

2 Thessalonians

**An Explanation
with Notes and Quotes,
Illustrations and Applications**

G. Michael Cocoris

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PREFACE

The purpose of this commentary is to provide a practical explanation of 2 Thessalonians. The objective is a balanced exposition—explaining the passage in context and applying its truths to life with illustrations. Some commentaries are, by design, of a technical nature, delving into the meanings of words and phrases even outside their use in the book under consideration. Those commentaries tend to ignore the context of the book and its application. Other commentaries go to the other extreme and concentrate on the application, often not fully expounding the passage. Commentaries should do both. They should offer a contextual exposition of the book and apply the truths of that book to life. Adding illustrations facilitates clarity.

First and foremost, this is a contextual exposition. The context is not just the paragraph or the chapter but the whole book. In studying any book of the Bible, the first question that should be asked is: “What is the subject of this book?” Each natural literary unit, whether a paragraph or a narrative, develops a subject. A legitimate exposition will show how the author develops his subject. That, and only that, is contextual Bible study. All details in a book must be explained in light of the message and structure of the entire book. Words only have meaning in a context. A detailed explanation of words and phrases ripped from their sentence and the broader context is not exposition. The flow of the thought of the passage in the context of the book is the message the author intends to convey.

The Bible was written for living (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Even the most brilliant explanation that stops short of the applications is an abortion of what God intended. Thus, the practical ramifications of every passage must always be considered.

The procedure of study I use is to first divide the biblical book into its natural literary units (narratives or paragraphs). Then, I analyze each unit. The analysis includes an outline of the development of thought in that unit (major points and sub-points), an explanation of each sentence, and a summary statement. After I have personally analyzed each unit, I read commentaries, deliberately reading commentaries from different theological perspectives. I credit commentators’ comments by putting their names in parenthesis, even if I had seen that point in the text during my study before I read their comments. Thus, each chapter of this material expounds a natural literary unit of the book of 2 Thessalonians.

In the process of study, I also wrote a tentative title, introduction, and conclusion as if what I was working on was a sermon. If I stumble across an illustration, I include it, but, at this point, I do not search for illustrations. I write all of this for each literary unit in the book before preaching the first sermon in the book. As a result, when I begin speaking through the book, I have the whole book in mind.

As I prepare to preach each literary unit, I may change the tentative title, introduction, and/or conclusion. I rarely change the explanation of the text. It is as I preach each unit that I search for illustrations. Again, having studied the whole book first is helpful here. I sometimes found an illustration I knew would fit better later in the book.

The introduction of each chapter briefly relates that section to life and/or the context. The captions throughout the chapters are divisions of that portion of Scripture and correspond to the main points of a sermon. The italicized headings correspond to the sub-points of a sermon. Rather than footnotes, the author’s name is in parenthesis in the text. While applications are made throughout the exposition, the passage as a whole is summarized and applied at the end.

May the Lord be pleased to use this approach to the Scripture to enlighten, encourage, and edify believers, thus glorifying His Son.

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INTRODUCTION

Second Thessalonians has been called “a very short letter” (Baxter). Except for the note to Philemon, 2 Thessalonians is the shortest of Paul’s epistles. It is the shortest of his nine letters to churches. It has also been called “the theological sequel to 1 Thessalonians” (Boa).

Author

Second Thessalonians 1:1 says this epistle, like 1 Thessalonians, was written by Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Again, like 1 Thessalonians, “we” and “us” are used (1:3; 2:1, 2:13; 3:1, 3:4, 3:6, 3:14; etc.). The letter ends with Paul speaking in the first person singular (3:17). Paul is “the” author and Silas and Timothy are “linked together” with him. The external evidence in favor of Paul is early and stronger than 1 Thessalonians. Second Thessalonians is quoted more frequently by the early church fathers than 1 Thessalonians. The passage about the man of sin (2:1-12) made a strong impression on the early church. Frequent references are made to it.

Recipients

Paul visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. After he left, he eventually ended up in Corinth, where he stayed for 18 months. He wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth in AD 51. All indications are that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians a short time after 1 Thessalonians, which means he wrote it from Corinth in AD 51. One author suggests that 1 Thessalonians was written in the early summer and 2 Thessalonians was written later the same year (Hoehner).

Whoever took the first epistle to Thessalonica remained long enough to notice the effects of Paul’s letter and gain insight into the situation. Evidently, this messenger brought back a report with favorable and unfavorable news. The immediate occasion for the writing of 2 Thessalonians was the nature of this additional information.

