

Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through 1 & 2 Thessalonians



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Living and Sharing the Gospel

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By Michael D. Morrison

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Introduction: This project began in the mid 1990s. The first volume of *Exploring the Word of God* was published in 1995. We were not able to print any more volumes, but we continued to study and write articles about Scripture. We have gathered these articles and are publishing them as e-books. We hope you find these studies useful and encouraging.

As you may note, our work is not yet finished.

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A Model for All Believers

1 Thessalonians 1

After a short ministry in Thessalonica, Paul was forced to leave (Acts 17:1-10). Probably less than a year later, Paul heard that the believers there were being persecuted. Paul wrote to reassure them that their faith and sufferings were not in vain. This is one of his earliest letters.

Salutation (verse 1)

Verse 1 presents the authors and the audience: “Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you” (NIV 2011 edition in this chapter).

This letter does not follow some of the literary patterns Paul used in other letters. He says nothing about who he is, either as an apostle or servant of Christ. He names the church as being of the people (rather than “church of God”) and says that they are “in God” (rather than “in Christ”).

He begins the letter with grace, and ends it with grace (5:28), but never uses the word grace anywhere else. Apparently the Thessalonians were not worried about the way in which Christ saved them; they had other pastoral needs.

Received with joy (verses 2-6)

Greek letters often began with a brief prayer. Paul says that he has been praying about the believers in Thessalonica: “We always thank God for all of you, and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul begins with faith, love and hope, observing that each of these virtues has results in a person’s behavior. He will later say more about how hope helps us endure difficulties, and the kind of life that flows from faith.

Paul assures the readers that they did not make a mistake in accepting the message: “For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.”

Was the power in the preaching, or seen in the people who believed? What did the Holy Spirit do? Was conviction in the preachers, or in the audience? Paul does not write enough for us to be sure.

Paul notes how the people responded: “You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” Paul does not say what he did, other than living “for your sake.” He does not say what aspect of Jesus’ life they imitated, but his comment does imply that he told people something about the way Jesus lived.

An exemplary faith (verses 7-10)

Paul’s focus is not so much the example *he* set, but the example that the Thessalonians set—an example that had begun to teach other people: “And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” Paul praises them for what they did, indirectly encouraging them to continue in it despite the troubles they faced. Unbelievers in Thessalonica may despise them, but people from other places admire them.

Their example spread like ripples in a pond: “The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.” Paul really doesn’t mean “everywhere”—this exaggeration is an example of motivational rhetoric, not an objective description of facts.

Paul follows that with another figure of speech: “Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us.” Paul could go into other cities and people would say,

“I hear that people in Thessalonica believed your message. What were you preaching?”

Paul repeats major elements of the message: “They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” This was Paul’s message for pagans: repent of idolatry, serve God, and believe in Jesus, who died and was resurrected and will return, and through him we are saved from the judgment.

Paul does not say what the “wrath” is, nor the way in which Jesus rescues us. This letter does not even mention the cross; it is designed more for motivation than for instruction.

Things to think about

How often do I thank God for other believers? (verse 2)

In my experience, what kind of power and conviction came with the gospel? (verse 5)

Am I a model for other believers to see and imitate? (verse 7)

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We Were Not a Burden

1 Thessalonians 2

Paul began preaching the gospel in Macedonia somewhere around the year A.D. 50. After some success, he was forced to leave Philippi. He and his group journeyed west 100 miles to Thessalonica. After a short ministry there, they were again forced to leave (Acts 17:1-10). Probably less than a year later, Paul heard that the believers in Thessalonica were being persecuted. Paul wrote a letter to reassure the believers that their faith and sufferings were not in vain. As he writes to encourage them, he reviews his ministry and relationship with that church.

Trying to please God (verses 1-6)

Paul reminds them that he preached despite persecution: “You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition” (NRSV in this chapter). Since the gospel always comes with opposition, the readers should not be surprised if they encounter difficulties as well.

“For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.” The ancient world had its share of traveling snake-oil salesmen, and whether people were accusing Paul or not, Paul defends himself against possible misunderstandings.

A critic might have said: Paul gave his sales pitch in Thessalonica, but only a few gullible people fell for it, and they had no money, so Paul left to try his luck somewhere else. He didn’t really care about the people who fell

for his scam. So Paul responds: Our time in Thessalonica was not a failure. We are not trying to trick anyone — we are serving God, delivering his message, and that’s what we did. We get beaten up for our gospel, but we keep preaching because that’s what God sent us to do.

“As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others.” There is no evidence to support any accusation. Paul does not fit the pattern of a traveling trickster — there was no flattery, no self-promotion, nothing shady going on.

Working hard, helping others (verses 6-12)

Paul could have asked for some financial support, but he did not: “Though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.” Although teachers were normally paid by their students, Paul did not ask for payment — he did not want people to question his motives (1 Cor. 9:12). He was as gentle as a woman taking care of a baby. He supplied their needs, but did not ask them to supply his. That is evidence of sincerity, and along with it, the truth of the gospel.

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” Paul cared for the people so much that he shared his life with them. (This may have been a cliché expressing friendship.)

“You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.” This is quite an achievement: Paul, Silas and Timothy could move to a strange city and quickly find jobs that supported them. This was part of Paul’s strategy: he did not want to be confused with the traveling speakers whose main motive was money.

“You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers.” He says this not to boast, but to forestall any accusations that would cast doubts on the gospel. This is the example he set for them to follow.

“As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” Fathers did not always deal with their children kindly, but Paul is appealing to the ideal: a father was supposed to help his children and encourage them to be good citizens.

What is a life that is “worthy” of God? Taken literally, this is an impossibly high standard. But this is motivational rhetoric, not a formula for earning salvation. It simply means, I urge you to live the way that characterizes God and his kingdom — the way of love.

