

Study Notes on 1 Thessalonians

By Vernon G. Wilkins

Introduction

1 Thessalonians is amongst the earliest books of the NT. Written approx. AD 50, only Galatians could be earlier of all Paul's letters (and then only by a year at most). It's a letter full of encouragement and joy, gently exhorting its readers to continue in their Christian faith as they started, growing in mission and godliness. The Thessalonian church is arguably the least chided and most praised of all the NT churches, and is a supreme model for us.

Acts 17:1-13

Explaining Christ

Acts 17:1-13 (ESV)

¹ Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

¹⁰ The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. ¹² Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. ¹³ But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

Explanatory Notes

1. This passage is the account of how the gospel came by the Apostle Paul to the Macedonian town of Thessalonica (modern-day Thessaloniki). We won't look at it in this series of studies, which is on 1 Thessalonians only, but here below are a few comments worth noting.
2. Note, it was a three week evangelistic mission!
3. Paul started in the Jewish synagogue, entirely typically for his ministry.
4. Note that Paul's evangelism was what we call *apologetic*. This refers to his explanation of why the gospel of Christ is true, and why the cross of Christ is to be trusted for salvation – see *reasoned ... explaining ... proving* (v.2-3)

5. The *scriptures* in v.2 means, of course, the Jewish scriptures, that is our Old Testament. So, yes, the gospel is in the OT, and not only the NT! Of course, it's in the OT in 'promise' form, and in the OT awaits its fulfilment, and the fulfilment comes with Jesus Christ in the NT. But given that God is to be trusted, his promises can be absolutely relied upon – they're true as they are, even before they are fulfilled in Christ. Paul is able to show that the entire message of promised redemption in the OT is indeed fulfilled in Jesus Christ.
6. For the contemporary Jews of the time the *Christ* meant the long-expected new Davidic King who would bring about God's long-promised rescue.
7. Take note of the entirely typical persecution, the fact of it, the injustice of it, the manner of it.
8. How wonderfully true it is, though, that, ironically, the Christians had indeed '*turned the world upside down*' (v.6)!
9. Notice the clever half-truth in v.7, '*another king*'. Yes indeed, Christ was the King of the Jews in the sense of being the messiah, the deliverer, the rescuing Davidic King; but the opposition cast Jesus Christ as a threat to the kingship of Caesar – and this he definitely wasn't.
10. Re. '*these Jews*' in v.11, see 'important note' in the Study 3 Explanatory Notes. Paul refers here not to the few Thessalonians who responded to the gospel, but the many who caused all the trouble, i.e., '*the people*' of v.8.
11. We note that the Bereans who responded to the gospel are said to have '*received the word*' in a manner very much like the Thessalonian Christians as described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1:6 and 2:13 (see Studies 1 and 3). And we note that it was the word of God that brought the Berean Christians to faith, just as also the Thessalonian Christians, as we shall see in Study 1 (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 1:5-8), Study 2 (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 1;2:9), and Study 3 (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 2:16).
12. Please do note, very importantly, that it's definitely not satisfactory for us to interpret or translate or understand the word 'Christ' simply as 'King' – many Christians do understand it just like that, but this is not adequate, I'm afraid. Yes, indeed, Jesus Christ is the King. He is God's King most definitely. But inherent in the word 'Christ', which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word 'Messiah', which means 'anointed one', is the idea of the deliverer, the rescuer, the saviour. What does the word 'Christ' mean? Answer, it means 'the God-anointed, God-appointed, Davidic Saviour-King', no less. All that is there in the word 'Christ' or 'Messiah'. Adding the adjective 'Davidic' means not only that Jesus Christ came in the Davidic line ancestrally speaking, but also that like David he is the Saviour of the people.
13. One might respond, 'But isn't the idea of Saviour in the word 'Jesus''? Yes, it is, for 'Jesus' means 'Yahweh (God) saves', it deriving from the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Joshua. But it's not either/or but both/and. The idea of Saviour is present in the name 'Jesus', it's present in the title 'Christ', and whilst we're about it, it's present equally in the title 'Lord' ...
14. ... because the NT term 'Lord' is all wrapped up with the Old Testament name for God, Yahweh, printed 'LORD' in most English translations, which in turn is all wrapped up with the OT notion of God being our redeemer. I won't offer an explanation of this here, but suffice it to say that when the Apostle Paul argued tooth and nail for the gospel of Jesus Christ, he, unlike so many of us Christians today, was not going to be downplaying the nature of Christ as, above all things, our *Saviour*. We note, though, that the term 'Lord' isn't present in this passage, but it's worth noting here that the notion of 'saviour' is definitely present in *all* the terms/names/titles 'Jesus', 'Christ', 'Lord' and 'King'. Let us follow in Paul's footsteps as we study 1 Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Study 1 – Turn, Serve, Wait

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (ESV)

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Study 1 – Explanatory Notes

1. See Acts 17:1-15 for the background to the church in Thessalonica. Silas and Timothy had been Paul's gospel partners during the original mission there.
2. v.1 – The greeting is absolutely typical, not only of most other NT letters, but of ancient near-eastern letters generally. Its significance lies in two specifically Christian slants given to it, namely (a) the expression 'in God the father and the Lord Jesus Christ', which emphasises the nature of the Thessalonian church as a divine not human society of people – they have their origin and life and whole being in, and only in, God's work done in them in Christ, and (b) the term 'Grace and peace to you': this term is a Christianised version of a typical secular greeting formula – it means 'may you know wholesome well-being from God', rather than the secular 'greetings to you'.
3. v.2-3 – there is no church that God gets 'thanked for' more, or prayed for more constantly, than the Thessalonians. These Christians are obviously very special in, and dear to, Paul's heart.
4. The trio of faith, love and hope occurs, you may recall, in a slightly later Pauline letter, namely 1 Corinthians (ch. 13). See also v.8-10, 5:8 (cf. Ephesians 6:10-18), Romans 5:1-11, Galatians 5:5-6, Colossians 1:3-8, Hebrews 6:9-15 (cf. 10:19-25[-39]), 1 Peter 1:1-9,17-23. Also Ephesians 1-2.

For the 'obedience' motif in 1 Peter 1, cf. Romans 1 (esp. v.5,16-17) and 2 Thessalonians 1:8, etc.

The NIV over-translates this trio: literally it is 'work of faith', 'labour of love' (this is where the expression 'labour of love' in our language came from), and 'endurance of hope'.

‘work’ in v.3 means the whole business of putting one’s faith in Jesus Christ and then starting to live as a Christian, as in John 6:29, *The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent* – ‘work’ here probably doesn’t mean quite the same thing as the ensuing ‘labour of love’.

‘labour’ is what we do in loving service to God, to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to our neighbours in the world generally.

‘endurance’ is a constant faithfulness to God in the face of suffering, inspired by the assurance of God’s eternal promises to us of heaven (‘hope’ in the Bible always rests its assurance on God’s promises and God’s faithfulness).

To put it another way (although this is an oversimplification, of course), the ‘work of faith’ probably refers more to the beginnings of our faith, the ‘labour of love’ could refer more to the ongoing Christian faith, and the ‘endurance of hope’ could refer more to the look forward to our future heavenly destiny.

5. v.4,5 – note that Paul unashamedly espouses the doctrine of God’s grace here (God’s choice), or to put it another way, the doctrine of divine election.
6. v.5a – cf. (importantly) 1 Corinthians 2:1-5[-16] – the Thessalonians’ conversion was the evidence of God’s election of them. Note the marks of a true conversion: (a) the gospel was clearly heard (because it was proclaimed by the evangelistic mission team), (b) the Holy Spirit was at work, and consequently (c) the hearers were convicted (of the truth of the gospel, and the reality of their need), and (d) therefore the Word of God in the hands of the Spirit of God was the power to convert these people – see Romans 1:16, *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*. Note: these four things all belong together – you can’t have one without the others: if the Holy Spirit truly is at work, it’ll be a work of his proclaimed word, it’ll be a work of deep conviction, it’ll be a powerful work that brings the hearer into Christ’s Kingdom, with forgiveness and concomitant joy, with understanding of the grace of God in Christ, with a life changed (and continually changing) to the glory of God, and with assurance.
7. v.5b-9a – these verses emphasise the authenticity of the Thessalonians’ conversion – it radically changed their lives. They embraced godliness of life and speech. Further, their welcome of the gospel was marked by their welcome of the gospel team (v.9a). This last point is quite important – Jesus in his ministry linked acceptance of his message with acceptance of his spokesmen, as in Matthew 25:40, *‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’*, and Matthew 10:11ff, *‘Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.’* If you read the passage in Acts 17 you will see that Jason exactly fits this theme – Jason welcomed the gospel team at considerable personal cost; see Acts 17:7a.
8. v.9b-10 – This trio of marks of authentic Christianity neatly matches the earlier trio, interestingly – their Christian beginnings, ongoing and destiny. ‘Turn’ denotes true repentance, of course, the ‘work of faith’; ‘serve’ marks the Christian life, the ‘labour of love’; and ‘wait’ denotes patience in the face of suffering, the ‘endurance of hope’.

9. v.9 – Note that the Thessalonians turned *from* idols as well as *to* Christ. Idols shouldn't of course be deemed irrelevant to us 21st century westerners. Idolatry involves replacing 'the living and true God' with anything else at all. If our idols are not wood, stone or metal, they are certainly real nonetheless – career, popularity, power, sport, just about anything. Talk about this when answering the questions on these verses.
10. v.10 – Note that the Christians' hope for heaven and of escape from judgement is tied to the resurrection of Christ, as in, e.g., 1 Peter 1:3
11. v.10 – The view towards the end of time is a marked theme of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Note that just as with the doctrine of election, so also Paul doesn't shrink from the reality of the return of Christ and of his judgement then. The reality of Christian hope is not only assurance of heaven, but also assurance of escaping God's final judgement. A true Christian profession means future salvation (from judgment and hell) just as much as present forgiveness. Interestingly, the terms 'salvation' and 'save' are used *more* in the future sense in the NT than in the present or past senses.

Study 1 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 – Turn, Serve, Wait

Read 1:1

Question 1. Paul addresses a church which is both in Thessalonica and ‘in’ God. ‘Every church has two homes, two environments, two habitats’ (quotation from John Stott). How does this fact both encourage and challenge our church?

Read 1:2-3

Question 2. What prompts Paul’s thankfulness and constant prayers for the Thessalonians? Discuss briefly the importance and meaning of the three qualities Paul notes at the end of v.3. The great Reformer John Calvin described 1:3, with its trio of marks of true conversion, as ‘a brief definition of true Christianity’. Would you say this rings true for you, in your own Christian faith, and for your church generally? Do you think Paul would have the same verdict on your church? Do we score three out of three in this?

Read 1:4

Question 3. God had ‘chosen’ the Thessalonians. On what two grounds did Paul and his colleagues know this to be true? The first is in v.5, the second in v.3 and v.6a.

Read 1:5a

Question 4. Four contributions to the original gospel work in Thessalonica are mentioned. One, the first mentioned, was the contribution made by Paul and his fellow-workers as they presented the gospel there – what was that? And three were the work of God – what were they? How does this verse challenge you and your church in your practice of evangelism?

Read 1:5b-7

Question 5. How were the Thessalonians affected by their reception of the message? Three (or four!) things are mentioned, in 6a, 6b, and 7. How does our own experience (individually and corporately) echo that of the Thessalonians? What challenge does this present to our Christian lives?

Read 1:8-10

Question 6. The Thessalonians' lives were manifestly and obviously turned around by their Christian faith, so much so that 'the Lord's message rang out' from them. Can you summarise the way in which this happened? or to put it another way, just what was their reputation, as reported back to Paul?

Question 7. Consider, then, these three steps in Christian conversion and Christian life: 'you turned ... to serve ... and to wait ...'. Can you trace this pattern in your own Christian experience? How should this understanding of Christian faith shape (i) our witness and evangelism, and (ii) our nurture of new Christians?

Conclusion

Question 8. Do you think the following is a fair two-fold summary of the whole passage? Discuss how we as a church, you as an individual Christian, and you as a small group member if applicable, can better implement these two essential marks of authentic Christianity:

"We can't receive the gospel without living the gospel; and we can't receive the gospel without letting the gospel be known."

Study 1 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 – Turn, Serve, Wait

Read 1:1

Question 1. Paul addresses a church which is both in Thessalonica and ‘in’ God. ‘Every church has two homes, two environments, two habitats’ (quotation from John Stott). How does this fact both encourage and challenge our church?

The challenge, of course, is that we are still in, and part of, the world around us.

The encouragement is that if we are ‘in God’ then we are secure in his love (v.4a).

Read 1:2-3 See note 4.

Question 2. What prompts Paul’s thankfulness and constant prayers for the Thessalonians? Discuss briefly the importance and meaning of the three qualities Paul notes at the end of v.3. The great Reformer John Calvin described 1:3, with its trio of marks of true conversion, as ‘a brief definition of true Christianity’. Would you say this rings true for you, in your own Christian faith, and for your church generally? Do you think Paul would have the same verdict on your church? Do we score three out of three in this?

This is the ‘work of faith’, the ‘labour of love’ and ‘the endurance of hope’.

Read 1:4

Question 3. God had ‘chosen’ the Thessalonians. On what two grounds did Paul and his colleagues know this to be true? The first is in v.5, the second in v.3 and v.6a.

Paul notes the Thessalonians’ *conversion*, in v.5 – when the gospel was preached to them they responded in faith; and their subsequent *changed lives*, in v.3,6a – after their conversion they showed the fruit of it.