They were making progress in faith and hope (1:3) and they were remaining steadfast under repeated outbreaks of persecution (1:4). In the first letter, Paul had relieved their distress about the death of their loved ones, but their expectation concerning the Second Coming of Christ had intensified. They concluded that the Day of the Lord had already arrived (2:2) and, thus, were expecting the immediate return of Christ. Consequently, some quit working. With leisure time on their hands, some became busybodies (3:10-12).

Message

The subject of 2 Thessalonians is a correction of a prophetic misunderstanding. Not only is the heart of the epistle a discussion of prophecy, but the other parts of it relate to that subject in one way or another. The message is that although they were experiencing persecution, they should not mistake that for the Day of Christ; they should not cease to work and discipline those who do cease to work.

Structure

Second Thessalonians is in the form of a letter.

I. Salutation	1:1-2
II. Thanksgiving	1:3-10
III. Prayer	1:11-12
IV. The Body of the Letter	2:1-3:16
A. Instruction: The Day of Christ has not Come	2:1-17
1. Instruction (Do not be soon Shaken)	2:1-12
2. Thanksgiving (Stand Fast and Hold to the Word)	2:13-15
3. Prayer	2:16-17
B. Injunctions: Pray and deal with the Disorderly	3:1-16
1. Call to Prayer	3:1-5
2. Command to Discipline	3:6-15
3. Concluding Prayer	3:16
VI. Personal Greeting and Benediction	3:17-18

Purpose

The first of a threefold purpose for 2 Thessalonians is to comfort them in their persecution. Paul had been persecuted by unbelieving Jews while he was there and after he left. The believers Paul left behind were being persecuted (1:4). They were doing well, but Paul was writing to encourage them. He does that by, among other things, letting them know he thanked God for them and was praying for them.

The second purpose of 2 Thessalonians is to correct a prophetic misunderstanding. Someone told them that the Tribulation had already begun (2:2). This was confirmed (supposedly) by a spiritual revelation (“spirit” in 2:2) or a messenger, perhaps even a letter from Paul (2:2). The fact that they were going through persecution made all of this believable. Paul tells them that the Day of Christ will not come until two events occur: 1) the apostasy and 2) the apocalypse of the man of sin.

The third purpose of 2 Thessalonians is to commend them in their practice. Paul also issues several commands: to pray (3:1-5) and withdraw from those who walk disorderly (3:6-15). This second command is related to the misconception of prophecy. Because they were expecting the Lord to come at any moment, some quit their jobs and became busybodies. Paul says if anyone does not work, he should neither eat (3:10) nor withdraw himself from him (3:6).

Summary: Paul wrote a second letter to the Thessalonians to comfort them in their persecution and correct their prophetic misunderstanding and practical misconduct. The Lord is coming back, but we should work until He comes.

PRAISE GOD AND BRAGG

Living the Christian life is like riding a bike up a steep mountain. With effort, some make slow but steady progress toward the top. Others have to stop and rest to recoup and may even be discouraged. Then, some have fallen and, perhaps, are hurt. We who pass by those who are hurt are responsible to our fellow travelers. To the fallen and the hurt, we must be a Good Samaritan. We need to pour oil on their wounds and may have to pay for a night's lodging in the inn. To the discouraged, we must be a friend and counselor. We need to listen to their woes to lighten their load. For discouragement, we supply encouragement.

Enlightened and experienced travelers know that they have a responsibility to fellow travelers, especially to the damaged and discouraged, but what about other fellows, the ones who, with effort, are making it slowly but steadily toward the top? What is my responsibility toward them? Some say, "I didn't know I had a responsibility to them." Some might even feel that such needs nothing. Therefore, we have no responsibility. According to the apostle Paul, we are responsible for those doing well.

Exceptionally Growth

Their Faith was Growing The Thessalonians were growing. Paul says, "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly" (1:3a). In 1 Thessalonians, Paul expressed fear about their faith (1 Thess. 3:5, 10), but now he was no longer apprehensive concerning their faith. It was growing. What does that mean? It means that they were learning more and more about what God said, and they were acting accordingly. They started out hearing what God said about sin and His Son. In a word, His Son paid for sin. They believed that and trusted Christ. Then, they understood what God said about their relationship to people, in a word, that God is love, He loved them and they should love one another. They believed that and practiced brotherly love. Next, they heard what God said about the future. In a word, His Son is returning and taking them to be with Himself. They believed that and waited for Christ to return. In the meantime, they were serving Him faithfully.

Furthermore, their faith was growing "exceedingly." The phrase "grows exceedingly," two words in English, is a single word in Greek. The root is simply the word "grow," which was used to increase living things, like a plant or a tree. To that root word, Paul added a preposition that indicated abundant or unusual growth. Their growth was beyond expectation (Hiebert).