Accepting the word of God (verses 13-16)

In chapter 1, Paul thanked God for choosing the believers in Thessalonica. Now, he gives thanks that they believed the gospel: “We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.” The word of God had begun to work in their lives.

What is the evidence that their faith was genuine? It was their willingness to endure persecution: “For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews...” Paul draws attention to this example because he wants them to continue in it, to be faithful despite the persecution.

In the ancient world, people wanted the gods to give them good crops,

good health, and good fortune. When people were suffering, it was assumed that they had offended the gods in some way. So when the believers in Thessalonica experienced difficulties, others would say: “Trusting in Jesus isn’t doing you any good, is it?”

So Paul says that persecutions are not proof that the gospel is false — God’s truth has always encountered opposition. The pattern began where the gospel began — in Judea. (Apparently Paul had already told them a little church history.) The unbelievers didn’t like the gospel there, either.

Paul then comments on the Jewish persecutors: They “killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God’s wrath has overtaken them at last”

These words are surprising — unlike anything Paul wrote anywhere else. They are anti-Semitic, some say, and an unfair condemnation of an entire ethnic group. But Paul is not condemning all Jews. He is referring only to the Judeans who killed Jesus and drove the early believers away (see Acts 7 for similar comments). Paul is not presenting a calm analysis of the place of Jews in God’s plan (for that, see Romans 9-11). Rather, his purpose is to strengthen the Thessalonian believers to remain true to their convictions. The context implies that a similar criticism could be said for the Macedonian persecutors.

Paul says that God’s wrath has come upon the Judeans. We do not know what is he referring to. Apparently God’s wrath can happen without making much of an impact on history. In some cases his wrath means only that he lets people continue doing the sins they want to do (Romans 1:18-32; John 3:18). It is difficult to know precisely what Paul means by the term.

Paul’s desire to see the Thessalonians (verses 17-20)

Paul reviews the history of his relationship with the people: “As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way.”

Paul does not say *how* he tried to return to Thessalonica, but the person who carried the letter could explain the details. It might have been risky to put them in writing, in case the letter was intercepted.

Paul explains that he takes pride in the Thessalonians: “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!” When Christ returns and assesses Paul’s ministry, he will praise work that had lasting results (1 Cor. 3:10-15). If all of his converts fell away, what would it say about his ministry?

This is emotion-laden rhetoric, not a statement about the way eternal rewards are given. Paul wants to assure the Thessalonians that they are important to him. If they are skeptical that Paul is motivated by love, then Paul explains another reason: This is what the Lord wants Paul to do, and Paul wants to do it for him.

Things to think about

Do I know anyone who has been tricked into following a false religious message? How can I tell the difference between a deliberate fraud and an honest misunderstanding?

Should all religious leaders work night and day to support themselves?
(verse 9)

How can I urge people to live a life “worthy of God” without being legalistic? (verse 12)

Have I suffered because of the gospel, or was it my own fault? (verse 14)

Is my hope and joy for the future centered on other people? (verse 19)

The Greeks had a word for it: Εκκλησία

The Greek word *ekklesia* comes from *ek*, meaning “from” or “out of,” and *kaleo*, meaning “to call.” So the roots of *ekklesia* mean “people who are called out.” Root meanings can sometimes shed light on an obscure word, but they do not determine what the word actually means (for example, consider the English word butterfly). A word’s meaning is based on the way the word is used, and that can change as the years roll by.

In ancient Greece, an *ekklesia* was the town council—citizens called out of their homes and into the amphitheater for a meeting (Acts 19:39 is an example). The people are not called *out*, as much as they are called *together*. “Assembly” is a good translation.

Ekklesia eventually became used for the church, the gathering of believers — but when Paul wrote his letters, that meaning was not yet common, so Paul had to specify which *ekklesia* he was writing to. He was not writing to the assembly of the Thessalonians — that would be the town council — he was writing to the assembly of those who were “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1).

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Paul's Concern for the Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 3

Paul, Silas and Timothy had been chased out of Macedonia, but they did not abandon the infant churches they left behind. Indeed, they were worried because the new believers in Thessalonica were being persecuted. Paul did not know how they would cope.

Sending Timothy to help (3:1-5)

“So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.” Paul’s stay in Athens is described by Luke in Acts 17 — Paul went there after he was forced to leave Berea. Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea for a time, but soon rejoined Paul (Acts 17:15).

“We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.” Timothy has already been there, so why is Paul telling them things they already know? The details remind them that their relationship with Paul has some historical depth — it is evidence that Paul cares for them and has not abandoned them.

Why was it necessary to send Timothy? “...so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.” Paul is vague on these trials — the details do not serve his purpose. Unbelievers might say that trials show that Christianity is false, but Paul reverses the idea: these trials *confirm* the message, because they were predicted. “You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.”

So Paul tells them again: “For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.”

Timothy's trip was not just to encourage them — it was also to find out if they were still faithful.

Was it really possible for Paul's efforts to have been useless? He later wrote, "You know your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:15). If he could say this to the Corinthians, despite their spiritual immaturity, it seems safe to say that efforts to serve Christ are *never* in vain, never useless. Paul is exaggerating his fears to highlight the relief he felt when he learned of the Thessalonians' faithfulness.

Since Paul sometimes exaggerates (see 1 Thess. 1:8), we have to be cautious when interpreting some of his comments. Sometimes he writes as if believers can never fall away. Here, he implies that they *can* lose their faith. His expressions of confidence encourage the readers, but his actions (sending Timothy to strengthen them) suggest that Paul knew the importance of encouragement and personal contact in helping Christians endure trying times and overcome the temptation to give up.

Timothy brings good news (3:6-10)

Paul completes the history by summarizing Timothy's report: "But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you." The desire for face-to-face meeting was frequently included in Greek letters of friendship. By putting this in the letter, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to continue what they are doing.