Read 1:5a [See note 6.]

Question 4. Four contributions to the original gospel work in Thessalonica are mentioned. One, the first mentioned, was the contribution made by Paul and his fellow-workers as they presented the gospel there – what was that? And three were the work of God – what were they? How does this verse challenge us and our church in our practice of evangelism?

1. = the gospel was preached.

2., 3., 4. = ‘with power’, ‘with the Holy Spirit’, and ‘with deep conviction’.

Read 1:5b-7 [See note 7.]

Question 5. How were the Thessalonians affected by their reception of the message? Three (or four!) things are mentioned, in 6a, 6b, and 7. How does our own experience (individually and corporately) echo that of the Thessalonians? What challenge does this present to our Christian lives?

6a. – changed (godly) lives

6b. – joy in suffering

6b. and 9a – a glad welcome given to the gospel message and to the gospel team

7. – changed lives again, leading to a commendable reputation

Read 1:8-10 [See notes 8. to 11.]

Question 6. The Thessalonians' lives were manifestly and obviously turned around by their Christian faith, so much so that 'the Lord's message rang out' from them. Can you summarise the way in which this happened? or to put it another way, just what was their reputation, as reported back to Paul?

Emphasise their *clear* and *universal* reputation

But then emphasise also this distinct trio of qualities of true Christian faith

'Turn' 'Serve' 'Wait'

Question 7. Consider, then, these three steps in Christian conversion and Christian life: 'you turned ... to serve ... and to wait ...'. Can you trace this pattern in your own Christian experience? How should this understanding of Christian faith shape (i) our witness and evangelism, and (ii) our nurture of new Christians?

Spend quality time on this question!

'Turn' = 'work of faith' – Show the nature of true repentance, both the *turn from* and the *turn to*.

'Serve' = 'labour of love' – Show the responsibility of true Christian living.

'Wait' = 'endurance of hope' – Show the reality of the promise of heaven as a prime motivating factor in maintaining present joy in suffering (suffering is suffering for the gospel, here).

Conclusion

Question 8. Do you think the following is a fair two-fold summary of the whole passage? Discuss how we as a church, you as an individual Christian, and you as a small group member if applicable, can better implement these two essential marks of authentic Christianity:

"We can't receive the gospel without living the gospel; and we can't receive the gospel without letting the gospel be known."

Have an enthusiastic discussion about this, unless you think you've already done justice to this matter in the previous Qq!

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Study 2 – A Window into Paul’s Pastoral Heart

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 (ESV)

¹ For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. ² But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. ³ For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵ For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. ⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸ So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. ⁹ For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹ For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹² we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Study 2 – Explanatory Notes

1. Although we as ordinary Christians in the 21st century western world should not necessarily, immediately and unequivocally apply teaching about *the apostles to ourselves* (for we are not apostles, and cannot be), nonetheless there are certainly many great lessons about gospel ministry that we can definitely learn from this passage.
2. The precipitating cause of ch. 2 must be the smear campaign Paul has suffered at the hands of the Jewish authorities. The opposition, as in Philippi (see Acts 16), was very vicious at the time of his first visit (see Acts 17), and presumably has continued in his absence.
3. Paul defends the *integrity, sincerity and authenticity* of his gospel mission, and the application for us must be that we examine ourselves and our gospel ministry in these matters.
4. Ch. 2 begins with a ‘For ...’ (not present in NIV), showing that ch. 2 explains ch. 1. Ch. 2, therefore, shows how the very real faith of the Thessalonians (ch. 1) hangs upon the very real ministry of Paul and his gospel team of Silas and Timothy.
5. ‘visit’ in 2:1 is the same word as ‘reception’ in 1:9a (it’s a tiresome feature of NIV that it manages so effectively to obscure these things). This is another connection between ch. 2 and ch. 1 – you gave us and the gospel a welcome reception; that reception was not a failure.
6. ‘not a failure’ (v.1) is literally ‘not empty’, which some commentators think means ‘empty of purpose’ rather than ‘empty of result’. This fits with v.2 a bit better. v.2 begins with a strong ‘But ...’ (also omitted by NIV, grrrrr...!), so the idea is ‘we preached the gospel in Philippi undaunted by strong opposition there, and with the same intensity of purpose we then came to you.’

7. 'dared to tell', v.2, literally means 'spoke fearlessly, frankly, openly'. There was nothing covert about Paul's gospel mission – it was full of integrity, not hypocrisy, as borne out by the entire passage we're looking at.
8. 'insulted' in v.2 means far more than just physical suffering. It refers to humiliating indignities (e.g. being flogged naked despite being a Roman citizen) arising from haughty insolence (the Greek word used gives us our 'hubris') on the part of the oppressors.
9. The allusions to the mother-like and father-like aspects of Paul's ministry are very touching, and are a lovely window into the utterly personable and genuine character of Paul (contrary to those many people who portray Paul as a nasty piece of work). Note that although these qualities should be true of us too (especially church ministers), we shouldn't be calling ourselves the father (or Father) of anyone (*father-like*, but not father), although Paul (as an apostle) did count himself the spiritual father of Timothy in some sense.
10. Note that v.12 contains allusions to the ongoing Christian life, and its final destiny, as well as its beginning, as did 1:3 and 1:9,10 – 'glory', though tasted in the present, is essentially future, 'live lives' is definitely the ongoing present Christian life. Paul didn't just preach the gospel as 'get saved', but rather as 'get saved, live a saved life, and look forward to heaven'.

Study 2 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 – A Window into Paul’s Pastoral Heart

Paul’s Integrity and Sincerity

Read 2:1,2,4,5,9,10

Question 1. What is common to these verses, and what does this teach us about Paul’s gospel ministry?

Read 2:2,9

Question 2. What is Paul’s courage matched by?

Read 2:2 and Acts 17:5-9

Question 3. Why do Paul’s sufferings in Thessalonica point to the integrity of his gospel ministry?

Read 2:2,3

Question 4. What other evidence is there in this passage that Paul's gospel mission was one of integrity and sincerity? How should all this apply to us in our gospel ministry? Is there a particular sense in which this should apply specially to Christian leaders (elders, teachers) today?

Read 2:4

Question 5. What does it mean to be approved by God and entrusted with the gospel? And what does it mean to please God and not men?

Read 2:11,12

Question 6. Paul's gospel mission wasn't a hit and run affair. Why and how? What implication is there here for our evangelism?

Study 2 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 – A Window into Paul’s Pastoral Heart

Note to the Bible study leader:

It may be very difficult to avoid answering all the following questions at the same time! The passage is so crammed full of lovely insights into the utter authenticity of Paul’s gospel mission, that they’ll probably all come tumbling out at once! It’s been quite difficult to set really distinct questions. Don’t worry if you don’t end up working through these Qq one by one. If you just have one extended discussion, that’s fine – but do try to ensure that all the points mentioned below are covered at some stage in your 40-45 minute study.

Above all, ensure that you all *apply* the points raised below to our own gospel ministry.

Paul’s Integrity and Sincerity

Read 2:1,2,4,5,9,10

Question 1. What is common to these verses, and what does this teach us about Paul’s gospel ministry?

Five times Paul says ‘you know’ or ‘you remember’ or ‘you are witnesses’ (compare 1:5b), and twice declares God as his witness too in v.5,10, and God as his authority (v.4).

This points to the *openness* and *transparency* of Paul’s ministry before both God and men. See note 7.. There is nothing covert or underhand about Paul’s ministry. Apply!

Read 2:2,9

Question 2. What is Paul’s courage matched by?

God’s help! As we courageously proclaim Christ, then God works supernaturally to strengthen and empower us. Wow!! Apply this!! See Colossians 1:28,29 for a similar example, though that one is about Bible ministry in the church rather than about evangelistic mission. Hard work (by us) and strength (from God) always go together.

Read 2:2 and Acts 17:5-9

Question 3. Why do Paul’s sufferings in Thessalonica point to the integrity of his gospel ministry?

You could observe that people only willingly suffer for what they truly believe in, and that they wouldn’t have carried on with their mission in the face of suffering if they weren’t sincere, or if they were in it for selfish motives.

If the gospel is worth suffering for and if it does arouse opposition, then surely it must be motivated by integrity. Apply!

Read 2:2,3

Question 4. What other evidence is there in this passage that Paul's gospel mission was one of integrity and sincerity? How should all this apply to us in our gospel ministry? Is there a particular sense in which this should apply specially to Christian leaders (elders, teachers) today?

It was courageous (v.2), honest before men (v.3,5,10), honest before God (v.4,5,10) and not self-seeking (v.3,5), it was loving (v.8), and 'incarnational' and relational (v.8) – that is to say, the people Paul was preaching the gospel to *mattered* to him as people, it was gentle and caring in a mother-like way (v.7), it was matched by a holy life full of integrity (v.10), it was without cost to the hearers (v.7,9), it was responsible and caring in a father-like way (v.11,12)

Apply!!

Read 2:4

Question 5. What does it mean to be approved by God and entrusted with the gospel? And what does it mean to please God and not men?

See 2 Timothy 2:2 (where also note the 'openness', 'witnesses' theme of 1 Thessalonians 2:10) for a challenging verse on the gospel being 'entrusted' to us (this is the NT theological college* – but one to which all Bible teachers in Christ's Church belong), along with 1 Timothy 1:11, Titus 1:3 (the gospel entrusted to Paul), and 1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 1:14 (the gospel entrusted to Timothy).

The 'approval' by God may signify the unique apostleship of Paul and the other apostles, but the 'entrusted' certainly applies to all Christians (as evangelistic ministers of the gospel) and to all Christian teachers (as ministers of the Word of God in the Church). Apply!! The words 'approved' and 'tests' in this verse are the same in the Greek.

The need to please God and not men is a great challenge to our motives, of course. See Colossians 3:23,24 (back one page!) for a very important example of the same theme. Apply!!

*Note the teaching 'ladder' here in 2 Timothy 2:2 – God has taught Paul, Paul has taught Timothy, Timothy teaches 'reliable men' (future church leaders and teachers), and they teach the church.

Read 2:11,12

Question 6. Paul's gospel mission wasn't a hit and run affair. Why and how? What implication is there here for our evangelism?

Paul didn't just 'hit 'em with the gospel' and run, but he stayed (three weeks, it seems) and taught them how to live the Christian life as well as how to become a Christian.

This shows that Paul taught the gospel not just as a message offering salvation, but with the mandate of a changed life too – he preached *repentance* and *faith*. He preached Christ as Saviour *and* Lord. Apply!!

Implication for us is that we must seek to initiate converts into the life of the church where they'll be taught, where they'll belong and be loved, and where they'll serve, along with us. Discuss how we can do this better in practice.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

Study 3 – The Powerful and Effective Word

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20 (ESV)

¹³ And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God’s wrath has come upon them at last!

¹⁷ But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavoured the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

Study 3 – Explanatory Notes

1. There are two Greek words for ‘and’, one stronger than the other (the other being a small ‘connecting particle’). The strong one occurs three times in v.13, translated only twice in the NIV (as ‘and’ and as ‘also’). The word can mean ‘and’, ‘also’, or ‘even’, or (to paraphrase) ‘yes indeed’. There is very much a sense of ‘yes indeed’ in this verse.
2. If ‘also’ (as most of the versions translate the second of these three ‘and’s) is the sense meant by Paul (and this is very likely), then almost certainly he is recalling the earlier thanks to God in 1:2, where he was full of thanks at the manifestly changed lives of the Thessalonians. So here Paul is saying, very strongly, ‘Yes, indeed, we thank God not only for your wonderfully changed lives (faith, love, hope), but also, yes indeed we do, for the underlying cause of this, namely your humble and obedient reception of God’s gospel message in spite of the suffering (v.14) it brought you’.
3. The word ‘word’ does, as in NIV, occur three times in this v.13. There is a strong emphasis here on the gospel message, as in 1:5,8 and 2:2,8-9. Notice then that the apostle Paul gives great weight to the power of the word of God to do its work. The last clause of v.13 shows this, ‘which is at work in you who believe’. Note that there is no discrepancy here between this clause and the equivalent clause in 1:5; that is to say, the idea that ‘the *word* does *its* work’ (2:13) is exactly synonymous with the idea that ‘the *Holy Spirit* does *his* work’ (1:5). The Bible never distinguishes between the word working and the Spirit working, and we mustn’t drive a wedge between them.
4. In 1:5 the work of the Holy Spirit was an effective work, i.e. a work of power and a work of deep conviction. Both these thoughts are present in 2:13 as well – conviction is implied in the Thessalonians’ acceptance of Paul’s message as God’s word rather than men’s, and powerful effect is implied in the clause ‘which is at work in you who believe’.

