

**Thoughts From  
I Thessalonians**

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Greetings and Thanks

Paul's first epistle to the brethren in Thessalonica is perhaps the oldest book included in the New Testament writings. The church in Thessalonica had a turbulent beginning on Paul's second missionary journey, with the Jews there being extremely hostile to Paul and to the introduction of the teachings concerning Christ and His new way. They not only ran the apostle out of Thessalonica, but they were so intensely opposed to his teaching that they also went down to Berea and drove him out of there as well, so that Paul ended up going by sea to Athens. After spending a comparatively short time in Athens, Paul went to Corinth, where he wrote this letter out of his intense concern for the welfare of the Thessalonian brethren.

- **Greetings from brethren** - Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy had been with Paul in Philippi, and had gone with him to Thessalonica. When Paul exited Thessalonica, he left Silas and Timothy behind. Eventually they came to Paul at Corinth, bringing him financial support from Philippi, as well as added teamwork for the preaching/teaching load. So as Paul writes this epistle, he includes Silas and Timothy in his greeting. "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, he begins, "to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace' (I Thessalonians 1:1).
- **Thankful prayers** - Every time Paul had a moment to think about the brethren in Thessalonica and consider the challenges to their faith and eternity, he prayed. "We give thanks to God always for all of you," says he, "making mention of you in our prayers" (I Thessalonians 1:2). The apostle Paul, following in the footsteps of His Master, the Lord Jesus, in effect laid down his life for the brethren. That sacrifice was borne out of his love for their Souls - a true, deep, abiding love. Hence, it is in all sincerity that his prayers are continual, and full of thankfulness and hope for the brethren.
- **Your work of faith** - One of the things the apostle mentions is that he is "constantly bearing in mind your work of faith" (I Thessalonians 1:3). A person can work hard, but that work often has nothing to do with "the faith" of the new covenant. A person can build bridges for Christ if he has the right perspective, or he can build bridges with no consciousness of Christ at all. But when the apostle brings up the concept of "your work of faith, he has in mind more of a direct work in spreading the gospel, strengthening and encouraging the Saints, and building up the local congregation. To keep the church in Thessalonica intact in the face of such intense persecution, as well as to increase in number, would require much work of faith.
- **Your steadfastness of hope** - It is one thing to maintain faith for a short period of time, or when things are "going well." It is another to stay upbeat, positive, and on course through persecutions and tribulations. Paul praises the brethren for their "steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus in the presence of our God and Father." They never wavered in their belief in their own resurrection to life at Jesus' second coming (which is the *hope*).

What awesome brethren these in Thessalonica were! The honest commendation by Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, showed that these were not mere polite words, spewed out into the atmosphere because it was customary. For them to have the true works of faith, the honest labor of love, and rock-solid steadfastness of hope serves as an enduring example. May modern saints imitate their example, so that the same words of commendation may be said of them likewise.

## The Coming of the Gospel

The apostle Paul, on his second missionary journey, had wanted to go to Ephesus. But the Holy Spirit blocked him, sending him to Macedonia instead. Within a short time, the apostle found himself in Thessalonica, reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue. Immediately he faced entrenched and vicious opposition, and had to flee the city. But he was able to leave men like Silas and Timothy behind to continue follow-up teaching so that the congregation could be established and not driven away from the foundational teachings of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes this letter to the brethren in Thessalonica, the scenes of his early work flashed before him, and he remembered some of the keys to his reception there.

- **Compliments** - The apostle notes their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in Christ. Backing the sincerity of his compliments is his Holy Spirit inspired statement is that this letter is written "in the presence of our God and Father." He proceeds, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you" (I Thessalonians 1:4). Paul is recalling the vision he had seen in Troas of a man from Macedonia, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:10). The vision was obviously from God; Thessalonica was the second place the preachers came to in Macedonia, so that those who became Christians there were known beforehand by God. Thus they were "His choice."
- **In power** - Jesus had informed the apostles in His presence in Samaria that the fields in which they would work were prepared by other people and forces. When the Holy Spirit blocked Paul from going into Ephesus, it was because He had prepared the fields in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. To get the testimony that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead to the point where that claim was believable, the apostles were able to perform miracles in Jesus's name. Thus Paul states, "for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also that in power" (I Thessalonians 1:5). While the details are not given, the power would be the miracles of casting out evil spirits, delivering the message in languages they had never learned, healing the sick and paralyzed, and the curing of all sorts of human maladies. There were also prophetic powers, as Paul illustrated in his epistle to the Corinthian Christians, speaking of the power of prophecy, when "an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters your assembly) he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you" (I Corinthians 14:24,25). That's some power!
- **In the Holy Spirit** - The apostle Paul would never claim that such power emanated from him on the basis of his own abilities. "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me," he plainly stated to the Roman brethren, "resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, *in the power of the Spirit*, so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ" (Romans 15:18, 19). That preaching "round about" included Thessalonica. Jesus originally promised the apostles "power when *the Holy Spirit* has come upon you" (Acts 1:8).

With this exhibition of power-coming through the actions of the Holy Spirit - the gospel came to Thessalonica, and the "word" which had the power to save and to cause the individual saints to be born from above was confirmed. Thus the congregation in Thessalonica was established and strengthened.

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### With Full Conviction

There is no doubt that the apostle Paul believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Early in the history of the church, he - then known as Saul of Tarsus - was instrumental in the death of the first martyr of the faith, Stephen. From that point on he persecuted the church intensely, being firmly convinced that their belief that Jesus was raised from the dead was a hoax or contrivance of confused men and women. But Saul was soon to reckon with the Christ who he had believed was permanently dead and buried. On his way to Damascus to round up disciples of Christ and bring them to Jerusalem for trial and punishment, Saul encountered the Lord Jesus. Blinded and knocked to the ground, he could only ask, "Who are you, lord?" when spoken to. "I am Jesus the Nazarene," the voice responded, "whom you are persecuting" (Acts 22:8). That answer rocked his entire belief system; Jesus was clearly raised from the dead, and in a position of demonstrated power. "But arise, and stand on your feet," was the command in the continuing conversation. "For this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you" (Acts 26:16). Jesus not only appeared to Paul that one time on the Damascus road, but also many times following. There is no doubt that the apostle Paul believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

- **In Thessalonica** - Thus, when Paul came to Thessalonica, he brought with him that full assurance that Jesus was indeed risen. "Our gospel," he comments, "did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit *and with full conviction*" (I Thessalonians 1:5). When a man is fully convinced about something, there is a force of character about him that communicates in all the non-verbals. For someone like Paul, who already many times over essentially had been faced with a choice - death, or deny Christ - the force of his conviction that Jesus was raised from the dead filled the area around his presence like an amplifier system filling a room with sound. The Thessalonian brethren would be able to remember when he arrived in the town, his impact on the Synagogue, and the impression he made on the Gentiles.
- **What kind of men** - It is one thing to say all the right things, it is another to back those fine sounding words with appropriate action. After referring to the coming of the gospel to Thessalonica, the apostle then adds, "just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you." The conduct of Paul and his preaching companions was so clearly consistent with the principles and practices of Christianity that he could say that the brethren knew about their character. Furthermore, their exhibition of character had shone brightly in the face of some severe testing and persecution; Paul used the words, "proved among you."

*Conviction* not only gives the words of the gospel a resonance that those without conviction can never achieve, but it drives the one with said conviction onward. A sense of this driving conviction can be gleaned from some of the statements of the apostle to the church in Corinth: "For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake," he adverted, "that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." Having laid the groundwork for his next driving comment, he wrote, "But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, I believed, therefore I spoke, we also believe, therefore also we speak, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus (II Corinthians 4:11-14). That is the conviction that drove him onward.

## Imitators

The theme of being an imitator is one that runs through the pages of the Scriptures. Elisha, for example was spoken of as one who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah'; that is, he trained under and imitated his mentor prophet. Joshua was an imitator of Moses, and was trained to take Moses' place as the one who would lead the children of Israel in the conquest of the promised land. "A pupil," said the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, "is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). That is why the apostle Paul would command the Corinthian brethren in the Roman province of Achaia, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ' (I Corinthians 11:1).

- **In much tribulation** - The Founder of Christianity Himself was persecuted and executed. The second preached message that was recorded resulted in Peter and John's being put on trial. Before long, Saul of Tarsus was using his tremendous zeal (as he would later put it - "zeal without knowledge") to breathe "threats and murder" upon those early saints, and they were driven out of Jerusalem and Scattered. Later that same Saul, known as the apostle Paul, suffered stoning, beatings, and lashings at the hands of the Jews and Roman authorities. He thus commends the brethren in Thessalonica, noting, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (I Thessalonians 1:6). They became *imitators!* These saints from the Roman province of Macedonia not only entered into persecution, but they imitated the apostles and the Lord Jesus in that they came through those fires successfully, with their faith intact. They received what the scripture boldly and uncompromisingly calls "the word." and consequently underwent what is termed "much tribulation." But, as imitators of the apostles and Christ, they endured and overcame their challenges "with the joy of the Holy Spirit." This is a powerful commentary on the faith of these brethren.
- **Became an example** - God uses events and circumstances to accomplish His will. When Saul of Tarsus was sitting blinded and repentant in the house of Judas, located on Straight Street in Damascus, he could not have known what the Almighty was going to do with his life. He was only conscious that he was guilty of persecuting the church of the living God, and wanting therefore to be forgiven by and be at peace with the God of Israel. He was unaware that God would feature his conversion in the eternal Spotlight of the word of God, and that his turning away from Judaism to the life of the new covenant would be a core example for many millions to come. In the same way, each of the brethren in Thessalonica was conscious only of his own spiritual battle to maintain his faith and focus during the specific persecution and threatening he was experiencing. But God took that suffering and advertised it to encourage other brethren. "You became an example to all the believers," asseverates the apostle, "in Macedonia and Achaia (I Thessalonians 1:7). The All Wise caused the word of their positive victories to spread throughout Macedonia and Achaia; their suffering was not in vain, but was magnified for God's purposes.

But the effects of their victorious suffering were not limited to their own contemporaries. Because God has seen fit to have this letter recorded in His eternal word, their faith continues to encourage brethren today. A lesson for modern Saints today is clear: Suffering and persecution is not for the moment and the event only. God has a much bigger picture, and often is willing to shine His light on that Suffering, and have the Saint's positive overcoming of that persecution serve as an encouragement for multitudes. May modern saints be willing to learn from their example, and to face the coming persecution of our time with hope and with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

## Sounding Forth

Many of the saints in the first century were very excited about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Within one generation, they took the good news of salvation through the Messiah to the ends of the world, as Paul described in his letter to the Colossians: the gospel, said he, "was proclaimed in all creation under heaven" (Colossians 1:23). It was "in all the world constantly bearing fruit and increasing" (Colossians 1:6). In spite of the fires of persecution from the Jews, and the black cloud of the impending doom of tyranny from the Roman government, these early Christians were excited about the eternal things connected with Christ, and in their excitement publicly and privately preached and taught the word of God with great success. And so it was in Thessalonica.

- **The word sounded forth** - The apostle Paul was complimentary in his remarks concerning the congregation in Thessalonica. He had noted that they received God's word in much joy in spite of the tremendous persecution that came upon them from the hands of the local Jews, and the maintenance of their faith was an example to all the brethren in that part of the world. "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you," he superadds, "not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything" (I Thessalonians 1:8). What an apt and descriptive phrase - *the word has sounded forth from you*. It creates a picture such as a man standing on a prominent peak with an Old Testament shofar (a big horn used like a trumpet to call Israel to the tent of meeting or to go forth in battle) and blasting away with a sound that could be heard all over the countryside. The gospel, then, and news of the attendant suffering connected with the gospel, spread "every place," so much so that there was nothing the apostle Paul could add.
- **Report of their reception** - News spread more slowly in those days than at the present, but it still spread. People talk about the things that are interesting to them, whether it be a tractor pulling contest or a beauty contest. Children of the new covenant are interested in the activities of the local congregations and the distribution of the gospel. Thus Paul writes, "For they themselves report about us what kind of reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (I Thessalonians 1:9). It is recorded in the book of Acts, when Paul first preached in the synagogue at Thessalonica, that "some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great number of God-fearing Greeks and a number of leading women" (Acts 17:4). Even after Paul was run out of town by the unbelieving Jews, the gospel continued to work and convert a large number of idol worshipers out of the contacts of those non-idol-worshipping God-fearing Greeks. The news of this positive reception of Paul and those who traveled with him was disseminated "every place."

One of the challenges for the spread of the gospel in the twenty-first century is getting it heard. First of all, the forces of darkness have created massive confusion about the way of salvation, so that much teaching and persuasion on an individual basis must take place. Secondly, the airwaves and social media are jammed with nonsense from the world itself, so that there is such a cacophony that the truth from God's word has very little space in which to compete. This is why it is imperative that the Saints of today, while it is still called "today," be very zealous about the Bible studies in prospects' homes. By following a good "track to run on," the word of the gospel and follow up teaching can be distributed, saints will develop conviction, the lost will be reached, and once again, the word of the Lord will *sound forth*. May each of us raise his *spiritual shofar*, and sound the blast that will be heard around the world!