He reminds them that he endures persecution, too, and that their faithfulness has helped him: "Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith." He adds, with some exaggeration, "For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord." Good news like that really lifted our spirits, we might say. It

makes our work feel worthwhile again.

Paul thanks God for their continuing faithfulness: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”

Paul has finished recounting his history with the readers, but the relationship is not finished. It continues by means of this letter, but Paul also hopes that it continues with personal contact.

Paul’s prayer (3:10-13)

Just as Paul turned his joy toward God in thanks, he also turns his hopes for the future toward God in prayer: “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.”

What was lacking in their faith? Perhaps Paul means that he wants to tell them more about the *content* of their faith — faith in the sense of “the Christian faith.” Judging by this letter, they lack very little; Paul does not criticize what they are doing.

He prays that he will be able to visit them: “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.”

And he prays for their spiritual growth: “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”

Does “blameless” mean that Paul expects them to be morally perfect by the time Christ returns? Paul’s prayer here means about the same thing as “I hope that you achieve everything that God wants you to achieve.” It is a sentiment, not a prophecy, and not a formula for salvation.

First Thessalonians is a letter of encouragement, not a letter of doctrinal instruction, and we should not try to squeeze doctrine out of passages in

which Paul is not trying to explain a doctrine. Some parts of the Bible are doctrinal, but other parts are more like a story, and some are motivational. God inspired every type, and we need to receive it the way it is, not try to force it into something else.

Paul will have more to say about love, blameless conduct, and the coming of Christ in the next chapter.

Things to think about

Have I ever felt that my work in the church was useless? (3:5)

When have I felt “really alive”? (3:8)

Who can supply what is lacking in my faith? (3:10)

The Greeks had a word for it: Περιχωρησις

Actually, they didn’t have a word for it, so they had to make one up. It was in the 7th century, and John of Damascus wanted a word to describe relationships within the Trinity: the Father in the Son and Spirit, the Son in the Father and Spirit, and the Spirit in the Father and Son.

So John used the word *perichōresis*, which comes from the Greek word *peri*, meaning “around,” and *chōreo*, meaning to “contain,” “hold,” or “make space.” The idea is that the members of the Trinity contain each other, or penetrate or permeate each other.

Interestingly, a similar Greek word, *choreuō*, means “to dance,” and some people have therefore thought that *perichōresis* means literally “to dance around.” It doesn’t. The connection is more of a pun, not a literal definition. However, although the real meaning is mutual indwelling, not dancing, Christian writer Paul Fiddes points out, “The play on words does illustrate well the dynamic sense of *perichoresis*...” (*Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* [Westminster John Knox, 2001], 72; see also the *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1928, pages 242-254).

It is into this dynamic, loving Trinitarian life of the Father, the Son and

the Spirit that the Father's beloved Son Jesus has brought all humanity. As one of us, and as our perfect representative, Jesus presents us to the Father fully redeemed and reconciled in his perfect humanity on our behalf. In Jesus, we dwell with him and the Father and the Spirit in *perichōresis*, mutual indwelling — God in us and we in God.

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Preparing for the Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 4

Paul has reminded the believers in Thessalonica of their faithfulness in midst of some trials. Now he reminds them of what he taught them about Christian life. Although the Thessalonians had been idolaters (1:9), Paul does not say anything about the need to avoid idolatry. He focuses on sexual purity, love, and work.

He begins with a general principle: “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more” (4:1). Paul’s message in Thessalonica was not just about how to get eternal life on the day of judgment — it included instruction about behavior, as well. Some ways of life are more pleasing to God than others — not because God has arbitrary pet peeves, but because our behavior can help or hurt the people he loves (including ourselves).

Paul praises the Thessalonians for already doing what he had told them, and he encourages them to continue, because the instructions are not just Paul’s personal preferences — he was acting as God’s messenger: “For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”

Sex and sanctification (verses 3-8)

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified,” Paul begins. “Sanctified” means to be holy, or to be “set apart.” In one sense, all Christians have already been set apart or sanctified or made holy by Jesus Christ. But Paul also encourages believers to set themselves apart for God’s use.

We are already children of God, but Paul exhorts us to act like it, to make our behavior consistent with what God says that we are. God wants us to set our lives in a certain way.

What does sanctification include? The first thing Paul mentions, and the topic he gives the most space to, is sexual conduct: “that you should avoid sexual immorality.” Greco-Roman religions had few restrictions on male sexuality, and as a result, sexual conduct was always high on the list of moral exhortations given to Gentiles. Paul does not specify here exactly what was included in “immorality” (he and Timothy may have already covered those details) — he just reminds them to avoid what they had already been taught is wrong.

Paul explains this instruction not on the basis of Old Testament laws, but on a more general principle: “that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.” Self-control was one of the primary virtues of Greco-Roman civilization, and Paul appeals to that cultural value to argue against a common cultural vice.

He contrasts self-restraint with people who are driven by carnal urges: “not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.” Paul uses the word *ethnē*, which means “nations” or “Gentiles.” His readers were Gentiles, but they are not to live in the same way as everyone else around them. If they indulge in sexual immorality, they are acting as if they are ignorant of who God is and what he wants. They are letting themselves be controlled by the flesh, not the Spirit.

Paul further says that in this matter “no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.” Sexual immorality hurts other people, and it should not be done to fellow believers — nor to anyone else, for that matter. People are not to be used for one’s own self-gratification.

Paul adds yet another reason for sexual purity: “The Lord will punish... for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.” Part of Paul’s message in Thessalonica was that God would eventually punish selfish behavior that hurts other people. (The 1984 NIV has the word “men,” but in a

passage about sexual sin, this could easily be read as referring only to males, when the Greek text is not gender specific. A more literal translation is “the Lord is an avenger concerning all these things.”)

Paul brings the discussion back to God’s will: “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” God wants sexual purity. Anything else is impure, unholy, unspiritual, and unchristian.