5. Note therefore that there is an implicit identification here of 'faith' ('you who believe') with acceptance of the gospel for what it is – God's word. NB, the two words 'accepted' and 'received', though two different Greek words, are essentially synonymous. To believe is to accept/receive (compare John 1:12, '*to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*'). Where there is no faith, neither God's Spirit nor God's Word are at work.
6. **Important note:** the term 'the Jews' in v.14 is very interesting. Leaving aside uses of the term in a purely neutral sense (i.e., simply to describe Jewish people), it is used very many times indeed in the NT in a negative sense, that is to say, referring to the Jews in their rejection of Jesus Christ and of the Christian gospel. Virtually all of these usages are in the gospels (especially John) and Acts. After the first five books of the NT the term is used negatively only twice, once in 2 Corinthians 11:24 (quite a late letter), and here in 1 Thessalonians 2:14 (an early letter). This, then is almost certainly the very earliest occasion this term is used (written 50 or 51 A.D.) Liberal scholars, who almost universally think the gospels and Acts were written very late, even in the second century, try to suggest that the term 'the Jews' was invented retrospectively and used to rewrite the history of Jesus of Nazareth and the history of the early church with an anti-Semitic slant (i.e., they try to suggest that the rejection of Christ and of Christians by Jews was in reality nothing like it's portrayed in the Bible). There have been many charges of anti-Semitism made against the Bible (none of which hold water), or against the Christian church (some of which, sadly, do hold water, as, e.g., the 'German Christians' who supported Hitler).

But even the liberal scholars almost all agree that 1 Thessalonians is a very early and authentic Pauline letter, and the occurrence of the term 'the Jews' here in 2:14 is a serious obstacle to the liberal view. Therefore note also the following:

First, reading the usages of the term in the gospels and Acts in context it's clear that by 'the Jews' the Bible means for the most part Jewish *leaders* who rejected Christ – it usually extends to ordinary Jewish people only in so far as they were led astray by their leaders (e.g. the crowd shouting 'crucify him').

Secondly, the reporting of history as it happened can't in itself be anti-Semitic. If the Jewish leaders of Jesus' own day rejected him, then that's what they did, leading the ordinary people with them. Because Jesus came to his own people, who'd had many long centuries of apostasy against the God who'd called them to be his own people, it was these people, his own people, who, faced before anyone else with the decision whether to accept him or reject him, decided to reject him. It goes without saying, I trust, that the Gentiles fared no better when they too were faced with the same decision after the launch of the gospel mission.

Thirdly, note that this became a hot potato with the release of Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of the Christ' in 2003, whose alleged anti-Semitism was then the cause of much criticism. Whether the film really was anti-Semitic, either by accident or intent, is moot, but I do personally have two massive reservations about this film. First, it was gruesomely violent (perhaps, not gratuitously so, though I myself am inclined to think, yes, gratuitously), and I quite simply can't cope with excessive violence, and that not just out of personal distaste but out of a deep conviction that the growing tendency towards graphic violence in films is having a very negative impact on society (but note, this is a personal view); and secondly, the Bible says virtually nothing about the gruesomeness of Roman execution methods – it simply does not dwell on the physical suffering of Christ in the way this film does (and it's interesting that the scourging of Christ, which gets just a couple of words in the NT narrative, is depicted rather more graphically, and at as great or greater length than the crucifixion): the horror of

the cross of Christ, for our Lord himself, was the horror of bearing our sins, and that is what the Bible majors on. The film actually fails totally to portray the sin-bearing substitutionary atonement of Christ.

I would encourage you not specifically to raise questions about the alleged anti-Jewish polemic of this passage; but if it crops up in your study then be forearmed with the above notes!

7. That having been said, it's clear that 'the Jews' were the cause of much suffering to the young Thessalonian church, just as they had been in Judea (2:14). See Acts 17:1-9 (and Acts 17:13 where the Thessalonians Jews went to Berea to stir up trouble there). Why Paul specifically refers to the churches of Judea by way of comparison is a matter of interesting debate. In 2:14 Paul simply shows the Thessalonians that what they were experiencing is exactly the same as God's prophets down through the ages experienced (rejection from *their* own countrymen), culminating in Christ himself, and thence experienced by the earliest Christian churches. I.e., persecution is 'situation normal' for an authentic Christian church.

Note that for Paul, persecution of the Christian church is extremely serious, warranting this comparison with the crucifixion of Christ by the Jews, and reaping as its reward the utmost wrath of God – not surprisingly, as this is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of Matthew 12:31 (a determined, settled, shameless, and unrepentant rejection of Christ). Opposition to Christ, opposition to Christ's people, and opposition to Christian gospel mission are all of a piece.

Note that the final sentence of v.16 is difficult to translate. First, despite the verb being in the past tense, there is no indication at all of any event that has happened to indicate that God's wrath has already come in some specific sense on these persecutors. It could possibly mean wrath in the sense of Romans 1:18,24,26,28: i.e. God's present wrath on them is evidenced by the shamefulness of their sin. But it's much more likely that this past tense ('has come') is what's known as a *prophetic (or proleptic) past*, whereby a past tense is used to denote a future event which is absolutely certain (as in Romans 8:30, where 'glorified' in the past tense certainly means 'will be glorified with complete certainty'). We use a similar idiomatic construction, 'it's as good as done' or 'consider it done'.

8. Secondly (on this final sentence of the paragraph) the word translated 'has come' can also be rendered 'has drawn near'. Thirdly, the two words translated 'at last' can be rendered 'finally' or 'at long last' or 'completely' or 'to the uttermost'. The last of these may what Paul intended as it is a natural complement to 'to the limit' in v.16b. The force of the sentence is definitely that with complete certainty, God's full and final wrath is on these persecutors of Christ and his gospel people – it's as good as done! – but it's final judgement which is almost certainly in mind.
9. v.17-20 revert to the tender loving care of Paul for this young Christian church. Just as his recollection of their transformed lives led to his first outburst of thankfulness and affection, so now this second recollection, this time of their acceptance of the Word of God, leads to a renewed outburst of thanks (v.13-16) and affection (v.17-20).
10. Note, however, that this isn't *only* affection – rather it's real pastoral concern. By pastoral concern, of course, we mean his concern to keep growing them up into Christ – in other words, just as he has got them started on the Christian road by the word of God, so he wants to keep them going on the Christian road by the word of God; but we shall see this in detail in future chapters.

11. The 'torn away' in v.17 refers to the enforced departure of Paul from Thessalonica as a result of the Jews' opposition (Acts 17:10). The thought of the Greek is of bereavement. The activity of Satan in v.18 is almost certainly a reference to the persecutions Paul himself was suffering which were preventing him from moving freely (but we'll see this too in future chapters).
12. v.19,20 demand some attention. Paul isn't being conceited here, of course, as if to say, 'look what a terrific job I've done on you lot!' Rather Paul is experiencing the very natural joy and encouragement of seeing fruit from his gospel labours. He's chuffed to yummy bits that these Christians have proved so faithful and resilient in their faith. More than that, though: although he is not boasting of his achievements, he is exulting joyfully in this church. The crown is a victor's crown rather than a king's crown, so the thought is this: that the tremendously encouraging start in the Christian life which this church has made, and which they have steadfastly continued despite persecution, is ample encouragement to Paul to inspire confidence that they will continue to a victorious end, so that on the last day the fruit of Paul's gospel labours will be evident to all. 'glory', here, is in the sense of something wonderful being seen for what it is (this is the original sense of the word even when applied to the glory of God).

Study 3 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20 – The Powerful and Effective Word

Read 2:13 and Acts 17:2-3

Question 1. What is the Word of God in v.13? If Paul's gospel message was *then* (in his own day) the Word of God, what can we deduce about it for *today*? What does this say about the authority of the apostles? What implications are there for us today, therefore, as we study Paul's and the other apostles' letters? What is meant by *receiving* (or, equivalently, *accepting*) the word of God? When we receive it, what does God do?

Read 2:14, and compare 1:6-7 and (e.g.) 1 Peter 1:6-7 or James 1:2-3

Question 2. What particular result of the Thessalonians' profession of faith does Paul mention specifically, and why? How does the suffering experienced by the Thessalonians contribute to Paul's estimation of their faith? What lessons are there for us here? Look at Romans 12:19 and compare with the final sentence of v.16: whose wrath comes on those who persecute God's people? So whose wrath shouldn't? What does this tell us about how to treat persecution?

Read 2:17-20, and 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, and its parallel in Hebrews 13:17

Question 3. Is anyone as proud of us (in the acceptable sense of pride!) as Paul was proud of the Thessalonians? If not, why not?! It may be that no-one has been quite as responsible for us as Paul had been for the Thessalonians, but pretend there has been, and ask yourselves, what should I be doing now to ensure that at the last day my/our spiritual mentor sees us as his/her glory and crown and joy? Are we a joy to our church leaders?

Study 3 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20 – The Powerful and Effective Word

A few notes to the study leader:

Bible Study leaders frequently comment on how hard they find it to keep the study reasonably short (40-45 minutes is what we suggest, without it being a law) – I do sympathise! It's great when discussion goes so well that you have to rein it in to some extent. But the trouble is that you can easily end up giving too much attention to earlier Qq and too little or none at all to the later ones.

Therefore I've given just three 'questions' for this study, though each 'question' is a 'multiple' one. It's just another way of doing it – with just three major questions you may find it easier to allot 10-15 minutes (say) to each. By 'multiple' question, I mean that I've asked the question in several components, or sub-questions (the first one, for example, has six little questions all rolled into one). The idea is to see these as just one discussion area really; you could go through the sub questions one by one briefly, or treat them all together, just as you like, ensuring a decent coverage in the end. But do try to ration the total discussion on each multiple question to 15 minutes max.

I haven't given you much help for the third question. It's not that I ran out of time, but rather that this is simply (but importantly) an application question. The idea is for us humbly to ask ourselves, 'Who is proud of me in respect of my Christian life?', or 'Are we a joy to those responsible for us spiritually?' You could usefully ask if you think your church members (and you in particular!) are a joy to your church leaders!! This is more pertinent than you might think, in view of 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 which we'll come to eventually, and its parallel in Hebrews 13:17(and 7)!

Read 2:13 and Acts 17:2-3

Question 1. (Ask these sub-questions one at a time if you like, or alternatively mingle them up together) What is the Word of God in v.13? If Paul's gospel message was *then* (in his own day) the Word of God, what can we deduce about it for *today*? What does this say about the authority of the apostles? What implications are there for us today, therefore, as we study Paul's and the other apostles' letters? What is meant by *receiving* (or, equivalently, *accepting*) the word of God? When we receive it, what does God do?

The Word of God in v.13 is the message the Thessalonians heard from Paul, which if you look at Acts 17:2-3 is none other than the gospel of Jesus.

In 1 Peter 1:23 the gospel is described as 'the living and enduring word of God'. God's word doesn't change (it's living and enduring), so God's Word then is God's Word now.

What it says about the authority of the apostles is very important. In the light of John 14:26 and 15:27, etc., we must be clear that the apostles had Christ's authority to declare the gospel to the world – so that what they taught, as at Thessalonica, is God's Word, or God's gospel. By extension, this contributes to our understanding of the authority of scripture. Correspondingly, what Paul writes here to the Thessalonians is for us too, and we likewise are obligated to receive it as the word of God and to obey it so that our lives are transformed too.

Receiving, or *accepting*, the gospel as God's word is exactly the same as *believing* the gospel. It's just another way of saying the same thing.

When we receive the gospel God works! It has been said that the gospel comes with its own power pack. But the power pack is God himself in the person of his Holy Spirit. Note the clear reference to the doctrine of justification by faith here – our obligation is to believe, but our conversion and growth is God's work, not ours.

Read 2:14, and compare 1:6-7 and (e.g.) 1 Peter 1:6-7 or James 1:2-3

Question 2. (Same remark as above) What particular result of the Thessalonians' profession of faith does Paul mention specifically, and why? How does the suffering experienced by the Thessalonians contribute to Paul's estimation of their faith? What lessons are there for us here? Look at Romans 12:19 and compare with the final sentence of v.16: whose wrath comes on those who persecute God's people? So whose wrath shouldn't? What does this tell us about how to treat persecution?

The result is persecution, because throughout the NT steadfastness under persecution is a prime hallmark of the authenticity and sincerity of Christian faith. It's because Paul sees this steadfastness under persecution that he is persuaded that their faith is for real. Faith under trial is faith that grows.

It's God's wrath, not ours, which is the final destiny of the persecutors. Patience under suffering is the order of the day!

Remember to try to keep clear of anti-Semitism issues unless they arise. You may need to explain the *proleptic past* in v.16c. [*proleptic past* means an event is put in the past tense in the text in order to emphasise its certainty of happening in due course, but which is actually future and not yet fulfilled. The event or happening is 'as good as done', to use an English idiom.]

Read 2:17-20, and 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, and its parallel in Hebrews 13:17

Question 3. Is anyone as proud of us (in the acceptable sense of pride!) as Paul was proud of the Thessalonians? If not, why not?! It may be that no-one has been quite as responsible for us as Paul had been for the Thessalonians, but pretend there has been, and ask yourselves, what should I be doing now to ensure that at the last day my/our spiritual mentor sees us as his/her glory and crown and joy? Are we a joy to our church leaders?

This is application!

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Study 4 – Steadfastness, Maturity and Love

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13 (ESV)

¹ Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labour would be in vain.

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Study 4 – Explanatory Notes

1. It's possible that the 'we' and 'us' of this week's passage refer to Paul and Silas, or Paul and Silas and Timothy, but scholars tell us there are good grounds for supposing that this *may* be a usage of what they call an 'epistolary plural' – similar to our 'royal we' – meaning I/me. In other words, Paul is being intensely personal in this passage – we don't know if Silas was with him at this stage, and it may be that sending Timothy meant leaving Paul totally on his own. But it's not certain, and doesn't matter a huge amount. But v.1 does give an indication of the personal cost to Paul of sending Timothy – Athens was a very pagan city to have to remain in. Given the return to 'I' in v.5 I think I am not persuaded myself about the 'epistolary plural' theory.
2. Note that Paul describes Timothy as *God's* fellow worker in v.2 – a note of great confidence that the gospel mission is God's mission and not just a human enterprise. See 2:13 for a similar sentiment.
3. 'Strengthen' in v.2 means more than just strength to stand up to persecution or strength against temptation. It has a note of being well grounded and built up in the faith too. Strength is frequently used in this sense, not just here, as in Romans 1:11, 1 Corinthians 1:8 (this has an echo of the 'growth towards maturity' motif), 1 Peter 5:10 (this last one has an echo of the 'growth through persecution' motif). Likewise 'encourage' includes a note of exhortation as well as of comfort. So once again it's the edification of this young, faithful church that is of paramount importance in Paul's heart.

