

Contents

1	The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica— <i>June 30–July 6</i> —————	6
2	Preserving Relationships— <i>July 7–13</i> —————	14
3	Thessalonica in Paul’s Day— <i>July 14–20</i> —————	22
4	Joyous and Thankful (1 Thess. 1:1–10)— <i>July 21–27</i> —————	30
5	The Apostolic Example (1 Thess. 2:1–12)— <i>July 28–August 3</i> —	38
6	Friends Forever (1 Thess. 2:13–3:13)— <i>August 4–10</i> —————	46
7	Living Holy Lives (1 Thess. 4:1–12)— <i>August 11–17</i> —————	56
8	The Dead in Christ (1 Thess. 4:13–18)— <i>August 18–24</i> —————	64
9	Final Events (1 Thess. 5:1–11)— <i>August 25–31</i> —————	72
10	Church Life (1 Thess. 5:12–28)— <i>September 1–7</i> —————	80
11	Promise to the Persecuted (2 Thess. 1:1–12)— <i>September 8–14</i> —	88
12	The Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:1–12)— <i>September 15–21</i> —————	96
13	Keeping the Church Faithful (2 Thess. 2:13–3:18) — <i>September 22–28</i> —————	104

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**Sabbath
School
Personal
Ministries**

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WHEN THE LORD DESCENDS FROM HEAVEN

In the 1940s, Nobel Prize-winning Irish author Samuel Beckett wrote a drama called *Waiting for Godot* about two hapless, homeless men waiting on the side of the road for someone named Godot, who was supposed to come and save them from the meaningless and pathetic absurdity of life.

“His name is Godot?” Estragon asks.

“I think so,” Vladimir answers.

As Vladimir and Estragon stand, suckled by the dehydrated hope that Godot will come, a procession of human suffering, missteps, goose steps, limps, and hobbles stomps past them. Bored, not so much by all the pain of life but by its uselessness, they seek diversion in doing good, such as lifting a blind man who has stumbled.

“Come, let us get to work!” Vladimir says. “In an instant all will vanish, and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!” But as Vladimir reaches, he falls and can’t get up.

Despite more promises that Godot will come, life seems so miserable in the meantime that they decide to hang themselves. But having no rope, Estragon takes off the cord that holds up his pants, which collapse around his ankles. To test the cord’s strength, the two men pull it; it breaks, and they almost fall. They decide to find a better rope and try again later.

“We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow,” Vladimir says. “Unless Godot comes.”

“And if he comes?” Estragon asks.

“We’ll be saved.”

This mysterious Godot never comes, which means they’re not saved. They weren’t, of course, supposed to be. Beckett’s whole point with the drama is to show the absurdity and hopelessness of life.

What a contrast to the view of life presented in the Bible. In particular, what a contrast to the view presented in this quarter’s lessons, that deals with the apostle Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians.

Like Beckett’s two characters, the Thessalonians faced stresses, strains, struggles, even outright persecution. In other words, life for them, as for all of us, had its hard moments.

How easy and understandable it would have been for them to fall into the futility, nihilism, and pessimism that Beckett expressed in his drama. Instead, the Thessalonians had a sure hope, a hope based on what Christ had done for them, a hope that pointed to the greatest promise of all—the Second Coming (which Beckett was mocking, as well). Though Paul had chided the Thessalonians, as they had behavioral, as well as theological issues in the church (sound familiar?), it was to them, and to us, that Paul wrote some of the most incredible, uplifting, and hopeful words in all inspiration.

The Thessalonians had a sure hope, a hope based on what Christ had done for them, a hope that pointed to the greatest promise of all—the Second Coming.

“For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:16–18).

It doesn’t get any more hopeful or glorious than that, does it?

This quarter, through Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, we’ll get a glimpse into the life of an early Christian church—an urban church, really—and see some of the struggles and challenges that it faced, including the difficulties that arose from the fact that Christ had not yet returned. Fascinating, too, is that however different the Thessalonians’ circumstances were from our own, so often the principles reflected in Paul’s words to the Thessalonians deal with the issues and challenges that we, too, confront as we await, not some mysterious Godot, but the Lord Jesus, whose death on the cross at the first coming guarantees His return in glory at the Second.

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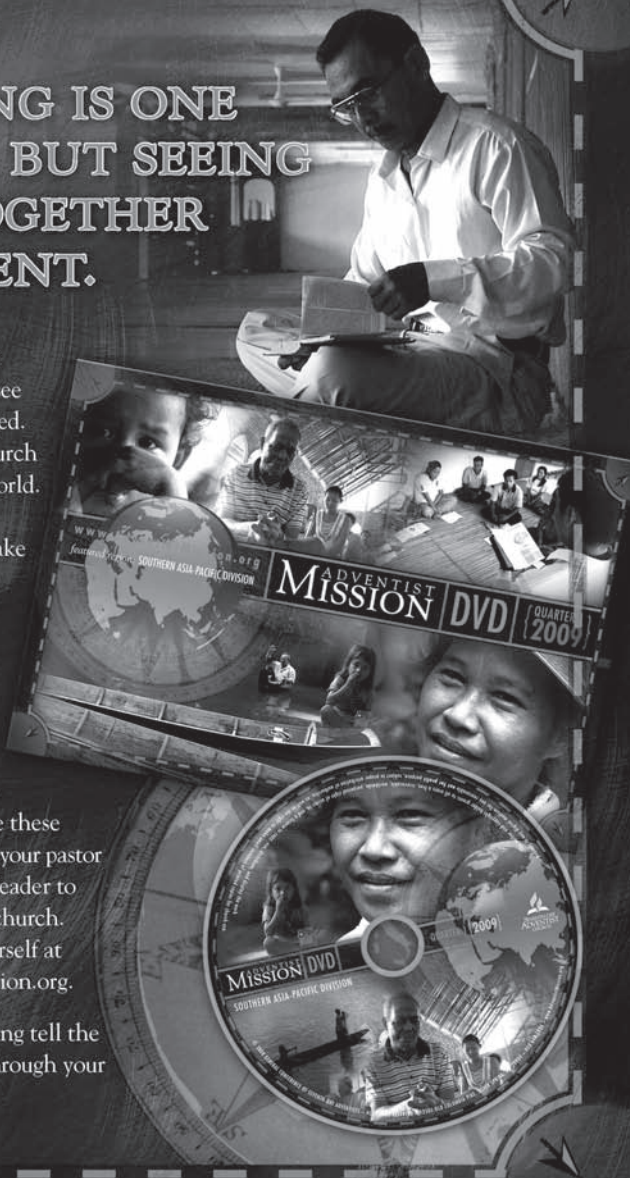
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The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Acts 16:9–40; 17:1–4, 12; Jer. 23:1–6; Isa. 9:1–7; Isaiah 53; Rom. 1:16.

Memory Text: “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13, NIV).

Key Thought: Our assurance of God's promises must be based on our confidence in His Holy Scriptures.

The young pastor sat outside with a young woman who had just been baptized. Much to his surprise, she said, “I need to be baptized again.”

When the pastor asked why, she responded, “There are things that I didn't tell the senior pastor about my past.”

Thus began a long conversation about forgiveness in Christ, a conversation she hungrily consumed. When the pastor finished praying with her, a huge downpour suddenly drenched them both. Eyes shining, the young woman said, “I'm being baptized again!”

A gracious God often provides living tokens, such as that unexpected rain, to assure believers that they are right with Him. But our confidence in God is even more solidly grounded when it is based on the clear teaching of His Word. In this lesson we'll see that the fulfillment of prophecy provided solid assurance to the new believers in Thessalonica.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 7.*

The Preachers Pay a Price

Read Acts 16:9–40. According to the passage, why did the Philippians react so negatively to the gospel? What important principle can we find in their reaction that we always need to be wary of ourselves? In what other ways can this principle be made manifest, even in the lives of professed Christians?

The gospel is the good news of God’s mighty actions in Christ that lead to forgiveness, acceptance, and transformation (*Rom. 1:16, 17*). Through sin, the whole world was condemned; through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the whole world was given a new opportunity to have the eternal life that God originally wanted for all humanity. God’s mighty work was done for us while we were still sinners (*Rom. 5:8*). This work of redemption was accomplished outside of us, by Jesus, and we can add nothing to it—nothing. Yet, the gospel becomes real in our lives only when we accept not only its condemnation of our sins but God’s forgiveness of those sins through Jesus.

Being that the gospel is such good news and is free, why would anyone resist or fight against it? The answer is simple: accepting the gospel calls us to set aside confidence in self and in worldly things such as money, power, and sexual attractiveness. Money, sex, and power are good things when submitted to the will and ways of God. But when people cling to these trivial matters that substitute for the assurance of the gospel, the gospel and those who proclaim it become a threat.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1, 2. Paul and Silas entered Thessalonica in pain, their bodies bearing the cuts and bruises they had received from their heavy beating and confinement in Philippi (*Acts 16:22–24*). But tokens of the mighty power of God (*Acts 16:26, 30, 36*) had encouraged their hearts. They boldly entered the synagogue at Thessalonica in spite of their pain and spoke again of the Messiah who had changed their lives and sent them on a mission to preach the good news in places where it had not been heard before.

What are the things of the world that, if we’re not careful, can draw us away from the Lord? Why, then, is it so important to keep the Cross and its meaning always at the center of our thoughts, especially when the lure of the world seems the strongest?

Paul's Preaching Strategy

What does Acts 17:1–3 tell us about the where, the when, and the how of Paul's preaching strategy in Thessalonica?

Although 1 Thessalonians was among Paul's earliest letters, both his theology and missionary strategy were well developed by the time he arrived in Thessalonica.

The first step in Paul's missionary strategy was to attend the local synagogue on the Sabbath. This was natural because the Sabbath was a good time to reach Jews in large numbers. However, more than just a missionary strategy was at work here. Paul would have taken time for prayer and worship on the Sabbath even if no Jews or no synagogue had been available (*see Acts 16:13*).

It was not uncommon in those days for Jews to invite synagogue visitors to speak, especially if they had lived in Jerusalem, as Paul and Silas had. The congregation would have been eager to hear news of Jewish life in other places. It also would have been interested in any new ideas the visitors had discovered from their study of the Scriptures. So, Paul's strategy was a natural fit with the synagogue environment.

The second step in Paul's strategy was to preach directly from their common Scriptures, the Old Testament. He also began with a topic of great interest to the Jews of the time, the Messiah ("the Christ" is the Greek equivalent of "the Messiah" in the Hebrew; *see Acts 17:3*). Using texts from the Old Testament, Paul demonstrated that the Messiah would first have to suffer before He would obtain the glory with which the Jews were familiar. In other words, the popular, glorious version of the Messiah's mission was only part of the picture. When the Messiah would first appear, He would be a suffering servant rather than a royal conqueror.

Third, having established a fresh picture of the Messiah in their minds, Paul went on to tell the story of Jesus. He explained how Jesus' life conformed to the pattern of the Bible prophecy that he had just shared with them. No doubt he added stories about his own previous doubts and opposition and also spoke of the convincing power of his personal encounter with the exalted Christ. According to Luke (*Luke 24:25–27, 44–46*), Paul's preaching strategy in Thessalonica followed the same pattern that Jesus had used with His disciples after the resurrection.

Notice that Paul sought to reach people where they were, using that with which they were familiar. Why is this strategy so important? Think about those whom you want to reach. How can you learn to start where they are and not where you are?

Two Views of the Messiah

Since ancient times, readers of the Old Testament have noticed a variety of perspectives in the prophecies pointing toward the Messiah. Most Jews and early Christians identified two major strands in the Messianic prophecies. On the one hand, there were texts that pointed toward a royal Messiah: a conquering king who would bring justice to the people and extend Israel's rule to the ends of the earth. On the other hand, there were texts that suggested the Messiah would be a Suffering Servant, humiliated and rejected. The mistake that many made was in not understanding that all these texts were referring to the same person, just to different aspects of His work at different times.

Read Jeremiah 23:1–6, Isaiah 9:1–7, 53:1–6, Zechariah 9:9. List the characteristics of the future deliverer that you find in these texts. What kind of “conflicting” images appear here?

These texts were puzzling in advance of the Messiah's coming. On the one hand, the royal Messianic texts usually contained no hint of suffering or humiliation. On the other hand, the Suffering Servant texts usually described the Messiah as having little power or worldly authority. One way that the Jews of Jesus' day resolved this problem was to see the Suffering Servant as a symbol of the whole nation and its sufferings in the course of exile and occupation. By removing these texts from the Messianic equation, many Jews expected the royal or conquering Messiah. This King, like David, would throw off the occupiers and restore Israel's place among the nations.

Of course, a major problem that results from removing the Suffering Servant texts from the equation is that there are, indeed, significant Old Testament texts that blend the two major characteristics of the Messiah. They describe the same person. What is less clear, at first glance, is whether those characteristics occur at the same time or one after the other.

As shown in Acts 17:2, 3, Paul walked the Jews of Thessalonica through these Messianic Old Testament texts, and they together explored their significance.

In ancient times, the Jews were confused about the first coming of the Messiah. Today, we find much confusion about the Second Coming as well. What should this tell us about the importance of truly seeking to understand Bible truth? Why can false doctrine be so problematic?

Suffering Before Glory

Jesus, like Paul, studied the Old Testament and drew the conclusion that the Messiah would “have to suffer these things and then enter his glory” (*Luke 24:26, NIV*). The “have to” of *Luke 24:26* translates the same word as *Acts 17:3 (NIV)*, where Paul says the Messiah “had to suffer.” For Jesus and Paul, the priority of suffering before glory was written into the prophecies long before they were to have occurred. The question is, then, on what Old Testament basis did they come to this conclusion?

They likely would have noticed that the most significant figures in the Old Testament had a prolonged period of suffering before they entered into the glory period of their lives. Joseph spent some thirteen years in prison before ascending to the role of prime minister of Egypt. Moses spent 40 years chasing sheep through the desert before taking up his role as the powerful leader of the Exodus. David spent many years as a fugitive, some of that time in foreign lands, before being elevated to kingship. Daniel was a prisoner of war, and was even condemned to death, before his elevation to the position of prime minister of Babylon. Therefore in the Old Testament stories of these servants of God, there are foreshadowings of the Messiah, who would also suffer and be humiliated before being elevated to His full royal role.

The capstone of this New Testament conviction is found in the most widely quoted Old Testament text in the New Testament: Isaiah 53. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah was despised, rejected, and sorrowful (*Isa. 53:2–4*). Like a sanctuary lamb, He was slaughtered on account of our sins (*Isa. 53:5–7*), according to the will of the Lord (*Isa. 53:8–10*). But “after the suffering of his soul” (*Isa. 53:11, NIV*), He would justify many and receive a powerful inheritance (*Isa. 53:12*).

For the writers of the New Testament, Isaiah 53 was the key to the Messiah’s role. Paul would certainly have preached this text in Thessalonica. According to Isaiah 53, the Messiah would not appear kingly or powerful at the time of His first appearance. In fact, He would be rejected by many of His own people. But that rejection would be the prelude to the glorious Messiah of Jewish expectation. With this in mind, Paul was able to show that the Jesus he had come to know was, in fact, the Messiah whom the Old Testament had foretold.

Prayerfully read through Isaiah 53, realizing that it’s talking about what the Lord, our Creator, went through just so that you, personally, can have eternal life. In light of what this amazing truth tells us about the character of God, why should Christ be first and foremost in our lives?

A Church Is Born

According to Acts 17:1–4, 12, what classes of people made up the core of the Thessalonian church plant?

A part of Paul’s missionary strategy was “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (*Rom. 1:16, ESV*). During Paul’s ministry, the Jews regularly received the first opportunity to hear and accept the gospel. And the fact is that, according to the Bible, many Jews in Paul’s time did accept Jesus as the Messiah. Later, as the church started to apostatize and reject the law, especially the Sabbath, it became harder and harder for Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah because, after all, what Messiah would nullify the law, especially the Sabbath?

As the texts show, some of the Jews in Thessalonica were persuaded by Paul’s exposition of Messianic texts in relation to the story of Jesus. One of these, Aristarchus, was later a coworker with Paul and even, at one point, a fellow prisoner (*see Col. 4:10, 11; Acts 20:4*). Another, Jason, was apparently wealthy enough to house the church at his home after the believers were no longer welcome in the synagogue, and he also provided at least a portion of the bond needed to prevent Paul’s arrest (*see Acts 17:4–9*).

The “God-fearing Greeks” (*Acts 17:4, NIV*) are usually thought to be Gentiles who became enamored with Judaism and attended the synagogue but did not convert. This was a widespread phenomenon in Paul’s day. These Gentiles became a natural bridge for Paul to reach those Gentiles who had no knowledge at all of Judaism or the Old Testament.

The Jewish, and relatively wealthy, character of the original church plant in Thessalonica is emphasized in Acts 17 (for example, verse 12), in which “prominent” Greeks also became believers. It is clear, however, that by the time 1 Thessalonians was written, the church to which Paul was writing was largely made up of Gentiles (*1 Thess. 1:9*) from the laboring classes (*1 Thess. 4:11*).

What we can see here is the universal character of the gospel—that it is for all people, all classes, all races; rich or poor, Greek or Jew, it doesn’t matter—Christ’s death was for the whole world. That is why our message, as Seventh-day Adventists, is for the whole world (*Rev. 14:6*)—without any exceptions. How important it is that we keep that mandate always before us. How important it is that we not become insular, self-absorbed, and more interested in sustaining what we have than in reaching out beyond the comfortable boundaries that we, perhaps even subconsciously, have set for ourselves.

Further Study: “From Paul’s day to the present time, God by His Holy Spirit has been calling after the Jew as well as the Gentile. ‘There is no respect of persons with God,’ declared Paul. The apostle regarded himself as ‘debtor both to the Greeks, and to the barbarians,’ as well as to the Jews; but he never lost sight of the decided advantages possessed by the Jews over others, ‘chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.’ ‘The gospel,’ he declared, ‘is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.’ ” —Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 380.

“In preaching to the Thessalonians, Paul appealed to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. . . . By the inspired testimony of Moses and the prophets he clearly proved the identity of Jesus of Nazareth with the Messiah and showed that from the days of Adam it was the voice of Christ which had been speaking through patriarchs and prophets.”—Pages 221, 222. (See the extensive collection of Old Testament texts that follows on pages 222–229.)

“In the closing proclamation of the gospel, when special work is to be done for classes of people hitherto neglected, God expects His messengers to take particular interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth. . . . As they see the Christ of the gospel dispensation portrayed in the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures, and perceive how clearly the New Testament explains the Old, their slumbering faculties will be aroused, and they will recognize Christ as the Saviour of the world. Many will by faith receive Christ as their Redeemer.”—Page 381.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Paul approached the Jews of his day on the basis of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. To what degree is such an approach useful today with Jews, especially with secular Jews who might not even be familiar with the Old Testament prophecies? What other kinds of approaches should be considered today for secular Jews, as well as for any groups of unreached people?
- ② How can the prophecies of the Bible be made to connect more effectively with your friends and neighbors? What approaches should you use with people who don’t believe in the authority of the Bible? For instance, how could Daniel 2 help someone from a secular or nonbiblical perspective start to trust the Bible as the Word of God?

Summary: A number of important points have been made in this opening week. What we should come away with, more than anything else, is just how important the Word of God is to our lives, our mission, and our witness. We need to be grounded in the Bible and the truths that it teaches, not only for ourselves but in order to be the most effective witnesses possible.

Courageous Little Evangelists

I'm Amir, a missionary in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I was asked to hold evangelistic meetings in a village in the Congo, where I stayed with the pastor and his family.

Early every morning my evangelistic team and I gathered for prayer before setting out to visit people and study the Bible with them before they left to work in their fields. I noticed that Genick, the pastor's 12-year-old son, joined us for prayer. When we left the house to visit people, Genick came with us. But when he turned off the path, I assumed that he was going to play with his friends.

So when Genick told me that he and two of his friends were giving Bible studies to several people—including a professor—I was surprised. I wondered if it could be true. Genick asked me to go with him to visit the professor's family and answer some questions they had. I gladly followed him to the professor's home.

The family greeted us warmly, and I watched with deep interest as Genick led them through another Bible study. He quoted one Bible verse after another to explain the Bible lesson. The professor praised Genick and his friends, who had been coming to his house every day to study the Bible. "I now understand why the Adventist Church is growing so fast—because even your children have the courage to give Bible studies!" the professor said.

We spent several hours talking about some of the Bible truths Genick and his friends had presented to the family and answering their questions. I was impressed with the courage and faithfulness of Genick and his friends. They gave me new insight into the role of young people in the mission of God's church.

So far some 36 people have been baptized into the church in this village. And although the professor has not yet taken his stand for truth, he has promised to continue studying the Bible with his family.



As for Genick and his friends, I'm sure that God has great plans for them. Already Genick has been appointed children's ministries leader in his church district.

Your weekly mission offerings and world budget offerings help make it possible for more than 900 interdivision missionaries to serve around the world. Thank you!

AMIR GULZAR and his family are missionaries from Pakistan to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he teaches business and computer science at the Adventist university in Lukanga.

Preserving Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 17:5–9, 10–15, 16–34; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:2; 1 Thess. 2:17–3:10.*

Memory Text: “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy” (*1 Thessalonians 2:19, 20, NKJV*).

Key Thought: True evangelism leads to relationships that can stand the test of time.

Paul held a three-week series of evangelistic meetings in Thessalonica. It was a very exciting series, but it incited opposition from local religious leaders and from a gang of thugs. Paul was finally expelled by the city council, which also sought to prevent his return.

This lesson covers the aftermath of Paul's attempt to evangelize Thessalonica. It would have been easy after such an experience for Paul to focus on the opposition and on other obstacles along the way. Instead, Paul's mind was focused primarily on the relationships that he had developed with members of the new Christian community in Thessalonica.

Paul was heartbroken that he wasn't able to spend more time with the believers. He knew that the short time he had been with them would leave them vulnerable to discouragement and negative influences. Not being able to be there in person, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write letters to them instead. Those letters make up the books in the New Testament known as “Thessalonians.”

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 14.*

Opposition in Thessalonica

Read Acts 17:5–9. According to this passage, what was the primary motivation for the opposition to Paul’s message? What statements did his opponents make to get the city authorities interested in the case? How did those authorities respond?

When someone preaches new teachings and people get excited, the leaders and teachers of other religious groups may become jealous. Attention that was once placed upon them is now directed to others. As a result, they may behave in irrational ways in order to try to reduce the influence of the new teacher.

According to the Roman historian Suetonius, shortly before the events described in Acts 17, conflict arose among the Jews of Rome over a man Suetonius calls “Chrestus.” This term probably reflects a Roman misunderstanding of the Jewish concept of the Messiah, or, in Greek, “the Christ.” Apparently someone’s preaching of the gospel had just split the Jewish community of Rome.

To Roman officials, debate over the Messiah sounded like preparation for the installation of a new king on the throne of Rome (*see Acts 17:7*). Probably for that reason the emperor expelled all Jews from his capital city (*Acts 18:2*). Some of these exiles settled in or passed through Thessalonica, bringing knowledge of these events to the city. Because the gospel had turned the world of Rome’s Jews upside down, religious leaders in Thessalonica were determined to prevent something similar from happening there.

Thessalonica itself was ruled by a city council of perhaps five or six “mayors” who made decisions as a group. This arrangement allowed for a considerable amount of independence from Rome, which the council would be loath to give up. So, the behavior of the city officials in this matter was quite impressive under the circumstances. The similarity to recent events in Rome could have led to severe physical punishment for the new Christians. Instead, the city leaders responded evenhandedly (*contrast Acts 16:22–40*). They took a significant amount of money from the new Christians as security so that they would not be the cause of further disturbances. Then the leaders let everyone go.

Jealousy and envy can destroy us. What can we learn from the life and teachings of Jesus that can help us to gain victory over these deadly sentiments?