Most of Paul’s exhortations are given without supporting argumentation, but when it comes to sex, it seems that Paul felt that more support was needed. Perhaps the Thessalonians had asked for some reasons for what was, in their culture, an odd restriction. So Paul gives several reasons:

1. immorality comes from a lack of self-control,
2. it hurts other people,
3. God wants us to avoid it, and
4. he will punish it.

Paul concludes by reminding the readers that this is God’s idea, not just his own: “Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.” Since God is sharing his life and nature with us, and this is the life we want for all eternity, then, as best as we can with his Spirit transforming us, our lives should be holy and conformed to the pattern that Jesus Christ gives us.

Respectable behavior (verses 9-12)

Paul then moves to two other areas of life — love and work. He does not say much about either one, apparently because the Thessalonians are already doing well, and a brief reminder will be sufficient. “Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.” Paul is using two Greek words for love: He did not need to write to them about *philia* love (mutual love) because they already had *agapē* love (unilateral love) for one another.

“And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia.” (Apparently they had some contact with the church in Philippi, and perhaps Berea.) “Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.” In other words, good job! Keep up the good work!

Paul turns from their behavior with other believers, to their role in the larger society around them: “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you.” If you want to be ambitious, count yourself a success when you stay out of trouble — that’s a pretty ambitious goal in itself. If you are going to be persecuted, make sure it is for the gospel and not for bad behavior. And don’t be lazy (some Greeks thought that manual labor was beneath their dignity).

He gives two reasons for this: “so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” Let your behavior make the gospel more attractive to unbelievers (similar to Titus 2:5, 8, 10), and don’t become financially beholden to someone else. Mooching doesn’t do the gospel any favors. Be an asset to society, and people might be a little more willing to listen to what you have to say.

The coming of the Lord Paul’s next topic is the return of Christ — the only place in his letters where he gives details about what will happen. The Thessalonian believers wanted to know more about this topic. We’d like to know more, today, too, because some of the things Paul says are puzzling.

He begins by discussing the resurrection of believers who die before Jesus returns. It sounds like someone in the Thessalonian church had died — although it’s possible that the people were asking a hypothetical question.

Paul assures them that people who die will not miss out on the great event. They will have places of honor as the saints rise to meet the returning King.

The return of Christ (verses 13-18)

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” It seems that the Thessalonians had asked about what happens to believers who die before Christ returns. Paul replies that we do not grieve in the way that unbelievers do. Death is still an enemy, so we may grieve, but our sorrow is mixed with hope because we know that we will all live again in far better circumstances.

Paul begins by stating the doctrine: “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, we will be, too, if we are spiritually united with him. Those who die will come with Jesus. Just what they are doing in the meantime, Paul does not say.

He quotes a saying of Jesus — one that is not in the Gospels: “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.” By using the word “we,” does Paul imply that he expects to live until Christ returns? Many scholars think so, and they suspect the Thessalonians had a similar belief, thus causing their worries about those who die in this age.

However, it is not necessarily so. If Paul had used the third-person “those,” he could have implied that he would not live until the return, and since he did not know one way or another, he used the more pastorally optimistic “we.”¹ Paul knew that believers could die before Christ returned, and simple logic would tell him that he might be one of them.

Paul’s point is that people who live until Christ returns will not have any advantage over Christians who die. The living ones will not rise to greet Christ while the dead ones are still struggling to get out of their graves!

Paul sketches a simple sequence: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with

the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” There will be a loud sound, and the dead will rise. Do they come with Christ from heaven, or do they rise from graves on earth?

Paul is not dealing with that question — he is just addressing sequence. “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” This is the key verse of the “rapture” theory, which says that Christians will rise into the air to meet Christ and then go with him to heaven while the Great Tribulation savages unbelievers on Earth.² Those ideas are not in this verse; they come from other books of the Bible.

Actually, no verse teaches the rapture — it is only when verses from different sections of the Bible are combined, that anyone can construct the theory. The Bible does not promise that believers will escape the Tribulation, nor does it say that Christ will come once for the saints, and then a few years later for the Last Judgment. The believers in Thessalonica would not understand Paul to be saying anything like this.

What would they think? Paul refers to the presence or *parousia* of the Lord; the word *parousia* was also used for the arrival of a king in a city. Whenever the ruler visited, there was a lot of pomp and ceremony. Heralds announced the impending event, and city officials formed a procession to greet the king as he approached, and they would escort him into the city.

By using the word *parousia*, Paul is suggesting that kind of scene: Christ the king will come and his people will go to greet him and escort him as he comes to where they live. The Thessalonian believers were asking about who would be first in the welcoming procession. Those who die are not left out of the party —they’ll be raised so everyone can celebrate together.

The bottom line is simple: “And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

And then Paul writes, “Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

What are the encouraging words? Is it that the dead in Christ will be in the welcoming delegation? That we will be in the clouds? Those are good, but such details pale into insignificance when compared with the eternal result: We will be with Christ forever. That is the message that puts all our trials into perspective, and gives us courage to be faithful until the end.

Things to think about

How would I respond if someone starting giving me commands I already knew about, and I was already doing a good job in that area? (verses 1, 10)

How “set apart” is my life for God’s use? Are there areas of my life that are not given to him? (verse 3)

Why does Paul specify that we should not harm a brother (or sister) in sexual immorality? (verse 5)

Are all people taught by God to love each other? (verse 9)

The Greeks had a word for it: Πορνεία

Paul told the Thessalonians to avoid it. He told the Corinthians to flee from it. He told the Galatians it was a work of the flesh. “It” was sexual immorality — referred to by the Greek word *porneia*. This word comes from *pornē*, prostitute, which comes from the word *pernao*, meaning “to sell.” *Porneia* is what prostitutes sold. The English word pornography comes from this same root word.