4. The word in v.3 translated 'unsettled' can mean just that, as in NIV, but is probably much stronger in meaning. It more normally means to 'deceived by flattery', or 'seduced', and thus 'led astray' – so Paul's concern is not just that the Thessalonians would be unsettled by persecution, but led astray by it. Perhaps the idea is that persecution 'preaches' a seductive message to the believers along the lines of, "Come on you Christians, it's not worth it, you know – being a Christian is too costly – come on now, compromise a little and it'll all be a lot easier".
5. Note the inevitability of persecution for the Christian church, according to Paul in v.1-10. Cf. Acts 14:22, Romans 8:17 (which also includes an echo of the strengthening and encouraging in the faith which is a hallmark of Paul's concern here), Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 3:12 (the inevitability of persecution is frequently questioned these days – the real question is why we in the west today seem largely to escape it, a question worthy of consideration!).
6. What appears to be Paul's fear in v.5 that the devil may have been successful in his ploys should not surprise us. It's true that Paul had had great confidence in the Thessalonians, but there are all too many instances in the NT where a promising start is succeeded by a catastrophic failure, either sooner or later – witness Galatia very quickly, Ephesus eventually, Corinth, some of the seven churches in Revelation, etc. Paul does not take the survival of the Thessalonian church for granted. This explains his anxiousness to know. Note also that Paul truly does believe in a real personal devil – and so should we!
7. 'brought good news' in v.6 is literally 'evangelised'. This is interesting (but not particularly important) because only here in the NT is this word used other than of the telling of the Christian gospel itself.
8. In v.12 note the superlative nature of Paul's terminology – 'overflow'. This surely is intended to reflect the superabundant nature of God's love for us.
9. It won't have escaped your attention that this passage is once again crammed full of personal sentiment. Note this *en passant*, because the sentimental attachment of Paul to this church is very striking as noted in previous weeks. What is important is that once again we see that this personal attachment of Paul to the Thessalonians arises out of the encouragement and joy they accord him on account of the reality of their faith, their steadfastness, their hunger for God's Word, etc. (see, e.g., v.6-9) – it's not just because he likes them.
10. The whole passage is crammed full (and, indeed, the whole letter) with Paul's concern for the church in Thessalonica. Note that this concern consists of concern for their *growth to maturity* and concern for their *standing firm in the face of opposition*, and for their *growth in love*.

Additional note about 'love for each other'

Note that the Bible here in 1 Thessalonians 3 (see first Bible verse below) and elsewhere unashamedly places a premium on the Christians' love for each other. Whilst not neglecting our duty to love the world ('everyone else') as well, it marks out for special attention our obligation to be specially loving to one another. See the Galatians verse below, for example, and the others below for this emphasis on mutual love within the family of God's people.

Note that Matthew 25, often misused as applying to our love for the world, is actually about our duty to give fellowship to the Christian church as it carries out its gospel ministry ('little ones' in Matthew are Christian believers, typified by the image of the child earlier in the gospel).

Note, therefore, that just as the love of spouse for spouse is enhanced, and not diminished, by their respective love for God first and foremost, and like wise parents' love for their children enhanced and not diminished by their mutual love for each other first and foremost, so also our love for the world is enhanced and not diminished by our mutual love for one another.

1 Thessalonians 3

¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

Galatians 6

¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Romans 12

¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves.

¹³ Share with God's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

John 13

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Matthew 25

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?' ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?' ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' ⁴⁰ The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Study 4 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13 – Steadfastness, Maturity and Love

We shall be concentrating this week on:

- ▶ steadfastness in persecution,
- ▶ maturity in the faith (growth in holiness),
- ▶ love in the church,

and these will form the basis of the three questions this week.

Read 3:1-5 and 3:8

Question 1. What two principal aims does Paul have in sending Timothy to Thessalonica? You'll find one in v.2-3a, and the other in v.5. Are we tempted to water down our Christian commitment in the face of trial? If so, in what ways? Are we actually facing opposition of any sort, either personally or corporately? If not, why not, and should we be? (Share personal testimonies to this in your groups, if people are willing to be open.) How concerned are we to be continually strengthened and encouraged by the biblical ministry of leaders such as Timothy was to the Thessalonians? Do we match up to their zeal? And how aware are we of the devil's devices to subvert our faith and lead us astray? What are we doing to guard against this?

Read 3:6-13, and focus especially on v.10,13

Question 2. In v.11-13 we obviously have a window into how the apostle Paul is praying for the Thessalonians. He has two main objectives for the Christians in that town. One is in v.13 (the other in v.12 we'll cover in the next question). What is it? It's reflected in the earlier v.10. It's surprising to see Paul describing the Thessalonians' faith as somehow lacking – does this mean he didn't do a very good job in evangelising them in the first place? No, of course not, but then what does v.10 mean? Are Paul's concerns in this regard for the Thessalonians matched by our own concern for our own growth as Christians? What do you think is 'lacking' in your faith at the moment? (Or to put it another way, what step of progress towards maturity is God's Holy Spirit prompting you to make now? And are you open to the church's ministry of teaching and exhortation to this end?) At the rate we're growing, does perfection in Christ look likely for us?!!

Focus now on v.6,12

Question 3. Leaving aside Paul's longing to be with them (v.11), the other principal concern in Paul's praying for the Thessalonians is in v.12. What is it? Are the Thessalonians a loving church (v.6)? So why pray for them to be one (v.12)? How are we doing in the love stakes in our respective church families? Is it top priority for us at your church? Are there members of your church who feel lonely at church? [Answer: Yes, almost certainly, sadly]. How can we grow in our love for one another? Any suggestions to feed back?

Study 4 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13 – Steadfastness, Maturity and Love

We shall be concentrating this week on:

- ▶ steadfastness in persecution,
- ▶ maturity in the faith (growth in holiness),
- ▶ love in the church,

[as per the final note above] and these will form the basis of the three questions this week.

Read 3:1-5 and 3:8

Question 1. What two principal aims does Paul have in sending Timothy to Thessalonica? You'll find one in v.2-3a, and the other in v.5. Are we tempted to water down our Christian commitment in the face of trial? If so, in what ways? Are we actually facing opposition of any sort, either personally or corporately? If not, why not, and should we be? (Share personal testimonies to this in your groups, if people are willing to be open.) How concerned are we to be continually strengthened and encouraged by the biblical ministry of leaders such as Timothy was to the Thessalonians? Do we match up to their zeal? And how aware are we of the devil's devices to subvert our faith and lead us astray? What are we doing to guard against this?

The *first* of Paul's aims is to **strengthen** and **encourage** [see my note 5.] so as to equip the Thessalonians to **stand firm** in the face of trial. The *second* is to find out about how they are getting on as Christians in the face of the devil's wiles. Timothy is to go with a nurturing ministry, and to return with a report.

See my notes 3. to 6..

Read 3:6-13, and focus especially on v.10,13

Question 2. In v.11-13 we obviously have a window into how the apostle Paul is praying for the Thessalonians. He has two main objectives for the Christians in that town. One is in v.13 (the other in v.12 we'll cover in the next question). What is it? It's reflected in the earlier v.10. It's surprising to see Paul describing the Thessalonians' faith as somehow lacking – does this mean he didn't do a very good job in evangelising them in the first place? No, of course not, but then what does v.10 mean? Are Paul's concerns in this regard for the Thessalonians matched by our own concern for our own growth as Christians? What do you think is 'lacking' in your faith at the moment? (Or to put it another way, what step of progress towards maturity is God's Holy Spirit prompting you to make now? And are you open to the church's ministry of teaching and exhortation to this end?) At the rate we're growing, does perfection in Christ look likely for us?!!

Paul's desire in both these verses is to see the Thessalonians' faith **grow** on to completion on the last day. His concern is for **growth in holiness** specifically (v.13). To supply what is lacking means no more than simply to grow the Christians up from weak to strong, from immature to mature, from relatively un-Christlike to more and more Christ-like.

On my last question above, make sure that your group understands that even if we do not make impressive progress in this life (though *some* progress is absolutely mandatory) this isn't a problem for God on judgement day – he will bring us to perfection in an instant then, whatever our progress now.

Focus now on v.6,12

Question 3. Leaving aside Paul's longing to be with them (v.11), the other principal concern in Paul's praying for the Thessalonians is in v.12. What is it? Are the Thessalonians a loving church (v.6)? So why pray for them to be one (v.12)? How are we doing in the love stakes in our respective church families? Is it top priority for us at your church? Are there members of your church who feel lonely at church? [Answer: Yes, almost certainly, sadly]. How can we grow in our love for one another? Any suggestions to feed back?

As with the Thessalonians' spiritual maturity in the previous question Paul at the same time acknowledges their love and prays for it to grow. Both are important. Paul is not saying, 'you're all terribly horrible to each other – now stop that and start loving one another', and neither is he saying, 'you're all wonderfully loving – whizzo – full stop'. He is saying 'how encouraged I am by your love – but keep growing in it until it overflows!'

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Study 5 – A Life Pleasing to God

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 (ESV)

¹ Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁹ Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹ and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹² so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Study 5 – Explanatory Notes

A. 4:1-2

1. There are numerous translation issues in the first two paragraphs, some of which are worthy of note, as follows.
2. *Finally* in 4:1 is over-translated (not least because we're barely half way through the letter!). The word means little more than *and now for a new section, or moving on from this ...*
3. However, there is a prominent *therefore* here in 4:1 as well, which isn't translated in NIV; in fact, most modern translations, but especially NIV, continually omit important connecting words like *therefore, for, and, or but* (to our constant annoyance).
4. The *therefore* is typical of Paul, in that a section on Christian living, as here in ch. 4, frequently follows a section on doctrine, or, as here in 1 Thessalonians, three chapters focussing on the gospel and how the Thessalonians have accepted it and proclaimed it as the Word of God. The idea conveyed in the all-important *therefore* is that Christian living is a necessary consequence of the gospel. Christian living is the application of Christian doctrine.
5. *brothers* in 4:1 means *brothers and sisters in Christ*.
6. *live* is better translated as *walk* – steady progress is in mind. *Walk* is very frequently used of Christian discipleship.
7. *how to live* isn't strong enough. It should be *how you must live* – the imperative is clear; it's definitely not *how you should* or *ought to live*, or *how we suggest you live*; moreover, it's not a technical matter as in (say) *we instructed you how to bake a cake* – it's a **moral** imperative.
8. In 4:1 *we instructed you* is just about acceptable as a translation, but it's more accurately *you received from us*, which makes the extra point that not only did Paul do the teaching, but they the Thessalonians accepted it in an evidently life changing way. This echoes 2:13ff (*when you received the word of God ... from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually*

is, the word of God ...) which itself, you'll remember, echoed 1:6ff (you welcomed the message ...).

9. Thus 4:1 should read something like this: *so then, brothers and sisters: we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus that, just as you received from us how to walk and please God, as indeed you are walking, you should abound all the more.* The word *encourage* is a strong one, including the sense of *urge*. The same word is translated *urge* in v.10.
10. Also, the word *instructions* in 4:2 means an authoritative command. So the note of necessity is strongly present in these opening two verses, as is the note of divine authority (*in the Lord Jesus, and through the Lord Jesus*). Actually, the word *authority* is not there on its own – it's contained in the meaning of the word *instructions*. 4:2 should read something like: *for you know what authoritative instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus*. This is not simply Paul speaking, it's God – God speaking his word. See 2:13 again.

B. 4:3-8

11. NIV omits (grrrrr!!) another *for* at the beginning of v.3. I.e., v.3 is tied in to the preceding argument. This is evident in any case in the *It is God's will*, repeating the divine mandate which we saw twice in v.1-2. The first half of the verse should read: *for this is God's will: your sanctification*.
12. *sanctification*, here in v.3, is a variant on the word *saint*. These words come from the Latin, and are equivalent to the words *holy* and *holiness*. The basic idea is to be set apart – in the Christian sense, it means to be set apart for God. Thus we understand every Christian to be a saint (because this is how the Bible understands the term – it definitely doesn't stand in scripture for certain Christians only who are in some sense deemed to be special). A Christian, i.e. a saint, is set apart for God, to belong to God, to belong to His Kingdom, to belong to His People, etc. Just as God, in his character, is 'apart' from the world, so should Christians be. We should stand apart from all that is opposed to God and his perfect character, not only in being apart from the sinfulness of the world, but apart from the sinfulness of the flesh too – i.e., our own sinfulness.
13. Thus *sanctification* here refers to the process of becoming more Christlike in character, or to put it another way, progressive growth in holiness. The word *sanctification* in the Bible can mean either the matter of becoming a Christian, or the process of growing as a Christian. Interestingly, in fact, *sanctification*, and related words like *sanctify*, *sanctified*, etc., in the Bible nearly always mean *becoming a Christian* rather than *growing as a Christian* afterwards. This is contrary to popular Christian opinion – most Christians think it always means growth in holiness. But this is not so – it nearly always means God's work in making us Christians. A notable example of this is in 2 Thessalonians 2:13b, *God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth*, or 1 Peter 1:2, *God's elect ... chosen ... through the sanctifying work of the Spirit*. It goes without saying that the two meanings of *sanctification* are intricately related – one who has been set apart *for* God cannot but become *like* God. But here in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 it clearly does mean the ongoing process of becoming more like Christ.
14. But because here *sanctification* means growth in holiness, which means becoming more and more 'apart' from the behaviour of the world, it's no surprise that Paul homes in on one aspect of conduct where Christians had then (as now) to stand thoroughly opposed to the conduct of the world they lived in – namely sexual conduct.

