return. What will the day of the Lord be like? It’s interesting to me that this question has fascinated the church ever since the ascension! We write books about it, try to plot all of the prophecies on a historical timeline that makes sense to us, and want to pinpoint exactly how the end times will unfold. Apparently we haven’t read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 either!

Paul gently reminds believers that it’s not up to us to know everything; indeed, Jesus tells us that not even the Son of Man knows the date of His return (Mark 13:32). Christ’s return will come “like a thief in the night”



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(1 Thessalonians 5:2). Thieves don't announce the dates of their robberies before they attack. They often come when least expected. Basically, Paul is telling the Thessalonians that they can't deduce the date of Christ's return. You can imagine their logical follow-up question as they read these first three verses - "if Christ is going to come suddenly, unexpectedly, and unavoidably, how can we get ready?" (John Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*).

Paul provides a really helpful answer to this follow-up question in verses 4-11. He reminds them that they are not children of the dark but children of the light. While unbelievers, living in the darkness of sin, will be caught off guard by Christ's return, the light has infiltrated believers' lives through salvation in Christ. How can they get ready for Christ's return? By living as children of the light. He implores them to stay alert and on guard, "having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation" (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

They should be encouraging each other and reminding each other of the truths of the gospel, the hope they have in Christ, and the call to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:11) rather than worrying about the judgment day date. If they live in this manner, they'll be prepared - regardless of when it comes. Because of the forgiveness they have received in Christ, they have no need to fear God's judgment or the final days like unbelievers (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

If you pass through the Religion section of a Barnes and Noble, you'll see that a lot of ink has been spilled on this topic. We continue to be preoccupied with this second coming. But perhaps we, like the Thessalonians, would be better off if we spent more time preparing ourselves to be ready to meet Christ and to live as His children of the day.

Thursday, August 17 | 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

Many Christians spend a lot of time in distress trying to discern God's will. Who should I marry? Where should I go to college? Which job should I take? I was struck by verse 18 in this passage: "...for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." What good news! We can find God's will for our lives in Scripture. He cares about those big decisions we all ponder, but He is even more concerned with the daily decisions we make to follow Him - to live in obedience to His word as His holy witnesses.

What is God's will for the Thessalonians? We see three pieces of it here in verses 16-18. First, God desires that they would rejoice always. What is joy? It's more than just happiness in a series of circumstances; anyone can experience happiness on an easy day. Paul is talking about an abiding joy that is a result of the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts, that goes deeper than our circumstances - that recognizes that, even in the midst of deep distress and pain, God promises His presence - and that is enough.

Second, God desires that they would pray continually. While Paul isn't saying that you should be praying every minute of the day, he is reminding the Thessalonians that prayer should be a "common and constant



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element in their daily life." I have many things I do repeatedly each day, as if they are a habit. Prayer should be as natural to me as these things.

Finally, God desires that the Thessalonians give thanks in all circumstances. I love how these ideas all connect! As we rejoice, the joy that the Lord has given us spills over into our prayer lives, where we have opportunity to give thanks for His work in our lives! Notice that Paul doesn't say we give thanks for all circumstances; rather, we give thanks in all circumstances. We may never give thanks *for* the difficulty of loss or suffering - but *in* those moments, we give thanks. In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes it as being "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10).

I have to admit that I'm feeling a little convicted about this list! If this is what the Lord wills for me, I have to be honest and say that my life doesn't always look like this. The good news is that these actions are all "in Christ Jesus." We can't do any of these things on our own! But the hope is that, through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, as we treasure Christ and what He has done for us on the cross, our lives will be slowly transformed.

Friday, August 18 | 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

I have a ritual where I do all of my laundry every weekend. It just feels so rewarding to empty the laundry basket completely, wash and dry everything, and to enjoy the satisfaction of an empty laundry hamper. Of course, that doesn't last for long, does it? I feel like I'm always doing laundry and that there won't ever be a day where my hamper is empty and all of my laundry is put away.