## Turning To God

Many of today's so-called Christians glibly use the phrase "turning to God." They like it because it is generic enough for them to duck the issue of the necessity of immersion in Jesus' name for the forgiveness of sins and for the receiving of the indwelling Spirit. But "turning to God" is a scriptural term, and it is important that the word of God itself define the meaning of that term. The apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Thessalonica, comments that the message had spread - throughout the congregations - that the Thessalonians had "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." They turned; how did they do that?

- **Converted** - The King James Version and others often use the word *converted* instead of *turned*. But those words are synonyms: they basically mean the same thing. Example: Acts 3:19 in the KJV and NKJV says, "Repent and be converted." The NASB says, "Repent and return." The ESV says, "Repent and turn back." The NIV says, "Repent and turn to God." The NIV, as stated in its preface, is not a word-for-word translation, so the translators felt free to add the words "to God" which were not there in the original Greek text. The point is that repentance and conversion (turning) are necessary "that your sins may be wiped out." Thus, where turning or conversion fits in Acts 3:19, *immersion* fits in Acts 2:38. A person may only be spoken of as having been *converted* or having *turned* to the Lord if he has been properly immersed into Christ. *Conversion* occurs in *immersion*!
- **The Thessalonians turned** - The brethren in Thessalonica therefore "turned to God" at their immersions in Jesus' name. The apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Colossians describes how in immersion a spiritual circumcision takes place. In Christ, he said, 'you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, *in the removal of the body of the flesh* by the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11). When a person commits his first sin, this spiritual sheath called here "the body of the flesh" drops in place, and separates him from God. Until this is removed in immersion, the individual has no fellowship with God. Paul described it in somewhat different terms in writing to the brethren in Corinth, calling it a *veil which lies over their heart*. "It is removed," he averred, "in Christ" (II Corinthians 3:14). A person enters into Christ at immersion (Romans 6:3). Hence, since turning occurs in immersion, Paul would say, "Whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (II Corinthians 3:16). What does the inner man see when the veil, or the body of the flesh, is taken away? "But we all," affirms the apostle, "with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord" (II Corinthians 3:18). When the Thessalonians turned to God, their inner man beheld the glory of King Jesus, shining in His radiance and seated on His throne.
- **To God from idols** - Paul, remembering the positive reception those who believed in the word of God gave him, also notes "how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (I Thessalonians 1:10). The brethren, spiritually speaking, had to turn their backs on the idols they formerly worshiped, and in turning to God, their inner man beheld the glory of the risen Christ. The inner man was thus prostrate before the throne of the Almighty - worshipping - while the outer man of these brethren would be serving the great King.

There is only one living and true God; there is no substance at all to idols other than that of which men have been convinced. Through their immersions into Christ, these brethren turned to the Lord, were being transformed as the inner man beheld the Lord's glory, and they had fellowship with the blessed and only Father of all who is over all and through all. What blessed people these were!!

## The Son From Heaven

The second coming of Christ is a great motivator for Christians. The scripture teaches very emphatically that He will come again to reward His saints and punish those who did not know Him or obey His gospel, and this return is one of the great themes of Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians. Mankind as a whole tends to live as if this life were the only part of man's existence, ignoring the fact that man is an eternal being who will live forever either in heaven or in hell. The teaching that Jesus is coming again brings eternity to the fore, and causes the honest ones among the Sons of earth to take careful inventory of their spiritual condition. The apostle Paul made this clear in the closing portion of his message to the pagan Athenians gathered at Mars Hill to listen to his discourse: "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance," he animadverted, "God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30.31). Even Enoch, the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied that the Lord would come with many thousands of His holy ones (angels), "to execute judgment upon all" (Jude 1:14). As the old spiritual queried, "Are you ready for the Judgment Day?"

- **Waiting for His Son** - Christians, having been taught the whole counsel of God, are supremely aware that Jesus is coming soon. Jesus Himself, during the last days of His earthly sojourn, spoke of His second coming. "Therefore be on the alert," He had admonished, "for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will" (Matthew 24:42.44). Thus the apostle Paul commends the brethren in Thessalonica, because as they turned from idols serve God, they also followed the instruction "wait for His Son from heaven" (I Thessalonians 1:10). This does not mean that they were to sit on their hands and do nothing, such as waiting at a bus stop; they were to be in *expectation* of His coming while they busied themselves in bringing the harvest of Souls in. This Son, of course, is the One "whom He raised from the dead - Jesus."
- **Wrath to come** - The scriptures continually warn mankind as a whole of the impending doom connected with the coming of Christ. Jesus informed us that few would find "the narrow gate," that most of the human race would choose the broad path that leads to destruction. Hence the day of the Lord's return, while it is a day of earnest expectation and anticipated joy for the saints, is a day of destruction for the non-Christians and the evil angels. Therefore, when the apostle Paul describes the Lord Jesus, he appends the words, "who delivers us from the wrath to come."

The brethren in Colossae understood the eternal consequences or blessings connected with the choice of following Jesus. The modern saint would also do well periodically to ponder the great blessings of having heard the gospel of Christ, and having had the opportunity to obey it. The brethren of today certainly need to turn from any modern idols to serve God, to wait for His Son from heaven, and to be delivered from the wrath to come. What a deliverance that is! And how worthy of praise is He who accomplished such a great redemption at the price of His own earthly suffering and separation from the Father!



## Remembering the Beginning

Paul arrived in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, having come into town from Philippi. While Paul was preaching in the place for prayer outside of Philippi, a slave girl having a spirit of divination kept following Paul and his fellow workers. Being demon possessed, she was kind of like a crazy person, and day after day she was saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17). Paul was annoyed by the testimony coming from this source, so at one point he cast the evil spirit out of the slave girl. With the spirit cast out, the girl did not have any ability to predict the future with the extra accuracy attributed to someone demon-possessed, so her masters lost their source of profit from her. The result was that Paul and Silas were cast into prison and beaten severely. God caused an earthquake to shake the prison, the Philippian jailer heard the gospel and was immersed, and Paul and Silas were asked to leave town by the judges. To Thessalonica they went, since it was the next locality with a Jewish synagogue.

- **How it was** - The apostle, then, takes a little trip down memory lane. "For you yourselves know, brethren," he recalls, "that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition" (I Thessalonians 2:1.2). Having faced much persecution in his preaching of the gospel, he remembered once again that he and his companions "had the boldness in our God" to preach the one way of Salvation through Jesus Christ. As he reasoned in the synagogue at Thessalonica, the Jews were jealous and did everything they could to oppose the gospel, finally forcing Paul and Silas out of town and down the road to Berea. Amid much opposition," he quietly notes.
- **Purity of exhortation** - The entire communication of God to men is predicated on truth, and in fact is truth. Satan, on the other hand, is a liar and the source of lies. Thus it would be clear that if the gospel of God were truly preached, it would be preached openly and without subterfuge. "For Our exhortation, clarifies the apostle, "does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit" (I Thessalonians 2:3). By obvious contrast, those who preach falsely are in error, or attempt to justify impurity, or are just plain deceptive.
- **Entrusted with the gospel** - The gospel, then, must be carried by those who are honest and exhibit the character of Christ-especially the apostles. The exhortation (an interesting Word for *preaching*) came openly and honestly, "just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts" (I Thessalonians 2:4). The pressure to bend, twist, or distort the gospel is tremendous. In Paul's case (and certainly the other apostles also), the opposition by the Jews nearly everywhere he went was intense, both in verbal argument and in violent persecution. If at any point there was a desire to please men, there would have been compromise on his part. That is why Jesus took such care in the selection of the apostles, and allowed the weeding out process to go on that eliminated Judas Iscariot. These men were those who could stand the test. But the pressure from the Jewish element was so strong that at one point even the apostle Peter got carried into the hypocrisy of not eating with the Gentile Christians. The gospel has to be preached regardless of opposition.

The God who examined the hearts of Paul and those other first century purveyors of the gospel also examines the hearts of modern Christians. Paul passed the test; he was approved by God and was thus entrusted with the sound doctrine of the new covenant. The question is: can any of twenty-first century Christians pass that same test, preaching and teaching the gospel of God without compromise, speaking the truth in love?

## The Proving Ground

The Father expects His children of faith to exhibit the character befitting those making a claim to godliness. "And do not be conformed to this world, was the exordium to the brethren in Rome, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may *prove* what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). *Proving* basically has to do with passing some sort of test. "You have been distressed by various trials," commented the apostle Peter, "that the *proof* of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though *tested* by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6,7). Before Jesus sent the apostles out with the message of salvation beginning in Acts chapter two, He put them through the tests to prove that they were trustworthy. The Lord knew that the character of Saul of Tarsus, once he turned to the Lord, would similarly shine as he would pass through tremendous pressure and persecution without compromising the gospel.

- **No pretexts** - Because the gospel is rooted in "the word of truth," there can be no lying or hidden agendas connected with its proclamation and explanation. "For we never came with flattering speech, as you know," Paul recalls, "nor with a pretext for greed - God is witness ..." (1 Thessalonians 2:5). If someone is flattering people, then he is planning on using them for personal gain somehow; and this is not honest. The apostle and his co-laborers did not come to Thessalonica to engage in a money extracting process or shakedown; they came to press the claims of Jesus Christ upon the Thessalonians' souls. Had greed been their motive, they would have figured out how to avoid the intense suffering that came upon them in that portion of Macedonia. Thus it was clear that there were no pretexts or pretenses in the apostle's presentation of the gospel of Christ.
- **No glory** - The apostle was willing to call God as witness as to the purity of their motives and intentions. Since this epistle was written under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we know for certain the accuracy of Paul's claims. He is also emphatic, adding "nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or others" (1 Thessalonians 2:6). The desire for glory from men - peer pressure - is a very large factor in people's rejecting the slicing truth of the gospel. For example, "many of the rulers of the Synagogues in Jerusalem believed in Him," the apostle John noted, "but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue, *for they loved the approval of men* rather than the approval of God" (John 12:42,43). Not only is there tremendous pressure on those who would think about believing the truth, but there is even more pressure on those who would think about proclaiming the truth, because the proclaimers are more visible. Paul and those who traveled with him did not back away from preaching the truth in order to be men-pleasers."

As apostles of Christ," he adds, "we might have asserted our authority." However, seeking glory from men was not their motive, and Paul was not trying to elevate himself in some sick game. "But we proved to be gentle among you," he avers, "as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her children" (1 Thessalonians 2:7). The congregation in Thessalonica consisted of new Christians who were willing to follow Christ in the midst of intense persecution from the local Jews. Not only would they have the normal personal issues to overcome as they spiritually moved forward from their past lives and habits, but these tensions would be exacerbated by the ill-treatment they were enduring. The leadership of Paul, proving to be the proper combination of care and correction, had been critical to their spiritual growth. The picture he used is one for modern leadership to keep in mind: "As a nursing mother tenderly cares for her children"!

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Imparting Their Lives

It cannot be overstressed that the gospel of Christ is carried from person to person. The growth of each Christian requires personal involvement on the part of church leadership in order to help the struggling Saints move forward and upward. The scripture pictures sheep being led by shepherds, who know the by name and are personally involved. The great picture is that of the Chief Shepherd, who is described in this foundational manner: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Even the great God, in dealing with the sons of men, became one of us in order to have the personal touch, and share in the one to-one interaction so necessary for the word of God to have its proper impact. Hence the apostle Paul and those traveling with him, when they came to Thessalonica, engaged in these same important personal interactions.

- **Fond affection** - As the apostle was writing this epistle, inspired by the Spirit of God, he comments on the personal relationship he had with these brethren. Because he had gotten down in the trenches with the people in the congregation, he could appeal to them personally because they knew who he was and how he had conducted himself. "We never came with flattering speech," he had stated. He was not motivated by greed, and did not earthly glory. "We proved to be gentle among you," was his assertion, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children." "Having thus a fond affection for you, the apostle continues the thought, "we were pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, you had become very dear to us" (I Thessalonians 2:8). So strong was this affection that it generated these words: *we were pleased!* What Paul and others were doing was not just a cause or some crusade or revolutionary agenda; they were driven by intense concern for those whom they had come to know personally. Thus it was not just the words of the gospel - which are powerful and life-giving - that he was presenting to the people, but they "imparted their own lives."
- **Labor and hardship** - He could go on appealing to their memories of his time with them. "For you recall, brethren," he prompts, "our labor and hardship, how working day and night so as not to be a burden to any one of you, as we proclaimed the gospel of God" (I Thessalonians 2:9). There have always been those who use scripture as "a pretext for greed." The apostle was conscious of this, and in consequence his method of operation was to work if necessary and have those accompany him work to pay their own expenses. In this way it was clear that they not come for money they could extract from the brethren, but that their concern truly was the eternity of each of those who heard. The word "labor and hardship" are easy to read over quickly, but each modern saint needs to create some vivid pictures in his mind as to what that would look like, and not complain about his circumstances.
- **Devoutly, uprightly, and blamelessly** - Amazingly, after listing all the things above, he could continue to appeal to what they personally knew about Paul and his team. "You are our witnesses," says he, "and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers" (I Thessalonians 2:10). Again, these are simple but powerful words. The brethren saw the personal faith and prayers of the apostle in action. They knew his moral character, and his walk with the Lord.