15. *sexual immorality* at the end of v.3 is the Greek word *porneia*, which means any kind of sexual sin, though it's sometimes translated *fornication*.
16. v.4 is the subject of much debate amongst translators and Greek scholars. The NIV text reads *learn to control his own body in a way that is ...* But most of the key words in the NIV are not there at all: *learn* is absent, so is *control*, and so is *body* (and so is *in a way that is*). They are simply not present in the text. Instead of *learn ... control ... body* the words are *know ... take ... vessel*. I won't detain you with all the reasoning, but almost certainly NIV has got the wrong end of the stick – along with other modern translations. The text carries on from the previous verse, which was describing the will of God, and thus it reads, literally, *(God's will) ... to know, each of you, to take a vessel in holiness and honour*. This may seem perplexing, but one thing is certain, namely that the word *know* can't mean *learn*, *take* can't mean *control*, and *vessel* can't mean *body*. But there is plenty of precedent for the word *vessel* to mean *wife*. Thus the verse would then read *... to know, each of you, to take a wife in holiness and honour*.
17. Thus the verse is simply advising that as an antidote to *porneia*, each man should take a wife rather than surrender to his passions. This is exactly the same thought as in 1 Corinthians 7, and we shouldn't be afraid of this translation. This is what the ancients thought it meant, from earliest times, and it's what older translations had. It's only modern sensibilities that have brought about the modern translations. Taken as I've indicated, it doesn't imply a low view of marriage any more than 1 Corinthians 7 does.
18. v.5,6 are straightforward, and mean just what they say, and have no particular difficulties, but do note the following.
19. *do not know God* in v.5 doesn't mean they know nothing about him, but that they have rejected the revelation of him that they've received. I.e., their rebellion is culpable and open-handed – it's not innocent ignorance.
20. The punishment theme in v.6 is definitely there and can't be ducked (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10).
21. v.7 literally reads *For* (yes, this time the NIV has included the *for*) *God did not call us to uncleanness but in sanctification* (cf. v.3a).
22. The prepositions *to* and *in* (see my literal translation in the previous note) are different in the Greek (NIV obscures this). This is almost certainly significant. *in* is not *to*, and is not even *into*. What this means (if it's not too subtle a point) is that the expression *in sanctification* prominently refers back to the state of *sainthood* that God brought us to when we became Christians. I.e. *when God made you saints it was not for the purpose of an unclean life*. So the word *sanctification* carries both the sense of what we became at the beginning of our Christian lives and the way we should live now (but then it always does – see note 13. above). NIV with its *to a holy life* completely obscures this. So this is not simply moralistic teaching – the message is very clearly, *live what you are, or as you became a Christian, so be Christlike*.
23. Note also the word *call* in v.7. This word, *call*, virtually always in the NT, where it's used of God's call on lives and hearts and minds (about 100 such uses, including here), means his call upon us to become and be Christians. When applied to us it never, and that means never ever, means God's call on us to be a dustman or a nurse or a missionary or whatever. There are just 4 occasions when it applies in a more particular way to the apostles (i.e., God's *call* on the apostles to be apostles), but never to us or ordinary Christians of Paul's day. So here as always the thrust is: *what you are as a result of God's sovereign act of bringing you to Christ, should shape and mould the way you live your lives*. The message is not simply *Be good* but *Be good, because you are God's* (see note 22. above).

24. Note importantly that v.8 yet again has the note of divine mandate allied to the teaching of the Holy Spirit. We've had this before! Remember 1:5,6 and 2:13, mentioned already above. Taking v.6 and v.8 together, we have here the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, surely (Matthew 12:31,32). In other words, the punishment isn't simply for the sinful act of *porneia*, but for the rejection of the teaching and convicting word of God – which is precisely what the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is. Cf. also verses (do look them up) like 1 Thessalonians 5:19, Acts 7:51, Ephesians 4:30 and Galatians 5:25.

C. 4:9-10

25. There aren't any translation difficulties in this paragraph (or the next) but note the following.
26. *brotherly love* in v.9 is the single Greek word *philadelphia*, and not one of the ordinary words for love like *philia* or *agapē*. *philadelphia* means love within the church. It refers to the sort of love that befits children of the same heavenly Father. You may remember we have noted previously that the NT not infrequently charges us to have a special love for each other in the church that transcends even our love for others (and in so doing, that enhances our love for others – loving our brothers and sisters in Christ in a special way makes us love others better, not worse). See the notes on ch. 3, including the supplementary page.
27. Some commentators suggest the following reason for the particular command for increased *philadelphia*. It is harder, it is alleged, to love the world; so we should practice on one another first. But others (including myself, I think) would challenge the notion that loving each other is easier than loving the world! There are so many passages in the NT which defer to the terrible trouble God's people have in trying to love one another. So more likely is that Paul charges us to love one another for the very reason that he jolly well needs to – we are terrible at it! Hence, of course, Christ's 'new commandment'.
28. Note yet again, yes yet again – it really is a constant theme, that the growth in brotherly love is attributed to the work of God (*have been taught by God*). A striking parallel with the same thought in the previous verse, and others before (see above).
29. *more and more* in v.10 occurred in v.1 too, as did the word *urge*, which is the word we usually translate *encourage*. But *encourage* in the NT always has the sense of *urging*, not just of *comforting*. It's the Greek word that gives us the old word *paraclete* for the Holy Spirit. The strong Greek word *abound* is also present in v.10 (but not in NIV) – it should read *we urge you ... to abound more and more*.

D. 4:11-12

30. This has no difficult translation issues, and it means exactly what the NIV text says.
31. The only thing to note is that the *quiet life* doesn't mean a life of peacefulness that simply happens to you. The onus is on us to lead a quiet life, just as NIV says, and it means here that we shouldn't be interfering busybodies – the latter being the usual result of unproductive lives (cf. 1 Timothy 2:1,2).
32. It's most likely that the laziness being referred to is as a result of an unwarranted assumption that the return of Christ was going to be immediate. This is clearer in 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12, and the subject is covered in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11.
33. Once again, Paul's concern was that the lives of the Christians should commend the gospel and promote the honour of Christ, rather than bring these into disrepute.

Study 5 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 – A Life Pleasing to God

Read 4:1,2

Question 1. Nobody likes to be told how to live their life, particularly by others whose lives are just as faulty. But how prepared are we to allow God himself to do this? – are we willing to allow God to rule and direct our lives, and not just in general principle, but in actual specific teaching on moral and other matters? In the bible, teaching about the Christian faith always leads on to teaching about living the Christian life; so it's not an option to be committed to right Christian thinking but not be concerned for right Christian living. Do we give enough emphasis in our teaching and learning to all aspects of behaviour, including how to make decisions in life? Do you hunger in your heart and mind to grow in Christlikeness? Is this hunger met at your church? Does the bible meet that hunger?

Read 4:3-8

Question 2. The ancient world, just like ours, was a world of extreme sexual laxity. Given that the word *sanctified* has the sense of being *set apart*, discuss the extent to which the bible calls us to a radically different lifestyle. Does this mean being 'puritanical' (a common charge from outsiders or by 'liberal' 'Christians')? Assuming the alternative translation of 4:4 is correct (see note 16. above), what standards does this passage set for the conduct (including sexual conduct) of a marriage, particularly a Christian marriage? If someone were to cast doubt on the validity of Christian morals (e.g., the Christian view that sex is for lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage only), how would you respond – and would your response depend on whether it were a Christian or a non-Christian casting the doubt?

Read 4:9,10

Question 3. We've studied brotherly love in 1 Thessalonians already, but here is one question for study that picks up the phrase *urge you to abound more and more*: the words *urge*, *abound* (this one is in the original, but not in NIV) and *more and more* are all strong terms. So just how important is this command?

Read 4:11,12

Question 4. The principal point of v.11,12 is the reputation of the gospel, of the Christian Church, and of Christ himself. What do you think was amiss in the Thessalonian church that prompted these words from Paul? In what respects do we today fall prey to the same temptations? In what respects do our lives lived in the world bring the gospel and the honour of Christ and his church into disrepute – or could do so potentially if we're not careful? If v.3-8 told us not to be like the world (don't be sexually immoral!), but these verses 11 and 12 tell us to be like the world (do an honest day's work!), how do we know when to be like the world and when not?

Study 5 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 – A Life Pleasing to God

Read 4:1,2

Question 1. Nobody likes to be told how to live their life, particularly by others whose lives are just as faulty. But how prepared are we to allow God himself to do this? – are we willing to allow God to rule and direct our lives, and not just in general principle, but in actual specific teaching on moral and other matters? In the Bible, teaching about the Christian faith always leads on to teaching about living the Christian life; so it's not an option to be committed to right Christian thinking but not be concerned for right Christian living. Do we give enough emphasis in our teaching and learning to all aspects of behaviour, including how to make decisions in life? Do you hunger in your heart and mind to grow in Christlikeness? Is this hunger met at your church? Does the Bible meet that hunger?

Show the emphasis in this passage on how it's God himself who is the author of the moral instruction here in this week's study. See notes 9. to 11., and 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

Read 4:3-8

Question 2. The ancient world, just like ours, was a world of extreme sexual laxity. Given that the word *sanctified* has the sense of being *set apart*, discuss the extent to which the Bible calls us to a radically different lifestyle. Does this mean being 'puritanical' (a common charge from outsiders or by 'liberal' 'Christians')? Assuming the alternative translation of 4:4 is correct, where 'vessel' is translated as 'wife' (see note 16. above), what standards does this passage set for the conduct (including sexual conduct) of a marriage, particularly a Christian marriage? If someone were to cast doubt on the validity of Christian morals (e.g., the Christian view that sex is for lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage only), how would you respond – and would your response depend on whether it were a Christian or a non-Christian casting the doubt?

If 'puritanical' implies legalistic righteousness, then no, we shouldn't be puritanical. But it's outrageous to think of 'puritanical' like this. The Puritans were thoroughly exemplary in their life conduct. Sometimes it gave way to legalistic righteousness, but that was not the norm in their day. 'Pharisaical' is the correct word to describe legalistic righteousness, not 'puritanical'.

The words 'holy and honourable' and 'wrong his brother or take advantage' give the clue to conduct within marriage.

Note that our passage this week doesn't on its own give a complete answer to my last Qq about the validity of Christian morality – we need the whole Bible witness.

Read 4:9,10

Question 3. We've studied brotherly love in 1 Thessalonians already, but here is one question for study that picks up the phrase *urge you to abound more and more*: the words *urge*, *abound* (this one is in the original, but not in NIV) and *more and more* are all strong terms. So just how important is this command?

The key to this is in the term *brotherly* (part of the Greek word *philadelphia*). I.e., the key to loving one another, however hard it is, when we're thrown together in the church without choosing our fellow members, and when we hurt one another continually, is to know deeply within our understanding that we are children together of the same heavenly Father. So we are the fellow-redeemed, the fellow-forgiven, the fellow-loved-by-God. Talk about this much! See, e.g., Matthew 18:35.

Read 4:11,12

Question 4. The principal point of v.11,12 is the reputation of the gospel, of the Christian Church, and of Christ himself. What do you think was amiss in the Thessalonian church that prompted these words from Paul? In what respects do we today fall prey to the same temptations? In what respects do our lives lived in the world bring the gospel and the honour of Christ and his church into disrepute – or could do so potentially if we're not careful? If v.3-8 told us not to be like the world (don't be sexually immoral!), but these verses 11 and 12 tell us to be like the world (do an honest day's work!), how do we know when to be like the world and when not?

The key to my last Q here is that both marriage and work are creation ordinances, but that they are in God's will when and only when they remain within God's boundary markers. The ordinance of marriage goes outside God's boundary markers when sexual immorality is indulged in (amongst other things), but the ordinance of work goes outside God's boundary markers when laziness is indulged in (amongst other things). It shouldn't be supposed that the world was guiltless of this sin – it's just that some of the Thessalonian church had begun to be lazy in not working for their living. We must be very careful that in our zeal for Christian service we don't start sponging off others (particularly others who do not belong to the kingdom).