The Episode in Berea

Persecution can be a two-way street. It is often provoked by malicious slander against those who have done nothing wrong. But it can also be provoked by inappropriate actions on the part of believers (*1 Pet. 3:13–16, 4:12–16*). It is very likely that the disturbance in Thessalonica was prompted not only by the jealousy of Paul’s opponents but also by the inappropriate actions of the new believers. The two letters to the Thessalonians reveal that Paul had major concerns about the lack of appropriate public behavior by some in the church.

Paul urges the Thessalonian Christians to live quiet lives and behave properly among their Gentile neighbors (*1 Thess. 4:11, 12*). He admonishes the unruly among them (*1 Thess. 5:14*). He commands them to avoid those in the community who are disorderly (*2 Thess. 3:6, 7*). And he notes that some members of the church are not only disorderly and idle but have become “busybodies” (*2 Thess. 3:11*). Thus, some members were not only troublesome to the church but also to the wider society. The persecution in Thessalonica was malicious, but there was blameworthy behavior among some new Christians, as well.

How was Paul’s experience in Berea different from that in Thessalonica? *See Acts 17:10–15*. **What’s the message for us in that difference?**

The Bereans were eager to know more about God and to better understand their Bibles. But while they listened with much openness, they also tested everything they heard from the apostles on the basis of what they found in their own study of the Old Testament.

This is an example for us. We can be open to new ideas, but we must always test these ideas on the basis of the teachings of the Bible. We have many things to learn and many to unlearn. At the same time, we must be careful to avoid error, as it will lead us away from truth.

While troublemakers from Thessalonica soon inserted themselves into the Berean situation, the Jews there did not close their minds to the new message; indeed, “many of the Jews believed” (*vs. 12*). While it was thought expedient for Paul to move on to Athens, Silas and Timothy were allowed to remain in Berea in order to encourage and strengthen the new believers.

What are some examples of the Christian church acting in ways that were clearly in the wrong? What lessons can we learn from those mistakes? Bring your answers to class on Sabbath.

Interlude in Athens

According to Acts 17:14–16, Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea while Paul was escorted to Athens. Paul instructed his escorts to have Silas and Timothy join him in Athens, but there is no mention of their doing so. On the other hand, in 1 Thessalonians 3:1, 2, we learn that Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica from Athens. So, Timothy, at least, seems to have joined him there for a short time.

When speaking to Jews in Acts 17:2, 3, Paul begins with the theme of the Messiah in the Old Testament. When speaking to the pagan philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:16–34), where does he begin? What can we learn from these different approaches?

Paul does not simply enter Athens, march up to the Areopagus (known also as Mars' Hill), and engage the philosophers there. He begins by spending some time walking around and making his own observations. He also engages the Jews of Athens and some of the Greeks in the synagogue there. Besides evangelizing to them in his customary way (*see Acts 17:2, 3*), he also would have been learning about the dominant culture in the city. The first step in any missionary effort is to listen and learn about the faith and worldviews of the people you are trying to reach.

Paul also spent time in the marketplace of Athens (which was below and within sight of the Areopagus, or Mars' Hill), reasoning with anyone willing to talk with him. In the process he provoked the curiosity of some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who invited him to address them in the traditional place for such discussions.

He began his address to the intellectuals of Athens with observations about their city and religions. His theological beginning point was Creation, a topic in which both he and they were interested. In contrast with his approach in the synagogue, he did not argue his case from Scripture but from writings with which they would have been familiar (Acts 17:27, 28 both echo and quote Greek writers). But when he stepped into territory that went beyond the boundaries of topics in which they were intellectually comfortable, the philosophers seemed to have abruptly ended the discussion. A few individuals, however, continued to talk with Paul and became believers.

How well do we understand the worldviews and religious beliefs of those around us? Why is it important for us to have at least some knowledge of these things as we seek to witness?

Arrival in Corinth

Acts 18:1–18 contains two major intersections with secular history. The first is the expulsion of the Jews from Rome during the reign of Claudius (*Acts 18:2*). Information from extrabiblical sources locates this event in A.D. 49. The other major intersection is the mention of the proconsul Gallio (*Acts 18:12*). Because proconsuls in Corinth were appointed for one-year terms, information from inscriptions and other data accurately dates Gallio's term of office to A.D. 50–51. Critical scholars often doubt the historicity of the book of Acts, but there are many casual references such as these that confirm its portrayal of history.

Timothy must have traveled from Thessalonica to Berea with Paul and Silas (*Acts 17:10, 14, 15*) after their expulsion from Thessalonica. He then briefly joined Paul in Athens and was sent from there to Thessalonica (*1 Thess. 3:1, 2*). There he joined up with Silas (*Acts 18:5*) and eventually journeyed to meet Paul in Corinth. First Thessalonians must have been written from Corinth shortly after Timothy's arrival. Paul knew what people were thinking in Achaia, where Corinth was located (*1 Thess. 1:7, 8*), and in 1 Thessalonians he was responding to information brought to him by Timothy (*1 Thess. 3:5, 6*).

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:2. What's Paul's main point in this passage? What do we learn from these verses about Paul's missionary strategies in Athens and Corinth?

Paul must not have been satisfied with the outcome of his encounter with the philosophers of Athens for in Corinth he decides to take a more direct approach to the Greek mind. In doing so, he does not reject the idea of “meeting people where they are” for he clearly promotes such an approach in the same letter (*1 Cor. 9:19–23*). What he demonstrates in Athens and Corinth is that the process of meeting people where they are is not an exact science; it requires constant learning and adjustment. Therefore, Paul did not take the same approach in every city. He was very sensitive to changing times, cultures, and circumstances.

Read again the passages for today. How is the main message there relevant for us today, when the “wisdom” of the world so often clashes with the “foolishness” of the Cross?

Paul Reveals His Heart

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:10. What does this passage tell us about Paul’s emotional attachment and relationship to these believers? What can we learn from it regarding the ways in which we should relate with those to whom we minister?

Paul’s depth of thought and confrontational tone (*see, for example, Gal. 1:6, 7; 3:1–4; 4:9–11*) sometimes make him appear dismissive of feelings and personal relationships. But this delightful interlude in 1 Thessalonians shows otherwise. He was an intensely relational evangelist along the lines of the Great Commission, which places primary emphasis on the making of disciples (*Matt. 28:19, 20*).

In the above passage Paul reveals his inner emotions. He misses the Thessalonian believers with “intense longing.” When Jesus comes, Paul intends to present the Thessalonian believers to Jesus as examples of his ministry. Paul is not content merely to be saved at the end of time; he wants evidence that his life made a permanent difference for the kingdom of God.

When Paul can “no longer endure” his intense longing for the Thessalonians, he sends a mutual friend to learn how they are doing. Paul is afraid that somehow Satan might lure them away from their original convictions. But he is comforted tremendously when Timothy reports that they are standing firm in the faith.

There is an interesting hint of a deeper dynamic in 1 Thessalonians 3:6. Paul rejoices at Timothy’s report that they have a good opinion of him and that they are longing to see him as much as he is longing to see them. Paul’s departure from Thessalonica was sudden, and he seems to have some uncertainty about the way in which they viewed him and his absence. Thessalonian faithfulness made a big difference to Paul. Paul’s sense of personal worth was, perhaps, to some degree, tied to the success of his mission. He was, after all, only human.

Timothy’s report brings Paul an intense experience of joy in his prayers to God. But his present joy does not squelch his intense longing to see them face to face and to complete their education in the Christian walk. However, unable to be personally present with them, Paul first sends an emissary, Timothy, and then engages the Thessalonians by letter. Those letters make up part of the New Testament corpus.

Further Study: “If we would humble ourselves before God, and *be kind and courteous and tenderhearted and pitiful*, there would be one hundred conversions to the truth where now there is only one. But, though professing to be converted, we carry around with us a bundle of self that we regard as altogether too precious to be given up. It is our privilege to lay this burden at the feet of Christ and in its place take the character and similitude of Christ. The Saviour is waiting for us to do this.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, pp. 189, 190, emphasis added.

“During His ministry, Jesus had kept constantly before the disciples the fact that they were to be one with Him in His work for the recovery of the world from the slavery of sin. . . . In all His work He was training them for individual labor, to be extended as their numbers increased, and eventually to reach to the uttermost parts of the earth.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 32.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss your answer to Monday’s final question. How can we avoid making the same kind of mistakes? Or are we in some cases making them even now?
- 2 In *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 189 (see today’s Further Study), Ellen White identifies “self” as the barrier to both a more powerful outreach and more conversions among the lost. In what ways does “self” manifest itself in our lives? How can we learn to die to self? What is the only true way to be able to do that?
- 3 The central focus of the Great Commission (*Matt. 28:19, 20, NIV*) is to “make disciples.” Share some of your own experiences of being or making a disciple. To what degree is your own church discipleship oriented? How can it become more so?
- 4 How can you explain to someone the “foolishness” of the Cross? Why do you think Paul used that terminology? What should that tell us about how limited our understanding of reality can be when the most important of all truths is deemed “foolishness” by many?

Summary: In a mere three weeks, Paul had become intensely bonded to the new believers in Thessalonica. Not being able to return to them, he first sent Timothy. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, he also put his heart into two letters. Meaningful evangelism must not settle for mere acceptance of Christian beliefs. The whole life—physical, mental, and emotional—is involved in Christian faith.

Lighthouse on the Island

Laura and Paulo live in town on the island of Madeira in the Mediterranean Sea. Paulo had once been a Seventh-day Adventist, but he had stopped attending church before he married. However, he often read from *The Acts of the Apostles*, a book he treasured.

One day a Seventh-day Adventist pastor visited them. Laura and Paulo were pleased, and the pastor continued visiting every week, even though the roads were treacherous and no other Seventh-day Adventists lived nearby.

The family began attending the only church on the island. They made the four-hour trip by bus, often arriving late if there was any delay. They stayed for afternoon meetings, arriving home late at night. Nine months later they were baptized. Not everyone in the community was happy that Laura had left her church to become a Seventh-day Adventist. Sometimes the family returned home from church to find windows broken. Other people stopped doing business with Paulo, a tailor. When his business dropped off, Paulo found other ways to make a little money to support his family.

The family couldn't afford to take the bus to the distant church every week, so they went only once a month. On the Sabbaths when they stayed home, they sang songs and read the Sabbath School lessons to their children. They invited friends to join them, but no one was interested.

The couple's children have faced a lot of prejudice in school for refusing to eat unclean food and for keeping the Sabbath. But they've remained faithful.

Their son Fernando shared his faith with a girl he liked, and she became a Seventh-day Adventist. Her father told her to leave home and refused to speak to her for seven years or attend her wedding. But she visited him when he became sick, and at last the two were reconciled. Now her father thinks Fernando is the best son-in-law in the world.

Now that the roads on the island of Madeira have been improved, a group of Adventists from the church in the capital city drives to Porto Muniz to worship with Paulo and Laura. The family continues to invite their neighbors to join them, but the family remains the only Seventh-day Adventists in the town.

"We will continue to share our faith with anyone who will listen," Laura says. "And we invite our friends to join us for worship. We just want to break down prejudice and invite people to meet Jesus."

Our mission offerings help provide materials to isolated members so they can share their faith with others. Thank you for sharing.

LAURA and PAULO CORRIERA and their family share their faith in Porto Moniz, Madeira.

Thessalonica in Paul's Day



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 11:48–50, 1 John 2:15–17, 1 Cor. 9:19–27, John 3:3–8, 1 Cor. 16:19.*

Memory Text: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (*1 Corinthians 9:19, NIV*).

Key Thought: A short study of the context of ancient Thessalonica demonstrates that Paul's approach to the citizens of Thessalonica was unique and carefully crafted.

The primary focus of this lesson will be a summary of that which history, literature, and archaeology tell us about Thessalonica.

This material is important for two reasons. First, it helps us to understand how Paul's original hearers and readers would have understood him. In so doing, it clarifies the meaning of what he wrote and the impact it had back then on both church and society.

Second, the more we know about the ideas and beliefs of the Thessalonians, the better we can understand that against which Paul was reacting. In order to promote the gospel, Paul would also have had to correct wrong ideas. So, while this lesson is not directly focused on the Bible, it sets the stage for our reading of the biblical text of 1 and 2 Thessalonians during the rest of this quarter's lessons.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 21.*

The Romans Arrive in Thessalonica

Read John 11:48–50. How were the political and religious decisions regarding the ministry of Jesus impacted by the arrival of the Romans in first-century Palestine and Jerusalem? Think through the logic expressed here. In what frightening ways does it make sense?

In the context of a civil war among the Greek city-states, the Thessalonians invited the Romans around 168 B.C. to take over their city and protect it from local enemies. The Romans rewarded Thessalonica for being on the “right side” of the civil war by largely allowing the city to govern itself. It became a free city within the empire, which meant that it could largely control its own internal issues and destiny. As a result, the wealthier and more powerful classes in the city were allowed to continue life much as they had before. They were, therefore, pro-Rome and pro-emperor in Paul’s day. But life was not nearly so pleasant for the common people, especially the working classes.

There were three major negative aspects to Roman rule in Thessalonica. First, the arrival of the Romans brought economic dislocation. The usual markets were disrupted by war and changing governments, both locally and regionally. These disruptions hit the poorer classes harder than they did the more wealthy. Over time, this negative aspect became less significant.

Second, although Thessalonica remained largely self-governing, there was still a sense of political powerlessness. Some local leaders were replaced by strangers who had loyalties to Rome, rather than to Thessalonica. No matter how benign, foreign occupation is not popular for long.

Third, there was the inevitable colonial exploitation that accompanies occupation. The Romans required a certain amount of tax exportation. Percentages of crops, minerals, and other local products were siphoned off and sent to Rome to support the larger needs of the empire.

So, while Thessalonica was quite a bit better off than Jerusalem, for example, Roman rule and occupation inevitably created significant stresses in local communities. In Thessalonica, those stresses were particularly hard on the poor and the working classes. As decades passed, these Thessalonians became increasingly frustrated and longed for a change in the situation.

How does the current political situation in your community affect the work of the church? What kinds of things can, or should, your church do to improve its place and standing in the larger community?

A Pagan Response to Rome

The pagan response to the powerlessness many Thessalonians felt was a spiritual movement scholars call the Cabirus cult. The cult was grounded in a man named Cabirus who spoke up for the disenfranchised and was eventually murdered by his two brothers. He was buried along with symbols of royalty, and the cult came to treat him as a martyred hero.

The lower classes believed that Cabirus had exhibited miraculous powers while alive. They also believed that from time to time Cabirus quietly returned to life in order to help individuals and that he would return to bring justice to the lower classes and restore the city to its past independence and greatness. The Cabirus cult provided hope for the oppressed in terms reminiscent of the biblical hope.

Things get even more interesting when we discover that the worship of Cabirus included blood sacrifices to commemorate his martyrdom. Reminiscent of Paul, the Thessalonians spoke of “participation in his blood.” By this means they obtained relief from guilt; class distinctions were also abolished. In the Cabirus cult all classes of society were treated equally.

But there was one further dynamic. When the emperor cult arose in the time of Augustus, the Romans proclaimed that Cabirus had already come in the person of Caesar. In other words, the occupying authority co-opted the hope of the oppressed. As a result, the spiritual life of Thessalonica no longer provided relief for the working classes. The common people were left without a meaningful religion. The existence of the emperor cult also meant that if anyone resembling the real Cabirus were to arrive in the city, he would be an immediate threat to the establishment.

The Roman response to the Cabirus cult left a spiritual vacuum in the hearts of the people—a vacuum that the gospel alone could fill. Christ was the true fulfillment of the hopes and dreams that the Thessalonians had placed on Cabirus. The gospel provided both inner peace in the present and, at the Second Coming, the ultimate reversal of current economic and political realities.

Read 1 John 2:15–17 (see also Eccles. 2:1–11). What crucial truths are being expressed here? How have you experienced the reality of these words in regard to how fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying the things of this world are?

The Gospel as a Point of Contact

Given what we learned yesterday, it is not difficult to see why many non-Jews of the city responded positively when the gospel came to Thessalonica. Whether or not Paul was aware of the Cabirus cult before arriving in the city, his Messianic approach in the synagogue resonated with the unique spiritual longings of the local pagans.

When the gospel came to Thessalonica, the working classes of the city were ready for it, and they responded in large numbers. They were also ready for extreme interpretations of the gospel. The Cabirus cult had enshrined in the people a spirit of rebellion against authority that may have been the source of the disorderly conduct that Paul addresses in his two letters to them (*see 1 Thess. 4:11, 12; 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6, 7, 11*).

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–27. What fundamental missionary strategy does Paul lay out in this passage? What potential danger lurks in this method? How can the two principles of this passage be kept in proper balance?

The gospel has the greatest impact when it impacts the needs, hopes, and dreams of the audience. But while the Holy Spirit can provide bridges for the gospel, this normally happens as a result of much listening and prayerful experimentation on the part of those witnessing. Experience has also taught us that people are most open to the Adventist message in times of change. Among the changes that open people to new ideas are economic turmoil, political strife, war, weddings, divorce, dislocation (moving from one place to another), health challenges, and death. The Thessalonians had experienced their fair share of change and dislocation, and this helped the gospel to take root.

But people who are baptized in times of dislocation also tend to be unstable, at least at first. Most apostasies occur in the first few months after conversion. The letters to Thessalonica bear witness to considerable instability in the church in the months following Paul's original visit.

What can we do to help members who are still adjusting to their new life in Christ? Seek out someone new, or even a young person. What can you do to help this person to stay grounded and stable in the Lord? You'll be amazed to find out how much this kind of ministry will help to strengthen yourself, as well.

Paul, the “Street Preacher”

The first-century Greco-Roman context experienced a proliferation of popular philosophers who, in public forums, sought to influence individuals and groups—similar to what street preachers might do today.

These philosophers believed that people had an inner capacity to change their lives (a form of conversion). Philosophers would use public speech and private conversation in order, they hoped, to produce change in their students. They sought to create in their listeners doubts regarding their current ideas and practices. By this means, the listeners would become open to new ideas and change. The ultimate goal was increased self-reliance and moral growth.

It was expected that such popular philosophers would earn the right to speak by first gaining moral freedom in their own inner lives. “Physician, heal thyself” was a well-known concept in the ancient world.

These philosophers were also aware of the need to vary the message in order to meet various minds and of the importance of retaining integrity in both the character of the teacher and the message that was being taught.

Thus, there are numerous parallels between these popular teachers and the work of Paul, who also traveled around and worked in the public places (*Acts 17:17; 19:9, 10*).

There were, however, two significant differences between Paul’s approach and that of these popular philosophers. First, Paul not only worked in the public places but also sought to form a lasting community. This requires some separation from “the world,” along with the formation of emotional bonds and a deep commitment to the group. Second, Paul taught that conversion was not an inner decision effected by wise speech; it was, instead, a supernatural work of God from outside of a person (*see Gal. 4:19, John 3:3–8, Phil. 1:6*). Paul’s teaching was more than just a philosophy; it was a proclamation of the truth and a revelation of the powerful work of God in the salvation of humanity.

The dark side of the popular philosophers was that they found an easy way to make a living. Plenty were hucksters, nothing more. Some would sexually exploit their listeners. Though honest teachers were among them, a lot of cynicism regarding traveling speakers existed in the ancient world.

Paul sought to avoid some of that cynicism by generally refusing support from his listeners and, instead, doing hard manual labor to support himself. This, along with his sufferings, demonstrated that he truly believed what he preached and that he was not doing it for personal gain. In many ways, Paul’s life was the most powerful sermon he could preach.

Home Churches

Read Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; and Philemon 1, 2. What do all these texts have in common?

In the Roman world there were two main types of residences. There was the *domus*, a large, single-family home built around a courtyard, typical of the wealthy. Such a home could provide a meeting place for 30–100 people. The other type of residence was the *insula*, with shops and workplaces on the ground floor facing the street and apartments (flats) on the floors above. This was the primary urban housing of the working classes. One of these apartments or workplaces could normally accommodate only smaller churches.

The *domus*, and many of the *insula*, would house an extended family—including two or three generations, employees of the family business, visitors, and even slaves. If the head of household could be converted, it could have a great impact on everyone else living there.

The ideal location for an urban house church would be near the city center. The shops and workplaces connected to the house would foster contact with artisans, tradespeople, shoppers, and manual laborers looking for work. This was the setting in which much of Paul’s missionary work may have been done.

In some parts of the world, people still worship in home churches, often because that’s all they have. Or, in some cases, they are not allowed to worship in public, and so a home church is their only option.

Read Acts 18:1–3. How do these verses help us to understand how Paul worked?

As a Roman citizen and, at one point, a member of the Jewish elite, Paul must have been from the upper classes. If so, working with his hands would have been a sacrifice for him; however, by way of such labor, he identified with the working classes and reached out to them (*see 1 Cor. 9:19–23*).

How well does your local church interact with the community? Are you part of that community, in the sense of being involved, or is your church locked in a “siege mentality” in which you isolate yourself from the dangers of the world so much so that you don’t influence it at all?

Further Study: “Providence had directed the movements of nations, and the tide of human impulse and influence, until the world was ripe for the coming of the Deliverer. . . .

“At this time the systems of heathenism were losing their hold upon the people. Men were weary of pageant and fable. They longed for a religion that could satisfy the heart.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 32.

“Outside of the Jewish nation there were men who foretold the appearance of a divine instructor. These men were seeking for truth, and to them the Spirit of Inspiration was imparted. One after another, like stars in the darkened heavens, such teachers had arisen. Their words of prophecy had kindled hope in the hearts of thousands of the Gentile world.”—Page 33.

“When Paul first visited Corinth, he found himself among a people who were suspicious of the motives of strangers. The Greeks on the seacoast were keen traders. So long had they trained themselves in sharp business practices, that they had come to believe that gain was godliness, and that to make money, whether by fair means or foul, was commendable. Paul was acquainted with their characteristics, and he would give them no occasion for saying that he preached the gospel in order to enrich himself. . . . He would seek to remove all occasion for misrepresentation, that the force of his message might not be lost.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 234, 235.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What do you think Ellen White meant when she wrote (in today’s Further Study) that the “Spirit of Inspiration was imparted” to Gentile teachers? To what degree is God at work in the world of ideas outside the Christian context? Can a person be saved if he or she has never heard the name of Jesus? If so, on what basis?
- 2 In what contexts would a private home or apartment be an effective location for a church in today’s world? Are designated church buildings always the best locations in which to worship? Why, or why not?
- 3 How can your church learn to better adapt its outreach to the local community? That is, why must we always remember that what might work in one area might not in another?

Summary: The biblical accounts of Paul’s missionary activity are set in the context of ancient Rome. In 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul was guiding ancient urban Christians through challenging times. As we see Paul wrestling with everyday issues, we can learn how to better apply the principles and lessons that God placed in Scripture for us today.

Etienne's Second Chance

Etienne moved to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, after floods destroyed her family's village. She was 18 and had nothing but her hope for a better life. She found a Seventh-day Adventist family with whom she could live. Etienne wasn't a Seventh-day Adventist and didn't want to attend church with her host family, but she went so they wouldn't ask her to move.

Most Seventh-day Adventist churches in Haiti hold evangelistic meetings in January. Etienne's host family invited her to attend the meetings in their church. Etienne went to please her hosts, but she paid little attention to the speaker.

Then on January 12, 2010, the earth shook furiously. Etienne and her host family staggered out of the house just moments before it collapsed. She stared in disbelief at the rubble around her. Once again she was homeless. Then she realized, *God has saved me again*. "Lord," she prayed, "I think it's time to give my life to you."

Etienne learned that the Morija Adventist Church hadn't been destroyed, and she made her way to the church. The members welcomed her onto the church grounds and showed her a space where she could sleep outside with other now-homeless people. She had no tent and no bed, so she flattened a cardboard box to make a bed. Someone offered her some rice and greens, but Etienne shook her head. She had no money to pay for them. "You don't have to pay," the woman told her. "Take it and eat." Gratefully Etienne took the plate, stunned to think that someone would give her food.