The apostle is not writing this epistle simply because he could not think of anything else to do on a fine Saturday afternoon. He is penning these thoughts because of his continuing desire to help the brethren remain solid and secure in their faith, and to extend the influence of the gospel. So when he is ready to make his appeal to them, they know that he has no hidden agenda, but that his concern is solely for them and their eternities.

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Imploring as a Father

Dads love their children. Sometimes, because of the sin that so easily besets the human race, that love is not perfectly shown, nor perfectly carried out. But, especially if the dads are Christians, they really want the best for their children – guiding them, developing their characters, getting them educated, bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. One of the greatest challenges, of course, is for the initiative, character, and discipline to become the child's own as he moves into adulthood. The father can want with all his heart for his sons and daughters to walk uprightly with the Lord, but at some point the now-adult child has to function on his own; the nestlings must flutter out of the nest and begin to fly without being propped up by their parents. However, if the communication and relationship has been maintained, dads still have many opportunities to encourage and strengthen their grown children, and the relationship often becomes friend-to-friend and partner-to-partner.

- **How we were** - Paul has the brethren in Thessalonica call to mind his and his companions' work ethic and conduct while they labored in the midst of great persecution from the local Jews. "You are witnesses, he brings forward, "how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children (I Thessalonians 2:10, 11). The key words are *each one!* Every single saint was very important to Paul, and he earnestly desired each's salvation and spiritual growth. Thus the apostle pictures himself as standing along the course of each of the brethren's long run, "exhorting and encouraging and imploring." Exhortation is demonstrated by a coach's firing up one of his players; encouragement would be complimenting the player on doing a great job on the last play and saying to go and play great again; imploring would be working with a player struggling with an attitude that needs improvement or helping him fight through frustration. Paul states that's "how we were."
- **Walking worthy** - But this is no football or basketball game. This is the road of eternal life. Thus the encouragement and imploring was "so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory" (I Thessalonians 2:12). There are those who insist that saints are always rotten sinners saved by grace. The word of God paints a picture that the brothers and sisters of Jesus can walk in a manner that imitates the character of the Lord, following in His footsteps. How exciting it is, that through the word of God and help from the indwelling Holy Spirit, the saint can present himself worthy of God!
- **Kingdom and glory** - The Father, through the gospel, is currently *calling* people out of this world into His kingdom - the church of the living God. He is also calling the brethren to participate in His glory now, the glory that shines in the inner man of the newly immersed saint. Those "whom He called," affirmed Paul, "these He also justified, and whom He justified, He also glorified" (Romans 8:30). But just as there is participation in the present kingdom and present glory, so there will be participation in the eternal kingdom and eternal glory! And the great God and Father of all has called each individual saint into both.

The apostle Paul knew how fraught with danger is the path that leads to eternal life. The lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life are lurking around every corner. The challenges of continually facing persecution and disappointment are great, and fighting the battle against discouragement while the outer man is decaying are great. Hence Paul and the others were "exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one as a father would his own children. And through the scripture, he still is!

## The Word of God Works

One of the great themes of the Bible is that the scriptures are composed of living words. "For the word of God is living and active," penned the author of Hebrews, "and sharper than any two edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). "You have been born again, affirmed Peter, "not of the seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God" (I Peter 1:23). "The words that I have spoken to you." asseverated the Lord Jesus Himself, "are spirit and are life" (John 6:63). Dead words lie there on the page and do nothing, but the words of God - while distributed on printed page or in some form of digital transmission - are endued with a life in themselves, and able to beget life in the process of regenerating man. This power and this life are to be pondered, and not dismissed or diminished in any way by the hearer.

- **Receiving the message** - The apostle Paul came into Thessalonica and first delivered the message of God's truth in the synagogue. Some of the Jews and a number of Gentiles who hung around the synagogue believed the message about Jesus and were immersed into Christ. These converts were the beginning of the congregation at Thessalonica, and formed the core to which others could be added. The goal of the apostle, then, in teaching these brethren following their immersions into Christ, was to help them to "walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." Building off that statement, the apostle continues. "And for this reason," he begins, as he recalls his first encounter with these saints, "we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God ..." (I Thessalonians 2:13). This is a point to ponder: the apostle himself, even with his ability to perform miracles, was apparently often challenged with the idea that his message was fabricated by men -himself and others. Even today, the foundational issue is whether the Bible is a collection of manmade teaching, or whether these are the very words of the great God Himself, written by the pen of man but inspired by the Holy Spirit. But, praise the All Wise, He set it up so that the Bible can be proven to be His word by an inductive reasoning process, and modern Saints can also receive it as the word of God rather than that of men.
- **Work in believers** - As noted earlier, the words of God have a life of their own, so to speak, a life given to them by the living God. Therefore the apostle comments that when the Thessalonians received the word as the word of God, he describes it as that "which performs its work in you who believe." They were "born again of the living and abiding word of God" to begin with (I Peter 1:23). The great principle from the physical realm is that "life begets life": that is, that life can only come from a previous living organism, a Seed (plant or, in a manner of Speaking, animal). Life cannot come from something inanimate. Similarly, spiritual life cannot come from a chemistry text or mathematics handbook; it can only come from the living word of God.

Not only does spiritual life come magnificently from the word, but the maintenance and continuing growth of the Christian comes from that word as well. Just as the DNA in the cell has the information for reproduction and also has the instructions for keeping the living cell functioning, the word of God has the instructions for the living Saint. The word ultimately performs the work, while the disciple of Christ feeds on and implements those instructions. The message is clear: if the saint will do his part, God and His word will accomplish the transformation.

## Enduring Persecution

The Lord Jesus had stated that He would build His church upon the "rock" - the foundational truth that He is the Son of the living God. He also remarked that "repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). Thus it was that the church began on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost, AD 30, as recorded in Acts chapter two. 3000 souls were added to the apostles' number, having been immersed in Jesus' name, and the church of Jesus Christ had its beginning in Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, the number of men became 5000, then the brethren numbered multitudes. But by Acts chapter eight, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem headed up by one Saul of Tarsus, and the church was scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. The apostle Paul - the former Saul of Tarsus - described his efforts before Herod Agrippa II and the governor Porcius Festus: "Not only did I lock up many of the Saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them ... I punished them often in all the synagogues" (Acts 26:10,11). It was clearly a rugged time for the brethren.

- **Record in Thessalonica** - But Jerusalem was not the only place where persecution occurred against Christians. "For you, brethren." Paul remembers, "became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the Same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews" (I Thessalonians 2:14). [As a side note, it is interesting that Paul would have been the ringleader of "the Jews" who persecuted the churches of Judea.] Some moderns who have never been persecuted will state that the church does better under such privations; the inspired record posits a different perspective. True it is, that the church was driven out of Jerusalem, and that was probably necessary to get them out of their comfort Zone. But when Saul of Tarsus turned from maltreating the church and became one of the promulgators of the gospel, then things changed positively for the early brethren, at least for a spell. "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up," is how Luke recorded the respite, "and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase" (Acts 9:31). Clearly, they "enjoyed the peace," and really moved forward with the gospel. For the congregation in Thessalonica, then, to hold onto its purity of doctrine and commitment to the Lord, in the face of the types of pressure exerted by the recalcitrant Jews, is commended by the apostle Paul.
- **Jews who reject the gospel** - The apostle and the Holy Spirit are not particularly complimentary to those of Israel who reject the gospel and savage the church. Describing the Jews who Wreaked havoc among the early church in Judea as well as those who opposed the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles, the apostle writes, "who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out" (I Thessalonians 2:15). It is interesting how again and again, the Jews are charged with the killing of Jesus, although it was Romans who drove the spikes into the tree. "They are not pleasing to God," the apostle adds, "but hostile to all men."

The church in Thessalonica endured persecution at the hands of the Jews in their region. They held to the doctrines the apostles preached, and kept moving forward in faith, comforted and strengthened by the indwelling Spirit. Paul was therefore very thankful that they received from him and his fellow workers the word of truth, and that the brethren did their part so that the word could continue to perform its positive and edifying work in them. Awesome progress in the face of immense opposition!!

## Wrath upon Gods Opposition

The only reason this world exists is so that God can call from the nations of earth a special people for the sake of His name. When there is no one left who will answer the call, then God's plan is finished on earth and He will destroy the physical universe. Jesus Himself said, during the years of His earthly sojourn, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49). But the time was not yet at hand, and, nearly 2000 years later, if anyone is still reading this, the time is still not yet at hand. "The Lord is not slow about His promise," commented Peter, "as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9). This is making it clear that God will hold off the day of judgment until every last person who will repent can be converted.

- **Jewish hostility** - Jesus had anticipated, as He explained at different times and different ways, the hostility the Jews would develop toward the gospel. "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue," the Lord had explained to the apostles, "but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (John 16:2). They were the ones who, as Paul put it, "both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out." They were misguided in their understanding, as Paul explained to the brethren in Rome, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge" (Romans 10:2). Because they did not understand, or would not understand, their zeal turned dangerous. "They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men."
- **Getting in the way** - Their hostility was so deeply ingrained that they not only rejected the gospel as it applied to them, and persecuted those who tried to preach to them, but they were also "hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles, that they may be saved" (I Thessalonians 2:16). God's obvious goal is the Salvation of the Gentiles, who can only be saved if they are able to hear and then obey the word of God. So when these men were blocking the progress of the gospel, they were in fact major barriers in the plan and purpose of God. And He wasn't happy!
- **Fill up the measure** - When Jesus rode over the crest of the Mount of Olives and overlooked Jerusalem, He wept over the city because of their rejection of Him as their Messiah and Savior. The culpability, He said, of all the righteous blood shed on earth would fall on that generation. "Fill up." He emphasized, "then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers" (Matthew 23:32). Similar language was used by Paul in describing the end of those Jews who hindered the early preachers from getting the gospel to the Gentiles. "The result," he commented, of Such conduct, is "that they always fill up the measure of their sins" (I Thessalonians 2:16).

The Scripture consistently pictures the ultimate destruction which will come upon those who are not obedient to the gospel of peace. But those who oppose the preaching of the word of God seem to get a hotter spot in the fires of hell. As Paul spoke of those Jews who tried to block the spread of the word of God to the Gentiles, he used this terminology: "But wrath has come upon them to the utmost." They will, as Revelation pictures it, say to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?" (Revelation 6:16,17). But they won't be able to run, and they can't hide!

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Paul's Crown and Joy

In his epistle to the Roman congregation, the apostle Paul describes what might be termed a road. The first section for a Christian is tribulation, followed by another section called perseverance. When the saint has successfully traveled the road through this tribulation and has exhibited the requisite perseverance, then he has demonstrated a "proven character." This proven character now has hope, because he has seen that if he perseveres through the difficulties, God always grants him spiritual victory. In this whole process he can now really exhibit the "love of God poured out" within his heart through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:3-5). Certainly the apostle Paul had demonstrated all aspects of traversing this road to the brethren in Thessalonica who heard him preach and were converted to Christianity. The tribulation and his perseverance were obvious, his character had clearly been exhibited in the midst of great persecution, his continued hope shone through, and his love of these brethren was evident even in his writing this letter.

- **Bereft for a time** - Paul was only able to preach in Thessalonica over a period including three Sabbaths, after which he and Silas were sent away to Berea. From thence he went to Athens, and then on to Corinth. Thus he was not able to be in the physical presence of the brethren, and to know from face-to-face contact how well they were doing spiritually. "But we, brethren," he therefore writes, "having been bereft of you for a short time — in person, not in spirit - were all the more eager with great desire to see your face" (I Thessalonians 2:17). Spiritually he was in fellowship with them, but the physical separation was of concern to him. He earnestly wanted to be in their presence to encourage and strengthen them.
- **Satan's hindrances** - Because of the difficulty of communication compared to modern days, the apostle has to explain why he had not yet come to encourage them. "For we wanted to come to you," averred the apostle, "I, Paul, more than once - and yet Satan thwarted us" (I Thessalonians 2:18). No details of how Satan hindered Paul from getting to Thessalonica are available. But somehow the prince of darkness had enough power to have stopped the apostle more than once! There is definitely a spiritual war going on.
- **Our joy** - Material things do not last forever; people are eternal beings and do last forever. Real joy, then, is derived from a systematic means of deepening relationships with people. Ultimate joy, superadding to the thought, is derived from deepening relationships with people who are going to heaven. The apostle, conscious of this, comments, "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?" (I Thessalonians 2:19). The apostle Paul plowed in the hope of having a crop of souls saved for all eternity. What joy he had in seeing that his toil and suffering not be in vain, that these people were pulled out of paganism or Judaism into the truth of life in Christ Jesus. What a picture he has, that these Saints would be his crown of tremendous happiness.