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Study 6 – Together with the Lord for Ever

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 (ESV)

¹³ *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* ¹⁴ *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.* ¹⁵ *For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.* ¹⁶ *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.* ¹⁷ *Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.* ¹⁸ *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

¹ *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.* ² *For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.* ³ *While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.* ⁴ *But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.* ⁵ *For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.*

⁶ *So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.* ⁷ *For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night.* ⁸ *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.* ⁹ *For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,* ¹⁰ *who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.*

¹¹ *Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*

Study 6 – Explanatory Notes

A. 4:13-18

1. *Brothers*, throughout the passage, as before, means Christians of either gender.
2. The two paragraphs 4:13-18 and 5:1-11 self-evidently owe their existence to some questions, two perhaps (see **B.** below for the second), having been asked of Paul by the Thessalonians (either by letter, or perhaps asked through Timothy during his personal visit to them, and who brought back the encouraging report to Paul). Paul is replying in this passage to these questions.
3. The first question, answered in 4:13-18, must have been something like, ‘Paul, what about our brothers and sisters who die before the return of our Lord? Are they in some way disadvantaged by not still being alive when Christ returns? Or will they even miss out altogether on the glory of meeting him?’ Thus Paul answers, *we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep ...*
4. The term *fall asleep* is an idiom for physical death. It’s possible that the term is used by the Christian writers to indicate that death is not the absolute end – there is something beyond, just as there is something beyond sleep. However, this may be saying too much, as it’s known that the term *fall asleep* was also used by a wide variety of religious cultures, including Judaism

and pagan religions, some of which had little understanding of life after death. So it may be that the term is just an idiom, and no more than that.

5. The fact that *asleep* means *physically dead* indicates that it's the body that's said to be *asleep*, and not the soul. My advice is to avoid at all costs discussions on the state of the departed soul, about whether it is 'asleep' in some sense of unconscious waiting, or whether it goes immediately to heaven, or immediately to a conscious blissful state of knowing Christ, albeit not in final heaven, or whatever – and likewise discussions about whether God is outside time, or inside time, or time is inside God, or whatever. Apart from this being a massive distraction, and ultimately unanswerable, it is simply not what this passage is about. The term *asleep* in this passage serves purely as an idiom for physical death (with the possibility, though no more than that, of a nuance that death is not the end), and makes no comment about the conscious or unconscious state of the departed soul.
6. *we do not want you to ... grieve like the rest of men who have no hope* doesn't mean *we do not want you to grieve at all*. Paul is not being inhuman here. Grief is fine, and all well and good, and Christians should grieve at the loss of loved ones. But we should grieve appropriately, and not *like the rest of men, who have no hope*. Christian grief is full of assurance founded on the goodness of God and his utter faithfulness to his own. Christian hope is not hope as the world understands the term, with its note of uncertain wishfulness. Christian hope, instead, means absolute assurance of the promises of God for beyond the grave.
7. And this confidence in God is itself founded upon the cross and resurrection of Christ (*We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so ...*). This is important – the cross and resurrection of Christ are the grounds of all our assurance.
8. Note, though, that death itself, which Christians shouldn't fear, is not the same as the process of dying. Quite obviously it's only human to entertain a real concern about the latter, as the process of dying can be very painful, undignified and unpleasant. No Christian should think it a virtue to be dispassionately gung-ho about the process of dying, though of course being a Christian should transform our attitude to this too.
9. There are a couple of translation issues in v.14, but I won't bore you with them – NIV gives the right sense notwithstanding a bit of liberty in the translation. The *in him* (literally *through him*) almost certainly, as NIV implies, belongs with *fallen asleep*; i.e., those who will appear with Jesus will be dead Christians, and not dead anyone else.
10. No-one knows what *According to the Lord's own word* in v.15 means exactly – it could be a direct reference to specific teaching of Jesus in his lifetime (though none such to this effect is actually recorded in the gospels), or it could be the apostle's conclusions based on teaching generally by Jesus about his return (of which there is much), or it could be Paul claiming direct revelation from the risen Jesus after his conversion (which we know is how Paul the 'extraordinary' apostle did learn much of his understanding of the gospel). It doesn't matter, save that we can be sure that Paul's authority to say this is directly from Jesus himself, some which way – it's according to the Lord's word, which makes it utterly reliable and certain.
11. The general thrust of v.15-18 is to give absolute assurance that Christians who die before the return of Christ are not disadvantaged in any way. I.e., the message is, in effect, *Dear brothers, when the Lord returns, those of us still alive will indeed meet him in the heavenly realms, but when we do, we shall see most assuredly that those who have died beforehand will be there with him too, absolutely on a par with us*. I don't want to underplay the details of these verses, but there really is very little more in this passage than this.

12. The pastoral implication of this, which surely should occupy big time in our study of this passage, is that death need not be feared by Christians. Whatever is true about the interim state of the departed, which we won't be discussing because we have no information about it in this (or any) passage, what is certainly true is that the return of Christ will be a consummately (and consummatingly – i.e., bringing everything to a final victorious conclusion) triumphant and glorious event in the experience of every believer who has ever lived (including, of course, though this passage doesn't actually say so, the true believers of the OT – for other Bible passages assure us that they are *in Christ* too).
13. As far as the details of these verses are concerned, *come down from heaven* in v.16 is an idiom for his return, reflecting Christ's own declaration that he would return as his disciples saw him ascend (see note 15. below for cross references) – but we must remain agnostic as to whether the descent of Christ at his return is to be understood literally; *the voice of the archangel* is properly *a voice of an archangel*, so attempts to identify him are fruitless; the three terms *loud command*, *voice of an archangel* and *a (not the) trumpet call of God* indicate a decisive and unanswerable (and unstoppable) intervention by God himself in the affairs of men, and essentially all make the same point – i.e., they represent an announcement from God himself that he is coming in power, in holiness, in judgement, etc. They are probably not to be given greater significance than that, for all these terms are examples of apocalyptic imagery – they state something important about the glorious return of Christ, but are probably not to be taken literally. We note, though, that the use of *three* such epithets is noteworthy – something said twice in Hebrew thought means 'this really is noteworthy'; something said three times means 'this is ever so terrifically extraordinarily noteworthy' (as in the three 'holy's of Isaiah 6, the only such threefold occurrence of 'holy' in all ancient near eastern literature.)
14. Note that the resurrection of the body (that is, the body of every Christian, deceased or otherwise) a doctrine taught especially in 1 Corinthians 15, and enshrined in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, is taught in part here in 4:16 too. Paul here stops short of explicitly stating that we'll have a resurrection body, but he does say the dead will be raised, and raised *first*, implying that in a sense the living will be raised too – a strange thought until we realise that even those who are living at the time of the return of Christ will also be given a resurrection body to replace their earthly one – but see 1 Corinthians 15 for all this in great detail.
15. *caught up ... in the clouds* and *in the air* in v.17 probably aren't to be taken literally, rather as an indication that our meeting the Lord is to be in the heavenly realms. Don't press these terms into greater service than that. See Matthew 24:30-31 for a crystal clear gospel parallel, and Matthew 26:64 similarly. Bear in mind the ascension of Christ in the clouds and up into the air (Acts 1:9), and his return likewise (Acts 1:11, Revelation 1:7), and the fact that clouds in the Bible often signal the glorious presence of God himself (e.g. the transfiguration in Matthew 17:5, and much in Revelation).
16. Therefore, for example, I strongly advise you to eschew all discussions about 'rapture theology' and debates about the relative merits and demerits of Dispensational Premillennialism, non-Dispensational Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, Amillennialism and any other attendant '-ism' that bears upon 'the rapture' in the estimations of those who set great store by these things. {NB, we're not against the term 'rapture' itself, used by theologians to refer, simply, to our being taken to be with Christ, as here in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. What we're against is building huge theological edifices upon virtually no biblical content! Some Christians, i.e. some Premillennialists, believe that at the return of Christ all Christians will suddenly disappear ('the rapture'), but life will otherwise go on without the gospel witness in the world of the Christian church. I personally don't subscribe to this school of thought, though plenty do, especially in the USA. Please don't get distracted on to this rapture debate – not because of my or anyone

else's preference for one or other point of view, but simply because this passage throws no light whatsoever on the debate. Indeed, a huge amount is not said here about the return of Christ and attendant events or about the subsequent realities of heaven and hell – it's vital we do not speculate beyond what is clearly stated here, though other Bible passages will supply what's lacking, and that we do not turn imagery and metaphor into certain literal realities.}

17. I don't think (nor do the commentators) that this passage in any way declares that deceased believers will in some way be *better* off than those still alive – it simply redresses the balance, and assures us that the dead won't be worse off. *together with them* (v.17) implies exact equality – we'll not only be with the Lord for ever, but with one another, irrespective of whether we're alive or dead at the return of Christ.
18. The assurance that the dead will rise, the confident assertion that *we will be with the Lord for ever*, and the command to *encourage each other* are what should occupy our thinking. This teaching is marvellously liberating and of immense pastoral value. Go for this. Remember that *encourage* includes a sense of *exhort* or *urge* or *spur one another on* as well as *comfort*.

B. 5:1-11

19. The second question, of the two that must have been asked by the Thessalonians (see note 2. above), this one answered in the second paragraph, 5:1-11, must have been something like, 'Paul, can you give us some indication of exactly when the return of Christ will be?' Thus Paul answers, *about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well ...*
20. It might be that these two questions, asked by the Thessalonians, are essentially the same question, in the following sense: if some suggestion has been made, and entertained by the Thessalonians, that Christians who die are somehow disadvantaged, then they might well be asking also, 'If our brothers and sisters are beginning to die in substantial numbers, and if they are thus somehow disadvantaged, just when is the Lord going to return? If he delays much longer, then surely more and more believers are going to die first, and thus miss out, somehow, on the benefits of Christ's return?' So the question about the date of Christ's return follows on from the question about deceased believers.
21. Thus Paul assures the Thessalonians that the dead in Christ will not in any way be disadvantaged, so that the date/time of Christ's return need not be an issue either.
22. The fact that Paul says *we do not need to write to you, for you know ...* indicates that Paul in his earlier ministry among them had taught these things. It's quite possible, therefore, that the Thessalonians had been unsettled by some suggestion or other to the effect, noted above, that the dead are disadvantaged or even disenfranchised altogether, as noted in **A.** above. Paul's answer settles these unsettled minds, and reassures the Thessalonians, not only that all believers, whether living or dead at the time of Christ's return, will receive the full benefit of heaven, as per 4:13-18, but also that the return of Christ, certain to happen some time, if uncertain as to exactly when, will be thoroughly good news for Christians (but not for non-Christians).
23. *the day of the Lord* is a frequent idiom in the NT for the return of Christ and the consummation of all things then – e.g. 2 Peter 3:10.
24. *thief in the night*, and the message of these verses generally, picks up Matthew 24, especially v.36-44, or Luke 12:35-40, and 2 Peter 3:3-10 (but don't get caught up in the imagery of these other passages – you've enough to think about as it is!), or Revelation 3:3 and 16:15. The impact of the term *thief in the night* is that it signals surprise to those unprepared, which is what these verses are about as well as being about assurance (and no surprise, v.4) for those who *are* prepared.

25. *While people are saying, "Peace and safety"* echoes Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11 and many other places in the Bible where false prophets declare that all is well, denying the reality of God's judgement.
26. *destruction*, as an idiom for God's judgement, echoes 2 Peter 2:1-3 and 3:7, Romans 9:22, and (Christ's own teaching) Matthew 7:13, and others – see Joel 1:15 for an interesting OT reference that refers also to *the day of the Lord*. Perhaps the clearest reference to *destruction* as an idiom for God's final judgement on people of the night/darkness (see note 28. below), understood as those who reject Christ, is in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10, *He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*
27. Note the finality and inescapability of God's judgement on those who deny God's judgement (*they will not escape*).
28. *light* and *day*, are, as elsewhere in the Bible, especially in John's gospel for instance, symbols of knowing God, as distinct from *night* and *darkness*, which are symbols of not knowing God, or (equivalently) symbols of living in unrepented sin. From darkness to light, or from night to day, is the transfer made when a person gives their life to Christ in repentance and faith.
29. *sons of* is bi-gender, as per *brothers*, in this passage (and also *men* in 4:13). *sons of* is just an idiom, meaning much the same as *belong to*.
30. *asleep* in v.6 is used quite differently from the same word in 4:13-15. There it meant physically dead. Here in 5:6 it's a different idiom meaning the same as *belong to the night* or *to the darkness*. I.e., *those who sleep* (v.7), like *those who get drunk*, are those who are not believers, who do not belong to God.
31. The *others* in v.6 are of course identical to *the rest of men*.
32. *alert* (v.6) and (meaning much the same) *self-controlled* (v.6,8) refer to the active discipleship (the lived-out Christian faith) of Christian people, encompassing all of what discipleship means. *Self control* is more than just not losing your temper – it refers to the whole of a life under the discipline of God's word, as in 2 Peter 1:6, and as in the *godly, righteous and sober life* of the BCP confession. Sometimes the term *self-controlled* has the more restricted meaning, but surely not here.
33. The pieces of armour in v.8 mirror the more comprehensive set of armour in Ephesians 6:10-18 – do look this up.
34. We've had faith, love and hope (in that order, cp. 1 Corinthians 13:13) before, of course, in this letter (1:3, which you'll remember we saw reflected in the *turn, serve, wait* of 1:9-10, which with its theme of rescue *from the coming wrath* also relates to the current passage). Faith, love and hope, demonstrably present in the life of a believer, as the evidence for a truly converted person, and are the sure defence against the impending judgement. Or to put it another way, a life undisciplined by Christ and thus showing no faith, love and hope, is a life ultimately under God's judgement and appointed for God's wrath on the last day. But a life manifesting faith, love and hope, under the discipline (self-control) of Christ, is *not appoint(ed) ... to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*.
35. Throughout this letter Paul has been saying, in effect, 'It's supremely great that you Christians in Thessalonica are so obviously living out your Christian lives, your conversion is obviously very real, and you're a tremendous encouragement to us all – but as you've started, so continue; it's because we see such real faith in you that we encourage you all the more to keep

it up and live it out and continue to demonstrate to the watching world the reality of what you are in Christ'. This is the thrust of 5:8 too: 'you belong to the day (you're real Christians), so be all the more zealous to be people of faith, love and hope – you've turned to the living God, so serve and wait for him with self-controlled, alert lives of supreme assurance of heaven in the end, whether you survive until Christ's return or you die in the meantime'. The 'keep on doing what you are doing' message of the letter is repeated yet again in 5:11.