Years ago, I moved to Dallas, Texas and purchased a home with no trees in the backyard. There were several in the front but none in the back. I'm not exactly sure what happened. Perhaps a bird dropped a seed. At any rate, a tree sprang up and shot up in my backyard. Within three years, the mulberry tree had reached the top of my house. It grew exceedingly, abundantly, beyond my expectations. The faith of the Thessalonians grew like a mulberry tree. That does not mean that they did not have problems; they did. That's why Paul wrote this letter! They were being persecuted (chapter 1). They were perplexed concerning prophetic points (chapter 2), and they had a practical problem with some idle, busy bodies (chapter 3), but they were growing spiritually in the midst of their problems.

Their Love was Growing Paul says, “and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other” (1:3b). Instead of saying, “Your love grows,” he says, “Your love abounds.” The Greek word translated “abounds” was used of the extension of a river overflowing its banks (Lightfoot; Hiebert). Paul is saying to the Thessalonians that their faith grows like a living tree and their love grows like a river extending beyond its banks. One is organic; the other just spreads (Milligan).

In Dallas, Texas, there is a bridge that is a half-mile long. It crosses the Trinity River. The river itself is only about fifty feet wide. Imagine a half-mile bridge to cross a fifty-foot river! The first time I saw that, I thought, “I know Texans do things in a big way, but this is ridiculous!” Then, the rainy season came, and I understood. That tiny river swelled until it overflowed its banks and filled the ravine the full length of the bridge. That’s what Paul says happened to their love. It abounded, that is, it extended way beyond its banks.

Their Growth was during Persecution Paul could say, “for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure” (1:4a). The Greek word translated “tribulations” means “pressure.” They had problems, persecutions, and pressure, yet they were enduring it (present tense). Their endurance was not of the grin-and-bear-it variety, for while they were enduring, they were growing exceedingly in faith and abounding in love toward everyone.

If Paul wrote you a letter, could he say you were growing? Are your faults growing, or is your faith growing? Is your complacency growing, or is your concern for others growing? Are you just going, or are you growing?

Roland Hill saw a child stride a rocking horse. The child was rocking back and forth and back and forth when Hill said to him, “My dear child, you remind me of many Christians. Plenty of motion, but no progress.” Are you like a plant growing from the inside out? Are you like a river reaching out? Or, are you like a boy on a rocking horse?

Thank God for such Growth

Not Because of Paul’s Ministry Because of their rapid growth in faith and love, even in the midst of pressure and persecution, Paul felt obligated to thank God for them. He says, “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting” (1:3). The Greek word translated “bound” connotes debt (Milligan); it is a moral obligation.

Why did Paul say he was morally obligated to thank God for them? It could be because their growth was a result of his ministry. In 1 Thessalonians 3:12, he prayed that their love would increase and abound (“increase” there is the same word as “abound” here). In 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10, he said that they did love one another, yet he encouraged them to increase their love more and more. Now, he says they were doing just that. His prayers had been answered and his preaching had been heeded, so it could be that he was saying that since their growth was a result of his ministry, he was obligated to thank God for it, that is, “I prayed and I preached. God answered and worked. Now I’m obligated to say thanks.”

Because God did it All that may be true, but it’s not the whole picture. Later in this book, he says, “We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2:13). The Greek word translated “bound” in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 is the same one that is translated “bound” in 2 Thessalonians 1:3. As he explains in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, he was bound to give thanks to God because God had chosen them. True, Paul had a part, but praise belonged to God apart from Paul’s part.

We are morally obligated to praise God because He has worked. His work is worthy of praise. In Romans 1, Paul says that God had revealed himself through creation (Rom. 1:19-20). Then, he says the whole world is without excuse because when they knew God, they glorified Him, not as God, nor were thankful (Rom. 1:21). In other words, God worked, and His work was worthy of thanksgiving. God expected them to give thanks. They were obligated to give thanks, but they did not. When God works, we are obligated to thank Him. It is our duty; it is our moral obligation.

In 1789, George Washington issued the first Thanksgiving Proclamation. It said, in part, “Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits and humbly to implore His protection, aid and favor ... now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the people of those states to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is or that will be, that we may then all unite in reckoning unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us.” Notice George Washington said, “Whereas it is the duty of all nations.” He recognized that thanksgiving is a duty, a moral obligation. Paul recognized that. The question is, do you? By the way, notice that Paul thanked God for what they did for others. Pleasure and personal benefit were not essential features of his thanksgiving.