The next day someone announced that there would be preaching that night. Etienne was surprised to see the same woman who had been preaching at the church her host family had taken her to. "I knew that God was giving me a second chance to accept His love and salvation in my life," Etienne said. "So, that night I surrendered my life to God."

Etienne attended the baptismal class every afternoon and accepted the truths she was learning. A few weeks later she was baptized.

"Life is difficult," she says quietly. "I don't know what my future holds, but I know that God will take care of me. He's already shown me that."

Haiti has more than 350,000 Seventh-day Adventist believers. Our mission offerings and a recent Thirteenth Sabbath Offering are helping the faithful believers spread the gospel of hope to the 9.7 million Haitians.



ETIENNE, 22, lives in a tent in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Joyous and Thankful

(1 Thess. 1:1–10)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 1:1–10, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 Tim. 1:15, Gal. 5:19–23, Dan. 12:2.*

Memory Text: “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (*1 Thessalonians 1:2, 3, ESV*).

Key Thought: Paul has many good things to say to the Thessalonians, at least when he begins writing to them in the first letter. What he praises them for is worthy of our attention.

Paul opens his first letter to the Thessalonians by emphasizing prayer and stressing how much he prays for them, which itself reveals the deep love and concern he has for the church there.

In this passage Paul then rejoices that the Thessalonians, on the whole, appear to be remaining faithful. Their lives offer abundant evidence of the life-changing power of the Spirit, despite the many challenges that they face.

Paul concludes his first chapter by remarking how the Thessalonians' openness to Paul and his teaching have led them to become true “Adventists.” They were believers who lived every day in anticipation of the day that Jesus would come from heaven to deliver them from “the wrath to come.”

In this lesson we get an intimate glimpse of how new converts dealt with the challenges that come after evangelism has taken place.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 28.*

A Prayer of Thanks (1 Thess. 1:1–3)

In the opening words of 1 Thessalonians, we catch a glimpse of the selflessness of Paul. While he was clearly the author of this letter (1 Thess. 2:18, 3:5, 5:27), he gives recognition to his coworkers Silas and Timothy.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1–3. For what things are Paul, Silas, and Timothy giving thanks? What do these things mean in a practical sense? That is, how would they be manifested in daily life? For example, how is the “work of faith” expressed in how we live?

The opening of this letter is typical of ancient Greek letters, but with an interesting twist. To the typical Greek opener (“grace”), Paul adds the familiar Jewish greeting “peace” (*shalom* in Hebrew). “Grace” and “peace”—these are apt depictions of what an experience with Jesus is all about.

Who was Silvanus? The name reflects the Latin equivalent of the Aramaic name “Silas.” Jews who lived outside Palestine usually adopted Greek or Latin names to go along with their Jewish ones (this is how “Saul” became “Paul”). Silas was a Jerusalem Christian like Mark, who was one of Paul’s first traveling companions. By having trusted leaders of the Jerusalem church with him on his missionary journeys, Paul was doing his best to maintain unity in the church.

What group of words in 1 Thessalonians 1:1–3 has become famous because of the way it is used in 1 Corinthians 13? Which of these words has the primary emphasis in 1 Corinthians, and why?

In his prayers, Paul concentrates on reality, not giddy spirituality. Faith provokes serious work. Genuine love produces much labor. And hope requires much patience. The stress in these words is on action, not abstract ideas. The order of faith, love, and hope varies in the New Testament, but the most important of the three is listed last in each case (see 1 Cor. 13:13). The order of these words in verse 3 underlines the importance of last-day events in Paul’s mind throughout the writing of these two letters to the Thessalonians.

Paul is also thankful before God because he remembers the way in which the Thessalonians have responded to the gospel. He probably hopes, too, that their positive emotional response to the praise Paul offers them will incline them to be more open to the concerns that he will soon express to them.

God Has Chosen You (1 Thess. 1:4)

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4. What does it mean that God has chosen or elected us? Does that mean we don't really have a choice? On the other hand, does it mean that someone who is not chosen by God cannot have salvation even if he or she wants it?

Verse 4 continues the same extended sentence that Paul began in verse 2 with “we give thanks.” One of the reasons Paul gives thanks to God is that he knows God has “chosen” the Thessalonians.

Some Christians have taken this idea of being “chosen” to an extreme. They want to move the believer away from any focus on lifestyle or behavior. Instead, they teach that our salvation depends on God's choice rather than on our own. Such a teaching can also lead to the idea that God's grace is only for a few and that, once saved, a person cannot choose to be lost.

How do the following texts help us to understand that salvation is our own choice? *Josh. 24:15, 1 Tim. 2:4, Rev. 3:20.*

Faith is impossible without God's drawing power. Yet, in the end, God allows human beings to make their own decisions regarding Him and what He has done for us. And what He has done for us is to “choose” us in Christ. We have all been “elected” to have salvation. That some won't be saved—won't claim that salvation for themselves—reflects their choice, not God's. God's choice is for all humanity to be saved. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:4, God wants “all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (*NKJV*).

Think through what it means to know that you have been “chosen” by God, that God wants you to have salvation, and that to be lost is a deviation from God's desire for all of us. What encouragement can you draw from this wonderful truth?

Assurance in Christ (1 Thess. 1:5)

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5. How do we gain the assurance that we are right with God? What three pieces of evidence in the lives of the Thessalonians indicated to Paul that they were right with God?

Verse 5 begins with “for” or “because.” In this verse Paul details the grounds for his conviction that the Thessalonians were “chosen” by God (*1 Thess. 1:4*). He is also underlining further reasons as to why his prayers are so filled with thankfulness (*1 Thess. 1:2*). Paul rejoices at the real-life evidence that the Thessalonians have responded to God and that He approves of them.

Paul begins the verse with rejoicing at a visible and outward sign of the Thessalonians’ position before the Lord. Their acceptance of the gospel was not merely a mental assent to teachings or doctrine. Their daily lives exhibited the presence and power of God. In everyday church life, things were happening that could be explained only as divine intervention. Prayers were answered and lives changed. The reality of their faith was being manifested in their works.

How does one know that the Holy Spirit is present and real in one’s life and in the local church? See *Gal. 5:19–23, 1 Cor. 12:1–11*.

The “fruit” of the Spirit is powerful evidence that God is actively working. Things such as love, joy, and peace can be faked only for so long; in the day-to-day stress of relationships within the church, the genuine is eventually sifted from the false. When the Holy Spirit is a living presence, things that are not natural to sinful human beings start to become natural in the life of the believer. Christians find themselves doing acts of grace and kindness that would not have occurred to them before. Paul saw plenty of evidence that the lives of the Thessalonians had been changed by the supernatural working of the Spirit.

For Paul, the final evidence that God had chosen the Thessalonians was their deep conviction and inner assurance that the gospel was true and that God was real in their lives. Though such convictions don’t prove true in every case, strong assurance that we are right with God usually accompanies the genuine gospel.

How much assurance of salvation do you have? On what, in the end, must that assurance be based?

Doing What Paul Would Do (1 Thess. 1:6, 7)

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 7. What is Paul’s message there? How are we to understand this in light of the idea that Christ is our ultimate example?

Most translations do not show this, but in verse 6 Paul continues the same sentence that he began in verse 2 and carries it on through verse 10. The main topic of this lengthy sentence is Paul’s list of reasons for the thanksgivings that he recites in his prayers. Verses 6 and 7 add two items to that list of thanksgivings, building on the “because” (*NIV*) at the beginning of verse 5. Paul gives thanks (*vs. 2*) because (*vs. 5, NIV*) the Thessalonians have both imitated him and his colleagues and have themselves become an example to imitate (*vss. 6, 7*).

We often caution people that it is dangerous to imitate anyone but Christ. That’s true, because even the best of people will let us down sometimes. But in reality we need role models. People need each other at times for guidance, counsel, and help in working through specific issues and even hard times. Who hasn’t experienced the blessing of good counsel and of a good example?

Also, whether we like it or not, once we become leaders in the church, people will imitate us. How important, then, that “veteran” Christians live what they preach and model the things that they say.

At the same time, Paul has placed a couple of safeguards here. First of all, the imitation (*vs. 6*) follows the receiving (*vs. 5*). The primary focus of the Thessalonians is on receiving the Word of God and applying it directly to their lives through the Holy Spirit. God’s Word can always be trusted. Second, Paul directs them to the Lord as the primary model (*vs. 6*). What Jesus did, and would do, is a much safer model than what even Paul would do. After all, Paul is under no illusions about himself or his character (*1 Tim. 1:15*).

Having said this, however, Paul affirms the Thessalonians’ desire to imitate him as a beloved teacher and mentor and also to become models worthy of imitation themselves. In this particular case, what is being modeled is joy in suffering. Suffering can make one bitter or better. In the context of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, the Thessalonians discover supernatural joy in the midst of suffering, just as Paul and Silas had earlier (*Acts 16:22–25*).

What kind of role model are you in the church? What ways in which you conduct yourself in your life are good for others to follow? What ways aren’t?

Further Evidence of Faith (1 Thess. 1:8–10)

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:8–10. In what ways does this passage offer additional evidence of the Thessalonians' faith?

Paul continues the sentence that began in verse 2 by explaining how he knows the Thessalonians have become a model, or type, for the other believers in Macedonia (where Thessalonica was located) and Achaia (where Corinth was located).

First, they were a model of evangelistic effort and success. From them the word of God “rang out” (*NIV*) into both of these provinces and beyond. Paul also considered them to have a model faith because of their openness to him and the gospel. They were willing to be taught. They were also willing to make radical changes in their lives, such as giving up idols and other popular forms of worship.

Communication was relatively rapid in the ancient Roman world, thanks to well-built Roman roads and widespread travel. So, the claim that their faith was known “everywhere” may indicate that people in places such as Rome and Antioch had already made reference to it in their communications with Paul.

It is also true that people want to live up to the high expectations of others. Praise contains an implied expectation. By praising their faith in such an overwhelming fashion, Paul was encouraging them to grow in that faith more and more.

It seems there was something uniquely remarkable about their conversion. As pagan idolaters they had to overcome two major barriers. First was the “crazy message” about some man who was dead and came back to life again. Then there was the fact that it was a crazy, Jewish message. Many Gentiles probably laughed when they heard the Christian message. The Thessalonians didn't. Instead, they completely rearranged their lives in light of the gospel.

“The Thessalonian believers were true missionaries. Their hearts burned with zeal for their Saviour, who had delivered them from fear of ‘the wrath to come.’ Through the grace of Christ a marvelous transformation had taken place in their lives, and the word of the Lord, as spoken through them, was accompanied with power. Hearts were won by the truths presented, and souls were added to the number of believers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 256.

Read again 1 Thessalonians 1:10. What's Paul talking about? What is the “wrath to come”? What does the resurrection of Jesus have to do with the point he is making? Why is this promise so crucial to all that we believe? See *1 Cor. 15:12–17*; *John 11:24, 25*; *Dan. 12:2*.

Further Study: “The arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia, during Paul’s sojourn in Corinth, had greatly cheered the apostle. They brought him ‘good tidings’ of the ‘faith and charity’ of those who had accepted the truth during the first visit of the gospel messengers to Thessalonica. Paul’s heart went out in tender sympathy toward these believers, who, in the midst of trial and adversity, had remained true to God. He longed to visit them in person, but as this was not then possible, he wrote to them.

“In this letter to the church at Thessalonica the apostle expresses his gratitude to God for the joyful news of their increase of faith. . . .

“ ‘We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.’

“Many of the believers in Thessalonica had ‘turned . . . from idols to serve the living and true God.’ . . . The apostle declared that in their faithfulness in following the Lord they were ‘ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 255, 256.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the question of role models, other than Jesus. What advantages and disadvantages come with them?
- 2 Paul spends a great portion of this letter giving thanks to God for the Thessalonians. What role can, or should, thanksgiving play in our worship experience, both personally and corporately?
- 3 If people around you were looking for evidence of your church’s faith, what would they find? How could, or should, things be different?
- 4 Why is affirmation of others so important? At the same time, why must we be careful as we do this?
- 5 Think through again how important the doctrine of the Second Coming is to our faith. What good reasons do we have for trusting in something that’s so radical, that’s so unlike anything that has ever happened before?

Summary: Paul found much joy in offering thanks to God for the abundant evidence of His work in the lives of the Thessalonian believers. In sharing the content of his prayers with them, Paul hoped to motivate them to continue growing in the faith and in their outreach efforts toward others.

Talking Hands

Six children of the Jacksonville Southpoint Seventh-day Adventist Church in Florida wanted to share their faith with others. They attended a weekend, training program for kids called “Go Fish!” and learned several, fun ways to tell others about Jesus. They learned to tell stories, lead singing, and use puppets. They returned home excited about what they had learned.

“So,” their pastor asked with a smile, “how are you going to tell others about Jesus?”

The children loved learning to work with puppets, making them look as if they’re alive as they talk, listen, and wonder. At the end of the training session each child received a puppet of his or her own. “We want to use puppets to tell about God,” one of the children said.

The children wrote their own scripts and made their costumes and props with help from their parents. “One of our skits is about two boys who get into a fight,” says Tenver, one of the puppet ministry kids. “The puppets’ friends stop the fight, and they talk about how peace is one part of the fruit of the Spirit.”

“We also do skits about Bible characters,” says Isabel, another member of the group. “One of our skits is about the ten lepers Jesus healed.”

It took a lot of practice to learn the lines and coordinate the puppets’ movements with the words so they looked realistic. But the children, who are between 10 and 12 years old, were willing to work hard so others could learn that God loves them and has a plan for their lives.

“It’s easier to tell others about Jesus when your friends are working with you,” says Tenver. “At first I was a little scared because I had never done something like this before. Now when I see the smiles on people’s faces when we finish a program, I know it’s worth the work.”

Sharing Jesus with others is an important part of the team’s ministry. “Recently we took our puppets to a program that helps teenagers who have dropped out of school and gotten into trouble,” Abigail added. “We pre-

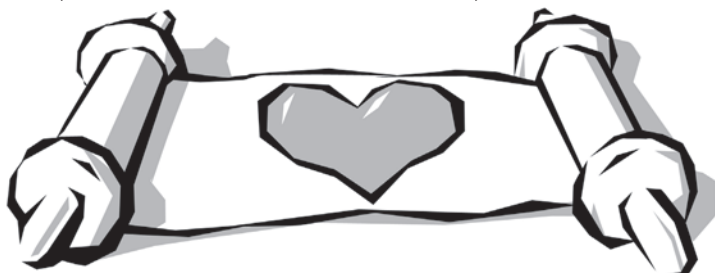
presented several skits for them and prayed that we helped them get their lives back on track.”

For the children in the puppet ministry, learning how to be God’s disciples has involved learning to talk with their hands. They are helping other boys and girls learn that Jesus wants to be their best friend forever.



The children in the puppet ministry attend the Jacksonville (Florida) Southpoint Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Apostolic Example (1 Thess. 2:1–12)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 2:1–12, Acts 16, Deut. 10:16, Ps. 51:1–10, 2 Cor. 8:1–5, Luke 11:11–13.*

Memory Text: “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” (*1 Thessalonians 2:4, ESV*).

Key Thought: By revealing what the true motive in ministry must be, Paul can help us all to examine our hearts and lives in light of the gospel.

This week's lesson marks a major transition from the arguments of the first letter to the Thessalonians. Paul moves from a focus on the church (*1 Thess. 1:2–10*) to a focus on the apostles and their experience in Thessalonica (*2:1–12*). In the previous chapter Paul gives thanks to God because the believers in Thessalonica modeled their lives on Paul and, in turn, became models of faithfulness themselves. Now, in *1 Thessalonians 2:1–12*, Paul probes more deeply into the kind of life that enables the apostles to function as role models.

While there are many possible motivations for teaching, preaching, and service, Paul puts his finger on the one that matters most: ministry that will be pleasing to God. Paul is less concerned with growing the church in numbers than with its growing, through God's grace, in the right spiritual principles.

In this lesson we glimpse Paul's innermost life. Paul bares his soul in a way that challenges us to align our own spiritual hopes, dreams, and motivations so that we will please God and have the right influence on others.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 4.*

Boldness in Suffering (1 Thess. 2:1, 2)

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1, 2 in light of Acts 16. What connection does Paul draw between his earlier ministry in Philippi and his ministry in Thessalonica?

First Thessalonians 2:1 picks up on the themes of the first chapter. The “you yourselves know” (*NKJV*) of this verse recalls the same language in 1 Thessalonians 1:5. And Paul’s reference to “coming” or gaining “entrance” with the church recalls 1 Thessalonians 1:9. So, Paul is continuing the themes that he raised in the opening chapter of the letter. In the end of the previous chapter, Paul is concerned with what “everybody” knows about the Thessalonians. In this chapter he discusses what the readers know about the apostles and their commitment to the faith.

Paul recalls how he and Silas were shamefully treated in Philippi on account of preaching the gospel. On the long road from Philippi to Thessalonica, every step was a painful reminder of that treatment. No doubt they bore outward signs of their pain, even upon arriving in Thessalonica. It would have been easy at that point for the apostles to take a less direct approach to evangelism in the new city. After all that they had just been through, who would have blamed them?

But the Thessalonians proved eager and open for the truth. Reality said, “Don’t ever preach the gospel again.” But in the midst of their pain and suffering, God was saying to Paul and Silas: be bold. Be strong. So, they “began to be bold” (*1 Thess. 2:2, author’s translation*) in spite of the likelihood that persecution would arise again. There was a strong and visible contrast between their human condition (and all the frailties that come with it) and their empowerment by God.

In the end, the Lord used these outward circumstances to His glory. The visible wounds of the preachers provided evidence of two things to the Thessalonians. First, the gospel they preached truly came from their personal conviction. They were not doing it for personal advantage (*see 1 Thess. 2:3–6*). Second, it was clear to the hearers that God was with Paul and Silas in a mighty way. The gospel that they preached was not just an intellectual construct; it was accompanied by the living presence of the Lord as revealed in the lives of the apostles (*see vs. 13*).

What would you point to as evidence that God has changed your life? How is this evidence visible to others? Or is it visible at all?

The Character of the Apostles (1 Thess. 2:3)

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:3. What key point is Paul making there about motives?

It was widely known in the ancient world that there were three keys of persuading people to change their ideas or practices: people judge the power of an argument on the character of the speaker (in Greek: *ethos*), the quality or logic of the argument itself (*logos*), and the power of the speaker's appeal to the listener's emotions or self-interest (*pathos*). In 1 Thessalonians 2:3–6 Paul focuses on the character of the apostles as a key element of the preaching that led to radical changes in the Thessalonians.

In these verses, Paul draws a contrast between himself and the popular philosophers, whose preaching was often motivated by personal benefit (see lesson 3). Paul uses three words in verse 3 to describe possible bad motivations for preaching or ministry.

The first word is *error*, or an intellectual mistake. That is to say, a preacher may be excited about an idea that is simply wrong. He or she may be perfectly sincere but self-deceived. He thinks he is doing good for others but is motivated by false ideas.

The second word is *uncleanness*, or *impurity*. It refers to the fact that people are attracted to individuals who are widely known for their power, ideas, or performance. In addition, some public figures can be motivated by the sexual opportunities that come with fame or notoriety.

The third word is best translated as *deception*, or *trickery*. In this case the speaker is aware that the ideas being presented are wrong but is consciously trying to mislead people in order to benefit himself.

Paul and Silas were not motivated by any of these. If they had been, their experience in Philippi would probably have made them quit preaching. The boldness that they exhibited in Thessalonica was made possible only by the power of God working through them. The power that the gospel had in Thessalonica (see *1 Thess. 1:5*) was in part due to the character of the apostles, which shone through in their presentations. So, logical arguments and emotional appeals were not enough. Their characters were in accordance with their claims. Such authenticity had tremendous power in ancient times, just as it does today.

Think through your own motives for all that you do. How pure are they? How free are they of error, deceit, and impurity? If they are not what they should be, how can you change them for the better? See also Deut. 10:16, Phil. 4:13, Ps. 51:1–10.

Pleasing God (1 Thess. 2:4–6)

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:4–6. Describe the contrast between Paul’s motivation for ministry and the worldly alternatives he mentions. Why is it not always so easy to see the differences; that is, how can people deceive themselves regarding the purity of their own motives? Why is this so easy to do?

The word often translated as “approved” (*1 Thess. 2:4*) reflects the idea of testing or examination. The apostles allowed God to test the integrity of their lives and intentions. The purpose of that testing was to make sure that the gospel they shared would not be distorted by a contrast between what they preached and how they lived.

The popular philosophers of the day wrote about the importance of self-examination. If you want to make a difference in the world, they taught, you need to constantly examine your motives and intentions. Paul took this idea one step further. He taught that in addition to self-examination, he was examined by God. This meant that God verified that what Paul preached was consistent with his inner life. Paul’s point was that, in the ultimate sense, God is the only one worth pleasing.

Human beings need a sense of worth in order to function. We often seek this worth by accumulating possessions, by achievements, or through the positive opinions that others express about us. But all these sources of self-worth are fragile and so temporary. Genuine and lasting self-worth is found only through the gospel. When we fully grasp that Christ died for us, we begin to experience a sense of worth that nothing in this world can shake.

What does 1 Thessalonians 2:5, 6 add to the three motivations listed in verse 3?

The concept of flattery picks up on the theme of pleasing people, a poor basis for evangelism. Paul is not motivated by what other people think of him. He also rules out another worldly motivation for ministry: money. People who have been blessed by someone’s ministry are usually eager to give money to that ministry or to buy its products. This can tempt God’s workers to lose their focus on the only motivation that really matters, pleasing God.

What in your life pleases God, and why? What doesn’t, and why not?

Caring Deeply (1 Thess. 2:7, 8)

In 1 Thessalonians 2:4, Paul’s primary motivation for ministry is to please God. What additional motivation does Paul bring up in the verses that follow? See 1 Thess. 2:6–8.

In today’s world, money, sex, and power are often considered the primary motivations for human behavior, at least for those consumed by self-interest. In 1 Thessalonians 2:3–6, Paul uses a number of different words to rule out similar motivations in relation to his ministry. Greed, immorality, deception, and flattery have no place in Christian life and ministry. The apostles were motivated primarily by the desire to please God in all that they did.

In verse 6 Paul notes that the apostles could have been a burden to the Thessalonians, or literally could have “thrown their weight around.” As apostles and teachers they could have demanded recognition of their status. They could have expected to receive monetary favors and to be treated with special honor. But in Thessalonica Paul declined anything that could have compromised his motives or that could have put a stumbling block in the way of the new converts.

While Paul’s primary motivation was to please God, in verses 7 and 8 he expresses an additional motivation—his great affection for the Thessalonians themselves. Verse 8 uses the language of emotional warmth. Preaching the gospel was much more than a duty for Paul; he gave his heart, even his whole self, to the people.

How did the churches of Macedonia, of which Thessalonica was a part, respond to the tenderness of the apostles? See 2 Cor. 8:1–5. What does this teach us about the importance of character in the lives of those who witness to others?

In Monday’s lesson we mentioned the three ancient keys to persuasion: the character of the speaker (*ethos*), the logic of the argument (*logos*), and the appeal to emotion or self-interest (*pathos*). In verses 4–6 Paul emphasizes the character of the apostles as being a reason to follow them. In verses 7 and 8 we see an appeal to *pathos*, the emotional bond that developed between the apostles and the Thessalonians. The gospel is at its most powerful when it touches the heart.

Think about the character of someone who influenced you in a positive way spiritually. What was it in particular that touched you? How can you learn to emulate the same traits?

To Not Be a Burden (1 Thess. 2:9–12)

While Paul was in Thessalonica, what other things did he do in addition to preaching the gospel, and why? *See 1 Thess. 2:9, 10.*

The idea that Paul was working “night and day” would be a huge exaggeration if taken literally. The Greek, however, expresses a qualitative idea rather than the actual amount of time spent. In other words, Paul was saying that he worked beyond the call of duty in order not to burden them; Paul did not want anything to stand in the way of his witness to them.

In addition, he was very careful to behave in such a way as not to cause offense, either before God or before others (*see 1 Thess. 2:10, Luke 2:52*). Paul and the apostles sought to be “blameless” in their relationships so that the gospel would become the central focus of attention.