36. Many of us are accustomed to thinking of salvation as something that has already happened to us, and thus may be surprised to see it in the future here. But actually the term salvation is a big one in the Bible, covering not only the past (as in 'we have been saved', which means 'we have been justified and forgiven and accepted into God's kingdom') but also the future (as in 'we will be saved', which means 'we will be saved, or delivered, from God's wrath on judgement day'). We mustn't be afraid of this. Christians truly have been saved in the first sense. But there's a future salvation too, meaning that judgement day will hold no terror for a Christian, and therefore death need hold no terror now as we wait for the return of Christ. This is the big message of this week's passage.
37. Note that v.10 repeats the theme of the death of Christ being the grounds of our assurance. In 4:14 the resurrection was included as well as the cross; make nothing of its omission here – the simple message is 'he died that you may live', which is true indeed whether or not the resurrection is included in the formula – Paul doesn't always say everything!
38. Heaven means living *together with him* (5:10) *for ever* (4:17). No wonder, then, that 5:11 and 4:18, the next verses respectively, both issue the command, *Therefore encourage one another ...* The *and* in 5:11, connecting *encourage one another* to *build each other up* is an example of the extremely frequent 'Hebrew *and*', where the word 'and' connects two things which really are the same thing. So 'and' means 'or to put it another way' or 'by which I mean' or 'and I'll repeat that in different words' or 'let me just run that past you again' or the like. In other words, if you want to *build each other up*, then *encourage one another* – it's the same thing! Encouragement is always edifying.
39. *asleep* in 5:10 reverts to the earlier idiom, where it refers to physical death. *whether we are awake or asleep* simply means *whether we are one of those who survive until the return of Christ, or whether we are one of those who dies first, it's all the same – we'll be met by Christ on his glorious return and we'll live with him for ever.*
40. Wow!!

Study 6 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 – Together with the Lord for Ever

Read 4:13-18

Question 1. How do you understand Christian hope? How does it affect our attitude, as Christians, to death? On what is Christian hope founded? Why, exactly, can I be so sure of God's promises for beyond the grave? Should the funeral of a Christian be a joyful time?

Question 2. How do you understand the term *fall asleep*? Will Christians who die before the return of Christ be at any sort of disadvantage? Will we ever see again those Christian friends of ours who die? If so when, and where, and how can I be sure?

Question 3. According to 4:13-18, what will happen to us if we're Christians at the return of Christ? How should this affect our living for Christ while we're waiting?

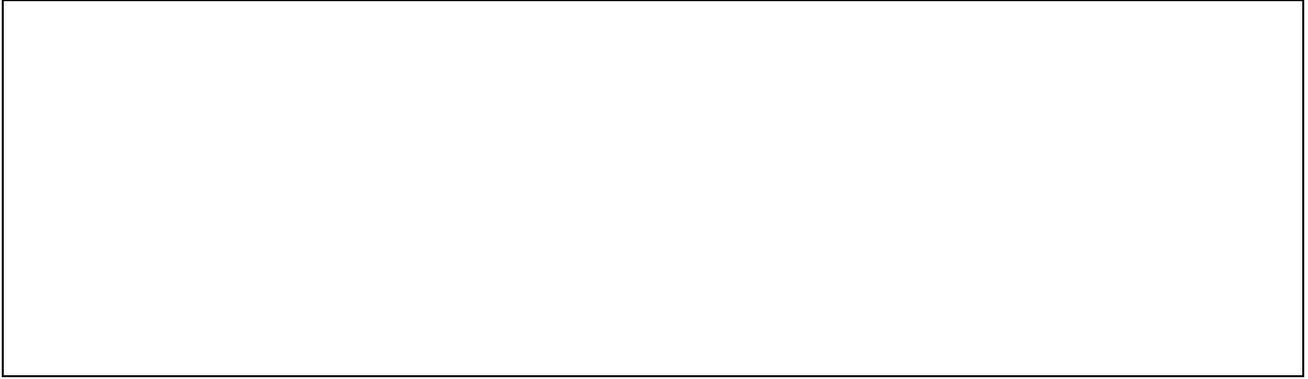
Read 5:1-11

Question 4. What is the day of the Lord? What does it mean that it will come like a thief in the night? Why will it be a surprise to unbelievers, and why won't it be a surprise for you?

Question 5. Who is it who *belong to* (or are *sons of*) *the night* and who is it who *belong to* (or are *sons of*) *the day*? What is wrong with the “*peace and safety*” verdict of those who *belong to the darkness*? What is to be the outcome for them of their false confidence? When will this happen, and how certainly?

Question 6. Similar to question 3, but answer this one from 5:1-11 – What will happen to us if we're Christians at the return of Christ? How should the expected return of Christ transform our daily lives for Christ now? Also: How can faith, love and hope be armour for us? What does self-control mean, and how do we live like that?

Question 7. What does it mean, that we should encourage one another, and how should we do this? What else, according to 5:11, is involved in mutual encouragement, and what does that mean?



Study 6 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 – Together with the Lord for Ever

Read 4:13-18

Question 1. How do you understand Christian hope? How does it affect our attitude, as Christians, to death? On what is Christian hope founded? Why, exactly, can I be so sure of God's promises for beyond the grave? Should the funeral of a Christian be a joyful time?

How do you understand Christian hope? **Emphasise the certainty of it.**

How does it affect our attitude, as Christians, to death? **It transforms our grief and gives us assurance of life beyond the grave.**

On what is Christian hope founded? **The cross and resurrection of Christ.**

Why, exactly, can I be so sure of God's promises for beyond the grave? **God's power and love and the reality of his purposes for us are absolutely established in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Because of them, we can be certain that God will 'finish the job' as it were and bring us to glory in Christ.**

Should the funeral of a Christian be a joyful time? **Yes, but not to the exclusion of real human sorrow.**

Question 2. How do you understand the term *fall asleep*? Will Christians who die before the return of Christ be at any sort of disadvantage? Will we ever see again those Christian friends of ours who die? If so when, and where, and how can I be sure?

How do you understand the term *fall asleep*? **Metaphor for physical death.**

Will Christians who die before the return of Christ be at any sort of disadvantage? **No!**

Will we ever see again those Christian friends of ours who die? **Yes!**

If so when, and where, and how can I be sure? **At the return of Christ, 'up in the air' = in heaven, and we can be sure because of the promises of God grounded in the cross and resurrection (again) – it's according to the Lord's own word (his promise).**

Question 3. According to 4:13-18, what will happen to us if we're Christians at the return of Christ? How should this affect our living for Christ while we're waiting?

According to 4:13-18, what will happen to us if we're Christians at the return of Christ? **Show the following from the passage: there'll be a resurrection; we'll be taken to heaven (*in the air*) to meet Christ, together with those who've died (if we're still alive) or with those who are still alive (if we're dead); we'll be with the Lord for ever (eternity).**

How should this affect our living for Christ while we're waiting? **Again (we've mentioned it already) it transforms our grief; but also we must encourage one another (including spurring one another on as Christians); and it surely gives us assurance about death and the afterlife.**

Read 5:1-11

Question 4. What is the day of the Lord? What does it mean that it will come like a thief in the night? Why will it be a surprise to unbelievers, and why won't it be a surprise for you?

What is the day of the Lord? **The return of Christ.**

What does it mean that it will come like a thief in the night? **Suddenly, without warning.**

Why will it be a surprise to unbelievers, **Because they're not ready, they're not in repentance, they're in rejection of Christ, = they're living in darkness, they're not expecting any intervention in life by God, whom they likely don't believe in anyway.**

and why won't it be a surprise for you? **Because we're expecting it, but also because at the return of Christ we'll be ready, we're sons of the day, we're living a life under the discipline of Christ, because we're armed with the spiritual armour of faith, love and hope.**

Question 5. Who is it who *belong to* (or are *sons of*) *the night* and who is it who *belong to* (or are *sons of*) *the day*? What is wrong with the "*peace and safety*" verdict of those who *belong to the darkness*? What is to be the outcome for them of their false confidence? When will this happen, and how certainly?

Who is it who *belong to* (or are *sons of*) *the night* **Those who do not know God (darkness/night).**

and who is it who *belong to* (or are *sons of*) *the day*? **Those who do know God in Christ (light/day).**

What is wrong with the "*peace and safety*" verdict of those who *belong to the darkness*? **It's false prophecy, as per Jeremiah 6:14;8:11.**

What is to be the outcome for them of their false confidence? **Certainty of God's judgement against them ('destruction', v.3, and 'wrath', v.9).**

When will this happen, and how certainly? **On the Day of the Lord (i.e., not yet, but it's certain, and will be sudden.)**

Question 6. Similar to question 3, but answer this one from 5:1-11 – What will happen to us if we're Christians at the return of Christ? How should the expected return of Christ transform our daily lives for Christ now? Also: How can faith, love and hope be armour for us? What does self-control mean, and how do we live like that?

Similar to question 3, but answer this one from 5:1-11 – What will happen to us if we're Christians at the return of Christ? **As for q.3. Note v.8,9,10**

How should the expected return of Christ transform our daily lives for Christ now? **Note the positives of v.6,8, and the implied negatives of v.6,7 (i.e., do not live like sons of darkness). Also note the theme of alert expectancy, but patience implied too.**

Question 7. What does it mean, that we should encourage one another, and how should we do this? What else, according to 5:11, is involved in mutual encouragement, and what does that mean?

What does it mean, that we should encourage one another, and how should we do this? Note *'together'* (v.10). Open discussion on the hows and wherefores.

What else, according to 5:11, is involved in mutual encouragement, and what does that mean? Note *'build'*. This must mean build by submission to God's Word and not simply a generalised desire for an encouraging spirit amongst the believers. Do we encourage one another to read, study, and live by God's Word?

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Study 7 – The One who Calls You is Faithful

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 (ESV)

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.

²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. ²⁵ Brothers, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Study 7 – Explanatory Notes

A. 4:13-18

1. NIV's section heading, *Final Instructions*, is about right as a description of our final passage, but that shouldn't lead us to suppose it's a disconnected set of titbits. There's more point to the selection than meets the eye, and in any case this is still the Word of God, and the short snippets are to be believed and obeyed the same as the purple prose of earlier on in the book.
2. Note that several themes of earlier in the letter, some of them really major themes, recur in this section. E.g., *to be kind* (expressed as *love the brotherhood* earlier), *not to be idle* (expressed as *work with your hands* earlier), *sanctify*, etc.
3. v.12 is paralleled in Hebrews 13:7,17, *Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith ... Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.*
4. Not everyone is comfortable with this teaching! Note, first, that Paul is not chiding the Thessalonians here, but urging them (there has been a lot of 'urging' in this letter, remember, in the use of the word *encourage*) – but urging doesn't imply it's correcting a great omission or failure; indeed, the Thessalonians are a great encouragement to Paul. Nonetheless Paul considers the urging necessary. This is only natural.
5. Note, further, that the Bible does give an authority to the church leaders (they are *over you in the Lord*), even to the extent that they have a role in *admonishing* the flock. This is just as strongly expressed in the Hebrews verse, and, indeed, in other places in the NT where church leadership is taught about. I have been asked the question recently, 'Surely this doesn't sanction authoritarian, dictatorial, autocratic leadership?' I completely and utterly agree. Authority is not the same as authoritarianism. Such tyranny is to be condemned absolutely – there is no justification whatsoever for church leaders to lord it over the flock inappropriately.

6. Rather, their leadership is to be servant-like, and this is strongly implied here in 1 Thessalonians. They *work hard among you*. Another useful control passage here is 1 Peter 5:1-3 *To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow-elder ... Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock*. Indeed, it's the case here in 1 Thessalonians that respect for the leaders is because of their work, as in v.13, *Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work*.
7. The church leaders' *work*, however, we must remember, is (obviously) their work of exercising their leadership, which predominantly, according to the NT, is the work of teaching the scriptures. The so-called pastoral epistles are the principal (though not sole) sources of information about church leadership, and they certainly speak in such terms. There is a lot in the pastoral epistles urging that leaders are to be chosen because of their godliness, but also because of their ability to teach. This is liberating, because it means that the authority of the leaders derives from the authority of the Word of God which they teach – it isn't a stand-alone authority deriving from the fact that they are 'number 1' in the church family – they are not kings. This is the essential corrective against dictatorial rule – when leaders lose their commitment to the Bible (and, a strongly related point, when they lose their commitment to godliness) their authority becomes tyrannical instead of shepherd-like. Legion are the stories of church leaders who have 'strayed' in either godliness &/or doctrine &/or the way they conduct themselves in their leadership (and usually all of these at once, or one following quickly after another) – and one such has been put in prison just a week or two ago as I write this, and others regularly disgrace themselves in one way or another.
8. Note, further, and this is important – although the Bible is very strong generally on the need for church leaders to be godly in conduct, morals and doctrine, our passage this week, and the Hebrews passage likewise, *assume* that the leadership in question is in the godly category. It doesn't make the command for respect for the leaders conditional at all. It says *Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work*, but it makes not the slightest suggestion that any of them is not worthy of that respect. We must assume that in this very encouraging Christian church all was well in this regard – the leaders are all working hard at their oversight of their congregations. Indeed, in the Hebrews passage it's almost explicitly stated that the leaders lives are godly (*Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith*, Hebrews 13:7). If there were those who were tempted to deny the leaders this respect, they did so for entirely unjustified reasons.
9. It's important you don't get side-tracked on to endless discussions about how to deal with tyrants, because tyrants aren't in the frame! Nor should you get sidetracked (please, oh please, now is not the time!) on to issues of women's ministry, or on to church government issues, because that's not the point in 1 Thessalonians either. In these days 'church' meant a local gathering of local Christians, probably meeting in homes, probably not very big, and the leaders, *those who work hard amongst you*, are simply the leaders of these local congregations, in all probability.
10. The message of these two verses is quite simple, and totally clear: 'Your leaders are worthy of your respect in all respects; so respect them, and love them to scummy bits'.
11. I write all the above because I know how contentious all this can be, because there are many disgruntled/disaffected church members in the churches of our or any land, who see a command to respect their leaders and immediately rise up in rebellion! But the Bible here and everywhere is absolutely clear: unless there are question marks over the godliness of the

church leaders (in which case the Bible has much to say, though not here, about it) then absolutely and without question those leaders are worthy of respect (v.12), love (v.13), submission to their correction under God's word (*who admonish you*, v.13), submission more generally (Hebrews 13:17) and obedience (yes! obedience! – do look at Hebrews 13:17).