The Lord, speaking through the prophet Daniel so long ago, stated, "And those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:3). Certainly there would be few who would be able to match the apostle Paul in those categories. But he always gave credit to the Lord for giving him the grace to accomplish what he did in his lifetime, and his concern was always for the eternities of those he taught. "For you," he emphasizes to the Thessalonian brethren, "are our glory and joy!" (I Thessalonians 2:20).



## Concern for the Brethren

Immersion is not the end for the Christian; it is the beginning. There are spiritual mountains and caves and holes in the ground that must be endured victoriously. There are battles to fight, betrayals to overcome, Strategies to orchestrate, and enemies to defeat. The warfare, while spiritual rather than physical as it was in the Old Testament, is just as intense. Thus the New Testament writings are replete with warnings, instructions, and concerns for the brethren as they engage in their solo skirmishes and as they collectively battle for the purity and progress of their local churches. Hence the apostle Paul, working with so many brethren, and involved with so many congregations in the ongoing Striving against the forces of darkness and for the victory of the light, exuded solicitude for all the brethren. In describing his beatings and challenges of survival while taking the gospel everywhere he could go, he commented, "Apart from such external things, there is daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches" (II Corinthians 11:28). He exhibits that concern for the congregation in Thessalonica.

- **Enduring no longer** - Paul was not long in Thessalonica or that region of Macedonia. He had not preached for many weeks before the Jews from Thessalonica drove him out of that region and he ended up in Athens, where Timothy apparently was able to join him shortly thereafter. In view of the fact that the congregation had begun in a cauldron of controversy, Paul's spirit was troubled as he undoubtedly prayed and waited for word of the health of the congregation. "Therefore when we could endure it no longer," he explains, "we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone" (I Thessalonians 3:1). His concern was so intense it was like severe pain, pain that could be tolerated no longer.
- **Sending Timothy** - To find out the condition of the brethren in Thessalonica, the apostle was able to send one of his most trusted lieutenants. Because of the burden of not knowing how well the brethren were faring, "we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone; and we sent Timothy our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ" (I Thessalonians 3:2). It was better to send Timothy to find out rather than to have his companionship-this shows how intense the concern was. Timothy, of course, was highly recommended by Paul as his "brother" and "fellow worker."
- **Strengthen and encourage** - The apostle's concern was that their faith remain intact in the face of the tremendous opposition by the Jewish element. Timothy, then, was also coming to Thessalonica "to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions, for you know that we have been destined for this (I Thessalonians 3:2.3). The preaching and teaching of Timothy would enable them to focus - by faith- on Christ in glory, and thus be undisturbed by the earthly challenges in which they were immersed.
- **Suffer affliction** - One of the great mental challenges for saints is to accept that to be a Christian also means to be persecuted. "We were destined for this, the apostle had noted, "For indeed when we were with you," he asks them to recall, "we kept telling you in advance that We were going to suffer affliction; and so it has come to pass, as you know" (I Thessalonians 3:4). This certainly flies in the face of the so-called "health, wealth, and happiness gospel.

On concluding their work on the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas informed the brethren, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The modern saint must take this perspective into consideration as the world moves on toward its final destruction. Evil men will proceed from bad to worse, and the gospel of Christ will be increasingly hated in civilizations that have deliberately turned their backs on God. Hence the brethren of today need the same type of strengthening and encouragement that their first century counterparts in Thessalonica experienced. May today's preachers and teachers be up to the task!

## Overpowering the Tempter

"How's your faith?" is a fair and honest question. Since a Christian is saved by faith, justified by faith, lives by faith, and walks by faith, the condition of the faith of the individual certainly needs to be monitored. The "testing of your faith," affirmed James, "produces endurance" (James 1:3). Peter added, "the proof of your faith [*the faith* being more precious than perishable gold] may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:7). The honest concern, then, of the apostle Paul would be connected with how the faith of the persecuted and tested brethren was holding up.

- **Finding out** - Paul was recalling the tremendous persecution that came upon the fledgling church in Thessalonica. "For this reason," he explains, "when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith" (I Thessalonians 3:5). Obviously, the concern for the brethren was weighing heavily upon the apostle, and he just had to send someone to find out their status. But what he was concerned about was not their physical health or whether any grandbabies had been born to families of the congregation; he was solicitous about the status of their faith, whether it was remaining firm and growing in strength. If they lost their faith, they were essentially "toast" at Judgment Day.
- **The tempter** - The tempter, of course, is Satan, who tempted Jesus Himself in the wilderness. The wiles of the schemer and his power to impede the gospel are variously indicated in the scripture; the apostle had just commented on how Satan thwarted even he, an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, more than once. Wondering, therefore, how the congregation in Thessalonica was faring, he "could endure it no longer," and sent Timothy to assess the Strength of their faith, "for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain." Temptation is not just dealing with overcoming personal bad habits; the possibility of giving up in the face of persecution is the particular temptation Paul is dealing with here. Had they yielded, had the brethren quit following the Lord and assembling as a congregation, Paul's labor would have been in vain. Modern Christians would do well to begin to strengthen their faith and steel themselves for the possibility of suffering, memorizing scripture and disciplining the mind for what is to come.
- **News from Timothy** - As mentioned, Timothy was sent from Athens to find out the condition of the faith of the brethren. What would be the news when Timothy returned? "But now that Timothy has come to us from you," rejoices the apostle, noting that he "has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you" (I Thessalonians 3:6). The brethren's faith was intact; praise the Lord! Their love was still strong; praise the Lord! Their desire was to at Some point See the apostle Paul again; praise the Lord!

The earnest desire of the Lord Jesus Christ is for the salvation of the lost among the sons of men. Clearly He does not wish "for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9). He longs for fellowship with His saints, and has set in motion His tremendous plan to reach and redeem every truth-seeker on the face of this planet. To accomplish this, He has implanted His love in the hearts of His servants so that they might carry His message to the lost and keep preaching and teaching to preserve the saved. Hence it is that the apostle Paul is truly concerned about the brethren in Thessalonica, and, with every fiber of his being, hopeful that they will be able to come through the fires of persecution and the wiles of temptation orchestrated by the prince of darkness. Thus he was tremendously excited when Timothy brought back a positive report of the progress of the Saints, how they had overpowered the efforts of the tempter!

## Encouraged about the Brethren

“Greater love, said Jesus, “has no man than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Our Lord led the way on this, backing His words with the laying down of His life, His suffering a violent execution on the cross for the sins of mankind. This precept is then passed on to the true disciples of Christ, expressed in these terms by the apostle John: “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (I John 3:16). As Jesus was wholly committed to reaching the lost and building His church, so also are those who lay down their lives for the brethren. This “cause”, then, becomes the primary focus of their interests and conversation. Hence Paul, having suffered intensely in getting the gospel to Thessalonica, was supremely interested in the spiritual safety and progress of those brethren.

- **Comforted** - Without the instantaneous means of modern communication, Paul is easily pictured as standing at some window well and looking into the distance toward Thessalonica, wondering if and how soon he will hear from Timothy. When Timothy finally arrived, bringing “good news,” Paul’s joy was manifest. “For this reason, brethren,” is his comment concerning the great report, “in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith” (I Thessalonians 3:7). The encouraging and comforting news was that the faith of the brethren was great, and that they were able to look beyond their suffering, as Paul was his, to their own resurrection from the dead regardless of what earthly privations they might experience.
- **Living** - Paul had written to the brethren in Colossae, that Christ “is our life” (Colossians 3:4). In the proper perspective, Christ and those things intimately connected with Him are the only things that will last. Everything else will be destroyed by the moths or rust, or thieves will steal it, or it will burn in the last day. Thus, even as was noted in Old Testament writings, “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who is wise wins souls” (Proverbs 11:30). The apostle Paul, therefore, having dedicated his life to saving souls, particularly those of the Gentiles, was inextricably involved with the continued faithfulness of those brethren for whom and with whom he had labored. “We were comforted about you through your faith, he had stated as he heard the good news about their steadfastness through Timothy, “for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord” (I Thessalonians 3:8). To have suffered the total loss of the congregation in Thessalonica would have been, in one manner of speaking, a partial death for Paul. But with the good news, “we really live!” Of course, they must continue faithful until death for the effort to be secure.
- **With joy** - There is a certain satisfaction of a job well done, a positive type of pride in a major project successfully completed. By contrast, to see a job collapse or be trashed - such as bicycle tracks running through freshly finished concrete, and hardened beyond repair — or to experience a major project forced to incompleteness because of someone’s stealing the money necessary for the final stages, would be a major blow. How much more, then, for the souls for whom someone like Paul labored and suffered in bringing them to Christ, only to see their faith collapse and for them to be sucked back into Satan’s realm. “For what thanks can we render to God for you, exclaims the apostle, contemplating the alternative, “in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account” (I Thessalonians 3:9).

One of the great challenges for the Saint is keeping what is important as important, and keeping what is secondary as secondary. Whether it is suffering beatings and shame for the sake of Christ, or enduring jail time, or suffering loss of property, those things are secondary to the value of Souls saved. The apostle Paul was able to understand the will and perspective of God, and thus experience great joy in the good news concerning the faithful brethren in Thessalonica!

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Some Important Prayers

From the time of the apostle Paul's conversion in his immersion, he suffered persecution as a result of his preaching Christ. At some point, the inquirer might ask what big benefit Paul was getting from going through all the privations he experienced. Was it fame? Clearly not. In Paul's own words, "I think God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as men condemned to death ... we are fools for Christ's sake. Was it fortune? Not that either. "To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed" (I Corinthians 4:9-13). What motivated the apostle was his desire to see souls securely saved for all eternity. This is why he preached, why he was willing to suffer hardship, and why he prayed.

- **Rendering thanks** - The apostle John often expressed his delight in hearing of the faithfulness of the brethren. "I was very glad," said he "to the chosen lady and her children," "to find some of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment to do from the Father" (II John 1:4). The apostle Paul, in a similar spirit, wrote, "For what thanks can we render to God for you!" Upon hearing of their faithfulness in Thessalonica, Paul's first thought was to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to the Almighty.
- **See your face** - When people have been absent from others whom they dearly love, it is with tremendous joy that they are actually able to have physical contact with them again. Especially do they desire to look once again into the loved ones' eyes, to see their faces again. "We night and day," affirms the apostle, "keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face" (I Thessalonians 3:10). He really loves them, and clearly expresses that love in this way.
- **Complete the job** - The apostle Paul often expressed his desire to make sure that each of the brethren was fully equipped and capable of carrying out the purpose of God in his life. "And we proclaim Jesus," asseverated the apostle, "admonishing every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). He also expressed that same sentiment toward the Thessalonian brethren, noting that his *most earnest* prayers are that "we may complete what is lacking in your faith." Paul would have to be physically present in those days to give his instruction and provide his example. These he was more than willing to do; time and space were what prevented him from being able to supply to the brethren all that he wanted to impart to them.
- **Direct our way** - Thus desiring to see the brethren and help them complete any lack in their faith, Paul would therefore pray to that end. "Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord," he petitions, "direct our way to you" (I Thessalonians 3:11). It is interesting that this most earnest prayer would appeal to both the Father and the Son; the intensity of the petition is thus very clear.

The apostle Paul was evidently a man of God who spent much time in prayer; his prison time undoubtedly gave him a little more time for such personal prayer. The words of prayer automatically flow as part of his stream of consciousness. As one who spent prayer time in praise, thanksgiving, petition, Supplication, and intercession, Paul in his prayers did not focus on self, but on the Spiritual needs of others, for the growth of the church, and for the glorification of King Jesus. "We really live," he says, but only "if you stand firm in the Lord." Again he says, "we rejoice before our God," but not for anything personal, rather "on your account." His desire is to see their face, but so that he might "complete what is lacking in your faith." The honesty of his concern is reflected, then, in his sincere petitions to the great God over all.

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Prayers for the Brethren

It is hard to comprehend the earnest desire that the Lord Jesus has for the salvation of even one soul. As the exhibition and embodiment of the concept that "God is love," Jesus was willing to leave the comfort Zone of heaven willingly to seek and to save that which was lost. The scripture positively vibrates with the idea that if there were only one who would believe, Jesus would still have come and suffered. Thus, when the blind man who was healed at Siloam was put out of the synagogue because he would not back down on his stand that the One who healed him was a prophet, Jesus personally came to him to comfort and encourage him. The message resounds: Jesus cares for each soul.