What analogy did Paul use in 1 Thessalonians 2:11, 12 to describe his treatment of the Thessalonians? *See also Luke 11:11–13. What does that analogy teach?*

The good father provides boundaries and encouragement, as well as love. He adapts his nurturing and discipline to the unique character and emotional condition of each child. Depending on the child and the situation, the father may offer encouragement, a stern lecture, or disciplinary punishment.

There is a certain tension in Paul’s missionary approach. On the one hand, he always sought to adapt his approach to the unique character and situation of the people; on the other, he was very concerned about authenticity, that the outward and inward be one and the same. How can one be authentic and genuine and yet be “all things to all people”?

The key is the love Paul had for his converts. He did all he could to model authenticity for them; yet, he realized that there were things that they were not ready to handle (*see also John 16:12*). So, he worked with his hands and adapted his instruction, all in order to avoid putting unnecessary barriers in the way of people’s acceptance of the gospel. A powerful lesson in self-sacrifice for sure.

Further Study: “No matter how high the profession, he whose heart is not filled with love for God and his fellow men is not a true disciple of Christ. . . . He might display great liberality; but should he, from some other motive than genuine love, bestow all his goods to feed the poor, the act would not commend him to the favor of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 318, 319.

“While Paul was careful to set before his converts the plain teaching of Scripture regarding the proper support of the work of God, . . . at various times during his ministry in the great centers of civilization, he wrought at a handicraft for his own maintenance. . . .

“It is at Thessalonica that we first read of Paul’s working with his hands in self-supporting labor while preaching the word [*1 Thess. 2:6, 9; 2 Thess. 3:8, 9*]. . . .

“But Paul did not regard as lost the time thus spent. . . . He gave his fellow workers instruction in spiritual things, and he also set an example of industry and thoroughness. He was a quick, skillful worker, diligent in business, ‘fervent in spirit, serving the Lord’ (Rom. 12:11).”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 234–236.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about a painful time that you have endured (physically, spiritually, emotionally, or some mixture of them all). In practical terms, how does someone find joy or courage in the midst of such suffering? Why is finding that joy and courage so much easier said than done?
- 2 Think about someone whose life clearly did not reflect his or her claims to be a Christian. How did that person impact your own walk with the Lord?
- 3 What are the pitfalls in becoming emotionally attached to people with whom you are sharing the gospel? How does one set appropriate boundaries for the relationships that develop whenever you work closely with other people?

Summary: In this passage Paul opened his heart to reveal the truest motives for ministry. The ultimate motive is to please God, whether or not those to whom we minister are pleased. Motivations of money, sex, and power have no place in a heart determined to please God. The next most important motive for ministry is heartfelt love for the lost. Both of these motives are clearly expressed in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12.

The Lost Boy

Du and Zho are a Global Mission pioneer couple who are planting a church in a city in China. They sell products from door to door in order to meet people and make friends for Christ. They focus on helping people with special needs such as the sick, the elderly, and the needy. Then they introduce their new friends to their Savior.

Most of the people living in the region worship idols, so Du and Zho visit the temples to meet people as well. They search for people who look lonely or sad and offer their sympathy and friendship. If the people are willing, the couple prays for their special needs. Thus, they have made many friends with whom they share God's love and some literature introducing their friends to God.

One day as Du and Zho were walking along a road, they saw a teenage boy. He looked dirty and lost and troubled, so they stopped to talk to him. Du and Zho realized that the boy had mental problems and couldn't tell them where he lived. It was winter and bitterly cold; the boy's hands appeared to have been damaged by frostbite.

Du and Zho asked the boy to come to their home. They gave him a bath, provided him with clean clothes, and fed him a simple, warm meal. Again they asked him where he lived. But the boy couldn't tell them.

Du and Zho cared for the boy in their home while they contacted the police and a local television station for help in finding his family. Two weeks later the police called to tell them that they had located the boy's family some 200 miles away from where Du and Zho had found him.

The couple took the boy back to his parents, who were grateful to have their lost son home again. When the family realized that Du and Zho were Christians, they invited the couple to stay with them and tell them about God. Du contacted the local elder at a nearby Seventh-day Adventist church and asked him to visit the family.

Du and Zho returned home to continue their work. A few months later they learned that the lost boy's family had found Christ as their Lord and had joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Our mission offerings support the work of Global Mission around the world.

Du and Zho are two of 60 lay workers who help a single pastor oversee 46 churches and 4,000 members in China.

Friends Forever

(1 Thess. 2:13–3:13)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 2:13–3:13; Rom. 9:1–5; 11:1–12, 24–32; Matt. 24:9–22; 10:42.*

Memory Text: “May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (*1 Thessalonians 3:13, NIV*).

Key Thought: Paul continues to praise the Thessalonians for the good things he sees in them and to encourage them amid the persecution they are facing.

There is a deep, emotional bond between Paul and the Thessalonians. Paul stresses that bond as he seeks to continue reinforcing in their minds the love that he has for them. While certainly sincere, his words will also help prepare them for the criticism that will soon follow.

Paul begins and ends this section with a prayer. In a sense the entire passage is written with prayer in mind. The underlying theme of this focus on prayer is Paul's desire for the Thessalonians to be “blameless and holy” (*1 Thess. 3:13; see also 1 Thess. 2:19, 20*) at the second coming of Jesus.

The friendship Paul has with them is deeper than earthly friendships; it is a friendship that goes beyond the boundaries of time and history on this earth. Paul is looking forward to spending eternity with the Thessalonian believers. This desire, in part, is what drives his intense concern throughout the letter about their beliefs and behavior. Paul loves these people and wants them to be ready for the return of Christ.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 11.*

The Judean Example (1 Thess. 2:13–16)

On the surface, 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 reads like a digression from the previous themes of pleasing God and caring for the new believers (*1 Thess. 2:1–12*). But verse 13 continues the theme of how the Thessalonians responded to the apostles and the gospel that they brought to Thessalonica.

With verse 14, Paul returns to the theme of imitation. The persecution in Thessalonica echoed the earlier persecution of Christians in Judea. Some Jews persecuted Jewish Christians in Judea, while Gentile and Jewish neighbors together persecuted the largely Gentile Christian population of Thessalonica. Here Paul shows that the persecution of Christians is tied to a larger pattern. Those who follow Christ are going to face opposition, even persecution.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16. What message should this passage have for us today? What does it definitely not teach?

Here Paul reveals his feelings about a specific group of Jews who dogged his evangelistic trail from place to place, sowing discord and opposition to the apostles. Passages in the Bible like this (*see also Matt. 23:29–38*) have been grossly perverted and twisted in order to “justify” persecution of Jewish people. But that kind of universal application goes way beyond Paul’s intention here. Paul is speaking specifically about the Judean authorities (the word translated as “Jews” in 1 Thessalonians 2:14 also can be translated as “Judeans”) who collaborated with the Romans in the death of Jesus and who made it their business to obstruct the preaching of the gospel wherever and whenever they could. In fact, Paul seems to be echoing what Jesus already said about those who were trying to kill Him (*Matt. 23:29–36*).

We must keep in mind that Paul himself was a Jew. He was not vilifying an entire class of people. Jesus was Jewish. The first disciples were Jewish. Jews alone formed the early core of the church. As far as Paul was concerned, every Jew he met, such as Silas, Barnabas, and Timothy, was potentially a friend for eternity (*see Rom. 9:1–5; 11:1–12, 24–32*).

Every person on earth is a soul “for whom Christ died” (*Rom. 14:15, 1 Cor. 8:11*). Prejudice against whole classes of people is not appropriate among those who live at the foot of the Cross.

It’s easy to point fingers at the church for failure in regard to how it has treated whole classes of people. What about ourselves? How much ethnic prejudice lingers in our own hearts?

Paul's Hope and Joy (1 Thess. 2:17–20)

In the fourteen verses that run from 1 Thessalonians 2:17 through 3:10, Paul offers a chronological account of his separation from the Thessalonian believers. The theme of friendship runs throughout the passage. These Thessalonians are not just Paul's parishioners; they are truly friends. The entire passage pulses with deep emotion.

Paul wants all of his later advice to, and criticism of, the church (*in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5*) to be read in light of his love and concern for its members. And because of this love, he has earned the right to counsel the church there. The giving of advice is best received when it is grounded in love.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17–20. What is Paul saying here that's so relevant to us today?

The main verb of verse 17 (usually translated as “being taken” or “torn away”) is rooted in the concept of being orphaned. When Paul is forced to leave Thessalonica suddenly, he feels the loss of relationship as deeply as if his parents had just died. He wants very much to visit the Thessalonians because he misses them dearly. They are absent in person but not in heart. He blames this delay on Satan, his words here being another text in the Bible that shows the reality of the great controversy.

Paul's longing for the Thessalonian believers, however, is rooted in more than just everyday relationship; it has an end-time focus. Paul looks forward to “showing them off” to Jesus after the Second Coming. They are the validation of his ministry for Christ, his eschatological joy and boast! Paul wants there to be evidence at the end that his life has made a difference in the lives of others.

What this passage should show us, too, is that we need to keep our priorities straight. Our existence here is but a “vapor” (*James 4:14, NKJV*); yet, it is vapor with eternal consequences. Paul's focus, Paul's priority, is on what is eternal, on what has lasting value and importance. After all, if you really think about the ultimate fate of this world, what else really matters other than the salvation of the lost?

How should all that we do in this life impact, to one degree or another, the salvation of the lost? However nice it is to talk about this ideal, how do we *live* in accordance with this objective?

Timothy's Substitute Visit (1 Thess. 3:1–5)

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1–5 and Matthew 24:9–22. In what larger context does Paul see the sufferings of the Thessalonians and himself?

Paul is so distressed about his absence from the Thessalonians that he decides to forgo the companionship of Timothy in Athens in order to get firsthand news of the Thessalonians' situation. His intense longing for them leads him to prefer being without Timothy rather than being without news of how they are faring.

Because Timothy's mission is to be a substitute, or stand-in, for Paul, Paul does his best to boost Timothy's authority with the church. Timothy is Paul's "brother," a "minister of God," and a "coworker in the gospel." Some Greek manuscripts go so far as to call Timothy a "coworker of God." This would be extremely high praise. Paul knows that the mission will be a difficult one, and he does his best to open the way so that Timothy will be received as if Paul himself had come.

Verses 3 and 4 give us an idea of what Paul would have said to the Thessalonians had he been able to visit them. The specific word chosen to describe their sufferings is typical of end-time passages, such as in Matthew 24:9–22. Affliction should not come as a surprise. We all have been warned about it.

Christian suffering calls to mind the events of the end, during which time all true followers of Christ will face persecution (*see Rev. 13:14–17*). When suffering actually comes, we should see it as a fulfillment of prophecy and an encouragement rather than a discouragement. The purpose of prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to provide solid assurance amid the challenges we face every day.

In verse 5, Paul reveals that he has an additional motive for sending Timothy. He is worried that the difficult things the Thessalonians have experienced might have resulted in their loss of faith. He is worried that his mission to Thessalonica might somehow have been in vain or empty of results.

What are things we can do, day by day, to prepare ourselves spiritually for the inevitable trials that life brings us?

The Result of Timothy's Visit (1 Thess. 3:6–10)

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6–8. Timothy was sent to encourage the Thessalonians. What aspects of Timothy's report brought joy and encouragement to Paul? That is, what did Timothy see in the Thessalonians that Paul thought was so good?

The “but now” of verse 6 is very emphatic. Paul did not waste any time before sitting down to write to the Thessalonians. The instant he got the news from Timothy, he immediately wrote 1 Thessalonians.

What do we learn about Paul's prayer life from 1 Thessalonians 3:9, 10? What can we take from that for ourselves?

The absence of words such as *always* and *constantly* (see 1 Thess. 1:2) suggests there was something new in Paul's joy and thanksgiving here beyond the constant joy and thanksgiving that he always felt when he prayed for the Thessalonians. The joy and thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians 3:9, 10 is in immediate reaction to Timothy's news.

What was lacking in the Thessalonians' faith (1 Thess. 3:10)? The immediate text doesn't say. As we can see later, Paul's concern for their faith was more practical than theological. Chapters 4 and 5 indicate that they needed to bring their practice in line with their belief. Though they had love and faith and were “standing firm in the Lord,” it becomes apparent later in the letter that they still had some important growing to do.

Why is prayer so important in our own walk with the Lord? How much time do you spend in prayer? What does your answer tell you about how important you deem it? In what ways can you strengthen your prayer life?

Paul's Renewed Prayers (1 Thess. 3:11–13)

The second coming of Jesus is a powerful incentive for spiritual growth. Every act of abuse or oppression will be brought to justice. Every act of love or kindness will be recognized and rewarded (*see, for example, Matt. 10:42*). That means that every act in this life, no matter how small, has meaning in the ultimate scheme of things.

But equally important for Paul, and the emphasis in this week's lesson, is that the Second Coming will be a glorious reunion of family and friends, whose relationships will last forever because of what Jesus has done. Christian relationships do not have an expiration date. They are designed to last forever.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13. What are the things that Paul includes in his prayers for the Thessalonians after the arrival of Timothy?

First Thessalonians 3:11–13 sounds almost like the benediction at the end of a worship service. Paul, of course, wishes to return to Thessalonica and make up the deficits in the church's faith (*1 Thess. 3:10*). But even if he is not able to return, he can still plead with God to motivate and grow the Thessalonians into an abundance of love, not only for each other but also for their neighbors and everyone they meet. This love will be an important component of their characters when Jesus returns.

Somewhat puzzling is Paul's comment in verse 13 that Jesus will come "with all his saints." The words *saints* and *holy ones* are normally applied to human beings in the New Testament. On the other hand, Second Coming texts in the New Testament normally describe Jesus as accompanied by angels rather than human beings (*Matt. 24:30, 31; Mark 8:38; 13:27*). So, who are the "saints" in this verse?

The solution to this problem is to recognize that in verse 13 Paul adopted the language of Zechariah 14:5 and applied it to the second coming of Jesus. The "holy ones" in the Old Testament are best understood as angels (*see also Deut. 33:2 and Dan. 7:10*). The New Testament, on the other hand, gives the word *saints* new meaning: they are human beings whose righteousness is from Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians 3:13, however, Paul reverts to the Old Testament definition of the word *saints* as angelic beings who stand in the presence of God. As such, they will accompany the God-man Jesus when He returns to earth.

Further Study: “The arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia, during Paul’s sojourn in Corinth, had greatly cheered the apostle. They brought him ‘good tidings’ of the ‘faith and charity’ of those who had accepted the truth during the first visit of the gospel messengers to Thessalonica. Paul’s heart went out in tender sympathy toward these believers, who, in the midst of trial and adversity, had remained true to God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 255.

“True, heaven-born love is not selfish and changeable. It is not dependent on human praise. The heart of him who receives the grace of God overflows with love for God and for those for whom Christ died. Self is not struggling for recognition. He does not love others because they love and please him, because they appreciate his merits, but because they are Christ’s purchased possession. If his motives, words, or actions are misunderstood or misrepresented, he takes no offense, but pursues the even tenor of his way. He is kind and thoughtful, humble in his opinion of himself, yet full of hope, always trusting in the mercy and love of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 101, 102.

Discussion Questions:

- ① In *Christ’s Object Lessons* and in many other places, Ellen White uses the phrase “souls for whom Christ died.” How widely should that phrase be applied? To every human being on earth? Or only to fellow believers in Christ? If Christ truly died for all, then why are not all saved?
- ② How important is previous relationship when it comes to giving advice or criticism to a fellow believer? What can we learn about this from Paul’s example in this week’s passage? What can we learn from this that can help us in our ministry to others?
- ③ Paul’s love and concern for the believers in Thessalonica is very apparent. This love mirrors the love that Jesus revealed when He was here in the flesh. Love is such a powerful component in the softening of hearts and the opening up of people to the grace of God. How can we learn to love others more than we already do? How can we better learn to reveal that love, as well?

Summary: In 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:13 Paul describes the events and emotions of the period between the time he was forced to leave Thessalonica and when Timothy arrives in Corinth with news about the church. The central emphasis of the chapter is Paul’s deep bond with the Thessalonian believers.

Finding the Way Home: Part 1

Verusca's brothers had become Seventh-day Adventists and often talked about their new faith. Verusca knew that what her brothers told her was probably true, but she wanted no part of a church that didn't allow dancing or drinking or other things that she enjoyed. But her brothers wouldn't take a hint; they kept talking to her about their faith.

Marques, one of her brothers' friends, often visited the family's home. He talked about God, too, and invited Verusca to study the Bible with him. Verusca wasn't interested in studying the Bible, but Marques kept asking. Eventually Verusca agreed to study the Bible with him. She noticed that Marques was passionate about God. Verusca discovered that she enjoyed hearing about God.

After several months of studying together, Marques asked Verusca to attend evangelistic meetings with him. Verusca declined. Marques invited her again and again, and still she refused. But finally she decided to go.

Verusca attended several of the meetings, but she resisted the calls to surrender her life to God. Then Verusca realized that she couldn't run from God. She thought of how angry her mother had been when her brothers had become Seventh-day Adventists. What would happen when Mother learned that she, too, was thinking of becoming a Seventh-day Adventist?

Early on Sabbath morning Verusca awoke and dressed, hoping to slip out of the house before her mother saw her and asked questions. But her mother saw her.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm going to church," Verusca said, unwilling to lie.

"Which church?" her mother asked.

"The Seventh-day Adventist church," Verusca answered.

"If you go, don't come back!" her mother said angrily. Verusca's courage failed, and she changed clothes and sat outside and cried. Her brother saw her and said softly, "Mom can't save you; only God can." Then he left.

Verusca's mind was in turmoil. She recalled Bible texts Marques had read to her about leaving family to follow God. Her brother's words, *only God can save you*, ran through her mind.

Verusca ran to her room and dressed for church. As she walked out the door, her mother said, "Take your things, and don't come back."

"Now what?" Verusca asked herself. She had no money and no place to go if her mother turned her away. Her father wasn't interested in religion and didn't care what she did.

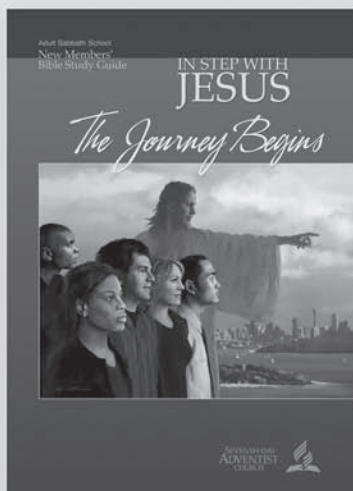
(Continued next week)

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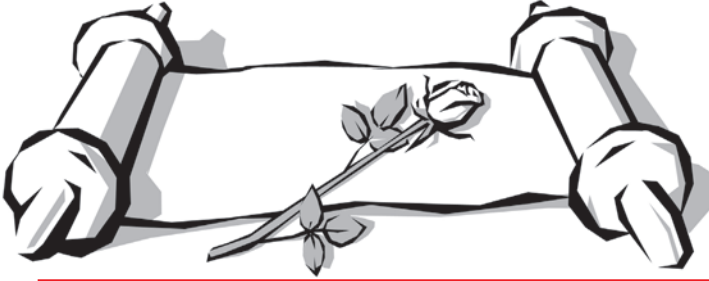
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Living Holy Lives (1 Thess. 4:1–12)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 4:1–12; Matt. 25:34–46; Gen. 39:9; John 13:34, 35.*

Memory Text: “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life” (*1 Thessalonians 4:7, NIV*).

Key Thought: Though human sexuality is a gift from God, as with all gifts, it can be abused.

The three opening chapters of 1 Thessalonians focus primarily on the past. In chapters 4 and 5, however, Paul turns to the future. There were things that were lacking in the faith of the Thessalonian believers (*1 Thess. 3:10*), and he wants to help them remedy these deficits. The letter begins the process, but more can be done only after Paul and the Thessalonians can get together again.

Beginning with 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul builds on the friendship he had affirmed in the first three chapters and offers practical advice for the Thessalonians' everyday life.

The main area of concern (but not the only one) in the verses for this week deals with sexual misconduct. Though we're not told what specifically prompted his admonition, Paul speaks very clearly about the need to avoid sexual immorality. He's very strong in his language here, saying that those who reject his instruction are, in fact, not rejecting him but the Lord. All one has to do, though, is look at the suffering that sexual misconduct has caused in so many lives to understand why the Lord would speak so strongly through Paul on this topic.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 18.*

Abounding More and More (1 Thess. 4:1, 2)

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 and 4:1–18. How does the content of chapter 4 expand on various parts of the prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13? What is the relationship between Paul’s prayer and his inspired words to the Thessalonians?

Paul’s prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 contains a number of key words that anticipate the content of 1 Thessalonians 4:1–18. The prayer is about “abounding” in “holiness” and mutual “love” in light of the second coming of Jesus. All these themes point to specific passages in chapter 4.

In our text for today (*1 Thess. 4:1, 2*) Paul picks up on the language of “abounding” in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, although the connection is masked by most modern translations. Modern translations have the commendable goal of making things more understandable in today’s language, but they may inadvertently hide connections that are explicit in the original. In the King James Version, the parallel between 1 Thessalonians 3:12 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1 is explicit; Paul invites the Thessalonians in both places to “abound more and more” in their love for each other and for everyone.

Paul began the work of building their Christian framework while he was with them, but now he is impressed by the Holy Spirit to fill in the gaps (*1 Thess. 3:10*) and clarify their understanding. The result would be “more and more” of what they were already attempting to do, which is to live worthy of their calling.

Paul begins chapter 4 with, “Finally, then” (*NKJV*). In chapters 4 and 5 he is building on the previous chapters, in which his friendship with the Thessalonians is the basis for the practical counsel he will now give. They had made a good start. Now he wants them to continue growing in the truths that they had learned from him.

Two mentions of Jesus in this passage (*1 Thess. 4:1, 15*) are particularly interesting. They indicate that Paul was passing on the teaching of Jesus’ own words (which were later preserved in the four Gospels). Paul was offering more than just good advice. Jesus Himself commanded the behaviors that Paul was encouraging. Paul, as Christ’s servant, was sharing the truths He had learned from Christ.

Read again 1 Thessalonians 4:1. What does it mean to walk in a way that will “please God”? Does the Creator of the universe really care about how we behave? How can our actions actually “please God”? What are the implications of your answer?

God's Will: Holiness (1 Thess. 4:3)

First Thessalonians 4:3–8 forms a complete unit of thought. The will of God for each Thessalonian believer is “holiness” or “sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3, 4, 7, *ESV*). What Paul means by holiness here is explained by the two following clauses. Each believer is expected to “avoid sexual immorality” and to “control his own body” (1 Thess. 4:3, 4, *NIV*). Paul concludes the unit of thought with three motivations to holy living (1 Thess. 4:6–8): (1) God is an avenger in these matters, (2) He has called us to holiness, and (3) He gives us the Spirit to help us. In today’s lesson and the next two, we will be looking at this passage in more detail.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3 and 7. How are the two verses linked? What is the basic message of both, and how is that message relevant for us today?

Verse 3 builds on verse 1, where Paul reminded the Thessalonians of how they were to “walk” (*NKJV*)—“live” in many translations—a Hebrew concept used to describe daily moral and ethical behavior. In verse 3 he uses another Hebrew concept to describe spiritual life and growth, “holiness” or “sanctification.”

A typical definition of *holiness* is “set apart for sacred use.” But Paul gives the term more specific meaning in this letter. Holiness is the condition the Thessalonians will be in at the return of Jesus (1 Thess. 3:13). But in chapter 4 Paul chooses a form of the concept that emphasizes process rather than outcome. It is a noun of action: “sanctifying” more than “sanctification.” It is the will of God that we be engaged in this process (1 Thess. 4:3).