It can feel like this in our Christian walk on the path to sanctification, can't it? Sanctification is a big theological term that describes our life after coming to know Christ. It is all sanctification - the process of being sanctified, or becoming more like Christ, as we put sin to death. I might feel like I'm doing pretty well through the power of the Holy Spirit in one area, but sure enough, another issue comes up! I don't ever feel like I will ever be sinless or perfect (which is true for me, at least on this side of heaven).

In some ways, this is good! If we could achieve sanctification on our own, we would forget our need for God! But the truth is that we can't. We can't bring ourselves to the throne blameless and spotless. Even as Christians, our hearts are prone to wander. But the good news is that the process of sanctification isn't all on our shoulders. Paul prays here that God would "sanctify you completely and make your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Do you notice who takes the action here? It's God. Of course we have a role in our sanctification and a call to respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We are participants - but He is the orchestrator and Paul declares that "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do this" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

When Christ returns and we kneel before His throne, we will be seen as blameless and spotless, not because of our moral fiber or stern work ethic - rather, it will all be because of His gracious faithfulness to us. On that day, our faith will be made sight, and we, who are clothed in Christ's righteousness, will be



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given new risen bodies like His! This is the hope we cling to as we battle sin today, wondering if victory will ever come. We hold on, trusting that what really matters isn't our "feeble hold on God but God's strong grip on us" (Leon Morris, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*).

Saturday, August 19-Sunday, August 20 | 1 Thessalonians 4-5

Reread 1 Thessalonians 4-5 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



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WEEK THREE: 2 THESSALONIANS

AUGUST 21-27

AMY JACKSON

Monday, August 21 | 2 Thessalonians 1

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians probably came soon after the first letter. Why did he write a second letter? He seems to have three primary purposes: to provide additional teaching on the day of the Lord, to encourage the Thessalonians to stand firm in their faith, and to rebuke those who were being idle.

Today's chapter focuses on the coming of the Lord. Some of the Thessalonians feared that perhaps the day of judgment had already come; others experienced doubt as they walked through suffering. Is God just? Doesn't He hear our prayers? Doesn't He see the persecution of His church? Isn't He going to do something about this?

To be honest, these are questions that I wrestle with as well. As I see those who love the Lord suffer, and those who follow the ways of the world prosper, I have to wonder if God really is fair. Yet Paul reminds us all that only God's judgment is perfect and just, and He will enact it in His time. Perhaps today we cannot see His hand as we grieve over sin and the brokenness of the world - but He promises that one day, He will return to "repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to those who are afflicted" (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7). Paul describes those who afflict believers as "those who do not know God...and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thessalonians 1:8).

Verses 9 and 10 describe the end result of God's just judgment. What will His affliction look like, for those who have afflicted believers? They will suffer eternal punishment - but more than that, they will be forever separated from the presence of God. Whatever physical torment they will experience in hell can't compare to the spiritual torment of being forever separated from the Lord. On the other hand, on that day, the faith of believers will finally be made sight as they see evil forever vanquished. We will be transformed to glorify Christ as His saints, forever reflecting His beauty and light.

Take heart today, that the promise of the judgment day is a promise that God indeed is just. We only see what is happening on the surface, but we trust that He is working, even in the midst of the brokenness, and we hold onto the good hope that evil will not have the final word. Spend some time in prayer for those you know who are lost - pray that they would turn to the Lord and that today would be the day of their salvation! After all, Paul too was once an afflicter of Christians until He met the Lord. Paul's life is a testimony that grace can cover any sin.

Tuesday, August 22 | 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Are you a fan of mystery novels or suspenseful films? Do you find yourself reading literary plots or watching a movie and trying to figure out how to put all of the pieces together? Who is the antagonist and what is his plan? How will the protagonist come through? Many scholars say this is the most mysterious passage in all of Paul's letters! Now we know that the Thessalonians had lingering questions about the return of Christ;



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in his first letter, Paul addressed many of these (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11). Apparently there was still some confusion, likely initiated by some kind of teaching or letter that some had erroneously attributed to Paul. What was the teaching? Specifically, it was that Christ had already returned. Now of course, this caused some distress for the Thessalonians! Paul encouraged them to hold fast to what they had been taught and reminded them that Christ would not return until the Man of Lawlessness had made his grand debut.