12. A final note on the first two verses: it could well be the case that Paul's next injunction, to *Live at peace with each other* belongs here as a consequence of the church leadership matter – by which I mean that a well led church is always far more likely to be an 'at peace' church than a badly led one. The charge to live at peace and the command to respect the leadership go together. Or to put it another way, if significant numbers of members are rising up in rebellion against their leadership, then the church is hardly likely to be an 'at peace' church. Obviously!
13. Furthermore, v.14 and v.15 (... *be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other*) concern issues to do with relational life in the church. *idle* people don't pull their weight, which is bound to have an effect on the peace of the church. *timid* and *weak* people are not to be rejected or disdained, but helped – a relational issue. And *be patient with everyone*, not paying *back wrong for wrong*, and being *kind to each other* are most certainly relational matters! v.26 is also relational!! Thus the *peace* of the church is much in mind.
14. Go to town for a while as you study this list of characteristics of godly discipleship in the life of the church. Note, though, once again, that Paul is not writing these things out of stern rebuke – for we know that the Thessalonian church is already scoring high marks (as it were) for their godliness. But Paul nonetheless says, in effect, 'What you are, be so all the more'. Or, 'I'm terrifically chuffed at your discipleship, dear brothers and sisters, but be on your guard for there are traps for the unwary – don't take it for granted that you're going to find it always easy to keep your standards of discipleship up, so keep working at it just as you have been hitherto.'

B. 4:19-28

15. The next paragraph, v.19-22, is also somewhat contentious! At least, some have found it so! It refers to contemporary prophecy – and that's bound to be the trigger for heated debate!
16. Seriously, I'll give my verdict on what *do not treat prophecies with contempt* means. It means, note this, nothing other than *do not treat prophecies with contempt*. Yes, indeed, *do not treat prophecies with contempt* means *do not treat prophecies with contempt*! It can't mean anything else, there's no squirming out of it, it's as plain as a pikestaff (what an odd expression!). We need to tease this around a little though – what is meant by prophecy here?
17. Whatever prophecy is, here or anywhere in the context of the NT church, however it is delivered, in whatever sort of terms, however dramatically or not so at all, by whomever, on whatever occasion, under whomsoever's authority (and we really must put our differences aside on this, or we'll miss the point), the one thing we can definitely say, without any contention and unequivocally, is that prophecy is the bringing, in some size, shape or form, of Spirit-given, Bible-based, godly wisdom into the circumstances of Christian and church life, to encourage, urge and enable Christians in the making of wise and godly life decisions, promoting the glory of Christ and the furtherance of the gospel and the edification of the church. The one thing prophecy can't be is new revelation from God independent of the scriptures.

18. But note, a long debate about contemporary prophecy really cannot be justified in a study on this passage! It's not the point. The point is not WHAT prophecy is, but NOT SCORNING prophecy, whatever it is.
19. The point of v.20 must be, certainly, that any suggestion brought to the Christian church, purporting to be godly wisdom given on God's behalf, is not to be scorned, but rather tested. But before we go further some additional points need to be made about our passage.
20. First, the word *fire* (NIV) isn't present – it simply says *Don't quench the Spirit*. This could mean either *Don't quench the fire of the Spirit* (and it almost certainly does) or it could mean *Don't quench the light of the Spirit* (and it almost certainly does mean this too). The Spirit both enlightens and burns, meaning he teaches and he rebukes; light, therefore, means the light of God's word, so *Don't quench the light of the Spirit* means *Let the Spirit do his work of bringing the light of the scriptures into your hearts*; fire, though, in the Bible is universally the fire of God's judgement. It's never a warm, cosy glow, nor a burning desire in the sense that we use that idiom! This is a serious point. The *Spirit's fire* is the fire of his judgement on sin. Now this needn't worry us here. It doesn't necessarily mean his final judgement on judgement day, and it can't mean that here – Paul is addressing Christians who are growing in their discipleship. So, given that in v.21,22 Paul says, *Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil*, and given that in v.23 he is saying, *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*, it is clear that growth in godliness is his principal concern, here like in so many other places in the letter. The Holy Spirit's *fire*, then, is his judgement on the sin of our hearts and lives, his work in rooting out of our hearts everything which is against his holy character, and his promoting instead all that is godly and good (and he does this by the *light* he brings from the scriptures into our lives). So, to conclude, the Spirit's work in enlightening our hearts with his word, and burning up the dross of sin – both his light and his fire – is not to be quenched.
21. Indeed, everything else in this final passage is about the godly discipleship, and growing in godly discipleship right up to the end – culminating in the grand, climactic, confident assertion of v.24, *The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it*.
22. What shall we say then? Surely we must understand prophecy here, in 1 Thessalonians 5, in this light, even if it has more general meanings elsewhere. Here prophecy, here in v.20, coming between v.21 (*the Spirit's fire*) and v.21-23 (*Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you*) must be the bringing of Spirit-given godly wisdom into the urgent task of growing Christ's disciples in godly discipleship. That's what we must concentrate on. This is the Spirit's role in our lives, after all (as per the fruit of the Spirit, for example, in Galatians 5, much of which, if you review the list, has been reflected in this letter). Indeed, *test everything* in v.21 may mean, '*test (i.e., examine) everything in your heart, in your life, in your thinking, in your conscience, etc., and let God's Spirit convict you of what has to be rooted out – because it is sinful – and what has to be clung on to and nurtured – because it is wholesome and good and part of the character of Christ and which you should reflect in all that you are.*' It could possibly mean '*test every prophecy*', one must concede, but personally I think it could be all these things: '*Test every prophecy, for any prophecy purports to bring godly wisdom into your Christian discipleship, and begs therefore to be examined to check it out against the authoritative voice of scripture; but if it passes that test, then indeed listen to it and humble yourselves before the God who thereby has brought your attention to some aspect of godliness that you need to do something about; and test every aspect of your discipleship in the light of every Bible-based God-given word that addresses your life; and where such an examination identifies some growth to be engaged in, then grow, grow, grow!*'

23. So, dear brothers and sisters, I beg you, I beseech you, I grovel in the dust before you, please, please don't have endless discussions about the nature of prophecy! For we will not solve in a trice a debate that has defied solution for centuries.
24. But do let's have (almost) endless discussions about how we can implement the character of Christ into our hearts and minds and lives, for that is the heartbeat of this passage and this letter.

A few more technical notes:

25. *timid* in v.14 probably means *spiritually timid*. *weak* probably means *spiritually weak*.
26. *be kind to each other and to everyone else* in v.15 picks up a theme from earlier in the letter (3:12), and in various other parts of the NT, where Christians are told to have a special love for one another, but not excluding a real love for the world. We concluded, remember, that the better we love one another in the Christian church, the better we'll love the world, so the world doesn't get short changed by our special attention to loving one another.
27. *Be joyful* properly should read *rejoice*. It's not *be joyful* in the sense of *be happy*, which would be an unkind command, for happiness is not always in our control, and not always possible (or even always desirable – who says one should be happy when facing, e.g., bereavement?); it's not what you feel like that's the issue, but what you do.
28. *spirit, soul and body* in v.23 should not be seen in its component parts, but as a single entity – a typical Hebrew way of saying *the whole you*. Don't chop it up into bits.
29. *kept blameless* in v.23 is a self-evidently idiomatic way of referring to our growth in godliness over the course of our Christian lives, culminating in the return of Christ. The verse says, simply, *So grow in your Christian lives that there is no cause for shame at the return of Christ*.
30. *grace* in v.26 means, as it often does, *strength* to live for Christ (as in *my grace is sufficient for you*.)

Study 7 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 – The One who Calls You is Faithful

Read 5:24, ‘The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.’

Question 1. What does this tell us about the character of God? And what encouragement does this give to us in our Christian lives?

Read 5:12,13. Also read Hebrews 13:7,17

Question 2. Assuming our church leaders are godly and honourable as they self-evidently are in 1 Thessalonians and Hebrews, why should we respect them? What evidence is there here that they *are* deserving of our respect? On the entirely justified assumption that the church leaders in Thessalonica did their admonishing in an honourable and godly way, what does this mean, and should we expect our leaders today to do it too?

Read 5:13b-15

Question 3. What do these verses tell us about our life together in the church family, especially about how we should treat one another? How does Paul challenge us in our treatment of those who ‘give us grief’ in the church family?

Read 5:16-18

Question 4. According to these few verses, what is the antidote to discontentment in the Christian life?

Read 5:19-22

Question 5. What is the heartbeat of these verses? Why? Who is responsible for our growth in godliness?

Read 5:23-24

Question 6. And what is the heartbeat of these verses? Why? Who is responsible for our growth in godliness *here*?

Study 7 – Questions – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 – The One who Calls You is Faithful

Read 5:24, ‘The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.’

Question 1. What does this tell us about the character of God? And what encouragement does this give to us in our Christian lives?

Go to town on this great, great verse!

Read 5:12,13. Also read Hebrews 13:7,17

Question 2. Assuming our church leaders are godly and honourable as they self-evidently are in 1 Thessalonians and Hebrews, why should we respect them? What evidence is there here that they *are* deserving of our respect? On the entirely justified assumption that the church leaders in Thessalonica did their admonishing in an honourable and godly way, what does this mean, and should we expect our leaders today to do it too?

See notes 3. to 12.

Read 5:13b-15

Question 3. What do these verses tell us about our life together in the church family, especially about how we should treat one another? How does Paul challenge us in our treatment of those who ‘give us grief’ in the church family?

See notes 12. and 13.

Read 5:16-18

Question 4. According to these few verses, what is the antidote to discontentment in the Christian life?

Joy, prayer, thankfulness (obviously!) See note 14.

Read 5:19-22

Question 5. What is the heartbeat of these verses? Why? Who is responsible for our growth in godliness?

The heartbeat is that as Christians we have a responsibility to behave as behoves our faith, even in some particular but important respects. But note, the specifics mentioned are all God-focussed. Answer to the last question: *We are responsible* – the verbs in v.19-22 are imperatives; but also *God is responsible* – our growth is God’s work, the result of the Spirit’s fire, and see v.23a! See notes 15. to 21.

Read 5:23-24

Question 6. And what is the heartbeat of these verses? Why? Who is responsible for our growth in godliness *here*?

Whereas we must keep on accepting that both *we* and *God* are responsible for our growth in godliness, the heartbeat of these verses is that we can have great confidence on account of God’s grace to us in Christ. Our spiritual security, and our spiritual future, are guaranteed because of God’s faithfulness to us. Eyes upon him, then!!

Acknowledgement

This paper has been peer-reviewed by a variety of colleagues. The finished result owes much to these contributors, and I humbly acknowledge with gratitude their help. Nonetheless, the views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and he and he alone accepts responsibility for them – particularly for anything inexact or unclear, any obvious omissions, faulty logic and other follies and defects. All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version except where noted.

Latest Version

This is version dated 2nd April 2011. The latest version of this paper can be found at vernonwilkins.org.

Apology

Apologies for the remainder of this panel and its verbiage – the site it was downloaded from requires it, I'm afraid, for usual safeguarding reasons.

Disclaimer

This paper is entirely the work of the creator/author. If at any stage I have expressed any idea in a way closely similar to the way anyone else has expressed a similar idea, then this is entirely coincidental and unknown to me at time of writing.

Copyright notice

Vernon G. Wilkins asserts his right to be known as the creator/author and owner of this work (created 2008), and as owner of the copyright of all its contents. This paper may, for study, review or discussion purposes, be downloaded and/or distributed in its entirety (where 'entirety' includes this copyright notice and the one on each page), provided it is not for gain; also, this paper may be quoted from in small portions with due acknowledgement, provided that the proper context and meaning of the portion quoted is honoured and that the integrity of the author is protected.

The Author

The author, Vernon G. Wilkins, M.A. (Hons) Cantab (Mathematics), M.A. (Hons) Oxon (Theology), is British, lives in Dorset, England, and is trained in mathematics and theology; he's had a career both as a mathematics teacher and as a Bible teacher/church minister.