The apostle Paul, as an imitator of His Lord, likewise had an intense desire for each person to be reconciled to God. But he also recognized that if a person were immersed into Christ but then at some point was pulled back into the world, the immersion was wasted. Therefore he continues to have great concern for the positive progress of each saint in each congregation, as exemplified in his prayers for the brethren in Thessalonica.

- **Increase and abound** - Part of his long petitioning was that both the Father and the Lord Jesus Himself would work to get Paul back to the brethren in Thessalonica. Part of his reasoning for this earnest desire and supplication was expressed as "may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another" (I Thessalonians 3:12). One of God's major purposes is to have His love duplicated in His children. Jesus, in His "sermon on the mount," stated, "But I say to you, *love your enemies*, and pray for those who persecute you, in order *that you may be the sons of your Father who is heaven*" (Matthew 5:44,45). It is fitting, therefore, that Paul should petition the Almighty that the brethren would increase and abound in this love for one another. But the prayer for such love continues, that their love would also increase and abound "for all men, just as we also do for you." When the church loses its focus - when it forgets its mission is to seek and to save the lost – then everything slowly implodes. The apostle encouraged them to keep that focus, abounding in love for the lost among the Souls of men, just as he increased and abounded in love for them.
- **Establish your hearts** - The Christian is not working on himself by himself; he has help and encouragement from the brethren, and help and encouragement from the Lord Himself. Paul explains, building off the "abounding in love" comments, "so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father" (I Thessalonians 3:13). Once again, the scripture emphasizes what God can do for those who are truly faithful in love toward Him and His word: He can make the heart of the saint *unblamable in holiness* while the Christian is still walking during the years of his earthly sojourn!
- **The coming of Christ** - "Be holy yourselves in all your behavior." was the admonition of the apostle Peter. He then quoted from the Law to emphasize his point, "because it is written," said he, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (I Peter 1:15,16). As the brethren "cleanse themselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (II Corinthians 7:1), they are "unblamable in holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints."

Jesus is coming again. He will bring with Him "those who have fallen asleep in Jesus," those who passed from earth and regarded by the King as faithful. The disciples of Christ therefore need to be found busy doing the things that please King Jesus: abounding in love for one another and for the lost, perfecting holiness, and eagerly awaiting the appearing the King and Savior.

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Excel Store More

What pleases the Lord has to be taught, and this instruction has to be received by one who is humble in heart. Man on his own has no ability to know God, much less know what pleases Him. Hence instruction must come from the Lord, specifically through that teaching which has now been recorded in the sacred writings. That is why Jesus commissioned first the apostles, then those subsequently instructed by the apostles, to go and make disciples, and after immersing them, to continue to teach them to observe all that Jesus commanded. "You were formerly darkness," Paul reminded the disciples in Ephesus, "but now you are light in the Lord." As children of light, then, they were to be "trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:8-10).

- **Received instruction** - When the apostle Paul came to Thessalonica, he engaged in Serious teaching and preaching. He commented that what he taught in one congregation, he taught in all. Thus, the approach in Thessalonica was the same as the approach in Corinth, and he explained his methodology: "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity" (II Corinthians 2:17). His preaching, therefore, to the Thessalonians was straightforward. "Finally then, brethren," says he, as he begins to start to close the letter, "we request you and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk..." (I Thessalonians 4:1). Clearly, they got the instruction they needed.
- **Walk and please God** - The Christian life is often referred to as "the walk." Adam and Eve walked with God in the Garden, and Enoch is referenced as one who "walked with God" (Genesis 5:22). While those were apparently physical walks, by the time of the new covenant "the walk" is clearly spiritual. So as Paul is commenting, he is speaking of their life of following should never in the footsteps of Jesus. "You received instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God," he reminds them. The old life of anger, clamor, and frustration was to be put aside and replaced by an orderly life of peace, forgiveness, and real love. The kingdom of God and His righteousness were to have highest priority, and the old wasting-time life was to be left behind.
- **Compliment and exhortation** - The apostle wanted to credit the brethren for the progress they had made. They had received instruction on how to walk and please God, and Paul compliments them, noting, "just as you actually do walk." But Paul was also a preacher. He, for example, in giving some directives to Timothy, his protégé, charged him in these words, "Preach the word ... reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (II Timothy 4:2). Taking his own advice, the apostle then proceeds to exhort the brethren in Thessalonica, saying that though they were following the instruction they were given, he was encouraging them "that you may excel still more."

Because congregations consist of people in various stages of personal growth, there is always room for improvement. Even on an individual basis, the saint should never stay in a comfort Zone; he should always be looking for the next way in which he can make improvement, set bigger goals, or increase his effectiveness. And people in Christ do tend to become complacent. The congregation in Laodicea of the book of Revelation fame is an excellent example of a numbing that can set in. They said, according to Jesus, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17). The Lord's analysis was that they were "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." So the brethren in Thessalonica were exhorted so that they too would not fall into that complacent and deadening condition. So also, then, the modern saints are similarly exhorted through these inspired scriptures: EXCEL STILL MORE!

## The Will of God

Because God is love, one of the major attacks of the prince of darkness is on the meaning and understanding of love. The All Wise, knowing the nature of the individuals with whom He must communicate, has various means by which He does develop an understanding of what true love is. The apostle John, in making his inspired emphasis on love, laid down a very interesting and instructive principle. "The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen," was the premise, "cannot love God whom he has not seen" (I John 4:20). Hence God has given relationships to provide real life teaching on understanding love, such as brother-sister, parent-child, and brethren-in-Christ. But probably the greatest general teaching tool is the marriage relationship, properly defined as husband-wife. The devil, then, majorly attacks the institution of marriage, and works to pervert the husband-wife relationship. An important component of that husband-wife relationship is what the apostle Paul called "the natural function of the woman." Some women, he said, resorting to other women, are described as having "exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural." Men who resort to men are similarly pictured as having "abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another" (Romans 1:26,27). Clearly, the deceiver works to pervert what God intended.

- **Commandments** - Sometimes brethren do not get the point if their proper course of action is merely hinted at. Thus the Holy Spirit and the apostles will come with stronger language to make certain there is no doubt as to what should be done or what attitudes should be exhibited. The apostle Paul, in introducing the subject of proper intimate behavior, comments, "For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus" (I Thessalonians 4:2). This is not a reversion to the system of thought under the law of Moses, but it shows the severity of the warning if the saint does not take heed. The apostle Peter put it in these terms: "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul" (I Peter 2:11). Failure to obey the commandment will result in the loss of the soul because that loss means that darkness has overtaken the light that should be shining in the disciple of Christ.
- **The will of God** - So often, people want to know the will of God in their lives. Therefore on the issue of sexual relations, God is very plain, as in His statement to the brethren in Thessalonica. "For this is the will of God," is the straightforward statement, "your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality" (I Thessalonians 4:3). As noted, Satan gets human thinking twisted in this area as part of his attack on God and the truthfulness that *God is love*. It is natural for man to desire a woman, and a woman to desire a man; without that, there would be little procreation, there would be no family life, men would not be tethered so strongly to the wife and family, and the plan for the family to be the core of the local congregation would go awry. Part of the personal holiness of the individual saint is dependent upon his keeping these desires within the proper bounds, and these boundaries are clearly "the will of God"

To be a follower of Christ in the truest sense of the word means to be one who eliminates selfishness. Jesus informed His followers of this precept in these words, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27). In order to properly carry that cross, the individual must deny himself. A major source of the loss of self control in matters of sexual purity is self gratification; hence the saint is to crucify self, and focus on loving God and loving his spouse. This sanctification is - again making an important emphasis - the will of God!

## God Called Us for Sanctification

Solomon, the sage of Proverbs, had some wisdom on the subject of husband-wife relationships of an intimate nature. "Drink water from your own cistern," advised he, to the man and regarding the man's focus on his own wife, "and fresh water from your own well. He continued, "Let your fountain be blessed in the wife of your youth ... be always exhilarated with her love." He then advanced the following question, "For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress, and embrace the bosom of a foreigner?" In addition, there is the continuing presence of the Lord, whose eyes roam to and fro about the earth, and miss nothing. "For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths." The All Knowing has always warned man that sin is destructive, both to the individual and to those around him. "His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin. He will die for lack of instruction, and in the greatness of his folly he will go astray" (Proverbs 5:15-23). Such exhortations and warnings were in the mind of Paul as he wrote to the brethren in Thessalonica.

- **A Sanctification and honor** - Many in Thessalonica were coming out of the immoral pagan Society of Roman and Greek times. Sometimes old habits die hard, so the brethren were in need of admonishment in the matter of husband wife fidelity. "Abstain from sexual immorality," asseverates the apostle, "that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, and not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God" (I Thessalonians 4:4,5). True love is caring and giving; lust is selfish and engaged in self-gratification. Love puts the other person first; lust uses the other person. The true happiness that is supposed to result from a loving husband-wife relationship only will happen if such intimacy is in an atmosphere of holiness to the Lord, and giving proper honor and respect to the partner in the relationship.
- **No transgression** - The old commandment warned about looking with wrong desire over the neighbor's fence; part of it read, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Exodus 20:17). One of the reasons the grass seems greener on the other side of the fence is that the imagining of the sexual interludes comes without the attendant responsibility of a real relationship. The danger of such dreaming is that the dreams tend to become reality, and the reality becomes a nightmare! So the apostle's instruction to the brethren sounds the alarm to let "no man transgress and defraud his brother in this matter because the Lord is the avenger in all things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you" (I Thessalonians 4:6). The solemn warning is not to be shunted aside easily; where the thoughts go, the body follows.
- **God's purpose** - The holy God is using the gospel to call people out of this world and transform their character so that they are fit to fellowship with Him for all eternity. "You once were not a people," Peter quoted the Old Testament prophet, concerning the Gentiles who previously had been set aside while God worked His program with the physical descendants of Jacob, "but now you are the people of God." These special individuals, along with the Jews who turned to Christ, are thusly described in terms such as "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a *holy nation*, a people for God's own possession" (I Peter 2:9,10). The apostle Paul concurs, averring, "For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in *sanctification*" (I Thessalonians 4:7).

God is serious about this matter of sanctification in all areas, but in this 50 context especially in the matter of marriage faithfulness. "Consequently," Paul intones, "he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you" (I Thessalonians 4:8). To describe God as the One who "gives His Holy Spirit to you" puts tremendous weight on what has just been said. Moderns, take heed!



## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Love of the Brethren

The church has a job to do. It is to go into all the world and get the gospel preached to all creation. It is to seek and to save the lost. It is to engage in spiritual warfare with the forces of darkness, and - as a mighty resurrected army - to win that warfare. But that is not going to happen if the brethren are in disarray, hateful and hating one another. To further His purpose, God has gone to a lot of work to create the proper atmosphere inside the local congregation, to have the Spirit of Christ pervade everything the church does. Each saint is repeatedly and in various ways exhorted to put aside petty selfishness and work together with the brethren in harmony and for the accomplishment of God's goals.

- **Love of the brethren** - When the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, he instructed them to "put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (Colossians 3:14). Real love, of course, is self-sacrificing and willing to put the desires of God and needs of others ahead of itself. In this area, the apostle commended the congregation in Thessalonica, noting, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you" (I Thessalonians 4:9). There was no need, but the apostle and the Holy Spirit are going to mention it any how! "For you yourselves are taught by God to love one another," is the objective statement, to which he adds, "for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia" (I Thessalonians 4:9,10). Yes, God indeed teaches His children of faith how to love, if they will pay attention to the instruction and example. "God is love," is certainly a beginning point, and Christ demonstrated the love of God to a lost race by His willingness to hang on the tree. The chosen ones of Thessalonica had weathered the Storms of persecution, and in consequence had really come to love and appreciate other brethren whose faith had carried them through. And not only in Thessalonica was this love exhibited, but also toward all the brethren in the whole province of Macedonia. This in itself is awesome, but Paul's record of that love for regional brethren shows how much interaction the different congregations had in the first century, and that too serves as an example for brethren of today. Paul, as would be expected, is not going to let those saints plateau out; "But we urge you, brethren," he exhorts, "to excel still more!"
- **Right kind of ambition** - The scripture warns against "selfish ambition" (James 3:14). Selfish ambition is destructive to the purposes of Christ, and always results in "disorder and every evil thing" (James 3:16). But there is good unselfish ambition, as Paul brings forward. "Make it your ambition," he asseverates, "to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you" (I Thessalonians 4:11). Disciples who learn to live quiet lives - lives without all the uproar and chaos and noise and clamor - are the ones who are productive; the others are so "crisis driven" that they never get anything of real value done. People who are "busy bodies," who always have their noses in everyone else's business, are using other saints' lives as means of ducking the responsibility of managing their own. Finally, the brethren are to be working "with their own hands, being productive and not wasteful of time or resources."