Paul clearly does not endorse a law-free gospel. There are behavioral requirements for those who are in Christ. In verse 7, the opposite of “holiness” is “uncleanness” (*NKJV*) or “impurity” (*ESV*). As Paul goes on to explain in verse 3, “you should avoid sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3, *NIV*). The word for “sexual immorality” is *porneia* in the Greek, which would today cover everything from pornography to prostitution, to any sexual activity outside of marriage.

While salvation is by God’s grace through faith, the Christian life is to be a growing life, constantly striving for the perfection that has been promised us in Christ.

The gift of sexuality is powerful evidence of God’s love for us. Yet, this gift has been so abused that, for many, it has become a curse, a cause of great suffering and sorrow. What choices can we make that will help to protect us from the potential damage that abuse of this gift can bring?

Not Like the Gentiles (1 Thess. 4:4, 5)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5. What message do you find in these verses? What do they say to you, personally?

Although the moral philosophers discussed in lesson 3 attacked many forms of sexual excess, Gentile society as a whole had little or no sexual restraint in Paul's day. According to the well-known pagan orator Cicero, "If there is anyone who thinks that youth should be forbidden affairs even with courtesans, he is doubtless eminently austere . . . but his view is contrary not only to the licence of this age but also to the customs and concessions of our ancestors. For when was this not a common practice? When was it blamed? When was it forbidden?"—Quoted in Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 235, 236.

In today's world many find sexual restraint of any kind distasteful. They feel that passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5 were relevant mainly in some other time and place. But the ancient world was no more sexually restrained than our world is today. Paul's message would have been no more acceptable in the wider society then than it is now.

Paul's solution to the problem of sexual excess is that every man should "possess his vessel" (1 Thess. 4:4). The word translated as "possess" normally means "acquire" in the Greek. The meaning of "acquire his vessel" is unclear. If by "vessel" Paul means "woman" (it was a common ancient expression for woman; see 1 Pet. 3:7), he is saying that every man should seek honorable marriage in order to avoid sexual promiscuity.

But most modern translations understand that the word *vessel* refers to the man's own body. In that case the phrase "possess his vessel" should be interpreted as "control his own body" (NIV).

In either case, Paul clearly confronts the moral laxness of his own age. Christians are not to behave as the "Gentiles" do. The norm of the wider society is not to be the norm for us. Sex is holy, set apart for marriage between a man and a woman. As Paul goes on to point out in 1 Thessalonians 4:6, sex can never be a casual matter. When indulged in outside of the norms established by God, it is inevitably destructive. Who hasn't seen in the lives of others, or in their own lives, just how destructive this gift can be when abused?

According to God's Design (1 Thess. 4:6–8)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:6–8. What is Paul saying about sexual immorality?

A man who had been sexually active outside of marriage said to a pastor: “As a young man, I learned to see sex and love as one and the same thing. When I got married, however, I discovered that premarital sex destroys not only your body (I got a venereal disease) but also your mind. Although we are now Christians, my wife and I have had to struggle with the mental and emotional behaviors I brought into our marriage from the past.”

The Bible’s restrictions are not there because God wants to prevent us from enjoying ourselves. Rather, the restrictions protect us from the physical and emotional damage that occurs as a result of sexual immorality. We restrain ourselves sexually because we care about the impact of our lives on others. Every person is a soul for whom Christ died; he or she is not to be sexually exploited, in any way. To do so is to sin not only against that person but to sin against God, as well (*see Gen. 39:9*). Sex is not only about how we treat others but how we treat Christ in the person of others (*see also Matt. 25:34–46*).

Sex, ultimately, bears upon our relationship with God. It is the Gentiles who do not know God who live lives of passionate lust (*1 Thess. 4:5*). It is ignorance of God that produces immoral behavior. Those who ignore the Bible’s teachings on this subject reject not only those teachings, but they also reject the call of God and even God Himself (*1 Thess. 4:8*).

On the other hand, when we follow God’s design, sex becomes a beautiful illustration of the self-sacrificing love that God poured out on us in Christ (*see also John 13:34, 35*). It is a gift of God and, enjoyed according to God’s will for us, it can powerfully reveal the kind of love that God has for humanity and the kind of closeness that He wants with His people.

We are told in 1 Thessalonians 4:7 to live a “holy life.” What is your understanding of what this means? Is this text talking about more than just sexual conduct? If so, what else might it include?

Mind Your Own Business (1 Thess. 4:9–12)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12 and 3:11–13. What aspects of the earlier passage does Paul reaffirm in today’s text?

The Greeks had a number of words for “love,” two of which are found in the New Testament. *Eros* (not found in the New Testament) is the Greek word from which we get the word *erotic*. It refers to the sexual side of love. *Agape*, though, is the form most used in the New Testament, as it refers to the self-sacrificing side of love. It is often used in relation to Christ’s love for us as manifested at the Cross.

Another Greek word for love, *philos*, is highlighted in our passage for today. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what they already know about “brotherly love.” The Greek word behind brotherly love is the word from which the city of Philadelphia gets its name. In the Gentile world *philadelphias* referred to love for blood relations. But the church extended this meaning to include love for fellow believers, the Christian family of choice. This kind of familial love is taught by God and is a miracle of God’s grace whenever it happens.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12. In your own words, describe Paul’s admonition to the Thessalonians regarding business and employment in the urban context.

The Thessalonian church seemed to have a number of lazy and disruptive individuals. Enthusiasm for the second coming of Jesus may have led some members to quit their jobs and become dependent on Gentile neighbors. But being ready at all times to witness does not mean being disruptive, nosy, or lazy on the job or in the neighborhood. For some outsiders, the closest they will ever come to the church is the impression they take away from the behavior of known Christians in their everyday lives.

Paul’s solution to the Thessalonian problem was to encourage them to be ambitious (“aspire”), not for power or influence but to live a “quiet life” (4:11) that would involve minding one’s own business and working with one’s hands. In the ancient world, manual labor was the primary means of self-support. In today’s world Paul would probably say, “Support yourself and your family and save a little extra to help those in legitimate need.”

How could we apply Paul’s words in these verses to our own lives, our own immediate context?

Further Study: “Love is a pure and holy principle, but lustful passion will not admit of restraint and will not be dictated to or controlled by reason. It is blind to consequences; it will not reason from cause to effect.”—Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 1, p. 222.

“[Love] is pure and holy. But the passion of the natural heart is another thing altogether. While pure love will take God into all its plans, and will be in perfect harmony with the Spirit of God, passion will be headstrong, rash, unreasonable, defiant of all restraint, and will make the object of its choice an idol. In all the department of one who possesses true love, the grace of God will be shown.”—Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 25, 1888.

“Those who would not fall a prey to Satan’s devices, must guard well the avenues of the soul; they must avoid reading, seeing, or hearing that which will suggest impure thoughts. The mind must not be left to dwell at random upon every subject that the enemy of souls may suggest. The heart must be faithfully sentineled, or evils without will awaken evils within, and the soul will wander in darkness.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 518.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 518 (see today’s Further Study), Ellen White talks about guarding “the avenues of the soul.” What are some practical ways that believers can do this? What implications does this principle have for our choices in entertainment and education?
- 2 In 1 Thessalonians Paul frequently uses the phrase “more and more” to describe growth in character and Christian behavior. What can churches do to encourage this kind of “more and more”?
- 3 If a young person asked you to give at least two practical reasons why he or she should “wait until marriage” before sex, what would you say, and why?

Summary: In the first 12 verses of chapter 4, Paul tackles a couple of the most difficult problems found in most churches, particularly urban churches. Sexuality is a very private matter; yet, there is abundant peril to the church when sexual immorality is not confronted. Equally important is the kind of church the world sees in the neighborhood and workplace. Paul’s guidelines in these matters are as important today as they were in his time.

Finding the Way Home: Part 2

“Take your things, and don’t come back,” Mother said as Verusca opened the door. Verusca paused and then said softly, “I’ll collect my things when I return from church.” She hurried toward the church, crying.

As Verusca entered the church, a woman was telling the mission story of a girl who faced trials similar to Verusca’s. Tears ran down her cheeks as Verusca listened to how God had prepared a safe haven for the girl who had dared to follow Jesus.

After church, Verusca stood near a wall wondering what to do next. Marques approached and saw her tears. She told him what her mother had said, and he offered to take her to his home. But Verusca declined. She didn’t know Marques’s family. The two walked toward town together. They found a bench and sat down to talk. Marques prayed for her and then read her some promises from his Bible.

Time flew, and as sunset approached, Marques said he had to return to church for vespers. Verusca walked home alone. Her mother wasn’t home when she entered the house, but she found a note on the table. Trembling, she read it. “Please don’t leave. Love, Mom.” Verusca smiled and hurried toward the church. God had provided a way for her!

But as she returned home after dark, fear once again enveloped her. She prayed for peace and entered the house. Mother welcomed Verusca with a look of relief. Verusca realized that her family had been worried about her.

No one mentioned religion that week, but Verusca knew her mother wasn’t happy with the direction she had chosen. In time her mother calmed down, and Verusca continued attending church.

Then one Sabbath morning Mother told Verusca, “Hurry or you’ll be late for Sabbath School.” Verusca smiled; her mother no longer opposed her decision to become a Seventh-day Adventist.

Verusca shares her faith with her mother, just as her brothers had shared theirs with her. Verusca has learned that her mother listens to some Seventh-day Adventist programs on the radio, and Verusca prays that God’s words will sink deeply into her mother’s heart and find fertile ground there to grow into faith. She prays that her father will find faith in God as well.

Angola is home to more than 350,000 Seventh-day Adventist believers. Our mission offerings help spread the gospel to the millions in Angola who have not yet heard the Seventh-day Adventist message.

VERUSCA DE PAIVA shares her faith in Lubongo, Angola.

The Dead in Christ (1 Thess. 4:13–18)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 4:13–18; Acts 17:3; 1 Cor. 15:20–23, 51–58; John 5:28, 29; Rev. 20:4–6.*

Memory Text: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (*1 Thessalonians 4:16*).

Key Thought: Paul gives the Thessalonians (and us) a powerful hope for the future, the promise of the second coming of Christ.

In the passage for this week (*1 Thess. 4:13–18*) Paul is reacting to a theological misunderstanding among the Thessalonians. Though we are not entirely clear as to what the error was, some members were definitely in distress regarding the fate of believers who died before Jesus' return. The issue seems to have been about the difference between those who died before that return and those who would be alive when it happens.

This week we will explore what we know about the situation that led Paul to write *1 Thessalonians 4:13–18*. In this passage Paul not only corrects first-century misunderstandings, but he provides solid ground on which twenty-first century Christians can stand. “‘For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets’” (*Amos 3:7, ESV*). It is through the prophetic ministry of the apostle Paul that the Lord has revealed to us wonderful truths regarding the nature of the Second Coming. As we study these verses, prayerfully dwell on the incredible hope that's contained in them for us.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 25.*

The Situation in Thessalonica

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. List the clues in this passage that point to the false beliefs in the Thessalonian church that brought unnecessary grief to those who held them.

Within the Judaism of Paul’s day, a variety of views regarding the end time were prevalent. One of these viewpoints, in some form, crept into the Thessalonian church. Though we’re not certain exactly what it was, it seems to have been the idea that though all of God’s faithful would share in the “world to come,” only those who were alive at the end would be carried up into heaven. Those who died before the end would be resurrected and remain on earth.

In such a belief system, it would be a serious disadvantage to die before the end came. But it would also mean a separation between those taken to heaven and those left on earth. If the Thessalonians Paul was writing to lived until the end, they would truly ascend to heaven at the second coming of Jesus, but they would have to leave their deceased loved ones behind on earth (*see 1 Thess. 4:13, 14*).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Paul begins 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 with a comment about the church’s ignorance, rather than with “you know very well,” which appears elsewhere (*1 Thess. 5:2, NIV; see also 4:2*). Regarding the prophecy about the Second Coming, there were important things the church didn’t know and other things they would need to unlearn.

As we think about prophecy, we must remember that it is not given to satisfy our curiosity about the timing and details of end-time events. Prophecy has an ethical and moral purpose. God designed it to teach us how to live. It is intended to provide encouragement and purpose, especially in the midst of suffering and loss. Rightly understood, the prophecies of the Bible have life-changing power. In other words, while it’s important to believe like an Adventist (which means believing in Bible prophecy), it’s even more important to live like one.

What does it mean to “live like a Seventh-day Adventist”? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Hopeless Grief (1 Thess. 4:13)

According to 1 Thessalonians 4:13, what was Paul’s purpose for writing verses 13–18? Why should this text mean so much for us today?

Why were the Thessalonian believers grieving as if they had no hope? A major factor was probably the short period that Paul was with them. We know that Paul talked about the death and resurrection of Jesus (*Acts 17:3*). There is also evidence that he talked about final events, even if his instruction was misunderstood. But he may not have had time to clarify issues related to the resurrection of believers.

A further element is the pagan background of most of the believers to whom Paul is writing (*1 Thess. 1:9*). Though the mystery religions of the time offered a picture of the afterlife, most pagans had no hope of life after death. A poignant example of this is found in a second-century letter: “Irene to Taonnophris and Philo good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things, whatsoever were fitting, I have done, and all mine, Epaphroditus and Thermuthion and Philion and Apollonius and Plantas. But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort ye one another. Fare ye well.”—Quoted in Adolf Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. 176.

It is ironic that this letter to a mother who has lost her son ends with the same words as 1 Thessalonians 4:18, even if they have a radically different twist. *Comfort one another, even though there is no hope.* That is what she was saying. What a contrast this is to that which Paul expresses to the Thessalonians.

Paul’s purpose for the passage is outlined in contrasting phrases at the beginning and the end. Paul writes in order that they might not grieve as those do who have no hope (*1 Thess. 4:13*). And he intends that the truth about the nature of the Second Coming will give them glorious reasons to comfort each other in times of loss (*1 Thess. 4:18*).

Someone once said, “In the long run, we’re all dead anyway.” From a totally human perspective, that’s right. From a biblical perspective, however, that view is very shortsighted. In the long run, what is the great hope we have in Jesus, and how can we learn to take comfort in that hope right now?

Dying and Rising (1 Thess. 4:14)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:14. What hope does Paul offer regarding those who have died?

In verse 14 Paul offers the solution to the problem of hopeless grief. In the original language he describes the believers who have died as having “fallen asleep through Jesus.” While falling asleep is a common metaphor for death in New Testament times, the normal expression for a believer’s death is “fallen asleep in Jesus” or “in Christ.” A good example of this is the “dead in Christ” of verse 16.

A second issue with the text is the idea that God will “bring with him” those who have fallen asleep. Some read this phrase as meaning that those who have died in Christ (and, they presumed, went to heaven at death) will return with Jesus when He comes. But this interpretation contradicts Paul’s own teaching in verse 16, that the resurrection of dead believers occurs at the Second Coming, not before.

How do 1 Corinthians 15:20–23, 51–58 help us to understand the point in 1 Thessalonians 4:14?

We can know what he’s saying if we pay careful attention to Paul’s main point. He is drawing a parallel between the death and resurrection of Jesus and the death and resurrection of the believer. For Paul, the recent resurrection of Jesus from death is the guarantee that all believers would also be resurrected at the Second Coming (*see also 1 Cor. 15:20–23*). Paul’s theology is consistent. “If we believe” (*1 Thess. 4:14*) in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we should also believe in the resurrection of those who have died as true followers of Jesus.

So, Paul is using “through Jesus” in the same way as “in Christ” is used in verse 16. The point he is making to the Thessalonians is that their dead brothers and sisters will not remain on earth when the living believers ascend to heaven. All will ascend to heaven together (*see also John 14:1–3*). God does not “bring” the resurrected Christians down to earth when Jesus comes; instead (as He did with Jesus), He “brings” them up from the grave and, together with the living ones, to heaven. Just as the resurrection of Jesus preceded His ascension to heaven, so it will be with His faithful followers.

Rising in Christ (1 Thess. 4:15, 16)

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, Paul builds on the earthly teachings of Jesus. There are more than a dozen parallels between these end-time passages and the sayings of Jesus recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But when Paul talks about the “word of the Lord” in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 (*NKJV*), he is referring to a saying of Jesus that did not make it into the four Gospels, but that Paul preserves for us (a clear example of this same thing is seen in Acts 20:35).

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 16. According to Paul, what happens when Christ returns? See also Rev. 1:7; Matt. 24:31; John 5:28, 29; Acts 1:9–11.

The second coming of Jesus is a noisy event. It is accompanied by a commanding shout from an archangel and the trumpet of God. Everyone will hear it and see it (*see Rev. 1:7; Matt. 24:31; John 5:28, 29; Acts 1:9–11*).

But the key point for Paul here is the order of events when Jesus comes. The Thessalonians had come to believe that dying before the return of Jesus would involve some sort of disadvantage in eternity, probably eternal physical separation from those who lived until Jesus’ return.

In this text Paul assures the Thessalonians that the living believers do not “precede,” or have any advantage over, the dead. The dead in Christ are the ones who rise first (*see Rev. 20:4–6*). Then the living ascend to meet Jesus in the air (*1 Thess. 4:17*). The righteous dead are resurrected and given immortality along with those who are alive when He returns.

This passage does not teach that believers go to heaven when they die. If Paul had taught the Thessalonian believers that their dead loved ones were in heaven, why would they be grieving, and why didn’t he just tell them so? Instead, the comfort Paul offers here is the knowledge that the resurrection will reunite them with those they have loved.

Think about all that happens at the second coming of Christ: Jesus comes in the sky, everyone sees Him, the dead are brought to life, the living are given immortality, and all are taken together to heaven. In one sense, it’s so outrageous, so against all that common sense, experience, and even science teach us. Yet, this is what we have to believe; otherwise, we have no hope. If you can trust the Lord in something like this, how can you not trust Him with whatever “smaller” things you are struggling?

Comfort One Another (1 Thess. 4:13, 17, 18)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 17, 18. What is the ultimate purpose of this passage about the second coming of Jesus?

As we said earlier, the purpose of prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to teach us how to live today. For Paul, the order of final events has practical implications for everyday Christian living. Prophecy is valuable to the degree that it impacts the way we relate to God and to each other. In this case, Paul wanted to use last-day events to bring comfort to those who had lost loved ones.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17. What important aspects of the Bible’s teaching about the Second Coming are not covered in these texts? See *John 14:1–3*, *Matt. 24:31*, *Acts 1:9–11*.

This text says that believers join Jesus in the air to be with Him forever. The key theme is the act of reuniting with each other and being together with Jesus. The text is silent regarding where they go after the initial encounter in the air. Paul himself clearly does not say that the believers will descend from heaven to earth with Jesus and reign there at the Second Coming. In fact, within the passage itself, the movement of the saints is only upward. The dead believers first rise up from their graves. Then they and the living believers ascend together to meet their Lord in the air.

Paul provides further information in 1 Corinthians 15:23, 24. There he draws a strong parallel between the experience of Jesus and of those “in Christ.” Jesus arose and ascended to heaven as a “first fruit,” which implies that those who are in Him will have a similar experience.

The immediate destination of the saints is clarified outside of Paul, in *John 14:1–3*. When Jesus comes, He will take His disciples to be where He is (in heaven). He does not come to join them where they are (on earth). This is why Adventists believe that during the thousand years after Jesus’ return (*Rev. 20:4–6*), the righteous will be with Him in heaven, the wicked will be dead, and Satan will be confined to earth with no one to tempt or annoy. Only after all the events associated with the millennium do the faithful come back to the earth to dwell (*2 Pet. 3:13*, *Rev. 3:12*).

Look at how “otherworldly” our ultimate hope is. How, though, could it be otherwise? After all, what real, long-term hope does this world offer us? How can we learn, then, not to get so caught up in that which offers us no hope anyway?

Further Study: “Many interpret this passage [1 Thess. 4:14] to mean that the sleeping ones will be brought with Christ from heaven; but Paul meant that as Christ was raised from the dead, so God will call the sleeping saints from their graves and take them with Him to heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 259.

“The Thessalonians had eagerly grasped the idea that Christ was coming to change the faithful who were alive, and to take them to Himself. They had carefully guarded the lives of their friends, lest they should die and lose the blessing which they looked forward to receiving at the coming of their Lord. But one after another their loved ones had been taken from them, and with anguish the Thessalonians had looked for the last time upon the faces of their dead, hardly daring to hope to meet them in a future life.

“As Paul’s epistle was opened and read, great joy and consolation was brought to the church by the words revealing the true state of the dead. Paul showed that those living when Christ should come would not go to meet their Lord in advance of those who had fallen asleep in Jesus.”—Page 258.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss what it means to “live like an Adventist.” What is it about some of our distinctive beliefs that should be reflected in a distinctive lifestyle?
- 2 Think through the fall of humanity, the plan of salvation, and the promise of eternal life. What did Jesus do that gives us the hope, and promise, that death will not be forever? What reasons do we have for trusting in what He has done for us? How does the resurrection of Jesus Himself offer us great hope that we will be resurrected as well if we die before He returns? How can we draw comfort from the plan of salvation, especially when death seems so final, so complete, and so unforgiving?
- 3 Read aloud the passage for this week together as a class and then talk about what it means, how it makes you feel, and the hope and promise found in it.

Summary: In this week’s passage, Paul corrects a number of misunderstandings about the state of the dead and the events surrounding the second coming of Jesus. When Jesus returns, the dead in Christ rise first, and then all believers ascend together to meet Jesus in the air. Believers can take great comfort in knowing that the separation from believing loved ones is only temporary.

Faith and the Pigs

“You are going to do *what?*” demanded Mitalyn’s husband.

“I’m going to become a Seventh-day Adventist,” she said as firmly as she could. Mitalyn knew that her husband, her neighbors, and almost everyone she knew would object to her decision. But she couldn’t wait any longer.

Mitalyn had grown up believing that Seventh-day Adventists were bad people who held false beliefs. Then her sister married a Seventh-day Adventist man. Mitalyn wondered who Seventh-day Adventists really were. So when her sister invited her to attend the evangelistic meetings, she agreed to go.

She heard only the final message of the series, but that message convinced her that this was the truth. She tried to get the message out of her mind, but she couldn’t stop thinking about it. Mitalyn couldn’t read, so she couldn’t prove or disprove what the pastor had said. But she sensed that the Holy Spirit was speaking to her.

The conviction was so strong that finally she gave in. When she told her husband that she wanted to become a Seventh-day Adventist, he was furious. He raised pigs, and it was Mitalyn’s job to feed them. He refused to allow her to attend the church on Sabbath, so she slipped away to attend midweek prayer meetings instead.

Then one day as she and her husband were talking about her desire to keep the Sabbath, Mitalyn saw a bright light and the words, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” Although she had never learned to read, she knew what these words meant. “Enough,” she said. “I *will* become a Seventh-day Adventist.”

Mitalyn faced opposition from her family and her friends. Often she prayed, “Show me the way.”

Then one day several of her husband’s pigs escaped from the pen and were killed by dogs. The pigs that didn’t escape began dying in the pen. “God,” she prayed, “if You are behind this, save one pig from death.” Just one pig survived. When her husband learned what had happened to his pigs, he not only agreed to let Mitalyn worship on Sabbath; he began attending church with her.

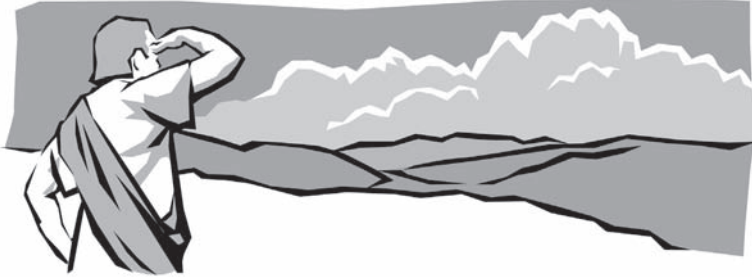
Mitalyn and 8 of her 10 children have become Seventh-day Adventists. Her husband continues attending church with the family. Mitalyn has shared her faith in her home village, and several people, including a Protestant pastor, have become Seventh-day Adventists.

Our mission offerings help reach people in every corner of the earth with the message of Christ’s salvation. Thank you for sharing so that others can hear.