Boast before Others

Boast The result of their spiritual growth was not only a sense of responsibility on Paul’s part that he should thank God for them but also that he should brag on them before others. Paul says, “So that we ourselves boast of you among the church of God” (1:4b). “So that” indicates results. This is not necessarily a responsibility as it was a result, a reaction, a response. Paul saw their growth, thanked God, and boasted before men. Every parent does this naturally. As the child grows, the parents brag.

For Growth Paul says, “For your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure” (1:4c). Paul bragged about their patience and faith. The Greek word translated “patience” means “endurance.” In the Greek text, the words “patience” and “faith” are inseparably linked together with one article (Hiebert). These two are also linked together in life. Technically, faith comes first. Those who believe God is in control and working will endure (Jas. 1:3). In other words, Paul told other churches, specifically the church at Corinth, “Let me tell you about the Thessalonians. Unbelieving Jews are persecuting and pressuring them. They’re doing everything they can to get them to deny the Lord and depart from the faith, but those believers are believing God. They’re hanging in there, and on top of that, they are growing. They’re growing like a mulberry tree shooting straight up and like a river shooting straight over its banks. It’s great! It’s terrific! It’s fantastic!”

Summary: When believers grow, our responsibility is to thank God; our response should be to boast about them before others.

Paul told God about the endurance and growth of the Thessalonians during his prayer time and announced it to the churches during praise. He also told the Thessalonians themselves. He penned these words to them! The reason he told the Thessalonians was to encourage them. Then,

the way to encourage a believer experiencing persecution is to thank God, tell others, and even tell them that you're grateful that they are enduring.

Many Christians practice the "Billy goat syndrome," that is, no matter how good the performance, they say, "Yes, but." We do with people what the negative farmer did with the bumper corn crop. His friend said, "It's been a great year for you!" He said, "Yes, but it's been awfully hot." His friend said, "Hot weather makes good corn." the farmer replied, "Yes, but you need to get enough rain." "Well," said the friend, "haven't you had enough rain this season, and isn't this the greatest crop you've ever had?" The farmer responded, "Yes, but a crop like this is awfully hard on the soil."

Today, we say, "He's smart, but he knows it." "She's good-looking, but she thinks it." "He's a good faithful fellow, but he's slow." A poem sums it up:

When you have truly thanked your God
For every blessing sent;
But little time will then remain
For murmur or lament.

We need to pray the prayer that says, "Father, you have given us so much, so please give us one more thing: a grateful heart."

IS GOD JUST IN ALLOWING PERSECUTION?

It is not on the evening news or the front page of the newspaper, but the persecution of Christians is alive and multiplying in America. It occurs in Boston, Baltimore, Birmingham, Seattle, San Francisco, and San Diego. Part of the problem is that the word “persecution” conjures up images of Christians being arrested and jeered at by an angry mob, having stones thrown at them, having their back peeled open with cat-o’-nine-tails, and being tossed into a dark, damp, dungeon. Persecution in this country is not necessarily physical, but it’s just as real.

A federal judge threatened “incarceration” to a high school valedictorian unless she removed references to Jesus from her graduation speech. City officials prohibited senior citizens from praying over their meals, listening to religious messages, or singing gospel songs at a senior activities center. A public school official physically lifted an elementary school student from his seat and reprimanded him in front of his classmates for praying over his lunch. Following U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ policies, a federal government official sought to censor a pastor’s prayer, eliminating references to Jesus during a Memorial Day ceremony honoring veterans at a national cemetery. A public university’s law school banned a Christian organization because it required its officers to adhere to a statement of faith that the university disagreed with. The Affordable Care Act will force religious organizations to provide insurance for birth control and abortion-inducing drugs in direct violation of their religious beliefs. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs banned the mention of God from veterans’ funerals, overriding the wishes of the deceased’s families. A federal judge held that prayers before a state House of Representatives could be to Allah but not to Jesus. Kelly Shackelford, the founder of the Liberty Institute, said, “I have been doing these types of cases for almost 25 years now. I have never seen the levels of attacks like these and how quickly they are now proliferating.”

Those who were being persecuted find themselves reacting, thinking to themselves, “Hey, wait a minute. I’m doing what’s right, but I’m being persecuted. Is that fair?” Or, “I’m doing what’s right, and they are doing what is wrong, yet they seem to be winning and I seem to be losing. Is that fair?” Ultimately, the question is, is God just allowing saints to be persecuted? Those who are not necessarily being persecuted themselves but who know someone who is also have questions, such as “How do I minister to this person who is under pressure? How do I encourage him? What truth do I give him to help sustain him in his time of stress? Paul answers these questions in 1 Thessalonians 1.