Living the Christian life is living a life of common sense, with a perspective of doing things that please God. A quiet life, minding your own business, and hard work are common sense principles for the upbuilding of society and making any community function. Even if the world as a whole goes the opposite direction, the Father in heaven still wants His children to live by those values, taking care of themselves, with instructions that "you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need" (I Thessalonians 4:12). Carry on!

## The "Rapture"?

There are supposed theologians who grabbed some scriptures out of the book of Revelation, and came up with some wild ideas about the times and events connected with Jesus' second coming. (This is called "eschatology," by the way, meaning essentially "study of the end times.") Because they started from their ideas of the book of Revelation rather than the plain statements of the epistles and other clear points from Acts or the gospel accounts, they have to use a twenty pound post maul to beat on the scriptures to try to get them to fit. Proper understanding of the word of God, however, allows the scripture verses to connect perfectly, just as jig-saw puzzle pieces nicely drop into place when they are in the correct location. But these false teachers ignore many straightforward scriptures and come up with something called "the rapture," followed by seven years of "tribulation," during which "the antichrist" comes and has a tyranny of terror over the earth, after which Jesus in "the second advent" comes down and reigns as king for 1000 years while David reigns as co-regent over Jerusalem and the priests of the descendants of Zadok offer sacrifices in a rebuilt temple. Whew! Pretty farfetched, and definitely counter to the teaching and tenor of the new testament writings.

- **"Secret rapture" scriptures** - One of the main scriptures for this false teaching [called *pre-millennialism* because it teaches that Jesus comes back before (*pre-*) the 1000 year (*millennium*) reign of Christ] comes out of I Thessalonians chapter four. This passage describes how Jesus "will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (I Thessalonians 4:16,17). This is somehow interpreted to mean that Christians will silently be lifted off the earth and meet Jesus in the air, while everyone else wonders what happened to them. Then follows the "tribulation," etc. It is absolutely amazing that people would believe in this "secret rapture" based on these verses. The concept that Jesus will descend from heaven with a shout using the archangel's voice Sounds like something loud enough to be heard all over the world; not exactly secretly or in stealth. Similarly, the sounding of the trumpet of God does not indicate a silent lifting of saints off the world. In a simple, obvious way, this pre-millennial doctrine is false teaching.
- **Denigration of Jesus' sacrifice** - A key component of pre-millennial teaching is that after the seven years of "tribulation" and the coming of Jesus down to reign on the earth is the restoration of Old Testament sacrifices. The idea is that God's real plan has always been with the nation Israel, that the church age is a temporary stopgap until God can get back to what He wanted to do all along. In the 1000 years, the sacrifices in a rebuilt temple once again are restored, and the priests of the descendants of Zadok are restored to the position of honor of being able to offer those sacrifices on a rebuilt altar in Jerusalem. This, of course, is totally contrary to the teaching of the scripture that those sacrifices were the stopgap until Jesus could be both the sacrifice and the high priest to offer the blood of His sacrifice in heaven, as illustrated particularly in the book of Hebrews. Thus, in pre-millennial teaching, Jesus' sacrifice amounted to nothing compared to the wonderfulness of those Old Testament offerings!

There are many other problems with the whole pre-millennial perspective. The church, for example, — the very bride of Christ - is relegated to nothing more than a temporary fix until the pipeline of Israel could be restored. Such false doctrine totally turns the teaching and tenor of the new testament writings upside down, and clearly is a satanic attack on the Lord and His church. It is important that modern disciples of Christ recognize pre-millennialism for what it is, and focus on what the scriptures themselves teach.

## Asleep in Jesus

The specter of physical death has always plagued mankind. Hence one of the things Jesus came to accomplish was to deliver His disciples from fear of death. Fear of death paralyzes, especially if it were to occur in connection with the intent to preach the gospel. Sooner or later the desire to preach the word of God accurately and importantly runs counter to the desire to please men; and it is when men are sufficiently displeased that they "kill the messenger." Hence, as Paul put it, "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). But there is another aspect of fear of death - concern over loved ones who have passed on, as to what will happen to them. Again, the desire of God through His word is to provide honest encouragement.

- **Asleep** - The term "asleep," used as a euphemism for "death," was introduced by Jesus Himself. When His friend Lazarus passed away, Jesus described his death to the apostles in this fashion: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep. The apostles understood that Lazarus had literally fallen asleep, and that meant he would recover from the fever or whatever malady he had contracted. "Then Jesus said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead.'" (John 11:11-14). The picture the Lord thus painted was that death, instead of being final, is to be thought of more in terms of someone sleeping and then waking up.
- **Not to grieve** - The apostle Paul, then, in writing to the suffering Thessalonian brethren, wants to encourage them in regard to the Christians in that congregation who had passed on, either through persecution or through normal aging or disease-related causes. "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren," he instructs, "about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope" (II Thessalonians 4:13). There is indeed no hope for the pagan and unbelieving peoples of the world; their false gods or false belief systems provide no real hope whatsoever for the life following the grave. But for the faithful saints who have made their departure from this world, encouraging details are about to follow, so that the brethren can rejoice rather than grieve, and make the saying operative, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones" (Psalm 116:15).
- **Coming with the Lord** - Christians, in one manner of speaking, when they physically die, simply change their address. "Absent from the body," as the apostle stated it, they are "at home with the Lord" (II Corinthians 5:8). In Paradise, they are thus waiting as spirit/souls for Jesus to bring with Him when He initiates His second coming. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again," asseverates the apostle, "even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (I Thessalonians 4:14). Jesus will return, pictured in the book of Revelation as riding on a white horse and leading the hosts of heaven to execute one final smash of the forces of darkness. Clearly, from the language of I Thessalonians, Jesus is God!! "And on His robe and on His thigh. He has a name written, 'KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.'" (Revelation 19:16). And He is bringing the brethren who have "fallen asleep" with Him.

The confidence of the saints that Jesus' return is real is based on their belief, as Paul puts it, "that 'Jesus died and rose again.'" When this same apostle Paul spoke to the pagan crowd gathered on Mars O Hill in Athens, he made the same point, noting that the great Creator God "has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). When He returns, the saints will rejoice, but the rest will cry to the rocks and mountains to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. Modern brethren, then, can take courage, and press forward in the faith once for all delivered!

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Descent of the Lord

Jesus' return is the great finale for earth! For those who simply live on this planet and are unaware of the scripture's teaching, the earth seems so massive that it would have to last forever. However, those who believe and understand even a modicum of the word of God know that God created the heavens and earth out of nothing, and that He will destroy them when He is done with them. "They will perish." the writer of Hebrews quoted from the Psalms, "but You remain; and they all will become old as a garment, and as a mantle You will roll them up" (Hebrews 1:11,12). This will happen in connection with Jesus' second coming; this is THE END!

- **What happens** - Mankind would not know that the Lord will return except that the scripture informs us of that event. As most of earth's residents were unaware or unwilling to accept that the great Flood was coming in Noah's day, So it is with regard to the coming of the Lord Jesus. In general, people will continue to have their focus on buying and selling, planting and harvesting, tearing down and rebuilding, marrying and being given in marriage until the day that Jesus comes; and they will be totally surprised and unprepared for the second coming of Christ. "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout," the inspired apostle Paul informs us, "with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (I Thessalonians 4:16). Clearly, this is no secret event; the impression is that the voice and the trumpet will be heard all over the earth. "We shall not all sleep," Paul informed the church at Corinth, "but we all [the whole human race] shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, *at the last trumpet*; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed" (I Corinthians 15:51,52). Everyone - good and bad - will either be resurrected or instantly changed into a resurrection body at that trumpet blast and archangel's shout.
- **There is an order of events** - The scriptures show that everyone gets resurrected and/or changed at the same time. "An hour is coming," the Lord Himself informs us, "in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28,29). Following that resurrection (which is defined as the rejoining of soul and spirit with the resurrection body), the bad guys are taken first to judgment: "So it will be at the end of the age," noted the Christ, "the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:49,50). Next come the saints who had passed away, and then experienced the resurrection. "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord," avers Paul, "that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, *shall not precede those who have fallen asleep*" (I Thessalonians 4:15). The bad guys are gone; the ones who therefore are alive and thus remain clearly will have to wait to ascend until those who "have fallen asleep" get their resurrection. Finally, apparently as an honor, the good guys who made it successfully alive with their faith intact at the Lord's coming, go last: "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (I Thessalonians 4:17).

It is encouraging to know how all the events and confusion of earth's upheavals and uprisings turn out. Faithful saints, either those resurrected or those who were instantly changed in the twinkling of an eye, will meet the Lord in their resurrected bodies in the air. "Therefore comfort one another with these words' (I Thessalonians 4:18). Amen!!!

## Thief in the Night

There are certainly going to be many, many surprised people at Jesus' return. Billions of earth's residents may have heard something about Jesus, but have no concept whatsoever that He is returning, and that "in that day men will cast away to the moles and the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship" (Isaiah 2:20). Many know of the The Second Coming claims of scripture, but deny its truthfulness and scoff at the idea of Christ that the Lord will return. Others believe in the return of Christ, but have been confused by the obfuscators of the day and totally misunderstand the nature of His second coming. All these will be Surprised when they end up in the place that Jesus Himself described as a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12).

- **Christians are taught** - One of the core teachings connected with Christ is the uncertainty of the timing of His return. While on His earthly sojourn, He Himself clearly stated, "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24:36). Hence, as Paul continues his commentary on the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, he notes, "Now as to the times and epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you' (I Thessalonians 5:1). But, Christians being Christians, and Paul's having had a lot of experience dealing with them, is going to write to them anyhow.
- **Day of the Lord** - The expression "the day of the Lord" appears in numerous places and in several contexts in the holy scriptures. Joel spoke of a day of the Lord as referring to the time when an enemy army would overwhelm the land. "Blow a trumpet in Zion," he prophesied, indicating that Jerusalem and Judah were in the crosshairs of the oncoming army, "and sound an alarm on My holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the *day of the Lord* is coming; surely it is near" (Joel 2:1). Joel also spoke of the day of the Lord in connection with the "consummation of the ages," the day of Jesus ascension. The Sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood," he again foretold, this time referring to the signs and wonders occurring in connection with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, "before *the great and awesome day of the Lord* comes" (Joel 2:31, quoted by the apostle Peter in Acts 2:20). But there is a *day of the Lord which comes like a thief in the night*, and this is in reference to Jesus' second coming. "For you yourselves know full well," is Paul's reminder, "that *the day of the Lord* will come just like a thief in the night" (I Thessalonians 5:2). This, of course, refers to the day when "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first (I Thessalonians 4:16).

Peter also referred to the same day. "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief," noted the apostle, using the same type of language that Jesus Himself had used as He discussed the time of His second return, "in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up" (II Peter 3:10). On that day, the physical universe ceases to exist. The day of judgment will take place, the unbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire, and saints of God will enter the glories of heaven. The Saints may "have no need of anything to be written' to them. But they certainly need to be reminded repeatedly!

## “Peace and Security”

Mankind is blissfully unaware of the sudden devastation that is about to come upon them and the earth they live upon. They tend to get caught up in believing their own propaganda, beginning with thinking that earth is something like four billion years old. While they profess some concern about "earth's dwindling resources," they really expect this planet to last billions of more years. "It escapes their notice," was the way Peter described them, "that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago but not four billions of years), and the earth was formed out of water and by water. The rebellious ones not only refuse to recognize that God created the earth, but they also deny that man's sinfulness caused God to destroy the earth with the Flood. Naturally, then, they are totally unaware and unbelieving that "the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (II Peter 3:5-7).

- **Saying "peace and safety"** - Christians, having been taught from the first by Jesus Himself, are aware that He will come suddenly like a thief in the night. But for the rest of the World, the apostle Paul comments, "While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly" (I Thessalonians 5:3). The English Standard Version translates the statement as, "There is peace and security." Paul and the Holy Spirit are, as to be expected, very careful in the wording: They are saying peace and security, not that there necessarily is any. One of the things which is a signal that Jesus' return is imminent is world influencers' mouthing those Words.
- **Peace and security institutions** - Being curious, I googled "peace and security" to find what would pop up on the internet. The first item to show was an article written for the World Economic Forum by Robert Muggah, research director of the Igarapé Institute on March 1, 2016, headlined, "The UN has a plan to restore *international peace and security*—will it work? (Emphasis added). Underneath the lead picture was the caption, a quote from within the article, "The UN is getting its act together to confront the most intractable threats to international peace and security." The article went on to highlight the results from three different commissions set up by former United Nations Secretary Ban Ki-moon, which basically called for a more robust UN financed by more money. Thus the final internal heading was "A new UN for a new global order." The piece calls for the UN to partner up with regional organizations to counter threats to the developing new world order - older organizations such as NATO, as well as new ones such as the Economic Community of West African States and the Union of South American Nations. Of course, one of the major "extremist threats to *international peace and security* is Christianity, because the teachings of Jesus are counter to the goals of the godless UN and the satanic forces of the new world order.