MITALYN CHURA *shares her faith on the island of Guadalcanal, one of the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific.*

Final Events

(1 Thess. 5:1–11)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 5:1–11, Gen. 3:15–24, Isa. 13:6–9, Luke 21:34–36, Rom. 1:18.*

Memory Text: “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” (*1 Thessalonians 5:8, ESV*).

Key Thought: The reality of Christ's return calls us to continual readiness.

In this week's passage, the Second Coming is still the primary theme, but the focus shifts. Here Paul is not so much clarifying details about Jesus' return as he is proclaiming the need for constant readiness in light of that return (and the judgment that it entails). The previous passage was encouraging; when the end comes, the outcome will be much more positive than the Thessalonians were expecting. Now that they understand better the nature of His return, the question is how to prepare for it.

The issue in the church then seems to have been a theology of “peace and security” combined, perhaps, with some members calculating the time of the Second Advent. Through prophecy, the Thessalonians hoped to be able to predict when the final events were coming and, thereby, know when to get ready. As a result, some could have been living without any sense of urgency.

Who among us today can't relate? The longer we are here, the easier it is to lose that sense of urgency. Hence our need to heed Paul's words here.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 1.*

The Two Sides of Judgment

Read Genesis 3:15–24. List the various ways in which God judged Adam and Eve both positively and negatively in this passage.

Though the specific word *judgment* does not occur in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, the passage is very much concerned with it. Paul wants the believers in Thessalonica to be aware that God’s judgment is not limited to something that happens in heaven at the end of time but that it has real consequences for their everyday lives.

Many people today are uncomfortable with the theme of judgment. They don’t like the implication of negativity and threat. But the biblical concept of judgment is broader than just threat, condemnation, and execution. There is also a positive side to judgment. Simple everyday actions of mercy and kindness do not go unnoticed or unrewarded (see *Matt. 10:42, for example*). God sees everything we do, whether positive or negative, and it all has meaning in the ultimate scheme of things.

The two-sided nature of judgment is evident in the earliest narratives of the Bible. In the Garden of Eden, God judges the sin of Adam and Eve negatively. There are consequences of sin in relation to childbirth, farming, and where they are allowed to live. At the same time, God judges them positively. He creates enmity between them and Satan and mercifully clothes them with skins so they will not suffer unduly in the changing environment. Even more important, those skins symbolize the righteousness of Christ that will cover their sin, as well.

In Genesis 4, God judges Cain negatively by sending him into exile. But Cain also receives a positive judgment. God places a mark on him so that no one will kill him. At the time of the Flood, God judges the human race negatively by way of the destruction of the Flood but also positively by providing the ark as a way of escape (*Gen. 6–9:17*).

In Genesis 11 God mixes up the languages and scatters the human race all over the earth (negative). Where is the positive judgment? It is found in Abraham’s call to be a blessing to “all peoples on earth” (*Gen. 12:3, NIV*), the same people who were scattered at Babel years before (*Gen. 11:9*).

How does the truth of Christ as our substitute in judgment make that judgment positive for us? Why must we always keep that important truth in mind when we think about judgment?

Sudden and Unexpected (1 Thess. 5:1–3)

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1–3 and Acts 1:6, 7. What is the meaning of “the times and the seasons” (*NKJV*) in these texts?

“The day of the LORD” is a phrase found frequently in Old Testament judgment passages. It describes a decisive “end time” intervention by God, with a strong emphasis on the negative consequences of disobedience (*Isa. 13:6–9, Jer. 46:10, Ezek. 30:2–12*). In our passage for today, Paul combines this earlier concept with the thief analogy, which Jesus introduced (*Matt. 24:43, Luke 12:39*).

The threefold combination of the day of the Lord, a thief in the night, and contractions just before birth all illustrate the same point: the second coming of Jesus will be sudden, unexpected, and inescapable for the wicked. The end time is not the time to prepare for the end. The time for preparation is now.

Verse 4 makes it clear, however, that Paul is not scolding the Thessalonians. They already know that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. It is others, those who cry “peace and safety,” who will be surprised by the coming destruction.

In Acts 1:6, 7 the disciples of Jesus are asking Him about the timing of the final events of earth’s history. But Jesus does not satisfy their curiosity about these things. The timing of the end is not for them to know. We can see that the phrase “times or seasons” (*NKJV*) concerns attempts to calculate the timing of the end. Such attempts attract attention, but they are spiritually counterproductive. They cause either disappointment when the calculated time passes or delay in preparation when the anticipated time is too far ahead.

What parallels exist between Luke 21:34–36 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11?

According to Luke 21:34, many people, through such things as alcohol and entertainment, try to escape from spiritual responsibility. Others may be concerned about spiritual preparation for the end but are distracted by the cares and anxieties of life. The suddenness of the end, however, means that the time is coming when there will be no escape for the distracted or the complacent. In the verses that follow Christ’s words in Luke 21:34–36, there is escape for those who watch.

How do we live with the sense of urgency, with the awareness of the nearness of Christ’s coming, and yet not get into fanaticism or extremism? How do we strike a right balance? Bring your answer to class.

The Believer's Advantage (1 Thess. 5:4, 5)

In the opening verses of the fifth chapter, Paul addresses the condition of those who, for whatever reason, are not prepared. The Thessalonians already know that the reality of the Second Coming is certain; only the timing is unknown. The surprise will be tragic for those who are not ready. Some are unprepared because they don't believe in the Second Coming; others because they think they can delay their preparation until events convince them that the end is near.

In the late 1950s, a young man heard a preacher say that Jesus was coming in 1964. Thus, the church better get ready. The young man decided that because it was still a number of years off, he wouldn't bother readying himself until about, well, 1962. In other words, the preacher's intention to increase the sense of urgency had the opposite effect on the young man. Such delay is perilous, of course, because you don't know if you will live through even today. The good news is that we don't need to know when Jesus is coming in order to be ready now.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:4, 5. What is the spiritual meaning of metaphors such as light and day, darkness and light? What aspects of your life could be described as light or as darkness? Think through the implications of your answer.

In these verses Paul begins a series of contrasts with day/night and darkness/light (a ruin/rescue contrast is implied in verse 3). He is showing that unbelievers will be surprised by the events of the end, but believers will not be surprised. Why? Because they live in the light. The Bible is a "lamp to [our] feet and a light to [our] path" (*Ps. 119:105, NKJV*). Prophecy is given so that we can have enough information in order to be spiritually prepared for whatever lies ahead.

Preparation for the Second Coming involves investing serious time in the Word of God. Preparation is the act of laying up treasure in heaven. Preparation is about a daily surrender to the Lord.

There are many distractions in today's world, from jobs to e-mail, entertainment, a cornucopia of drugs, and other mood enhancers. Paul's appeal comes down to us through the corridors of time. Set distractions aside. Put the Word of God first in your life, and you will not be overtaken by events, no matter how unexpected their timing may be.

Constant Watchfulness (1 Thess. 5:6–8)

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:6–8. How does the drunken/sober analogy help us to better understand preparation for the second coming of Jesus?

Paul begins verse 6 with “therefore” or “so then,” depending on the translation. He has established that true followers of Jesus are children of the light and of the day. In today’s passage he continues the metaphor in order to exhort them to be more and more ready for Jesus’ return. While verse 7 offers a bit of a digression, verses 6 and 8 encourage the Thessalonians to be awake, sober, and armed for the challenges ahead.

Paul begins with the contrast of asleep/awake. Because believers “belong to the day” (*ESI*), they should not sleep, as the night is for sleeping. Paul is writing metaphorically, of course. Sleep here is a metaphor for spiritual laziness or lack of interest (in verse 10 it is a metaphor for death). The expression “let us not sleep” in the original Greek means “don’t even start” sleeping. Paul assumes that the believers are already awake but encourages them to persevere in watchfulness more and more.

Paul then encourages them to be sober rather than drunk. In the ancient world soberness was a symbol for philosophical reasoning. Paul wants the Thessalonians to be thoughtful and careful in their reasoning from Scripture. Some use the Bible for date setting and speculation. Paul wants believers to be focused, instead, on the implications of Scripture for their own spiritual preparation. The sober/drunken metaphor may also point back to the kind of ethical restraint he has encouraged in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12.

The daytime is associated with being awake and sober. It is at night that people sleep and, usually, at night that they get drunk. But in verse 8 Paul switches to the imagery of a military guard. Guards need to be awake and sober at all times, day and night. So, soldiers need to exceed the norm when it comes to watchfulness. Paul likewise expects Christians to exceed the norm when it comes to preparation for the Second Coming. And like soldiers, Christians should put on all of their equipment before taking their posts.

Consider Paul’s words in these texts as if he were writing specifically and personally to you and you alone. How would you translate those words into action? That is, what about your life would need to change in order for you to be doing what he says?

Encourage One Another (1 Thess. 5:9–11)

As we have seen, in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 Paul has drawn a series of contrasts to illustrate the two sides of judgment that will happen when Jesus returns. In our passage for today (*1 Thess. 5:9–11*), Paul addresses the contrast between wrath and salvation. Believers can have confidence in the last days because in Christ there is assurance that they are children of the light.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:8–11. What is the essential message in these verses? What is the hope that Paul is talking about, and why can we claim it for ourselves? How is the gospel revealed in these texts?

Many today feel that the biblical concept of God’s wrath reflects more the culture of Bible times than the truth about God. That, however, is a misconception. It is true that, in the Bible, God has accommodated His truth to the limits of human language. But the concept of the wrath of God is not limited to the more ancient parts of the Bible; it is widespread in the New Testament as well, including from the lips of Jesus (*Luke 21:23*; see also *John 3:36*), the pen of Paul (*Rom. 1:18*, *1 Thess. 1:10*), and the visions of Revelation (*Rev. 6:16, 17*; *15:1*). So, we cannot safely ignore the concept; it must express something very important about God and the plan of salvation.

While we cannot go deeply into the matter here, we must be clear that the wrath of God is not an irrational, impulsive rage. God’s ways are not our ways (see *Isa. 55:8, 9*). The biblical concept of the wrath of God is more like a nation’s need for justice in relation to lawbreakers who abuse and oppress others. Those who persist in wickedness will be punished and destroyed. Because we have all broken the law of God, we would all be subject to the execution of justice were it not for the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

That is the good news about the wrath of God that shines through 1 Thessalonians 5:8–11. God’s purpose for us is not “wrath” or punitive justice but grace and salvation. And in Christ He has provided the protection we need so that we do not experience destruction in the judgment. This is why Paul thought that the wrath of God, rightly understood, was a reason for encouragement rather than fear (*1 Thess. 5:11*). In Christ, we never need to face God’s wrath because, on the cross, Jesus faced it for us.

Talk about good news!

Further Study: “There is need of watchfulness. Our own hearts are deceitful; we are compassed with the weaknesses and frailties of humanity, and Satan is intent to destroy. We may be off our guard, but our adversary is never idle. Knowing his tireless vigilance, let us not sleep, as do others, but ‘watch and be sober.’”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 409.

“Some seem to feel that they must be on probation and must prove to the Lord that they are reformed before they can claim His blessing. But . . . Jesus loves to have us come to Him just as we are—sinful, helpless, dependent. We claim to be children of the light, not of the night nor of darkness; what right have we to be unbelieving?”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 150.

“The mass of professed Christians . . . are living for the world. Their faith has but little restraining influence upon their pleasures; while they profess to be children of the light, they walk in darkness and are children of the night and of darkness.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 404.

“The world, who act as though there were no God, absorbed in selfish pursuits, will soon experience sudden destruction, and shall not escape. . . . Dancing and carousing, drinking and smoking, indulging their animal passions, they go as an ox to the slaughter.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 26.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, ask the question, *If Christ were to return tomorrow, would you be ready?* Discuss the answers and the reasons given for them.
- ❷ Go over your answers to the question at the end of Monday’s lesson. How do we keep a sense of urgency and at the same time function “normally” in society?
- ❸ To what degree has the Adventist focus on the end of time been a positive or negative influence in your life? How have your views on the end time changed over the years? Why is an understanding of the plan of salvation, and justification by faith alone, so crucial to a clear understanding of last-day events?

Summary: In 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, Paul calls for total commitment to readiness for the second coming of Jesus. When we accept the gospel, we become children of the light. As we live out the gospel in faith, hope, and love, we grow more and more into the image of Jesus. If we are ready to die in Christ today, we will be ready if Jesus comes today.

From Prisoner to Preacher

I was arrested and jailed for a murder I did not commit. I had been a lay pastor of a little church before I was imprisoned, and I was angry at this injustice. Then a group of Seventh-day Adventists visited the prison, and I heard their message of hope. But I found it difficult to accept the Sabbath. In the same prison was a Seventh-day Adventist man who also had been wrongfully accused of a crime. He encouraged me to follow God's commandments.

I challenged the Seventh-day Adventists to bring me another Bible in another version that clearly stated that the Sabbath is Saturday. Only then would I believe. They brought me a Catholic Bible, which names Saturday as the Sabbath. I thought a long time about the law and the Commandments. *If it's true that the law was done away with, then why am I in prison for a crime I didn't commit? If the law is done away with, then all the law should have been done away with.* It struck me like lightning! The law wasn't done away with at all, and therefore the Sabbath was still binding.

Convinced of this truth, I shared this message with other prisoners and began studying the Bible with others who wanted to know the truth. Some of these prisoners asked to be baptized even before I was. But I hesitated. I wanted to wait until I was freed to be baptized so I could profess my faith as a free man.

As I waited for my freedom, I had a troubling thought: *What will happen to me if I put off following God and I die?* I decided to follow God's calling and be baptized while I was still in prison.

I remained in prison long after I was supposed to be freed. But God used me to lead others to Christ inside the prison.

At last I was freed. I became a lay worker under a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. I gave Bible studies, and in five years I led more than 150 people to Christ. One congregation with 30 members worships under a mango tree for they have no other place to meet.

I harbor no ill feelings for those who wrongfully accused me of murder, for if I hadn't gone to prison I might not have found this wonderful Seventh-day Adventist faith.

Your mission offerings support full-time pastors and lay workers as they share God's love around the world. Thank you.



CONRADO ANDOY, 65, shares his faith in central Philippines.

Church Life (1 Thess. 5:12–28)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 5:12–28, Matt. 5:43–48, Gal. 5:22, Phil. 4:4, John 15:4–6.*

Memory Text: “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good” (*1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21, ESV*).

Key Thought: Paul gives these Thessalonians, both leaders and lay members, very practical, as well as spiritual, advice about how to relate to one another.

Paul concludes his first letter to the Thessalonians with seventeen admonitions (*1 Thess. 5:12–22*), followed by a closing prayer (*1 Thess. 5:23–27*). This week's lesson begins with three admonitions regarding the attitude of local church members toward their leaders (*1 Thess. 5:12, 13*). These admonitions are followed by six imperatives regarding how local church leaders should behave toward their people.

Eight brief admonitions follow in the next seven verses (*1 Thess. 5:16–22*). These can be organized into two groups; three counsels on maintaining a positive Christian attitude (*1 Thess. 5:16–18*) and five on how to relate to new light in the form of prophecies (*1 Thess. 5:19–22*).

In the concluding prayer Paul summarizes a main theme of this letter: that believers in Thessalonica and beyond would continue to grow in holiness until the Second Coming itself. In other words, they are to live every day in preparation for the Lord's return. In one sense, what could be more of a “present truth” message than that?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 8.*

Response to Ministry (1 Thess. 5:12, 13)

The two verses at the heart of today's lesson follow the concluding admonition of last week's lesson to "encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:11, NIV). This work takes place in local churches in the process of mentoring and discipleship. The lesson today focuses on how disciples should respond to the efforts of their leaders and mentors.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13. What is Paul's basic point, and how should we apply it to ourselves? In what ways can you better work with, support, and love those who are "over you in the Lord"?

The structure of the Greek of verse 12 indicates that the three phrases in the second half all refer to the same group, the local leaders of the Thessalonian church. Paul calls on the members to "know" these leaders, meaning to notice, respect, or recognize them. The implication being that, perhaps, some in the church were disrespectful of authority.

The word *admonish* has the connotation of instruct, warn, or even "knock sense into." Paul acknowledges here that church leaders will often need to exercise "tough love." This kind of leadership is not always welcome; yet, Paul goes on in verse 13 to ask the members to highly esteem their leaders on account of the difficult issues with which they have to deal. He wants all the members of the church to be at peace with one another.

The language of these verses reflects ancient strategies for dealing with people. Thought leaders of Paul's day knew that dealing with people is delicate work. They encouraged leaders to carefully diagnose the condition of their followers, to be sensitive as to whether or not the follower was open to correction, to choose the right timing, and to apply the appropriate remedy. Above all else, leaders were expected to examine themselves before trying to correct others. Paul added elements to this framework. For the Christian, God is the model of leadership, and the goal of church leadership is a membership who live lives worthy of God.

In some cultures, there is a tendency to distrust and challenge leadership; in others, to blindly submit to it. How has your own culture's attitude toward authority impacted the church in your area?

Providing Ministry (1 Thess. 5:14, 15)

In verses 12 and 13 Paul addresses ways in which members in the church should treat their leaders. In today's passage (*1 Thess. 5: 14, 15*), Paul turns his attention to the leaders of the church and how they should treat those under their care.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 15. In what ways does Paul admonish church leaders in regard to their treatment of members? Look at the principles there. How can we apply them to ourselves, whatever our role may be in the church? Meanwhile, how should we apply these principles at work, at home, at play, and wherever we find ourselves? See also *Matt. 5:43–48*.

Paul encouraged the leaders in Thessalonica to “warn those who are unruly” (*1 Thess. 5:14, NKJV*). The unruly were members who refused to support themselves, who were willfully difficult to deal with, and who had to be confronted.

In contrast, Paul instructs the leaders to “encourage the timid, help the weak,” and “be patient with everyone” (*1 Thess. 5:14, NIV*). The “timid” are people who have little self-confidence or sense of worth. They are anxious and worried about many things. Such people matter to God; so, leadership should encourage them.

The “weak” are those with moral and spiritual limitations. They are gullible, easily discouraged by hardship, and fearful of the unfamiliar. Their hearts might be in the right place, but they lack knowledge and are troubled by the past. They need help to survive.

Paul directs church leaders to be patient with everyone. While the first three counsels in verse 14 are finely tuned to meet various conditions, patience is always appropriate for pastoral care.

Paul probably continues to have leaders in mind in verse 15. Whenever caregivers are attacked by those who don't appreciate their admonitions, they may be tempted to retaliate. But when leaders retaliate, it demonstrates that their leadership was not motivated by the spirit of Christ. It is crucial to sound church leadership to keep the good of others in mind.

Verses 12–15 presume that there will be mentors and disciples in the church, and it is important that there be a lot of respect and patience in those relationships. But we should not forget 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (“encourage one another and build one another up,” *ESV*). Pastoral care will often go both ways. There are times when the mentors need to be mentored.

Positive Christian Attitudes (1 Thess. 5:16–18)

According to 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15, Christians need to learn how to accept and how to offer constructive criticism. That can happen only in the context of relationship. The bottom line is that every Christian needs to be accountable to others and needs to be willing to hold others accountable. A praying church will grow in admonition and encouragement.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18. What three things does Paul consider to be the will of God for every believer? Why is each one so important? *See also Gal. 5:22, Phil 4:4.*

Glenn Coon, a beloved Seventh-day Adventist preacher, loved to say that there are many more commands in the Bible to rejoice than there are to keep the Sabbath. Yet, we rarely give rejoicing the emphasis it deserves. Joy in life is a fruit of the Spirit (*Gal. 5:22; see also Phil. 4:4*). And spirit-filled joy is possible even in suffering (*1 Thess. 1:6*).

Paul certainly was a model of what it means to pray without ceasing. First Thessalonians is saturated in prayer, as we have seen. Here Paul invites readers of his letter to follow his example.

Thankfulness is another positive Christian attitude that Paul exhibits (*1 Thess. 1:2, 2 Thess. 1:3*). At the root of pagan depravity was a lack of gratitude to God (*Rom. 1:21*). According to Thomas Erskine, “In the New Testament, religion is grace and ethics is gratitude.”—Quoted in F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (UK: The Paternoster Press, 1977), p. 19. It is interesting to note, then, that the Greek words for “rejoice” and “be thankful” have the same basic root. The key to godly rejoicing is a continuing spirit of thankfulness to God.

Open your eyes. The gifts of God are all around us; we just forget to thank Him for them—often because we’re so focused on the trials and struggles of living. If we would cultivate an attitude of thankfulness to God more and more, our walk with Him would be much closer and our lives would be filled with joy.

Make a list of ten things for which you are thankful. Be very specific. Then, make each of these the center of a short prayer to God. Notice the changes that will come in your whole attitude and outlook. This practice can show you just how crucial thankfulness is in our experience with God.

Relating to “New Light” (1 Thess. 5:19–22)

“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:19–22, NKJV). What is Paul saying to us here? How can these words be applied in our experience? What “form of evil” must you, in your own situation, work extra hard to avoid?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15 Paul was admonishing the church. In verses 19–22 he brings up another form of admonition, the gift of prophecy. The two negatives with which he begins this section are both continuous in emphasis: “Stop quenching the Spirit” and “stop despising prophecys” (1 Thess. 5:19, 20, *author’s translation*). He’s basically telling the Thessalonians to stop something that they were doing on a consistent basis.

Though we don’t know what specific issue Paul was addressing, he seems to be telling them to be open to more light, while at the same time telling them to test it just to make sure it is indeed light (2 Cor. 11:14).

There are various ways to undermine the gift of prophecy. One of these is to “quench the Spirit.” We do this when we ignore or resist the work of a true prophet. Look at all the opposition, even from within our own ranks, to the prophetic gift we have been given in the life and ministry of Ellen White.

A second way to undermine the gift of prophecy is to accept what is said but misinterpret or misapply it. We can approach a prophetic message with an open mind but apply what is said inappropriately to the immediate situation. This is something about which we, as Adventists, need to be very careful. We have been given a wonderful gift; we don’t want to undermine that gift by misusing it.

A third way to undermine the gift of prophecy is to give prophetic authority to persons or writings that have not received the gift from God. The church must be continually vigilant, testing everything in order to see whether the prophetic message builds up the church.

What has been the impact of Ellen White’s prophetic ministry in your own life? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

End-Time Holiness (1 Thess. 5:23–28)

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24. What does it mean to be “sanctified wholly” and “preserved blameless” at the coming of the Lord? Shouldn’t we be that way, even now?

In today’s passage Paul returns to the language of prayer. His style is similar to that of 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13. His main theme is also similar: being found blameless in holiness at the Second Coming. Paul makes a transition here from what the Thessalonians are supposed to do (*1 Thess. 5:12–22*) to what God does in us (holiness) and for us (the Second Coming).

Believers have often disagreed as to exactly what this text says about the nature of human beings and the kind of character they can expect to have when Jesus comes. In our brief encounter with this passage, we will focus on what can be said clearly on the basis of this text.

Paul is saying that what God does in believers should extend throughout the entire person. Every part of the believer’s life is to be affected by sanctification as the return of Jesus approaches. In speaking of “spirit, soul and body,” Paul is not attempting to be scientific and precise about various layers of the human person (in biblical thought, mind, and body are a unified whole, not parts that exist separately). Rather, he is expressing that every part of our mind and body is to be submitted to God. God is to be allowed full control of our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Paul’s prayer extends from the present time to the Second Coming. Believers are to be preserved, or kept blameless, until the coming of the Lord. Paul is praying that the completeness of their dedication to God will be maintained all the way to the end. According to this letter, the Thessalonians are far from perfect, but what they do have is worth preserving until Jesus comes. As much as anything else, then, Paul is praying that they will continue to grow in grace through a relationship with Jesus (*see also John 15:4–6*).

In what ways can you, and should you, be preparing every day for the Lord’s return?