Although *porneia* originally meant to consort with prostitutes, it was also used for a variety of other sexual practices outside of marriage, including incest (1 Corinthians 5:1), adultery (Matthew 5:32), the orgy at Sinai (1 Corinthians 10:8; Numbers 25:1), and the immorality in Sodom (Jude 7). “Among you,” Paul writes in Ephesians 5:3, “there must not even be a hint of *porneia*.”

Endnotes

1 Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World* (InterVarsity, 1992), 24.

2 For a more thorough analysis of this theory, see the chapter below.

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Don't Be Surprised

1 Thessalonians 5

In almost every one of his letters, Paul refers to the return of Christ. But he rarely gives any details. His letters to the believers in Thessalonica are exceptions. Apparently they had asked for more information on this topic.

No need for surprise (5:1-11)

After Paul tells them that Christ will return, he discusses the timing in more detail: “About times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” Jesus also referred to a thief in the night in the Olivet prophecy (Matt. 24:43). This may have been a common proverb about someone coming at an unexpected time.

“While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.” Labor pains are not totally unpredictable, but this was probably another proverb for something that could not be scheduled precisely.

What sort of “destruction” did Paul have in mind? He refers to “wrath” in verse 9, but he doesn’t give us many details about it. Paul may be referring to the turmoil or tribulation that was expected before the day of the Lord, or perhaps to the day of judgment itself, when some people will find that the world is ruled by someone they don’t like, and they will suffer the consequences of their own actions.

Paul’s purpose is not to tell us about destruction, but to encourage us that we will not experience it: “But you...are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.” They do not know when the day will be — Paul’s point is that they won’t suffer loss, because they are always ready.

“You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the

night or to the darkness.” Paul is using “darkness” as a spiritual category, just as some of the Dead Sea Scrolls do. The believers are children of light, children of God, not of evil and darkness, and that should change the way they live.

“But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” Paul here uses another metaphor, perhaps adapted from Isaiah 59:17. Faith, love, and hope should cover and protect our hearts and minds.

“For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” God does not want us to experience the unpleasant consequences of sin. He has planned something far better for us — salvation.

In this letter, written to people who were already Christians, Paul does not say much about how a person is saved. The only glimpse comes in verse 10: “He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.” This is where the discussion started: Whether we live until Christ returns (are awake), or if we die (are asleep), either way, the purpose and result is the same: we will live with him. That’s the salvation he obtained for us.

Paul concludes: “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” As the young church struggled to hold on to their faith in a time of persecution, they saw that everything, whether life or death, made sense only in Christ.

Things to think about

Am I disappointed by the idea that Christ may not return in my lifetime?

What will I think as I rise into the air to greet Christ?

Have I used these words to encourage others?

How does a belief in resurrection lead me to self-control?

The Greeks had a word for it: Παρουσία

The Greek word *parousia* comes from the preposition *para*, meaning “near,” and the participle *ousia*, which means “being.” Literally, it means “being near”; in everyday Greek it meant “presence” or “arrival.” In addition to these ordinary uses, it also “became the official term for a visit of a person of high rank, especially of kings and emperors visiting a province” (F.W. Danker, ed., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 2000, 781.)

Paul referred to his own presence (Phil. 1:26), and the presence of the “man of sin” (2 Thess. 2:9), but when he used this word he usually meant the presence of Jesus Christ, returning visibly and in strength. As a result, *Parousia* has entered English as a theological term for the return of Christ.

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2 Thessalonians

Punishment of the unbelievers

The letter tells us that it is from the same three people – Paul, Silas and Timothy, and to the same people: the Thessalonians. They start by giving thanks to God, in this case for the peoples' faith and love (verse 3). The readers are suffering under persecutions *and* afflictions (verse 4), but are still faithful. “Exactly how Paul has become aware of such developments,” Gorman says, “we do not know.”[1]

We are bragging about your endurance, the writers say—which subtly implies that if they quit, the apostles will be embarrassed. (Similarly, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to give more generously because he had been bragging about them to others – 2 Cor. 9:2.)

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God” (verse 5, NRSV used for 2 Thessalonians). Grammatically, it is not clear what “this” refers to. It would sound odd to say that the persecutions show that God is righteous, because he has not yet punished the persecutors. The best suggestion, it seems to me, is that “this” refers to the fact that their faith is growing *despite* the persecutions. Bruce writes, “Your *endurance* of tribulation is a sure token of God’s righteous judgment...”[2] Similarly, Michael Holmes writes:

Paul interprets the fact that the Thessalonians are not only persevering and trusting in the midst of persecution, but actually growing and increasing, as a sign of God’s blessing, not judgment.... The growth, increase, perseverance, and faith demonstrated by the Thessalonians together give evidence that they are indeed part of God’s people.[3]

Do people become “worthy of the kingdom” by going through trials? I don’t think Paul intends that – the writers are trying to encourage the

afflicted, not trying to tell us how to be saved. They want to say that faithful endurance will have good results, even eternal rewards.[4] I wouldn't phrase it the way Paul does here – but maybe I am missing part of the context...

In the future, God will turn the tables on the persecutors, and it will be right for him to do so: “it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels” (verses 6-7). In some unspecified way, God will punish the people for the evil they do, and the believers will have relief when the Lord returns.

Jesus will be “inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel” (verse 8). We are not talking about people who live in the jungles of Borneo – we are not talking about *everyone* who lacks knowledge – we are talking specifically about the people who are persecuting the Thessalonian believers. It's as if this letter is saying, “Your persecutors may be calling you ignorant and disobedient, but *they* are the ones who are really unaware and rebellious, and they will be punished for it.” The goal here is to encourage people who are being persecuted.

“These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory” (verse 9). Some say here that eternal destruction means annihilation, but if so, it would seem unnecessary to mention that they will also be separated from God. Paul simply doesn't give us enough detail here for us to know what his beliefs about punishment are.