The believers at Thessalonica knew what persecution was about. The church was born in persecution. Acts 17:5 records that unbelieving Jews set the city in an uproar against these new converts (see 1 Thess. 1:6). After Paul’s departure from Thessalonica, the persecution continued.

History after Paul’s time records some samples of persecution at Thessalonica. Some men took wine into the pagan temple and offered it to the altar of Venice or Caesar. Then, they sprinkled it on all the vegetables and meat in the marketplace and announced that it was all dedicated to their gods. Anyone who bought the food or ate it thereby worshipped a heathen god. Pliny the Elder says that it was in Thessalonica that the first Gentile was killed for Christ. At any rate, the saints in Thessalonica in Paul’s day suffered persecution.

They were probably perplexed. Surely, they were asking such questions as, “Why is God allowing this?” “Why doesn’t God punish the persecutors?” “Will we ever get relief?” And the ultimate question, “Is God just allowing this?”

God is Just in allowing Persecution

Their Faith and Endurance Paul opens with a thanksgiving (1:3-4). At this point in the thanksgiving, Paul begins to wander away from thanksgiving and begins to teach. Speaking of their endurance (1:4), he says, “Which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God” (1:5a). Paul is saying their faith and endurance is a manifestation of the fact that God’s judgment is just. Tribulation produces perseverance (Rom. 5:3). God knows that. So, He allows tribulation to come into our lives. James teaches that the genuine part of faith produces patience (Greek: endurance, Jas. 1:3). The believer who believes God sticks it out no matter how hard the situation. Paul looks at the faith and endurance of the Thessalonians and says, in essence, “God’s Word was right. He made a good decision to allow you to be persecuted because it produced endurance in you.”

We look at trouble, tribulation, pressure, and persecution and say, “God is punishing me.” Paul looked at it and said, “God is perfecting you.” It’s like attending boot camp and watching the drill sergeant put the recruits through the paces. He makes them hike five, ten, fifteen, and twenty miles. They have to run with a full pack on their backs. They have to jump over barriers and crawl under barbed wire. The uninformed might say the drill sergeant is punishing them, but they didn’t do anything wrong! He’s not fair; he’s unjust. Those who understand say, “No. The drill sergeant knows exactly what he’s doing.” He is perfecting them. Look at the endurance and stamina they now have compared to when they first began. That drill sergeant knows what he’s doing, and his decision to drill them is right; it’s just. Likewise, God’s decision to allow believers to be under pressure is just because the results—faith and endurance—demonstrate that.

Being Counted Worthy There is a second thing that demonstrates God is just in allowing believers to be persecuted. Paul says, “that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer” (1:5b). The Greek word translated “that” can either indicate purpose or result or both. In this passage, it probably includes both (see Hiebert). Thus, Paul is saying that the purpose and result of God’s decision to allow persecution is that they were counted worthy. Since the result is that they are counted worthy, God’s judgment is just.

Paul is not saying that all of this *made* them worthy; he says that they may be *counted* worthy (Milligan). There is a sense in which no one is worthy of the kingdom of God, and yet there is another sense in which one can be counted worthy of God’s kingdom. Elsewhere, Paul said, “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him” (2 Tim. 2:12). If believers suffer for the kingdom of God, they will be counted worthy to reign in that kingdom. If, through the pressure and persecution, the trouble and tribulation, the believers learn to trust God and endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, they will be counted worthy to reign with Christ in the kingdom.

Let me illustrate. Suppose a self-made businessman started a small business and built it into a multimillion-dollar corporation. Then, suppose he made his son, who never worked a day in his life, president. Whether the son was capable or worthy would not be the issue. People under him would not think he was fit to be president simply because he had never worked a day. On the other hand, suppose the same thing happened: the businessman made his son start at the bottom and work his way to the top. People would consider him worthy of his position because of what he had suffered and learned. The businessman made a right and wise decision to make his own son work his way to the top. In a similar fashion, God allows His children to suffer and be counted worthy to reign in the kingdom. God’s decision to do that is right and just.

God Is Just in Repaying Persecutors

God will Repay What about the persecutors? God is just in repaying persecutors. Paul says, “Since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you” (1:6). The Greek word translated “repay” means “to give back as an equivalent.” The idea is of a full and complete return. This is highlighted in the Greek text by the fact that “tribulation” and “trouble” are the same word. The Greek text reads, “pressure for pressure,” or “affliction for affliction,” or “tribulation for tribulation.” God will repay and He will repay in kind. He is just (Lev. 24:17-22; Deut. 19:21).