Who is the Man of Lawlessness? I think this is where our sleuth skills can get us into trouble. Countless drops of ink have been spilled on the subject with theologians across the centuries giving various theories. Certainly there have been people who have opposed Christ across the ages, and in many ways, these people are “anti-Christ” - they are against His work and teaching and live in complete opposition to the gospel. But who is this final Man coming? No one really knows! We could spend a lot of time wondering and discussing and trying to reason our way through the situation. But Paul doesn’t give us all of the answers for a reason. As one theologian explained, “Paul’s interest is not in the course of the rebellion, nor in the Man of Lawlessness as such. He puts his emphasis on the overriding sovereignty of God. He is convinced that all peoples and all events are in the hand of God” (Leon Morris, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*).

Rather than being totally consumed by the particular order of events, or by how the Man of Lawlessness will be revealed, we should be focused on what happens at the end: Satan’s forces are defeated. Paul tells us that Jesus will bring about his end through just the breath of His mouth (2 Thessalonians 2:8)! This Man, who seemed to control all and called the world to worship him, will be no more when the rightful King comes to take His place and bring His people home. This should be good encouragement for us as we think on these future events. Rather than getting lost in the details and trying to predict the exact course of the future, we are invited to rest in this reminder of God’s good control and to hold fast to His goodness and His truth, trusting that the allure of evil is temporary and that Christ will have the last word.

Wednesday, August 23 | 2 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Recently I heard Dr. Christian George give a lecture on the life of Charles Spurgeon. Dr. George is a Spurgeon scholar and has a wealth of knowledge about the famous Baptist preacher. There’s one phrase that sticks out to me from the lecture, though: it’s a Latin phrase, “Et Teneo, Et Teneor,” which means “I hold and am held.” Spurgeon loved this phrase; in fact, it served as the motto of Spurgeon’s College. Dr. George explained that the life of the believer is one of holding and being held - we hold tightly to the truths of God’s character and the hope of the gospel, and yet we are assured that all the while, we are being held by God Himself.

This phrase came to mind as I was reading today’s passage. Here, Paul demonstrates both being held by God and holding tightly to Him. He explains to the Thessalonians that they are “brothers beloved by the Lord” who were chosen by Him, called by Him, and are being sanctified through the power of the Holy Spirit. (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Make no mistake - God is the one who is at work and is about the business of redemption! As the old hymn “The Rock of Ages” puts it, “Nothing in my hands I bring” - not our labor or work or zeal can bring about our salvation. It is entirely a work of God.



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And yet as we are held, we are also called to hold. The rest of the line I quoted from “The Rock of Ages” continues with “simply to the cross I cling.” We hold tightly to the truth of the gospel in the face of persecution. And Paul encourages the Thessalonians to continue in this pattern, to “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Paul doesn’t tell them just to sit back and take it easy - He recognizes that the Enemy seeks to kill, steal, and destroy. Persecution has threatened the Thessalonians. They’ve been deceived by false teachers. Paul exhorts them to keep gripping tightly to the truths they have been taught. What are “the traditions” he’s talking about? He’s not referring to Jewish dietary laws or other religious rules - rather, he reminds them to hold tightly to the truth of the gospel - that Christ came, died, was raised again, and is returning, and that this truth changes everything for those who repent and believe. This is the truth that we hold onto in the midst of persecution and pain - and this is the very truth that holds us and gives us “eternal comfort and good hope through grace” through the Lord himself (2 Thessalonians 2:16).