On the other hand, when the Lord appears, he will “be glorified by his saints and...marveled at on that day among all who have believed” (verse 10). We will praise and honor him, because we believe the gospel message.

So the writers pray again: “asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith”

(verse 11). They ask God to help the readers keep their faith even in their difficulties – for God to *make* them worthy. The result will be that both Jesus and the believers will be given more glory (verse 12).

Signs of the end time

“How long, O Lord?” the Thessalonians were no doubt asking, “How long will it be until we are vindicated, until we get relief, until our enemies are punished for the evil they are doing?”

Some apparently thought it was quite soon, so Paul and his companions write, “We beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here” (2:1-2). Perhaps someone claimed to speak under inspiration, to have a special word of knowledge, or perhaps this was in a letter – we don’t know, and it is possible that Paul didn’t, either. Johnson writes,

Three things have contributed to shaping the crisis: the immaturity of the community, Paul’s instructions in 1 Thessalonians, and the classic apocalyptic scenario of the end-time.... For those already confused concerning when “the Son from heaven” would come to relieve their suffering and bring them salvation (1 Thess. 1:10), the temptation would be great to see in every increment of persecution the final progress toward that climactic moment when God would intervene.[5]

The point is that the Thessalonians should not think that the day of retribution is in the immediate future. (Surely they didn’t think it had *already* arrived, for they were still suffering “The day of the Lord” refers not to a 24-hour period, but to a general span of time, and it seems that they thought this time period had already begun.) As Wright observes, “If ‘the day of the Lord’ meant ‘the end of the world,’ the Thessalonians would not need to be informed of such an event by letter”[6]

It is natural for people undergoing persecution to want an immediate end to their difficulties, and perhaps they were overly ready to believe a claim that the end is near. But it is also possible that a local legend made them especially susceptible to speculation. Macedonia had been the location of the Cabirus cult. Cabirus had supposedly been murdered by his brothers, but had been made one of the gods, and he would eventually return.[7] The Romans had combined this cult with the Thessalonian city cult, apparently against the wishes of some, and it is possible that “some of the Cabirus cult’s original adherents, having lost what their recently co-opted faith had provided for them, may have found a suitable substitute in the gospel.”[8]

So it was easy for the people to believe that Jesus died, went to heaven, and would return and give benefits to those who believed in him, and it was easy for them to believe that this would happen very soon. When Paul called for watchfulness, they may have interpreted it to mean an increased interest in prophecy, whereas he meant it as good behavior.

However, as deSilva notes, it is “not clear what threat this collapse of the future ‘Day of the Lord’ into the present posed to the community beyond the error itself.”[9] It might make the people look foolish, but isn’t this a harmless error that would, in time, correct itself?

Perhaps, but the hope of future reward can help motivate people to be faithful in times of trial, and if there is no more hope, faithfulness may be seen as pointless. Urgent or not, Paul and his friends have the opportunity to correct the error, and they do so. They do not attack anyone, or get all excited – they simply correct the problem with a little more teaching. They get more emotional in chapter 3 when they are dealing with lazy believers; that is a more serious problem.

No matter what the cause of the idea, Paul, Silas and Timothy respond that certain things must happen before the Lord’s return – a rebellion, a

lawless one, and a mystery of lawlessness. Paul (singular) had told them these things earlier (verse 5), but I guess they hadn't paid enough attention.

Despite all sorts of modern speculations about the apostasy and the son of perdition, we do not know what was meant. One of the ideas out there might be right, but we don't have enough information to prove which is right. The Thessalonians knew what was restraining him (verse 6), but we do not. Gorman writes:

Paul's major concern here is not some dogmatic stance about the "antichrist"; and even far less about this figure's actual identity. (Suggestions for what Paul had in mind include an emperor, a Roman military figure, or a false prophet and/or miracle worker.) His overriding concern is pastoral – to stress the futurity of the parousia (2:3) and to encourage faithfulness to the Lord.[10]

Whether this passage cooled their eschatological excitement, we do not know. As we see with modern prophecy speculators, people can get just as hyped up about "signs" of the end as they can about the end itself.

Marshall asks, "What do we make of the fact that nothing that can reasonably be identified as corresponding to this description has happened? The nearest that we have is the desecration and destruction of the Jewish temple in AD 70, but that is not a close fit." [11] Others say that with a little creativity, it's close enough, and creativity is appropriate when it comes to prophecy. But considering the low chance of making a correct identification, and the low difference it would make in our Christian life, it's not worth a lot of research time.

The lawless one, with satanic power, will work signs and wonders to deceive people. They are "perishing because they refused to love the truth and so be saved" (verse 10). And because they refused, "God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false" (verse 11), making

them worse off than they were before. (See Pharaoh for an example – he hardened his heart, and God hardened it some more.)

These people are really set in their ways. We are not talking about people who never heard of Jesus, or of babies who die in infancy. We are talking about people who heard the truth and refused it, and “took pleasure in unrighteousness” instead. These are the people who will be condemned (verse 12).

Exhortations for believers

But the believers are in a different category. The writers have another thanksgiving section, noting that the Lord loved the Thessalonian believers and God chose them for salvation through the Spirit and through faith (verse 13). As Gorman says, they have a “special calling to be in relationship with the triune God: God (the Father) who elects, the Lord (Jesus) who loves, and the Spirit who sanctifies.”[12]

Verse 14: “He called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Because of this calling, the believers should hold fast to what they have been taught by the apostles.

After a brief benediction and prayer for comfort and strength (verses 16-17), there is another request that the Thessalonians pray for the apostles – not only for success in the gospel, but also deliverance from persecutors (3:1-2). This request would help the Thessalonians remember that they are not the only ones being persecuted.