Harry Glick, an inmate of the Ohio Penitentiary, designed an electric chair, but it did not work. Charles Justice, a fellow prisoner, suggested that Glick design another chair with arms and leg clamps, and it did work. Justice was pardoned. Later, he committed a murder, was caught, convicted, and sentenced to death. On October 27, 1911, Charles Justice died in the electric chair he had helped design for the death of others. An eighteen-year-old youth was fatally burned in Sandusky, Ohio while setting fire to the building of his father’s competitor.

God is Just Today, justice is not just. The guilty never get punished or receive little or no punishment. Sometimes, the innocent are arrested and found guilty, but in God’s case, strict justice will prevail.

However, the battle is ended
Though proudly the victor comes;
With fluttering flag and prancing nags,
And echoing rolls of the drum.
Still, history proclaims the motto,
In letters of shining light:
“No question is ever settled
Until it is settled right.”
Though the heel of the strong oppressor
May grind the weak to the dust;
And the voice of fame with shouts acclaim
They call him great and just.

Let those who applaud take warning,
And keep his motto in sight:
“No question is ever settled
Until it is settled right.”

Selected

God is Just in Giving the Saints Relief

When Christ Returns Paul teaches a third truth that indicates that God is just in allowing believers to be persecuted, namely that God is just because, ultimately, He will relieve the persecuted. Paul discusses this in detail. He begins by saying, “and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels” (1:7). The Greek word translated “rest” means “losing, relaxation, relief.” The picture is of losing and

relaxing a taut bowstring (Hiebert). Hence, it is rest from tension. God is going to give believers relief and is just in doing so. The question is how and when.

The answer is, “When the Lord returns” (1:7). That’s interesting. Paul promises believers relief, and yet it is not now; it is when Christ comes back. In verses 7-10, Paul describes in detail what will happen when the Lord returns. In doing so, he tells the Thessalonians this will relieve them from the pressure and persecution they are experiencing. Two truths in these verses should give them relief.

Christ will Punish Sinners The first is that when Christ returns, He will punish sinners (1:8-9). Paul says that the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels “in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (1:8-9). Sinners are described as those who “do not know God.” This is probably a reference to the heathen who refuse the light of nature (Lightfoot). They are also described as “those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,” a reference to those who have heard and refuse the light of the gospel (Hiebert). The gospel is good news to be obeyed. God commands all men everywhere to repent. The point is that when Christ returns, *all* who do not know Christ will be punished. He certainly will have the power to do that. He will be revealed from heaven “with His mighty angels” (Greek: “with angels of power”). He will come “in flaming fire” (1:8). Fire is not the means of judgment but a description of the Judge (Hiebert). He will be encircled with a fiery robe (Dan. 7:9).

The coming Judge will “recompense trouble for trouble” (1:6). He will take “vengeance” (1:8). He will “punish with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” (1:9). Those who do not know God and have rejected the gospel of His Son will be eternally separated from God.

To some, this sounds hard, harsh, and haughty. It isn’t. Sinners have left God out of their lives. They have shoved God out. They did not trust His Son. They did not live according to the Scriptures. They did not depend upon the Holy Spirit. God is simply going to make it permanent. They separated themselves from Him in this life; He will separate Himself from them in the next. Eternal separation from God is serious.

Let me put it like this. I’ll tell you the punishment and you tell how serious the crime: \$25 fine ... 30 days in jail ... 10 years in jail ... life imprisonment ... electric chair ... eternal separation from God. Leaving God out of one’s life is the most serious crime in the universe.

Christ Will Glorify Saints The second truth that gives relief is that when Christ returns, He will glorify the saints. Paul says, “When He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed” (1:10). For God to be glorified in His saints means that His attributes will be manifested, displayed, reflected in His saints (Lightfoot; Hiebert). Just as the sun is reflected in the moon, the Son will be reflected in the saints.

That doesn’t mean that people will look at us, for no sooner does Paul say that God will be glorified in His saints than he says that God will be admired among all those who believe (Greek: they will marvel in wonder at the Lord). Instead of being struck by our reflected glory, they will be awestruck by His real glory.

Besides, it is no credit to us. Paul adds, “because our testimony among you was believed.” All we did was believe. Christ is the one who died and rose to take away sin. Paul only delivered the message and all that the Thessalonians did was believe. There is no room for pride. All the glory belongs to Christ, even though He will glorify us.

The ultimate issue in this section of the paragraph is that the Thessalonians can rest (1: 7), not only because their enemies will be punished (1:8-9), but because God will be glorified and admired in them when Christ returns (1:10). In the final analysis, isn't that what life is about, namely that we be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ and glorify God? If that is going to happen, both now and later, is there not relief in that truth?

Summary: God is just in allowing saints to be persecuted, persecutors to be punished, and saints to reflect His glory in the future.