Of man, whether he be rich or poor, his tendency is not to think about eternity. "Their inner thought is, that their houses are forever, and their dwelling places to all generations" (Psalm 49:11). "While they are saying, Peace and safety," is Paul's tipoff to the saints, "then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape." Whether the current emphasis on "peace and security" is the prelude to the Lord's Second coming, or whether it is a temporary phase of human history, time will tell. Certainly there have been similar promises throughout the span of man. But one thing that should be considered is that this time the emphasis is on global or *international peace and security*. This has never happened before on that scale, and if the people who are pushing for it get their way, there will be no freedom left on this planet for the proclamation of the gospel. But the Saint can be encouraged either way: if it is not the final, there is future opportunity on earth; if it is final, Jesus is coming!!

## Sons of Day, Sons of Night

At the first of creation, everything was dark. Then God said for the light to come into existence, and there was light. From the get-go, then, there has been this contrast between light and dark in the physical realm, setting the stage for the communication of the concept of darkness and light in the spiritual realm. "For you were formerly darkness," the apostle Paul explained to the brethren in Ephesus, "but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8). This usage of *dark* and *light* is not just metaphorical; Christians really are "light," and non-Christians really are "darkness." The apostle informed the congregation at Corinth that the God who caused the light to shine on the first day of creation is "the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6). Inside each true saint of God there is a tremendous light shining, the treasure currently obscured by "earthen vessels" (II Corinthians 4:7). Brethren are "sons of light."

- **Not overtaken** - The apostle has already indicated that the disciples of Christ in Thessalonica should not be surprised should Jesus return at any point, the teaching about Jesus' second coming being a basic doctrine of Christianity. The rest of the world will be planting and harvesting, buying and selling, and marrying and being given in marriage totally oblivious to the fact that the Maker of heaven and earth is on His way, the "destruction coming upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child." "But you, brethren," the apostle reminds them, "are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief" (I Thessalonians 5:4). Christians are enlightened, alert, and awake!
- **Sons of day** - There is a clear contrast between night and day. What is done in the day is honest, done out in the open where everyone can see what is going on. What is done in the darkness is hidden, often illegal or immoral; even the word *shady* applies. "For you are all sons of light and sons of day," Paul emphasizes, indicating that the brethren have nothing to be afraid of at the Lord's return, because they have nothing illegal or immoral hidden. "The fruit of the light," Paul had commented, "consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth" (Ephesians 5:9). Saints are ready for the return of Jesus, and are not doing anything that would cause them to shrink away in shame.
- **Sons of darkness** - The sons of darkness alive on earth at Christ's return will be engaging in their conniving, immoral, and lascivious activities, and they will cry out to the mountains and to the rocks, saying, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Revelation 6:16). "We," says Paul, of the faithful brethren, "are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober" (I Thessalonians 5:5,6). The sons of day are doing what they are supposed to be doing, being where they are supposed to be, having the great attitude they are supposed to have, scanning the sky and expecting the Lord's imminent return. Not so with those on the dark side: "For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night" (I Thessalonians 5:7).

By contrast, then, "we are of the day," and the exhortation is "let us be sober" (I Thessalonians 5:8). For the saint, the sober warning of Jesus still stands: "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming." If the householder had known when the thief was coming, he would have been ready with his shotgun. "For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will" (Matthew 24:42-44). Are you still willing to say that Jesus is not coming today?

## Sober Saints

It is good and acceptable to be "of sober spirit." This does not require the elimination of all humor or levity, but it does require a willingness to take a hard and honest look at facts, issues, personalities, and potentials. For example, if a person has a denominational background where he thought that salvation was accomplished by saying a prayer and "inviting Jesus" into his heart, he would have to take a Sober look at scripture. If he attempted to be angry about it and by this means duck his responsibility, he would not be "of sober spirit." If he tried to laugh it off, making some joke to change the conversation, he would not be "of sober spirit." "Be of sober spirit," exhorted the apostle Peter, "be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (I Peter 5:8). That picture, honestly processed, would make a person sober in a quick hurry!

- **Drunk vs. sober** - A clear contrast often drawn is the difference between someone drunk and someone sober. Generally speaking, a drunk cannot be engaged in a deeply reasonable conversation; he hasn't the mental capability under those conditions to focus or process properly. Drunkenness from alcohol is always pictured as a bad thing in the scripture, and the word of God is clear that drunkenness will send a person directly to hell. Christians are exhorted to be awake, alert, and Sober, ready for Jesus' soon return. "For those who sleep do their sleeping at night," Paul points out, "and those who get drunk, get drunk at night" (I Thessalonians 5:7). Their attempt is really to hide from God, much like their forebear Adam, and is equivalent to a small child's covering his eyes with a handkerchief and saying, "You can't see me!" Clearly, the advice is to abstain from drunkenness, and be sober in all things.
- **Some sober armor** - Those who are in rebellion and in hiding from God skulk around in the darkness. "But since we are of the day," observes Paul, "let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation" (I Thessalonians 5:8). The apostle likes to use the picture of a soldier in armor to describe Christians, and here he speaks of the breastplate's consisting of faith and love. Faith includes the drive to keep moving forward in spite of obstacles and difficulties, trusting the Lord to bring about the proper result in His time. Love, as well as faith, is part of the breastplate — protection, as well as covering for the forward march in the army. Without Holy Spirit-given love, the individual is open to discouragement and destruction. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails [quits]!" (I Corinthians 13:7,8a). The helmet pictured is "the hope of salvation." As usual, *hope* here is used in connection with the resurrection of the saint from the dead; this is "the salvation of the body" - the hope that enables the saint to "press on."

God raised Jesus from the dead, and then took the step of seating Him at His right hand in the power position. This is pictured as "within the veil"; that is, that as the veil or curtain separated the holy of holies from the outer room or the holy place, so Jesus has entered into the true holy of holies within the veil, or into heaven itself for us. "This hope," said the writer of Hebrews, connected with Jesus resurrection and ascension, "we have as an anchor for the soul" (Hebrews 6:19). This "hope is also the salvation of the body, set to occur at Jesus' return. "For God has not destined us for wrath," Paul encourages the brethren in Thessalonica, "but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thessalonians 5:9). "He shall appear a second time," the writer of Hebrews also assures us, "for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him" (Hebrews 9:28). Crank up that eagerness!!



## Together with Him

The more a person contemplates the plan of God, the more clear it becomes as to how much God loves each person. It is also very clear that God wants a spiritual people who will appreciate what He has done to rescue mankind and reconcile the sinner to Himself. The Word of God is so designed that, as it works its way through the masses of mankind, it separates out those who truly are in tune with God from those who are not. "His winnowing fork is in His hand," said John the Immerser of His Lord Jesus, "and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). The earth is the threshing floor, and, as the process of winnowing goes on, only those who have an honest and good heart will hear the voice of Jesus as expressed in the written word, obey the gospel, and remain firm and faithful to the end. Jesus, in His prayer before He crossed the Kidron to Gethsemane, expressed the desire of His heart and thus illustrated the purpose of the winnowing. "Father," petitioned He, "I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory, which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). He is looking for a spiritual people who will desire to see His glory and appreciate it, and His sifting the hearts of men is for that purpose.

- **Not destined for wrath** - The faithful brethren at Thessalonica would listen to Paul. They would put on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet as a representation of the hope of their salvation - the positive resurrection to life. They would be eagerly awaiting the return of Christ, to be caught up with Him in the air, thus to ever be with the Lord. "For God has not destined us for wrath," the apostle emphasizes, "but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thessalonians 5:9). Every honest person recognizes that he deserves the wrath of God, but is grateful for the tender mercy extended through Christ the sacrifice and the high priest. The destiny of those regarded as "wheat" is receiving a resurrection body in the likeness of Jesus glory, and dwelling in the eternal city with the great and awesome God.
- **Christ the substitute** - The curse that should have fallen on the saints because of even one sin has instead fallen upon Jesus, as it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). Our salvation, then, comes through our Lord Jesus Christ, "who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him" (I Thessalonians 5:10). It is true, but not trite, that Jesus died that we might live. So whether we are still making daily choices during the days of our earthly sojourns, or whether we have passed into the realm described as "asleep," Jesus wants us together" with Him.
- **Ultimate encouragement** - This earthly life is truly short, a vapor. Eternity stretches out beyond the human imagination. Regardless, then, of prison or privation, the saint has a tremendous pick-me-up coming from the assurance of an eternity with Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood. "Therefore," exhorts Paul, "encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing" (I Thessalonians 5:11).

Moses said to the Almighty on the summit of Sinai, "Show me Your glory" (Exodus 33:18). This could not happen for Moses because no one still in the physical realm could behold that glory and live. Hence Christ through His gospel plan and winnowing action has produced a people who are able to see that glory. "Beloved," said John the apostle, "now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is" (I John 3:2). Jesus desired it enough to die for us; may we desire it enough to live for Him, regardless of external circumstances.

## Appreciation and Esteem

The flesh tends to chafe when directed by the bit of God's directive, and often tries to remove the saddle of responsibility. Hence come some instructions and exhortations from the word of God for the encouragement and strengthening of the brethren. In addition to these from the scriptures, saints can encourage others. "Encourage one another," says the apostle Paul, "and build up one another." This edifying of one another is one of the important functions of the local assembly; the noting of positive accomplishments, and truly complimentary remarks about the brethren really assist in the development and growth of saints, especially the new ones. The apostle is even complimentary to the brethren in Thessalonica, adding, "just as you also are doing." As the disciples of Christ assemble, the exhortation from the author of Hebrews is, "consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24). Thus the apostle has some stimulating exhortations for the brethren.

- **Have charge over you** - Any group of people, in order to accomplish anything of significance have to be organized (not the same as *micromanaged*). So it is that the church of the Lord has leadership by the design of the Lord. Paul, in his inspired instructions to both Timothy and Titus talked about overseers and deacons (special *servants*), and in the letters defined a lot of the work of evangelists or preachers. Writing then, to the brethren in Thessalonica, he says, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction (I Thessalonians 5:12). If someone is in charge, then others are in submission. This, obviously, is not blind submission, where saints are manipulated into doing things counter to the scriptures, which is why Paul uses the expression, "charge over you *in the Lord*." There has to be an understanding among the faithful followers of Christ that there are those who are in leadership, and whose directives are to be implemented by the brethren.
- **Appreciation** - When Paul spoke of the eldership to Timothy, he noted "If any man aspires to the office of overseer (*bishop*), it is a fine work he desires to do." (I Timothy 3:1). It has to be the *work* that the man aspires to, not the *position*. As Paul talks about the leadership in Thessalonica, he requests that they appreciate "those who diligently *labor* among you." Those who thus labor, who are in charge, and who give instruction can often be unfairly criticized or castigated. If they are having to give the instructions in the "hard sayings of Jesus" or get the Saints to engage in some work for the Lord that is difficult or challenging, they can encounter resistance from those being taught or directed. This can devolve into criticism and kicking against the leadership. Paul requests that the brethren be appreciative instead.
- **Esteem** - In addition to appreciation, Paul adds, "and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (I Thessalonians 5:13). This means that the brethren are to regard highly those who engage in such labor, recognizing that their leadership and instruction result in the salvation of many new souls, as well as the conservation of those who are already Christians. What more valuable work could be done than that?

God brought Israel out of the "iron furnace" of Egypt, but they had to wander in the desert for forty years because of their initial unbelief. This was traveling under difficult circumstances, but necessary to accomplish God's objective. "Now the people," recorded Moses, "became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord" (Numbers 11:1), and their carcasses fell in the wilderness. One of the lessons clearly to be drawn from their example is not to complain about adversity and cheerfully to heed God-ordained leadership. If this were true under the terms of the old covenant, how much more true it is under the terms of the new. Appreciation and esteem should rightly be given to those who have a proven track record of getting the work done! "Live in peace with one another."

## Interacting with the Brethren

Living the Christian life is a struggle. "I have fought the good fight." was the apostle Paul's commentary just before he made his "departure" from earth, "I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (II Timothy 4:7). It is clear, then, that the Christian life is a struggle, and has to be fought successfully to the end. Brethren, then, coming from all sorts of backgrounds and home environments, have mental and attitudinal challenges in fighting that fight and hence have some need of help. Paul thus encourages the saints at Thessalonica, and through them the rest of us who have been designated to live out the earthly sojourn at a different time, to do their part to assist struggling disciples of Christ.