Further Study: “[As a child] Jesus carried into His labor cheerfulness and tact. It requires much patience and spirituality to bring Bible religion into the home life and into the workshop, to bear the strain of worldly business, and yet keep the eye single to the glory of God. This is where Christ was a helper. He was never so full of worldly care as to have no time or thought for heavenly things. Often He expressed the gladness of His heart by singing psalms and heavenly songs. Often the dwellers in Nazareth heard His voice raised in praise and thanksgiving to God. He held communion with heaven in song; and as His companions complained of weariness from labor, they were cheered by the sweet melody from His lips. His praise seemed to banish the evil angels, and, like incense, fill the place with fragrance. The minds of His hearers were carried away from their earthly exile, to the heavenly home.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 73.

“Nothing tends more to promote health of body and of soul than does a spirit of gratitude and praise. It is a positive duty to resist melancholy, discontented thoughts and feelings—as much a duty as it is to pray.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 251.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers to Wednesday’s final question. Look at it in two ways: what has been Ellen White’s impact on our church as a whole, and how has her ministry impacted our lives as individuals?
- ❷ Dwell more on this idea of how our culture’s attitude toward authority affects our attitude toward authority in the church. Does our culture incite us to disrespect authority or to pay too much deference to it? How can we strike the right balance?
- ❸ How can your local church do a better job of mentoring new believers in character growth? What kind of spiritual leadership training is needed?

Summary: In this week’s passage (*1 Thess. 5:12–27*) Paul addresses a variety of issues, but he is particularly focused on the spiritual quality of local church life. Believers at the local level are to mentor each other and be joyful and thankful. They are also to be open to new truth, particularly prophetic truth, yet careful and thoughtful in their evaluation of new ideas. Above all else, Paul calls for complete submission to God in every area of personal life with an eye toward the return of Jesus.

Light in the Darkness: Part 1

Bhutan is a small mountainous country lying on the southern slopes of the Himalayas and bordered by northeast India. For generations it has been cut off from the outside world. Bhutanese are nearly all Buddhist and Hindu. There are few known Christians in the country. But God has ways of opening hearts and leading seekers to Jesus.

Tepa was a monk in Bhutan, but he felt dissatisfied. One day he met a Christian couple who secretly introduced him to Jesus. When Tepa's family learned that he had become a Christian, he was disowned and cut off from his village. Tepa, one of the first Bhutanese Seventh-day Adventists in the world, left Bhutan and settled in Nepal.

Tepa's son, Praveen, shared his father's passion to reach the Bhutanese for Christ. He became a teacher in a boarding school near the Bhutan border in India, where many Bhutanese students studied. Praveen befriended them and secretly taught them the Bible in a way they could understand. Some eagerly accepted Jesus as their Savior.

During vacations Praveen visited his students' families in Bhutan. Some of these families became close friends.

One day Praveen stared at the Himalayan Mountains, wondering how he could share Jesus with the Bhutanese. Just then a man approached and said he was a Seventh-day Adventist. The two talked long about the Bible, Ellen G. White, and *The Great Controversy*. Praveen was inspired to print copies of *The Great Controversy* to give to Bhutanese people who lived on the border of India and Bhutan. Others helped to finance the project.

The book created a stir. Some monks, and even some Christians, became alarmed and threatened to have the book banned. Christian leaders of other denominations denounced the book and urged their members to burn it.

But others became curious about this book that had caused such a stir. They sought copies for themselves and began reading it. The book was reprinted.

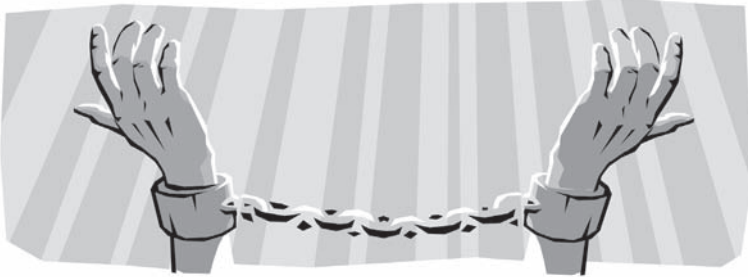
Praveen befriended two monks. After several months he introduced them to Jesus and gave them copies of *The Great Controversy* and a New Testament. The monks secretly read their books and have asked to take more copies across the Bhutan border.

Praveen's Bhutanese students take copies of *The Great Controversy* with them when they return home. They share the books with family and friends, and in this way God's truths have entered Bhutan.

(Continued next week)

The author, whose name has been withheld for security reasons, is an evangelist who works with Bhutanese people near the border of India.

Promise to the Persecuted (2 Thess. 1:1–12)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Thess. 1:1–12, John 1:18, Rom. 2:5, 12:19, Rev. 16:4–7, 20:1–6, John 14:1–3.*

Memory Text: “To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power” (*2 Thessalonians 1:11, ESV*).

Key Thought: The second coming of Jesus is the culmination of all Christian hope.

Because written correspondence could be slow, a church that wanted to talk to Paul had to track him down to get a message to him, which was not always an easy process, to be sure. Once contact was finally made, the apostle would then dictate a response and have it hand-delivered back to the church. The process might take months. In the meantime false beliefs would have time to develop and spread.

This seems to have happened in Thessalonica, where new problems arose in the church. These problems may even have become worse due to the misapplication of what Paul wrote in the first letter. Second Thessalonians was Paul's attempt to further correct the situation.

Paul's words in this week's lesson come down to this: at the Second Coming, believers will be rescued by God's spectacular intervention in Christ. This passage provides further information about the nature of His return.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 15.*

Fresh Greetings (2 Thess. 1:1, 2)

“Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:1, 2). What hope and promise are found even in such a simple greeting as this? How much theology is in there, how much hope, how much promise? How can we learn to make these hopes and promises our own?

Paul, as he does so often, talks about grace and peace. In one sense, are they not related? Shouldn't the realization of God's grace, the promise of forgiveness in Jesus, lead to peace in our lives? How crucial that, no matter our circumstances, we all take time to dwell on the wonderful provision of salvation made for us and the grace it offers us, regardless of our unworthiness. What better way to experience the peace that we are promised? We need to keep the focus off ourselves and on Jesus and what we have been given in Him.

Compare 1 Thessalonians 1:1 with 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 2. There's a small difference in the wording. What significance might be found in that difference?

There is one difference between 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Paul changes from “in God the Father” (1 Thess. 1:1) to “in God our Father” (2 Thess. 1:1). This adds a relational touch. There are people who feel close to Jesus yet are afraid of God the Father. Paul assures the Thessalonians that they can have as much confidence in their relationship with the Father as they do with Jesus. Jesus came to this earth to show us what the Father is like.

Read John 1:18 and 14:7–11. What assurance and hope can we draw from these texts, especially in light of 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 2?

Paul's Thanksgiving (2 Thess. 1:3, 4)

Paul had a tendency toward extra-long sentences. Second Thessalonians 1:3–10 is a single sentence focusing primarily on events surrounding the second coming of Jesus. The central core of the sentence, however, is not focused on the Second Coming (*2 Thess 1:3, author's translation*): “We are obligated at all times to give thanks to God concerning you.” Paul's comments regarding the return of Jesus (*2 Thess. 1:6–10*) are part of the reason that he thanks God concerning the Thessalonians themselves.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4. What important spiritual principle do we find in these verses in regard to the question of faith? What happens to faith if it does not grow?

“We are bound” or “we ought” (to give thanks to God) is the main verb of 2 Thessalonians 1:3–10. It shows that Paul feels obligated to thank God for the Thessalonians because their faith is getting stronger and stronger. Meanwhile, their love for one another is also increasing, and both verbs are in the present tense in the original. This means that their growth in faith and love was consistent and ongoing. This kind of growth is basic to any healthy church. Like a plant, if a church does not grow spiritually, it will die.

Paul will go on to offer significant criticism of the church in the second and third chapters of this epistle. But he knows that people need a lot of affirmation before they can handle criticism constructively. He provides that kind of affirmation in the first chapter.

One of the reasons for Paul's affirmations is that the church in Thessalonica is continuing to suffer persecution. He particularly commends their “patience” in affliction. Instead of faith, hope, and love, Paul talks about their faith, love, and patience. Because “patience” here is substituted for “hope,” it leads Paul into his exposition of the Second Coming later in the chapter.

The result of their increase in faith and love is that their fortitude in the face of affliction has become a source of boasting for the apostles among all the churches they visit. The Thessalonians have become a model of Christian commitment under fire.

How can trials and affliction increase our faith? At the same time, who hasn't struggled to maintain faith precisely because of trials?

Suffering as a Sign of the End (2 Thess. 1:5, 6)

Second Thessalonians 1:5–10 in the Greek has an Old Testament feel (the Bible of most New Testament Christians was the Septuagint, a pre-Christian, Greek translation of the Old Testament). Second Thessalonians exhibits many more references to the Old Testament than does 1 Thessalonians.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:5, 6. What is Paul saying?

The word *evidence* (NIV) or *token* (KJV) means “proof” or “plain indication” of something. What does the persecution of Christians (*vs. 4*) prove? It is certainly not evidence of God’s judgment against His people. To the contrary, it is a pointer to the future judgment, in which the people of God are vindicated and those who persecuted them receive the same kind of experience they inflicted on others.

There is a message here for us. Violence begets violence, and those who use violence against others have reason to fear for the future. God’s judgment sets things right. Those who persecute the people of God will one day face the justice of God. But those who experience injustice on account of their faith today can look with confidence to God’s future judgment. On that day, it will be evident to all that they were the objects of God’s favor.

The New Testament encourages believers to exhibit grace, mercy, and forgiveness toward others. But when these actions are rebuffed and repaid with curses, blows, and confinement, it is encouraging to know that injustice will not last forever. Thus, the saints of God are invited to have patience (*see also Rev. 14:12*).

In 2 Thessalonians 1:5, 6, therefore, Paul reminds the persecuted Thessalonians that the “righteous judgment of God” in the future will demonstrate His approval of them in the present. More than this, their patience and faith in the face of trial validates that God has chosen them. In this way Christian suffering can be the basis for rejoicing (*1 Thess. 1:6, 7*). It is real-life evidence of whose side we will be on when Jesus comes.

Verse 5 shows the righteous judgment of God in His approval of the Thessalonians. Verse 6 shows it in the condemnation and destruction of their persecutors.

Have you been unfairly victimized, with the perpetrators receiving no apparent punishment for their actions? If so, what comfort can you take in the promises of God’s judgment? Or look at it this way: have you treated people badly, unfairly, and gotten away with it (at least so far)? If so, how do you view the promises of God’s end-time judgment?

Fire and Destruction (2 Thess. 1:7–9)

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9. What is the primary reason for the destruction of the wicked at the time of Jesus’ second coming? How are we to understand these verses with the idea of God as being full of love, grace, and forgiveness?

Many people are uncomfortable with the language of these verses. They feel that “everlasting destruction” (*NIV*), vengeance, punishment, and the infliction of suffering are unworthy of a God of love, grace, and mercy. But just punishment and retribution is a frequent theme of Paul’s (*Rom. 2:5, 12:19*). Paul is unequivocal: God’s justice will one day be powerfully made manifest.

And why not? Any good government in today’s world must at some point exercise force in order to restrain evil. Though force is not always violent (as when you are stopped for a traffic violation or audited for your taxes), in some cases, especially when the criminals are using violence themselves, they must be answered with violence. Good governments provide a necessary restraint so that we can all live together in peace. Many times outright evil will not give way voluntarily. And the greater the power and brutality of evil, the greater the force often needed to undo that evil.

The images in this passage are not pretty, but they assure us that God will do whatever it takes to end violence and oppression.

Read Revelation 16:4–7 and Daniel 7:21, 22. What do these verses teach that parallels what Paul wrote above in 2 Thessalonians?

Through His own experience, Jesus understands the cost of suffering. He can be trusted to exercise divine justice but without overkill. Divine justice will result in suffering but not one iota more than necessary. If we can trust God in anything, we can trust that His justice will reveal a wisdom and fairness that we cannot currently comprehend.

The goal of this passage is not to rejoice in vengeance but to encourage the abused and oppressed. The day of justice is coming. We don’t need to take justice into our own hands.

Glorifying Christ (2 Thess. 1:10–12)

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:10–12. What does it mean that Jesus Christ will be glorified in His saints?

The full sentence in this week’s text (*2 Thess. 1:3–10*) provides a number of important details about the second coming of Jesus. When Jesus returns, He will afflict the afflicters and provide rest for the afflicted (*see 2 Thess. 1:6, 7*). He will come down from heaven in the company of powerful angels (*2 Thess. 1:7*). He will come with flaming fire and execute justice on those who have rejected God and the gospel of Jesus Christ (*2 Thess. 1:8*). The wicked are destroyed (*2 Thess. 1:8, 9*) while the righteous bring glory to Christ (*2 Thess. 1:10*).

The events of the Second Coming set the stage for the millennium, during which time the earth lies desolate for a thousand years (*Rev. 20:1–6*). Though this week’s passage does not tell us what happens to the righteous, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17 tells us that the saved join Jesus in the air at His return. John 14:1–3 further indicates that Jesus will take the righteous with Him to heaven.

How does Paul instruct believers to prepare for the second coming of Jesus? *2 Thess. 1:11*.

With verse 10 Paul is finished talking about the wicked and turns again to the fate of the righteous at the Second Coming. In verses 10–12, the glory of Jesus is exhibited in the character of those who believe in Him. Paul rejoices that his prayers and efforts for the Thessalonians will be vindicated at the return of Jesus (*see 1 Thess. 2:19, 20*).

Paul here sets the stage for chapter 2, in which he argues that the day of the Lord has not yet come. If it had, there would be flaming fire, destruction of the wicked, and the full glorification of Jesus in the eyes of all.

In today’s passage, Paul shifts easily from God to Jesus, using the two names interchangeably. According to inspiration, Jesus is God. This teaching is very important to us. The greater Jesus is, the more powerful His salvation and the clearer a picture of God we receive as we contemplate His life, death, resurrection, and return. If Jesus is truly God, then the Father is just like Him.

How can we learn to go about the business of living our daily lives, but with the expectation of the Second Coming? Why is it so easy, amid the daily rhythms of life, to forget about His coming? How can we learn to keep this amazing promise before us and go about our daily business, while still giving the promise the time, attention, and seriousness it deserves?

Further Study: “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. . . .

“It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 21.

“The instruction that Paul sent the Thessalonians in his first epistle regarding the second coming of Christ, was in perfect harmony with his former teaching. Yet his words were misapprehended by some of the Thessalonian brethren. . . .

“In his second letter Paul sought to correct their misunderstanding of his teaching and to set before them his true position.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 264.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Does the truth of Scripture reveal itself more through intensive word-by-word study or in the broad themes that we can observe by way of wide reading? Or is there a time and place for both? Discuss the answer(s) in class.
- 2 Read the Ellen G. White quote in today’s Further Study regarding how inspiration works. How does this help us to understand the “human element” that appears at times in the Bible?
- 3 Does the thought of the Second Coming frighten you, or does it bring you hope? What does your answer say about your relationship with God or about your understanding of the gospel? Or both?
- 4 However much truth there is to the idea that trials can strengthen our faith and character, what do you say to people whose trials are not only causing them to be bitter, resentful, and angry (in other words, not character-building) but are causing them to lose their faith?

Summary: In the opening chapter of 2 Thessalonians, Paul rejoices over the way in which the Thessalonian believers remain faithful in spite of much affliction. He encourages them by pointing to the great reversal at the second coming of Jesus. Whatever happens now, we have the promise that God will execute divine justice.

Light in the Darkness: Part 2

Nima was one of many Bhutanese who received a copy of *The Great Controversy*. He read it through several times and is sharing his discoveries about God with his family and friends in their small village in Bhutan. He meets with a small group of about 15 people in the bedroom of a house to worship. Several are preparing for baptism. And their numbers grow as Nima continues to share his faith and provide Seventh-day Adventist books and literature, which he smuggles across the border into his homeland.

It remains difficult for Christians to practice their faith in Bhutan. Dozens of believers have been imprisoned for sharing their faith. So at present most volunteer evangelists meet with people across the Bhutanese border in India. There these volunteers study the Bible and teach the people how to use simple medical treatments to reach others for Christ. So far at least 25 Bhutanese have accepted Jesus as their Savior and become Seventh-day Adventist Christians. When they return home they take Bibles and Seventh-day Adventist books with them.

Stories continue to seep out of Bhutan of people who want to know about Jesus. One hotel manager received several books, which he gave to tour drivers to give to passengers.

Recently some Bhutanese believers visited several small villages to pray for the sick and comfort the mourning and brokenhearted. Several people wanted to know more about God; so the believers cautiously introduced them to Jesus. The Holy Spirit is working in the hearts of these people who are so eager to know about Jesus.

Sadly, most of the 700,000 people living in Bhutan still worship spirits or gods made of wood and stone. They live and die with no assurance of salvation, for they've never heard the message of God's love or Jesus' sacrifice for them. They are spiritually hungry and crave truth on which to build their lives. Slowly God's message is opening the doors to the hearts of the Bhutanese people.

We can help the people of Bhutan meet Jesus. Our mission offerings can support Bible workers and provide literature and Bibles so that these people can meet Jesus, the King of all kings, who loves them so much that He died for them. We must tell them so they can be ready to meet Jesus when He comes.

The author, whose name has been withheld for security reasons, is an evangelist who works with Bhutanese near the border of India.

The Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:1–12)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Thess. 2:1–12, Matt. 24:1–14, Zech. 3:1, Dan. 8:8–11, Acts 2:22.*

Memory Text: “Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (*2 Thessalonians 2:3, ESV*).

Key Thought: In correcting the Thessalonians' false theology of last-day events, Paul reveals truth about end-time deceptions.

In the midst of all Paul's words of encouragement as well as exhortation, he wrote about end-time events, including the greatest end-time event of all, the second coming of Jesus.

In this week's passage, though Paul talks about the end, his emphasis is a bit different from that which came before. For one thing, he already told the Thessalonians the details while he was with them. For another, his goal in this text is pastoral, to calm them and persuade them to be more patient regarding end-time events and to warn them about the false teachings being circulated on that topic.

The opening of this week's passage (*2 Thess. 2:1, 2*) contains several Greek words that point back to *1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11*, such as the coming of our Lord (*1 Thess. 4:15*), the gathering (*1 Thess. 4:17*), and the day of the Lord (*1 Thess. 5:2*). To some extent, this week's passage is a clarification of what Paul said earlier. In it he reveals truths that we need to understand today.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 22.*

The Problem (2 Thess. 2:1–3)

What is the topic addressed by Paul in the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians? How are these words relevant to us today? In what way do we face similar challenges within our church regarding end-time events (date-setting, conspiracy theories, and the like), however different our context may be? What similar principle do we find here that we also constantly confront? *2 Thess. 2:1–3.*

There is no clear evidence in this passage that the church was asking questions about the second coming of Jesus. Paul himself perceives a problem and addresses it. The concept of “gathering to him” recalls that which Paul wrote in the previous letter (*1 Thess. 4:15–17*).

In this passage, Paul’s words recall the warning that Jesus Himself had given (*Matt. 24:1–13*). The Thessalonians had been “quickly” destabilized by conflicting information that they had received in the short time since Paul had written his first letter.

Paul doesn’t identify the specific source of their confusion. Perhaps it hadn’t even been revealed to him. By “spirit” (*2 Thess. 2:2*) he likely refers to a prophetic teaching, either that of a false prophet or a misunderstanding of Paul’s first letter. The second possible source is the spoken word, a teaching passed from mouth to mouth among the members. When he mentions a letter “supposed to have come from us” (*NIV*), Paul is either referring to a letter forged in his name or a misuse of one of his genuine letters.

No matter how carefully a pastor may watch over a church, there are multiple ways in which false ideas can take root. It is sometimes easier for members to accept a report or rumor than to examine the Scriptures carefully for themselves. Sometimes the new ideas may even be biblical to a point but are promoted out of balance with complementary Bible teachings.

The latter seems to have been the problem in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians knew many correct things about the second coming of Jesus and the events preceding it. But they tended to emphasize one extreme or another of the teaching without its balancing perspectives. They had failed to heed Jesus’ warning about chasing after signs of His return (*Matt. 24:4–8*). As a result, in 1 Thessalonians they lamented the delay of Jesus’ return (*1 Thess. 4:13–15*). In this chapter they seem to have drawn the conclusion that they are already in the midst of final events.

Paul's Short Answer (2 Thess. 2:3, 4)

In the short interval between 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the Thessalonian church members became confused about the meaning of what Paul wrote in the first letter. They drew the conclusion that the Second Coming was either at hand or had already come in some secret way (2 Thess. 2:2). Paul's short answer to this problem? "That can't possibly be true. There are too many things that haven't happened yet."

The confusion in Thessalonica caused Paul to write his most extensive outline of final events. Had he not done so, it would not have been preserved for us.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4. What does Paul tell us about "the man of sin" (NKJV) in these verses? What principles do we find here that help us to understand what Paul is discussing?

Verses 3 and 4 are an incomplete sentence in the original. "That day will not come" is missing in the Greek and is supplied in most translations. Paul lists the things that have to happen before Jesus can come. There will be a "falling away" (the Greek word *apostasia* for "apostasy"), and then "the man of lawlessness" will be revealed. That revelation is described in 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10 as the working of Satan just before Jesus comes (which we will examine more closely in Wednesday's lesson). But before that revelation of wickedness, there is a period of "mystery" and restraint (2 Thess. 2:6, 7).

Verse 4 is a description of the man of sin (or "lawlessness"), who operates under cover for a time and is then revealed at the end. He opposes God, exalts himself above God, sits in the temple, and proclaims that he is God. This verse is filled with allusions to Old and New Testament texts. The "opposer" recalls Satan in Zechariah 3:1. Exalting himself above God and usurping God's place in the heavenly temple recalls the little horn of Daniel 8. Showing himself to be God recalls Satan in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28; it also points to the blaspheming power of Daniel 11:36–39. So, the description of the man of sin contains elements pointing to both Satan himself and a wicked agent of Satan in the course of Christian history.

In what subtle ways is each of us susceptible to having the same kind of attitude as we see revealed here in this "man of sin"?

The Restrainer (2 Thess. 2:5–7)

According to Paul, what two things characterized the world situation at the time he wrote? How do we see the great controversy revealed in these verses? *2 Thess. 2:6, 7.*

Combining these verses with the previous ones, we can see that Paul is outlining three stages of history from *his* time until the end. The final stage begins at the Second Coming. Before this stage is the revelation of the man of sin (*2 Thess. 2:3*), also known as the lawless one (*2 Thess. 2:8*). And before that stage is a time of mystery and restraint (*2 Thess 2:6, 7*).

While we would like very much to fully understand Paul’s meaning here, there are a number of uncertainties in these verses. The restraining power is neuter (a thing) in verse 6 and masculine (a person) in verse 7. The lawless one (masculine, *vs. 8*) is neuter in verse 7 (“mystery of lawlessness”); neither is it clear (*vs. 7*) whether the restraining power is taken out of the way or has the authority to remove itself (the *ESV* translates correctly—“until he is out of the way”).

Who is the restrainer, or power of restraint, in these verses? It is present in Paul’s day; it is upholding the law (a power that restrains lawlessness, *vs. 7*); it is on a divine time mission; and it is powerful enough to restrain the working of Satan (*vs. 9*).

According to other New Testament passages, what is holding back the Second Coming? *Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rev. 14:6, 7.*

In much of the New Testament the events leading up to the Second Coming follow from the final proclamation of the gospel (*Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rev. 14:6, 7*). In this case, then, it’s possible that God Himself is the Restrainer described by Paul, holding the final events back until everyone has had a chance to hear the gospel.

How much restraint do you need in your life? That is, when tempted, how can you learn to claim the power of God to restrain you from doing what you know is wrong?

The Antichrist Revealed (2 Thess. 2:8–10)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10. What’s especially important in all this about the phrase, “they received not the love of the truth”?