The writers add, “But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen *you* and guard *you* from the evil one” (verse 3). It seems that even when requesting prayers for themselves, the writers are thinking primarily of the persecution that the *Thessalonians* are suffering. Their prayer request is designed to encourage the readers.

They express confidence that the Thessalonians will obey (hint of a command that will soon come?), and give a brief prayer for love and steadfastness (verses 4-5). Perhaps they need an extra prayer because of the difficulty of the command...

Verse 6 has a forceful command “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” – they should “keep away from believers who are living in idleness.” This had apparently become a serious problem. Some scholars suggest that people had quit their jobs because they thought the return of Christ was near, but others point out that idleness was a (minor) problem even in the first letter. Perhaps both were involved: the lazy people seized upon the eschatological excitement as an excuse for their laziness.

We are not talking about independently wealthy people here – they were expecting other believers to give them food while they were “living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work” (verse 11). Wright says that this may imply “common distribution of food, perhaps even regular eating of main meals together.”[13] The Thessalonians had enough problems with persecution from outside; slackers like this on the inside could undermine their morale and lead outsiders to ridicule the gospel.

The writers again remind the Thessalonians to imitate the apostolic example: “You ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you” (verses 7-8). Since the apostles imitated the self-sacrificial behavior of Jesus, the people should imitate the apostles; that is why Paul can give this command “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the way of Christ.

So they repeat their command: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (verse 10). They are not welcome at the community meals.

They command the slackers to change their ways (verse 12) – and they

command the congregation to shun those who won't (verse 6) – and repeat the command in verse 14: “Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed.” Marshall observes, “It is assumed that the church has some authority over its members and their way of life.”[14] Whether we should excommunicate a person for laziness today is quite another question. We do not have communal meals.

The believers are growing in love for one another, so it may be psychologically difficult for them to ostracize anyone. So Paul and his companions write, “Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right” (verse 13). You might not like to obey this one, he might say, but you need to do it anyway. Otherwise, the leeches will continue sucking blood out of the body. The goal is not to kick them out, but get them to change their ways (verse 15).

Paul signs the letter with his own handwriting (verse 17) – a way in which the readers might be able to identify unauthorized letters. Presumably they know what his signature looks like.

Endnotes

[1] Gorman, 171.

[2] F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Word Biblical Commentary, 1982), 149.

[3] Michael Holmes, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Zondervan, 1998), 212.

[4] “Affliction is not simply an external force to be endured but is a positive factor in the strengthening of their identity. It enables them to grow in faith and love” (Johnson, 289).

[5] *Ibid.*, 288-89.

[6] Wright, 147.

[7] deSilva, 528.

[8] Simpson, 935.

[9] deSilva, 545.

[10] Gorman, 177.

[11] Marshall, 68.

[12] Gorman, 177.

[13] Wright, 158.

[14] Marshall, 69.

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What Does the Bible Say About “the Rapture”?

By Paul Kroll

The “rapture” is a belief among some Christians about what happens to the church before Jesus’ coming in glory, commonly called “the Second Coming.” They use the phrase “the rapture of the church” to refer to their belief that Christians will be “caught up” to be with Christ sometime around his glorious return. The rapture event is said to protect the church from a period of great tribulation. Those who believe in a rapture rely mainly on one passage of Scripture, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

The rapture doctrine seems to have originated with a man named John Nelson Darby in about 1830. He divided the time of the second coming into two stages. Darby said Christ would come *for* his saints (the “rapture”) before the tribulation and he would come *with* his saints after it, which he thought was Jesus’ true coming in glory or second coming.

Those who believe in the rapture disagree as to when it will occur in relationship to the “great tribulation” before Christ returns. They are divided over whether the rapture will happen before, during or after the tribulation. These groups are called *pretribulationists*, *midtribulationists*, and *posttribulationists*. A less prominent variation of the rapture theory is that

only the faithful elect within the Christian church community will be caught up at the beginning of the tribulation.

What is our view on the rapture? If we look at 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, the apostle Paul seems to simply say that at “the trumpet call of God” the dead in Christ will rise first and those believers who were alive would be caught up together with them “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” There is no discussion of the church, or a part of the church, being raptured or taken away before, during or after a tribulation period.

Matthew 24:29-31 seems to be describing a similar event. In Matthew, Jesus says that the saints are caught up “after the distress of those days,” which includes the tribulation. They are caught up at Jesus’ second coming. From such Scriptures, it’s hard to see the distinctions that exponents of the rapture attempt to make.

For this reason, the church historically has chosen the straightforward reading of the Scriptures mentioned above, which do not describe a special rapture. The verses in question simply say that the dead saints will be resurrected and will be joined by those who are yet alive when Jesus returns in glory.

The question of what specifically will happen to the church before, during and after Jesus returns in glory is not clearly addressed in Scripture. What we can be sure about is what Scripture is clear and dogmatic about: Jesus will return in glory to judge the world. Those who are found in allegiance to him will be resurrected and live with him in joy and glory forever.

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Who Is the “Antichrist” and “Man of Sin”?

By Paul Kroll

Christians throughout the history of the church have been fascinated about the identity of the “antichrist,” mentioned in the New Testament. The list of possible candidates to fit his description includes many past and present religious and political leaders.

However, when we look at the scriptural passages that mention the “antichrist,” it becomes clear that they don’t refer to any specific historical personage at all. The Bible uses the term “antichrist” only four times, and it appears only in the letters of John (1 John 2:18,22; 4:2-3; 2 John 7). Jesus, Paul and Peter do not mention the “antichrist.

In the contexts in which John uses this term, he seems to have been most interested in showing that his *immediate* readers – not some group of Christians living in future times – were in what could be called “the last days.” John’s use of the term “antichrist” was a label that applied to people teaching certain heresies who were or had been associated with the church of his day. Primarily, it was applied to those who denied that Jesus was God Incarnate – that God had come in human flesh (John 1:1, 14). By reading John’s letters, we can see that this “antichrist” teaching was one that existed in *his* day. The people whose teachings John labeled as “antichrist,” and which he had in mind, were ones that must have been then alive.