This passage teaches persecuted saints that God is just. He is just in allowing persecution. He is just in punishing the persecuted, so relax, rest. When the Lord comes, sinners will be punished and saints will glorified. The next time you are persecuted, whether it is slight or severe, remember that God is just. Justice will triumph in the end. Wicked men may look like they are winning now, but God and justice will win in the end.

This passage teaches saints how to minister to those who are being persecuted. It is done by you thanking God that they are enduring and encouraging them by telling them you thanked God and bragged about them before others. It is also done by teaching them that God is just in allowing the persecution now and that justice will be done when Jesus Christ returns.

Many years ago, in another time and another place, there was a man who was unjustly pressured, pursued, and persecuted. He was tracked down like an animal and stalked like a common criminal. The stalker, the persecutor, was King Saul. The one being unjustly pursued and persecuted was David. As a result of that experience, David wrote a psalm.

In the Lord I put my trust;
How can you say to my soul,
“Flee as a bird to your mountain?”
For look! The wicked bend their bow,
They make ready their arrow on the string,
That they may shoot secretly at the upright in heart.
If the foundations are destroyed,
What can the righteous do?
The Lord is in His holy temple,
The Lord's throne is in heaven;
His eyes behold,
His eyelids test the sons of men.
The Lord tests the righteous,
But the wicked and the one who loves violence His
soul hates.
Upon the wicked, He will rain coals,
Fire and brimstone and a burning wind;
This shall be the portion of their cup.
For the Lord is righteous,
He loves righteousness;
His countenance beholds the upright (Psalm 11).

In other words, David's response was, “Saul may reign upon the earth and do wickedly, but God reigns from heaven and will do right.”

PRAYING FOR THE PERSECUTED

Suppose you were in a prayer meeting and the leader asked for prayer requests. Imagine a Christian standing up and saying, “Please pray for Mary. Her husband doesn’t know the Lord and he’s giving her a tough time. Because she has been living for the Lord, he has laughed at her, lectured her, and is limiting her spiritual activity. She’s feeling the pressure. We need to pray for her.” Then, suppose the leader called on you to pray. What would you say? Here are some possibilities: 1) Pray for relief, that is, pray that her unsaved husband will get saved. 2) Pray for strength, that is, pray that God would sustain her until her husband got saved and give her the strength to withstand the pressure. What more could you ask? Wouldn’t that be enough if he got saved and she got strength? The answer is “No.” Well, what else is there? Paul answers that question 2 Thessalonians chapter 1.

In 2 Thessalonians 1, Paul acknowledged that the Thessalonians were being persecuted. He speaks of their “persecutions and tribulations” (1:4) and their suffering (1:5). He thanks God for them (1:3-10) and prays for them (1:11-12). The prayer falls into two parts (see “that” in verse 11 and “that” in verse 12).

For their Growth

Paul begins his prayer by saying, “Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power” (1:11). In this part of the prayer, Paul asks God to do three things, all of which amount to the spiritual growth of the Thessalonians.

Counted Worthy of His Calling First, Paul prays that God would “count you worthy of His calling.” Paul often speaks in his epistles of God’s calling. God has called believers to fellowship with Himself (1 Cor. 1:9). He does this through the gospel (2 Thess. 2:14). This calling was not to uncleanness but to holiness (1 Thess. 4:7). So, Paul exhorts believers to walk worthy of that calling (Eph. 4:1). The old English word for “calling” was “vocation.” As the artist’s vocation is to paint pictures, and a barber’s vocation is to cut hair, and the carpenter’s vocation is to build houses, so the calling, vocation, occupation of the Christian is fellowship with God.

In this passage, Paul is concerned that God would count the Thessalonians worthy of His calling. What does that mean? Some teach that Christians must be worthy, that is, they must work to be worthy before God. That’s not the idea here. Paul uses the word “count,” not “make.” The idea is not to be made worthy but to be counted worthy.

On the other hand, some feel that no believer can be worthy, so they shouldn’t worry, but that’s not biblical, either. Paul teaches that it is possible to be counted worthy, so the believer should walk in a worthy manner. In other words, we recognize that we are not now worthy, nor never will be, yet at the same time, we recognize that God has called us to Himself and we are to walk worthy of such a high calling. Thus, Paul prays that the Thessalonians would so esteem their calling that they would walk accordingly and, thus, be counted worthy.

In a sense, this is a prayer for their spiritual growth. In verse 4, he said they had faith and endurance. In verse 5, he said that faith and endurance were a token of God’s righteous judgment and that they could be counted worthy. In one sense, they *were being* counted worthy. Yet, in

another sense, Paul prays they *will* be counted worthy. In other words, he is praying for their spiritual growth.