- **Admonish the unruly** - In earthly terms, an adopted child of an age to know that he is being adopted, might have a bit of adjustment to make to his new circumstances. Therefore, in the process of being accepted into a new family, and accepting his new family, the adoptee might have some emotional problems that play out as appearing to be "unruly." Wall-kicking, loud yelling and screaming, silent moods, and downright disobedience might be some of the exhibitions of this unruly behavior. Similarly, in coming out of the world and in being adopted into the family of God, the new Saint may demonstrate some of this unruly behavior. "And we urge you, brethren," Paul calmly comments, "admonish the unruly" (I Thessalonians 5:14). Tested and trusted church leadership knows how to handle these types of new kids who have come into the body of Christ. These kids do need this admonition, and they do need to accept it. Admonitions can be fairly strong words, and the usage of well-chosen words of those experienced in leading the flock must be accepted, not only by the brother who has been admonished, but also by the congregation as a whole.
- **Encourage the fainthearted** - Real and imaginary fears can govern a person's life, and some brethren are more likely than others to be subject to those fears and become what the word of God calls *fainthearted*. The loving Father in heaven does not wish for any to perish through being too fainthearted to keep moving forward. Hence brethren are pressed to "encourage the fainthearted."
- **Help the weak** - Every member of the body of Christ is important to the functioning of the local congregation. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,'" was Paul's analysis of the body, "or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary" (I Corinthians 12:21,22). Since those perceived to be weak are very necessary to the functioning of the congregation, according to the will and design of God, then the brethren are exhorted to "help the weak."
- **Patience** - Different people do things in different ways. So when saints are working together as a team, there are many opportunities to be frustrated with a brother or sister because things do not mesh together as perfectly as they potentially could. But God expects His children to be as gracious as He is, and "be patient with all men." Yes, of course, that means be patient with EVERYONE!

The church universal is God's vehicle for victory over the forces of darkness. But where "the boots are on the ground" is the local congregation. This is where the work really gets done, and where the saints must function as a well-oiled machine to do their part to combat the rising tide of evil. The unruly and disruptive have to be tamed, the fearful have to be given a backbone, the weak need to be helped and strengthened, and everyone must be patient as the brethren work their way through personal obstacles and foibles. Then the church will be ready for "the God of peace to crush Satan" under their feet!

## Seek after Good

There is a natural tendency on the part of people to want to get even or get back at someone who has, at least in their view, wronged them. So strong and ingrained is this desire that the scripture has to deal with it in a variety of ways and from a variety of people. The challenge, from God's perspective, is to change the thinking of Saints in particular so that they are looking for positives to compliment rather than negatives at which to be enraged. When the inside of man is a seething cauldron of anger, waiting for the slightest disturbance to enable it to boil over, then it is only a matter of time and some incident will serve as the excuse for outrage or the opportunity for "evening the score." Rather, God wants those He calls His children to be calm on the inside, looking for ways to soothe the spirits of others, and in general making peace.

- **No evil for evil** - Jesus Himself taught on the issue of the mind and how it must handle difficult people. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy,'" He noted, "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45). He appealed to the brethren in the future who would read His words to be like their heavenly Father in character. "Pardon," He said, "and you will be pardoned" (Luke 6:37). This perspective, then, is a theme that also runs through Paul's Holy-Spirit-inspired writings. "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone," he exhorted the Roman brethren. "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:17, 19). Hence it is not surprising if this sentiment also shows up in his message to the persecuted brethren in Thessalonica, "See that no one repays another with evil" (I Thessalonians 5:15).
- **Seek what is good** - Where an individual focuses is where his conversation and actions are going to land. Jesus commented that "The lamp of your body is your eye; when your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light; but when your eye is bad, your body is full of darkness" (Luke 6:34). Similarly, the apostle Paul instructed the saints in Philippi thusly, "Brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things" (Philippians 4:8). If the mind focuses on the dark and dreary, the destruction and disasters, then that is what will continually come out of the mouth, and what will be the direction of action. By contrast, if the mind dwells on the pure, the true, the lovely, and the excellent, then praise for progress and solutions to problems will exude from the conversation, and be exhibited in the action of a life well lived. Such a saint will be able to carry out Paul's injunction to the congregation at Thessalonica, "always seek after that which is good for one another and all men."

The Saint who is following in the footsteps of Jesus recognizes that he is always scattering the seed for the word of God. The kind deed, the word of encouragement, the card of appreciation ... who knows what big plant can grow from such a small seed! For the sake of the gospel, the Christian lets the evil pass without retaliation; but he continues to focus on what is eternally important. "If you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others?" asked the Lord Himself. "Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:47). The saint is to do good for his brothers in Christ, but also reach out and do good for all men!

## Thoughts From I Thessalonians

### Pithy Exhortations

The Saints need continual reminders about their attitudes and actions. More often than needing to learn something new, brethren simply need to have things they already know and to which they are already committed brought to the forefront of their minds. Hence it is that the Lord has given memorials such as the Passover for the Israelites, and the Lord's Supper for Christians to keep important things at a high level of consciousness. "Do this," said Jesus of the breaking of bread, "in remembrance of Me!" What could be more important than remembering Jesus? Reminders, remembrances, and occasional remonstrations focus the child of God and help keep him on task and heaven bound.

- **Rejoice** - God wants His kids to be happy campers. They are on a pilgrimage, strangers and aliens in a foreign world. As such, they really don't belong here, and are then regarding as camping rather than thinking of earth as a permanent home. On camping trips, challenges arise: the weather turns bad, unexpected difficulties arise, all the money gets lost, and people in the campground often get hostile. "If you were of the world, the world would love its own," noted Jesus, using the term "the world" as His description of the campground. "But because you are not of the world," He continued, "but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19). So what is a saint to do in the midst of difficulties and even persecutions on this camping trip? "Rejoice always" says Paul (I Thessalonians 5:16). The fact that rejoicing is commanded means that the brethren can make the decision to rejoice no matter what the earthly circumstances.
- **Pray** - The saint is not alone on his pilgrimage. Indwelt by the Spirit and thus comforted by the presence of Christ within, he continues to take his steps forward in faith. But like the One whom he follows, he prays. Of Jesus, Dr. Luke recorded, "But He Himself would often slip away into the wilderness and pray (Luke 5:16). Jesus was in constant communication with the Father, and serves as an example for His disciples. Paul likewise encourages brethren to be conscious of the Lord at all times, and be ready to slip into an attitude of prayer instantaneously. "Pray without ceasing" is the exordium. "In everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (I Thessalonians 5:17,18). When brethren want to know what God's will is for them, the answer is simple: pray without ceasing and be thankful. Everything else must be very secondary!
- **Prophetic utterance** - In the first century church, gifts of the Spirit were extant, and certain men would deliver the prophetic messages by direct inspiration to the congregations. In modern times, the completed New Testament writings serve as a Superior replacement. But as the brethren were exhorted then, so it is now: "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances," avers the apostle (I Thessalonians 5:19,20). Messages delivering God's doctrinal truths and encouragements are not to be sneered at or discounted. "But examine everything carefully," Paul cautioned; "hold fast to that which is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21). Not everyone is honorable in their purported proclamation of God's truths. The scriptures warn about false teachers and false prophets, and saints are exhorted to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (I John 4:1). But that which is good and consistent with the teaching and tenor of the new covenant is to be grasped, honored, and implemented, in contrast to the injunction, "abstain from every form of evil" (I Thessalonians 5:22).

This series of punchy, pithy, and powerful reminders bring the Saint to the continued recognition that he needs to keep moving forward with a great attitude. He needs to be in a state of continual prayer, thankful and honoring the precepts of the word of God. He needs to turn away from evil and do good. Certainly the words of Paul to the Colossian brethren fit here as well: "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17).

## God's Purpose

The tremendous plan of God has been to produce a truly spiritual people who can and will appreciate the glory of Christ. A key ingredient, as far as God is concerned, is that these truly spiritual people be spiritual by their choice. The integral part of the process, however, is that it takes a powerful act of God's creative powers to produce such a spiritual new creation. So the challenge has been for the All Wise and the Almighty to set in motion a system wherein both the individual's free choice out of love for God and God's infinite power both are actuated to produce this spiritual being which is desirous and capable of seeing the glory of Jesus. "Father," said the Lord Jesus in His prayer before He crossed the Kidron to the Garden of Gethsemane, "*I desire that they also, who You have given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory, which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world*" (John 17:24).

- **First the natural** - The first Adam, in the words of Paul to the Corinthian brethren, was a natural man, "from the earth, earthy." The second Adam, a reference to Jesus as the progenitor of the spiritual race, was "heavenly." The idea is that "as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly." The heavenly image thus must grow out of the earthly; the earthy man is the foundation out of which the seed for the heavenly man can sprout. "However," avers the apostle, "the Spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual" (I Corinthians 15:45-49). The natural man is the incubator where the decision to become a spiritual man is made, thus preserving freedom of choice. The spiritual man is the result of God's performing an entirely new creative act in bringing this new creature into existence at his immersion into Christ. For we are His workmanship," noted Paul, "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:10).
- **Understanding the inner man** - When a person becomes a "spiritual man" through His immersion in Jesus' name, the outer shell remains part of the material existence. This is part of God's plan so that Christians can, as the body of Christ on earth, continue to be the bridge by which the gospel can be transported to those who are still natural men but seeking God's face. "Our outer man is decaying," was the apostle's observation, "yet our inner man is being renewed day by day" (II Corinthians 4:16). In the realm of the spirit and soul, the saint is a new creation; in the realm of the flesh - in the sense that "flesh" refers to the physical body - the outer man is subject to the vagaries of earthly existence. And, as the physical man dies, the spirit and soul are transported to Paradise, there to await their coming to earth when Christ returns and to be clothed with an immortal body. "We do not want to be unclothed," as Paul phrased it, "but to be clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (II Corinthians 5:4).
- **The completion of the project** - God will bring the saints with Him when He makes His second coming. He will stop in the air, but the spirits/souls of His brethren will hit the ground and will receive their resurrection bodies, which is the completion of His process to produce a truly spiritual people.

"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely," is Paul's ultimate prayer, "and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass" (I Thessalonians 5:23,24). With the glorified body, the saint can see Jesus' glory, and fulfill His earnest desire. "Beloved, now we are children of God," was the apostle John's reminder, "and it has not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because *we shall see Him just as He is*" (I John 3:2).

## Key Considerations & Closing Comments

Jesus was very serious in His quoting from Deuteronomy, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Thus the words in the letters, such as the opening and closing comments, are very necessary in establishing the authenticity of the epistles, and give us a look at the interrelationships of the first century church. Additionally, they often add punchy or encouraging exhortations in the form of one-liners, and strengthen the modern reader as well as those to whom they were directly addressed.

- **God of peace** - God's critics often accuse Him of being evil and warlike. This is dispelled by the title given by Paul, with the attestation of His character displayed throughout history and throughout the word of God. “Now may the *God of peace* Himself...” is how the apostle opens his closing comments.
- **Sanctify** - God is holy, and He desires His children of faith to be sanctified - holy - also. “May the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely,” is the apostle's prayer. God has to perform the sanctification in the initial sense when the individual is immersed into Christ, but God requires obedient cooperation from the saint for the sanctification to continue.
- **Without blame** - At Jesus' second coming, the spirits and souls of the saints will be brought with Jesus out of Paradise, and be joined to their resurrection bodies on the surface of the earth. “May your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete,” the prayer continues, “without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is exciting to realize that if the follower of Christ attains to the positive resurrection of the dead, he is declared blameless before the judgment throne of Christ!
- **Faithful** - Another of the characteristics of the great God that shines through the inspired scriptures is God's faithfulness; he is constant or unchanging. He keeps His word, and will execute His promises. “Faithful is He who calls you,” comments the apostle, “and He also will bring it to pass” (I Thessalonians 5:24). God has promised His faithful brethren to give them a resurrection to life, and He is guaranteed to do so at Jesus return.
- **Prayers** - Another constant in the revelation of God is the continuing need for prayer; obviously the Father desires much communication from His children of the faith. “Brethren,” says the apostle Paul, clearly one of the most favored of people upon earth, “pray for us” (I Thessalonians 5:25). Even he earnestly petitioned the brethren to pray for him and his co-workers; how much also would every other saint need prayers on their behalf, and how much should they also be in the process of praying for others.
- **Greeting the brethren** - Christians are not mere numbers in a box on someone's organizational chart; they are important individual sheep for whom Jesus died. Paul knows personally many of the brethren in Thessalonica, and loves even the ones whom he had not the pleasure to meet. “Greet all the brethren, he requests, “with a holy kiss” (I Thessalonians 5:26). The “holy kiss” was a standard greeting of the time, and can be imitated carefully in modern times.
- **Read this letter!** - Paul is writing this letter from prison, and earnestly desires the doctrinal issues and encouragement to reach every single Christian in Thessalonica. Hence he gives this directive, “I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren” (I Thessalonians 5:27).

This awesome letter of encouragement for the suffering brethren of Thessalonica was deemed worthy of inclusion in the inspired record by the Holy Spirit. Its scope is broad, detailing the apostle Paul's thankfulness for the faith of the believers, his recall of his time with the saints, his encouragement from the Word he received from Timothy about the continued faithfulness of the Saints, his admonition on sexual purity, his information about the visible return of Christ, and his closing points in exhortation. Appropriately, the epistle closes with standard but important words: “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you” (I Thessalonians 5:28).