Any discussion of the “beasts” of Revelation 13 and 17, and especially of the “image” of the beast in 13:11-18 identified by the number 666, causes people to wonder if this is a description of the “antichrist.” In fact, Revelation does not use the title “antichrist” for any of the “beasts” – or anything else. As mentioned earlier, the specific name “Antichrist” appears only in John’s

epistles. Therefore, whatever Revelation has in mind when it speaks of “the beast,” it is different from the “antichrist” mentioned in John’s letters.

Let us come back to the “antichrist” and ask what it was that such a person taught. If we read the verses mentioned above, we will note that the term “antichrist” described someone who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh (2 John 7) or that Jesus was the Christ (1 John 2:22). This heresy must have referred to individuals who denied the divinity of Jesus and his Incarnation, reducing him to the status of a mere man. It’s also possible some may have taught that the body of Christ was only a spirit, and that it was not real.

Another view of “antichrist” is that the term could refer to those who stood in the “place of Christ,” that is, claimed they were the Christ. Based on what Jesus said about false Christs and false prophets (Matthew 24:4-5, 24), John may have thought he and the church were living in “the last hour” because such heretics had appeared (1 John 2:18).

Who was an “antichrist”? Whoever these people were and whatever their specific teachings may have been, they had left the body of believers (verse 19). This means they were once part of the church but had now departed, presumably to start their own group or groups. John’s controversy was not with unbelievers, but with people who at one time claimed to have been Christians or members of the church.

In conclusion, the term “antichrist” can refer to any individual who opposes the true doctrine about the Incarnation and divinity of Jesus – and his work of salvation as God in the flesh. “Antichrist” has no specific prophetic application to any living or dead political leader such as a Hitler, or to any group, such as a so-called “satanic cult.” John did not pin the title “antichrist” on any single individual. He was identifying any person who denies the Incarnation of Jesus or his deity as true God of true God as such an

individual, an antichrist.

Any person who claims to be Christian but denies that Jesus as the Son of God came in the flesh, or who claims to be Christ himself, could fairly be called an “antichrist.” Of course, any individual, group or power that opposes the purposes of God especially as it relates to his work in Jesus, would, in a general way of speaking, be antichrist and anti-God.

The “Man of Sin”

Both Old and New Testaments speak of an individual, representing a system of evil – symbolizing sinfulness – who would arise in the “last days.” The Jewish apocalyptic writings, the Sibylline Oracles, describe this man of evil as a revived Roman emperor Nero coming from Babylon (5:143-148).

The source of this belief in a “man of sin” goes back to Daniel. He had spoken of a fierce king who would arise at the time of the end. This king, said Daniel, “Will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed” (11:36).

In this connection, we should mention the apostle Paul’s reference to a “man of lawlessness” or “man of sin” in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Sometimes this person is referred to as the “antichrist,” though Paul does not use the word in connection with this individual.

Paul said that something was holding back this individual from accomplishing his nefarious deeds. The implication is that the restrainer, and thus the “man of lawlessness,” was alive in Paul’s day. This means Paul was concerned with someone living in his day, not in the future. Yet, Paul wrote of this “man of lawlessness” as though he would be revealed in the day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:3), which Paul said had not yet arrived (verses 2-3).

Paul said of this person: “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in

God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (verse 4). The question arises as to what Paul might have meant by “the temple.” Was it the physical temple in Jerusalem or was he speaking of the church, which he called “God’s temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)?

Commentators point out that Paul wrote his letter less than ten years after the Roman emperor Caligula tried to set up an image of himself in the temple’s Holy of Holies at Jerusalem. Josephus, the Jewish historian, refers to this provocative gesture as well (*Antiquities*, 18:8). A similar desecration of the temple was described by Daniel (9:27; 11:31). This actually occurred during the reign of the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 B.C.

Jesus also said that the temple would once again be desecrated. His words are recorded in Matthew 24:16: “When you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand – then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains...” This probably referred to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Roman armies in A.D. 66-70, though some see this as a yet future occurrence.

We can see that there is biblical as well as historical precedent for describing the appearance of an evil ruler who would challenge the worship of God. We can, based on the biblical material, appropriately call him “the man of sin.” However, while the biblical allusions to this individual, individuals or system are provocative and interesting, it is impossible to identify any specific person, government or other entity as representing either one.

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Who Needs a New Covenant? The Rhetorical Function of the Covenant Motif in the Argument of Hebrews (print only)

Sabbath, Circumcision and Tithing: Which Old Testament Laws Apply to Christians?

E-books:

The Bible: A Guided Tour (co-author)

Evangelism Without Guilt

Exploring the Word of God: Studies in Matthew

Exploring the Word of God: Studies in Luke

Exploring the Word of God: Acts of the Apostles (co-author of volumes 1 & 4)

Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Romans

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Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Philippians

Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Colossians and Philemon

Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of Scripture

The Proverbs 31 Woman and Other Biblical Women (co-author)

The Purpose for Human Life: Learning to Be Like Jesus Christ

Using Microsoft Word for Academic Papers

What Does the Bible Say About Prophecy and the Millennium?

What Does the Bible Say About Speaking in Tongues?

What Does the Bible Say About the Kingdom of God?

What Does the Bible Say About the Old and New Covenants?

What Does the Bible Say About the Sabbath?

What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?

Paul Kroll was an employee of Grace Communion International, writing

hundreds of articles for our magazines. He is now retired.

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About the Publisher...

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshiping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at www.gci.org.

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

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See our website for hundreds of articles, locations of our churches, addresses in various nations, audio and video messages, and much more.

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Jeff McSwain, Reality Ministries
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Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network
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