The man of sin was introduced in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4. Through much of Christian history he has operated to undermine God’s law (particularly the Sabbath) and to usurp powers that belong only to Christ. In passages such as Daniel 7:20–25 (the little horn) and Revelation 13:1–7 (the beast from the sea), this same power operates after the fall of the pagan Roman Empire, combining both religious and secular authority to persecute the saints of God. The only power in history that fits all the specifications of these prophecies is the papacy. Many interpreters from the Middle Ages, and even to this day, have designated this institution as the antichrist. (Only in the past century or two has the vast majority of Christians moved away from this interpretation, an interesting move in itself in light of our understanding of last-day events). This identification of the papacy fits the specifications of 2 Thessalonians 2 that the man of sin would be both masculine (a person) and neuter (a world power or institution).

In verse 7, “mystery of lawlessness” (*NKJV*) is an appropriate designation for his activity. But at the close of history, just before the Second Coming, there will be an even more worldwide, open defiance of God and His laws. The continuity of powers, both in this passage and elsewhere (*Daniel 7 and Revelation 13*), indicates that the papacy will play a major role at the end of time, as well.

What earlier work of God in the course of history will the final deception counterfeit? *Compare 2 Thess. 2:9 with Acts 2:22.*

Today’s passage draws back the curtain to reveal an even greater antichrist behind the one that has operated among the nations in the course of history. Satan himself is the author and finisher of the deceptions of the end time. As the return of Jesus approaches, events will force him into a final act of desperation. Through counterfeit miracles he will attempt to draw people’s attention away from the gospel (the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus) and even the Second Coming itself.

Dwell on this idea of “the love of the truth.” How do we “receive” it? Why is having this love so crucial for anyone who doesn’t want to get caught up in any spiritual deception, especially during the last days? How can we learn, even now, to “receive the love of the truth”?

Truth and Lies (2 Thess. 2:10–12)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12. Why does God allow so many to be deceived? According to this passage, what have the wicked rejected?

Verse 11 is a text that many people find extremely challenging. Paul states very directly, “God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie” (*2 Thess. 2:11, NIV*). The knee-jerk response to this text is something like, “How can a God of truth send deception? How can He act the same as Satan at the end?” (*Compare 2 Thess. 2:11 with 2 Thess. 2:9.*)

In today’s passage Paul draws back the curtain and gives us a glimpse of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, which involves much more than just the affairs of this earth and its history. Satan has accused God of being unreasonable, a bully, and a deceiver. In the final crisis of earth’s history, God “sends” a delusion upon the wicked, not because He lies but because He allows the wicked to choose lies over truth and, thus, expose the outworking of decisions that they have already made (*2 Thess. 2:12*). He simply allows them to bear the fruits of their wrong actions. The events of the end time clearly expose the mind and character of Satan and his followers for all to see.

The process of delusion begins when people reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. In verse 10 the wicked refuse to receive the love of the truth. The offer of salvation in the gospel is the subtext that lies behind the apocalyptic powers of 2 Thessalonians 2. Through its teachings and practices, the papacy has undermined the gospel. That work continues until it is exposed by the final events described in 2 Thessalonians 2:8–12. Thus, the final proclamation of the gospel (*Matt. 24:14; Rev. 14:6, 7*) sets the stage for both the final judgment and the delusions of the end time.

In the end, whatever the outward political and religious manifestations of the great controversy as it plays out here on earth, the gospel of Jesus Christ, not political events, has always been the crucial divide between good and evil throughout Christian history. Antichrist reveals its true character by usurping the life, death, and heavenly reign of Jesus. All other actors in the drama play subordinate roles.

Read carefully 2 Thessalonians 2:12. For what key reason do people not receive the truth? How have you experienced this principle in your own life? That is, how has the “pleasure” of unrighteousness, even subtly, kept your mind from being open to truth?

Further Study: “The apostle Paul warned the church not to look for the coming of Christ in his day. ‘That day shall not come,’ he says, ‘except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed.’ 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Not till after the great apostasy, and the long period of the reign of the ‘man of sin,’ can we look for the advent of our Lord. The ‘man of sin,’ which is also styled ‘the mystery of iniquity,’ ‘the son of perdition,’ and ‘that wicked,’ represents the papacy, which, as foretold in prophecy, was to maintain its supremacy for 1260 years.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 356.

“As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate Christ. . . . In gentle, compassionate tones he presents some of the same gracious, heavenly truths which the Saviour uttered; he heals the diseases of the people, and then, in his assumed character of Christ, he claims to have changed the Sabbath to Sunday, and commands all to hallow the day which he has blessed. . . . Only those who have been diligent students of the Scriptures and who have received the love of the truth will be shielded from the powerful delusion that takes the world captive.”—Pages 624, 625.

“In bearing the message, make no personal thrusts at other churches, not even the Roman Catholic Church. Angels of God see in the different denominations many who can be reached only by the greatest caution. Therefore let us be careful of our words. . . . Upon these themes silence is eloquence. Many are deceived. Speak the truth in tones and words of love.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 576.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Today many believe that the papacy has changed, and in some ways it has. Yet, on the basic issues of salvation it still seeks to usurp all that Christ has done and is doing for us. It is still the power depicted in prophecy. How can we stand firm in our biblical position regarding Rome while doing so with Christian love, forbearance, and tact?
- ② As a church we are constantly being confronted with people who come up with new dates for final events, new charts, new conspiracy theories about this group or that. While we must remain open to new light, how should we deal with these challenges?

Summary: By correcting some of the Thessalonians’ wrong views about last-day events, Paul gave us precious truth on the topic. We must always remember, though, that the crucial issue of the last days is not the timing of events or even all the details, but on which side of the great controversy we choose to be.

A Passion for Sharing

My name is Christian, and I live in Denmark. My family has no real relationship with Christ, but when I was a child, my grandmother taught me to pray and to trust in God.

My faith in God wasn't popular with my classmates, and often they teased and tormented me. So when I was ready to enter high school, I didn't want to attend a public school. My parents helped me find a Christian school, and I was thrilled when I visited the Seventh-day Adventist boarding school in western Denmark. I didn't know anything about Seventh-day Adventists, but I knew I was in the right place.

I loved the worships, the singing, and the Bible study. At last I belonged. During a Week of Prayer, I answered God's call to surrender my life totally to Him and asked my mother for permission to be baptized. But she refused. I prayed earnestly about my decision, and in time Mother gave her permission.

After high school graduation, I joined a program called "One Year for the Lord" and worked in a café church in the city. There I started a teen club where kids could eat, talk, and listen to music or just do homework. One of my friends came, and I invited him to come back on Sabbath afternoon. He came and started asking questions about God. I was thrilled when people from the café meetings started using a prayer room I'd created. I was feeling the joy of serving God.

In high school I had worked with a kids' club, and I wanted to start something similar while in university. Some friends joined me, and we organized a program and advertised it across town. Since then, we've averaged 35 kids at a time. We do fun activities and talk about serious topics relevant to them, such as bullying. Parents often tell us that this club is something that their kids need. The city leaders support us too and refer families to our club, in which we focus on teaching respect.

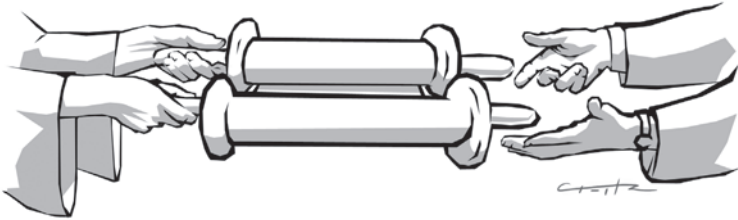
I work with our church plant team in my town, too. And we have several other special interest ministries, including a Christian motorcycle club.

I'm still in school, but I'm teaching in a kindergarten. I have a passion to share God's love with kids. I want to be there to help kids make important life decisions and let them know that Jesus is the answer to questions in their lives.

God has shown me that He wants to use me—and every Christian—to spread this love to others.

CHRISTIAN GJESTHEDE *shares God's love in Jutland, Denmark.*

Keeping the Church Faithful (2 Thess. 2:13–3:18)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Thess. 2:13–3:18, Acts 17:11, Luke 10:25–28, Matt. 7:24–27, 18:15–17.*

Memory Text: “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (*2 Thessalonians 2:15, ESV*).

Key Thought: Even with all the grand and glorious promises for the future, we have to deal with daily challenges and struggles in the church. The Thessalonian church was no exception.

Churches are a lot like plants. If a plant does not grow, it will die. In other words, change is wired into the way plants were designed by God. Similarly, a church that does not change and grow also will die. But not all change is good. Change can lead us away from who we are. It can cause us to lose touch with God's purpose for us. The Seventh-day Adventist Church must be especially on guard because this present-truth message is being proclaimed by no one but us! That's a heavy responsibility—one we all, whether laity or ministry, must never forget.

Through revelation and Spirit-guided consensus, God has led the church to even more light. The light of the past helps the church to navigate its way through the treacherous waters of change. Paul's final word to the Thessalonians gives us inspired guidance in this crucial area.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 29.*

Faithful by God's Choice (2 Thess. 2:13–17)

The language of this section recalls the prayer at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians. It is almost as if Paul is returning to the place where he began, creating a natural conclusion to this pair of letters. Paul here expresses his concern that the believers in Thessalonica not deviate from the path on which he has placed them.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17. Why does Paul thank God for the Thessalonians? What does he ask them to do in this passage? In what ways are these words so pertinent to us today, so near the end?

The lives of the Thessalonians provided evidence to Paul that they had been chosen as “first fruits to be saved” (*ESV*). Some translations say “from the beginning.” Though salvation is a gift, the believer experiences it through sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth. The life of the believer is more than just a subjective experience; it is solidly grounded in truth.

That is why Paul is so concerned that the Thessalonians hold to the doctrines they have been taught, both by letter and the spoken word. People’s grasp of truth often slips with the passage of time, which is why we must always be affirmed by those who preach and teach us.

In the early days of the church, there was even a preference for oral tradition over written tradition. Oral tradition is less subject to unintentional distortion. Tone of voice and gestures communicate meaning more accurately than do words on a page. This is why preaching as a method of communication never grows old.

But written tradition, as in the letters of Paul, is less subject to intentional distortion by those who would alter the gospel for their own purposes. The written word provides a secure and unchangeable norm by which one can test the oral messages that come through preaching. In the book of Acts, the Bereans were commended because they combined attention to the oral messages with careful examination of the Scriptures (*Acts 17:11*).

Read again the texts for today. So many forces are always at work trying to pry us away from the truth. Look at how you have changed over time. Do these changes reveal a slow, steady settling into the truth or a slow, steady movement away from it? In other words, in what direction is your life moving?

Confidence in the Face of Evil (2 Thess. 3:1–5)

In today’s world many people laugh at the idea of a literal Satan. In their mind, he’s a myth, a holdover from a superstitious and pre-scientific era. They feel that good and bad are simply the random consequences of cause and effect; or, in some people’s minds, good and bad are only culturally constructed concepts relative to specific times and places, nothing more.

But the Bible clearly asserts that Satan is real. And it is often to his advantage in some parts of the world to hide himself or even allow himself to be mocked in the form of a red devil with horns. The caricature goes a long way in making people think he’s not real, which is exactly what he wants. (“The devil made me do it!” one comedian used to famously mock.)

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5. Though the challenges to our faith are out there, Paul expresses hope. On what is that hope based, and what is the condition upon which we can be certain to claim it? See also *Luke 10:25–28, Deut. 8:1*.

Paul begins this passage with a request for prayer (*as in 1 Thess. 5:25*) that the gospel will spread rapidly and be honored through his work. Paul also wants the Thessalonians to pray that he will be delivered from evil men (*2 Thess. 3:2*). The expression here implies that he has in mind specific individuals whom the recipients of the letter might even know.

Paul follows this with wordplay (*2 Thess. 3:2, 3*). Not all men have “faith” (trust in, or commitment to, God), but the Lord is “faithful” (dependable—one who inspires faith and commitment). This faithful Lord is dependable and will guard them against the evil one, or Satan. The good news is that, though Satan is more powerful than we are, the Lord is more powerful than Satan, and we can find safety and power in the Lord.

Paul ends this passage (*2 Thess. 3:4, 5*) by once more commending the Thessalonians and offering a prayer in their behalf. He is confident that they are doing what he has asked and that they will continue to do so in spite of the opposition of Satan and the people he inspires. He offers a “wish-prayer” (*2 Thess. 3:5*) that the Lord direct their attention to “the love of God” and “the patience of Christ” (*NKJV*).

Even amid trials and suffering, Paul’s letters are always so full of faith, hope, and certainty. How can we learn to have this faith, hope, and certainty for ourselves, regardless of our often difficult circumstances?

Scripture and Tradition (2 Thess. 3:6–8)

When Jesus walked this earth there was no New Testament. The Bible of Jesus was the “Old Testament.” But, from the start, obedience to Jesus’ spoken words was the wise thing that His followers did (*Matt. 7:24–27*). Jesus’ words and actions continued to be authoritative for the church in the years that followed (*1 Thess. 4:15, Acts 20:35, 1 Cor. 11:23–26*). Then, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were guided to rightly interpret the words of Jesus and the significance of His actions (*John 15:26, 27; 16:13–15*). And before the first generation of Christians had passed off the scene, the writings of the apostles were considered fully equal to those of the Old Testament prophets and could be called “Scripture” (*2 Pet. 3:2, 16*).

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6–8, 14. According to these texts, what would Paul include in his concept of truth?

By the time Paul arrived in Thessalonica, the early church considered the sayings of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles as supremely authoritative. *Tradition* in New Testament times was not necessarily a dirty word; it could refer to the church’s memory of the sayings and actions of Jesus and include the oral teachings and writings of the apostles. Tradition was to them much the same as the Scriptures are to us. It could be commanded and was to be obeyed.

For the Thessalonians, tradition meant more than just the letters of Paul. It included all that Paul had said to them while he was in Thessalonica, and included also his actions, which they were to imitate. The fact that Paul worked hard to support himself in Thessalonica did not merely show that he cared for them (*1 Thess. 2:9*); it was a “tradition” that he expected them to apply to their own lives.

Paul was not idle while he was among them; he did not eat other people’s food without payment. He labored “night and day” so as not to be a burden to anyone. And anyone in Thessalonica who lived differently was “out of order.” So, Paul’s definition of disorderly people was not limited to those who were disruptive in the church or community; he broadened it here to include anyone who did not follow the teachings or practices of the apostles.

These texts reveal how important Paul’s actions were for the Thessalonians. Though he had truth directly from the Lord (*Gal. 1:1*), Paul bore witness as much by his life and actions as by his words. How well do our lives reflect the truths that we have been given?

Working and Eating (2 Thess. 3:9–12)

What unique type of problem does Paul face in the Thessalonian church? *2 Thess. 3:9–12.*

In these verses Paul applies the tradition of what he did and said to a specific situation. A significant group of members was disorderly or out of order (*2 Thess. 3:6, 11*). Paul had mentioned the problem in the previous letter and addressed it gently there (*1 Thess. 4:11, 12; 5:14*). But he uses much stronger language here.

As an apostle, Paul could have required the church to provide him with income, housing, and food. But in 1 Thessalonians he sets an example among them of “working night and day” in order not to be a burden on them (*1 Thess. 2:9*). This was an example of love. But according to 2 Thessalonians 3:8, he also works “night and day” in order to create a model of how everyone should take care of their own needs, as much as possible.

If Paul had only set an example, some could have responded that the tradition was not clear. But Paul had also addressed this issue with words. During the short time he was with them in person, he often expressed (as the Greek imperfect tense implies) a popular saying as a command, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (*2 Thess. 3:10, ESV*).

In this passage Paul is not criticizing the efforts to care for those in need, or those who can’t take care of themselves. After all, Jesus Himself left a powerful example of compassion toward those whose circumstances in life have left them helpless or destitute.

Instead, the target of Paul’s concern was a group of people in the church who were willfully idle. They were busybodies, minding everyone’s business except their own (*2 Thess. 3:11*). Like some of the popular philosophers in the ancient world, these believers preferred a life of ease over labor. Perhaps they spent their time discussing theology or criticizing the behavior of others instead of earning their way. Paul commands them “in the Lord Jesus Christ” to follow his example and earn the right to speak by caring for their own needs first (*3:12*).

How amazing that, even so early in church history, Paul had to deal with so many problems among the members. How should this protect us (and especially new members) from the expectation that our churches are going to be filled with saintly people? More important, how can we be a positive force in our local church despite our own faults and weaknesses?

Tough Love (2 Thess. 3:13–15)

According to Matthew 18:15–17, how is the church supposed to treat a person who has been disfellowshipped?

The matter of church discipline is one of the most difficult issues that a local church faces. Often an errant member is another member's brother, mother, son, cousin, or best friend. Some members prefer never to discipline anyone; others prefer harsh sanctions. How does a church find the will of God in the midst of so many competing interests?

Matthew 18 suggests a clear and simple process. First, a one-on-one conversation between the offender and the one offended. The context indicates that forgiveness is to be the goal of that conversation, whenever possible (*Matt. 18:21–35*). Second, the offended member is to take one or two others along to avoid confusion as to what is being said by one party or the other. Only after these first two steps have been carefully followed should the process move to the church in business session. Then, if the offender does not respond to the church as a whole, he or she is to be treated as “a Gentile and a tax collector” (*Matt. 18:17, ESV*).

Here is the problem. What does it mean to treat someone like a Gentile and a tax collector? There are at least two different possibilities. On the one hand, Jesus could be calling the church to shun the offender the way the Gentiles and tax collectors were shunned in the society in which He grew up. On the other hand, it could be a call to treat the outcast the way Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors (with compassion and forgiveness).

What does Paul have to say about church discipline? *2 Thess. 3:13–15*.

Rightly applying Matthew 18 and 2 Thessalonians 3 to contemporary life is a challenge. No two people are alike. No two situations are alike. In some cases forgiveness softens the heart of an offender and brings reconciliation to the church. In other cases hardened offenders may respond only to a love that is tough enough to confront and administer consequences. This is why the General Conference does not disfellowship anyone. Such delicate processes are best handled by the local church, where the offender is best known.

Tough love is not a license for abuse. According to verse 15, the person being disciplined is still to be treated like family. The church must remain conscious that the offender is a brother “for whom Christ died” (*Rom. 14:15, 1 Cor. 8:11, NKJV*).

What experiences have you had with church discipline? How can the church maintain a balance between confrontation and acceptance?

Further Study: “The Thessalonian believers were greatly annoyed by men coming among them with fanatical ideas and doctrines. Some were ‘disorderly, working not at all, but . . . busybodies.’ The church had been properly organized, and officers had been appointed to act as ministers and deacons. But there were some, self-willed and impetuous, who refused to be subordinate to those who held positions of authority in the church.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 261.

“Paul was not wholly dependent upon the labor of his hands for support while at Thessalonica. . . . Philippians 4:16. Notwithstanding the fact that he received this help he was careful to set before the Thessalonians an example of diligence, so that none could rightfully accuse him of covetousness, and also that those who held fanatical views regarding manual labor might be given a practical rebuke.”—Pages 348, 349.

“The custom of supporting men and women in idleness by private gifts or church money encourages them in sinful habits, and this course should be conscientiously avoided. Every man, woman, and child should be educated to do practical, useful work. All should learn some trade. It may be tentmaking, or it may be business in other lines; but all should be educated to use the members of their body to some purpose, and God is ready and willing to increase the adaptability of all who will educate themselves to industrious habits.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 912.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How does our church keep its balance between hanging onto truths confirmed in the past and following the advancing light of God? How can we know when new “light” is, indeed, “light” and not deception?
- ❷ How do we deal with unruly and troublesome church members who always seem to be complaining about something? At the same time, what about those who are expressing concerns over real problems?
- ❸ Mentally summarize Paul’s essential message in these two letters to the Thessalonians in a way that makes them relevant to the situation in our church today.

Summary: Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians have taught us a great deal about how to be a church in a difficult environment. However different the immediate context he dealt with is to ours, the principles he espoused are enduring and eternal because they are inspired by the Lord Himself.

A New Master

People living in the small West African country of Guinea Bissau lead lives of uncertainty and fear. Ongoing political unrest breeds fear for the future. But an even greater fear comes from the spirits that they believe control their lives.

Throughout the country “devil trees” stand as a reminder that the devil and evil spirits are never far away. Some people claim to have heard spirit voices coming from these trees. Often these voices sound like people from the nearby village who have died. Spirit priests offer sacrifices to the spirits living in the devil trees, and parents may dedicate their children to the spirits in hopes that the children will be protected from harm.

Tat is a young man whose grandmother had dedicated him to the devil when he was a child. He wore an amulet, a small goat’s horn, around his neck at all times to protect himself from evil spirits. His grandmother often warned him that sickness or death would surely come if he should ever break the covenant she had made on his behalf with the devil.

Tat, now a young man, learned of the evangelistic meetings being held in his neighborhood. He decided to attend. As he listened to God’s message of love, his heart was touched. And when the young speaker invited those present to give their hearts to God, Tat felt called to respond. He fingered the goat’s horn hanging on his chest as he struggled with the truths he was learning. He wanted to follow Jesus Christ, but he had seen firsthand what Satan could do to those who tried to break away from the spirits. Just days earlier, a friend who also had been dedicated to the devil as an infant had died mysteriously. And as far as Tat knew, his friend hadn’t broken away from the spirits. *The spirits hadn’t protected him after all*, Tat thought.

Tat continued to attend the meetings. The speaker explained that the devil rules by fear, but God rules by love. And God’s perfect love casts out fear. Tat cast off his amulet and chose to follow Christ.

Dozens of people in Guinea Bissau, who once had been slaves of Satan, declared their freedom in Christ during those evangelistic meetings. Our mission offerings help break chains of fear and bondage every day. They help nurture and train new believers around the world to share God’s love with others.

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a statement of twenty-eight fundamental beliefs. And though we must always be open to more light, a firm consensus on these beliefs is crucial to the unity and mission of the church. What has brought together millions of people from all over the world into a unified movement other than our shared doctrines? The fourth quarter 2012 *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, entitled: “Growing in Christ,” by Kwabena Donkor, will focus on some of those teachings. Though we believe that all twenty-eight are foundational and fundamental to our identity as Seventh-day Adventists, we cannot study them all in one quarter. We do hope to present a systematic and coherent guide to most of those beliefs. Special attention will be given to belief Number 11, “Growing in Christ,” which was accepted during the General Conference Session in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2005 (see lessons 5–7). This belief, in and of itself, didn’t add new or previously unknown teaching but, rather, in response to needs in certain parts of the world, helps to clarify the church’s understanding of God’s power to give believers in Christ victory over the forces of evil. In fact, all the lessons in this quarter will be framed within the context of the struggle between Christ and the forces of evil. It is what we call “the great controversy.”

Lesson 1—The Great Controversy: The Foundation

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Controversy and Its Players** (*Genesis 3:15, Revelation 12:1–17*)

MONDAY: **Lucifer’s Fall** (*Isaiah 14:4–21, 1 John 3:8*)

TUESDAY: **God’s Weapon** (*Genesis 3:15*)

WEDNESDAY: **Satan’s Fight** (*Matthew 2:1–18, 4:1–11, 16:21–23, 27:39–42*)

THURSDAY: **Destinies** (*Revelation 14*)

Memory Text—*Genesis 3:15*

Sabbath Gem: The great controversy motif is the overarching concept that gives cohesion to Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs.

Lesson 2—Revelation, and the God Revealed in It

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Doctrine of Scripture** (*2 Peter 1:19–21; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17*)

MONDAY: **The Nature of Inspiration** (*Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:26, 1 Kings 6:1*)

TUESDAY: **The Mystery of the Triune God** (*Deuteronomy 6:4, Mark 12:29*)

WEDNESDAY: **The Attributes of our Creator** (*Genesis 1:1, Hebrews 11:6, Romans 10:17*)

THURSDAY: **The Activities of God** (*Genesis 11:9*)

Memory Text—*Hebrews 1:1, 2, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: However important it is to understand the way biblical inspiration works, it’s more important to know the God revealed to us through that inspiration.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audiocassette to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097.