Thursday, August 24 | 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

One of the ways that I know someone really cares for me and loves me is when they tell me they’ve been praying for me. There’s something really special about knowing that others are lifting you up to the Lord and praying for you specifically. I’ve had several friends who have been faithful partners in prayer for me over the years, and knowing this has made all of the difference, especially in life’s difficult moments. When we pray for others, our love for them grows and our fellowship with them is strengthened. We begin to see them as the Lord sees them and to show them God’s mercy and grace, just as we have been shown. When we stand beside others in prayer, we remind them that they are not alone - Christ never abandons us, even in the darkest valleys, and faithful believers lifting us up in prayer is a reminder of His constant presence.

This section in 2 Thessalonians 3 is about prayer, but it’s not just about Paul praying for the Thessalonians. I think we have the tendency to elevate Paul in our minds; after all, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, he brought the gospel to the Roman empire and wrote most of the New Testament. But Paul’s request here in 2 Thessalonians 3:1 shows his humility and that he understands his position before the Lord: Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray for him and for the apostles. Paul “did not see himself as high above them, but as one of them. He valued their intercessions and sought their prayers” (Leon Morris, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*). In fact, this is a pattern we see in his letters: as he prays for congregations, he asks that they would also pray for him!

What are Paul’s prayer requests? He asks for prayer that “the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored...and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men” (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2). In summary, he prays that the gospel would go forth throughout the entire Roman empire, just as it had in Thessalonica, and that enemies of the gospel would not hinder the proclamation of the good news.



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Who are you praying for today, and who is praying for you? We are all in need of prayer - even Paul requested prayer in these verses! Prayer knits our hearts together in faith, as we come before the throne of God on behalf of others. Prayer also draws us closer to the Lord, as we communicate with our Father and are reminded of our need for Him in every moment. My hope and prayer is that you would also be able to experience the joy and grace of praying alongside people who are praying for you.

Friday, August 25 | 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Paul's last section of his second letter to the Thessalonians highlights one of his primary purposes for writing again: to address the issue of idleness in the church. For reasons unknown, apparently this was quite an issue in Thessalonica! Many commentators suggest that perhaps some church members were overly fixated on the imminent return of Christ - so much so that they had stopped working and were just waiting for Him to return. Others suppose that the idlers were people who were lazy and depending on the wealthy members of the church to meet their needs.

Regardless of the reasons, Paul attacks laziness here. He reminds the Thessalonians that when the apostles were present, they themselves worked even though they had warrant to rely on support from churches as ministers (2 Thessalonians 3:9). Even though they had this right, they worked to support themselves so that they wouldn't burden the Thessalonians and also might serve as a role model for them (2 Thessalonians 3:8-9).

From time to time, we all probably struggle with laziness. I can be the first to say that it's hard to get out of bed and exercise each morning. I'd rather sleep in sometimes. When I'm sitting on the couch at night, it's tempting to watch just one more episode of my favorite show on Netflix. Sleeping in, lounging around in my pajamas, and doing nothing sounds pretty glamorous sometimes. But it's not very formative, is it? Hard work isn't glamorous. But work, when viewed in the right lens, shows us our fallenness and a need for a Savior. It provides a place for us to serve others. And it gives us opportunities to share the gospel with unbelievers.

Many Christians don't have glamorous or powerful jobs; many live quiet lives, working very normal jobs in a fallen world. Paul's admonition is to continue serving in these ways - "to do [your] work quietly and to earn [your] own living" (2 Thessalonians 3:12). Of course, Paul isn't saying that we shouldn't be benevolent or help others who are in need, especially those within the body of Christ. But Paul is saying that we have a responsibility to work hard for our earthly masters, knowing that our work done on earth, in the presence of earthly masters, is work ultimately that is done for the Lord (Colossians 3:23).

May God give you the grace today to work quietly with your hands, to live at peace with all men, to be a witness in dark places, and to live as a faithful follower of Christ, trusting that He will use even our work for His glory and our good.



1 & 2 Thessalonians

Saturday, August 26-Sunday, August 27 | 2 Thessalonians

Reread 2 Thessalonians over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.