In his first epistle to them, he acknowledged they had faith and love (1:3). And yet, he prayed that they would have more faith and love (3:10-12). Likewise, in 2 Thessalonians, he acknowledges that they were being counted worthy. Then, he prays that they would be counted worthy even more. In short, he is praying for their continuing spiritual growth.

Complete their Godly Desire Next, Paul prays that God would “fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness.” The Greek word translated “fulfill” means “to fill to the full, to complete.” It denotes bringing something to completion. The phrase “the good pleasure of His goodness” is more difficult to interpret. The word “His” is in italics, indicating that it is not in the Greek text. The reference here may be to the goodness of the Thessalonians and not the goodness of God (Lightfoot; Milligan; Hiebert). Thus, the “good pleasure of goodness” means the good pleasure prompted by goodness, that is, they were full of goodness (Rom. 15:14) and that goodness prompted goodwill. Thus, Paul prays that God will bring to completion those desires. Hiebert puts it like this: “The prayer is that God may bring to completion every aspiration that springs out of their regenerate nature.”

Paul knew that even though they had good desires, good intentions, and good plans on the inside, if there was persecution and pressure from the outside, all that goodness would not necessarily be expressed. Imagine a Christian wife married to an unbeliever. She decides that she will treat him well. She prepares his favorite meals, praises him, and even pampers him. Then, when he hits the door, he laughs about some fellow at work who claims to be a Christian but who is obviously a hypocrite. The wife’s attitude may be, “What’s the use?” She may put the prepared meal on the table and the prepared praise on the shelf. External pressure can prevent the expression of internal good pleasure, so Paul prays that God will bring to completion every aspiration that springs out of their new nature.

Complete their Works Paul adds “and the work of faith with power.” The “work of faith” means the work prompted or produced by faith. Faith produces works. Believers in Christ believe they have been united to Christ and other believers. The Scripture teaches that they meet together to worship God and to minister to other saints. So, as a result of their faith, they work. They go to church, not forsaking their assembling with other believers.

The implication is that persecution and pressure could prevent faith from producing works. Some may believe they ought to assemble with the saints, but if someone laughed and ridiculed them, they might not. Persecution, then, could prevent faith from working. So, Paul prayed that God would complete every work prompted by faith.

The point of all of this is that Paul is praying for their spiritual growth: 1) that God would count them worthy, that is, they would grow in their calling to the point that God would count them worthy of His kingdom, 2) that God would complete their every desire prompted by goodness, that is, they would grow in goodness, and 3) that God would complete their every work prompted by faith, that is, they would grow in works.

Many saints have testified that their most rapid spiritual growth was during a time of trouble. The winter accomplishes more than the summer for the soul’s development and advancement. The valley of weeping may be the mountain of growth. Thus, Paul prays for believers who are being persecuted that they would grow.

“Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly

enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness” (Malcolm Muggeridge, *Homemade*, July 1990).

For God’s Glory

For Jesus to be Glorified The second part of Paul’s prayer is marked off by the second “that” in this prayer. Paul prayed, “that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him” (1:12a). What does it mean for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to be glorified? “The name” stands for all that a person is, his character and attributes (see Ps. 9:10; Milligan; Hiebert). “To glorify” means “to manifest, reflect, display.” So, glorifying the name of the Lord Jesus is manifesting all that He is.

Peter gives us some specifics of Christ’s suffering and persecution and tells us it is an example for us to follow. “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: “Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth”; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:21-23). The NIV translates verse 23, “when they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate.” On top of that, when they hung Him on the cross, He said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” When we are persecuted, if we do not retaliate but forgive, we manifest the attributes of Jesus Christ; we glorify Him.

For You to be Glorified Paul says something that is almost beyond comprehension. He says, “And you in Him,” that is, Christ is to be glorified in them, and they are to be glorified in Christ. The glorification will be reciprocal (Hiebert). Perhaps this refers to now. Obviously, if a saint endures suffering and persecution, his character is manifested in Christ. Most, however, suggest that the manifestation of the saints in glory awaits Christ’s return (Col. 3:4). As the parent can be seen in the child and the child in the parent, Christ can be seen in the Christian and the Christian in Christ. As the teacher can be seen in the student and the student in the teacher, the Son can be seen in the saints, and the saints can be seen in the Son.

By Grace All of this is “according to the grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:12b). The source of mutual glorification is God’s grace. All human merit is excluded. Heaven will not be like the locker room show after the Super Bowl game. There are two kinds of responses in that locker room: 1) “We’re number one; I knew it all along. We worked hard all year; today, we had the opportunity to demonstrate it to the whole world.” 2) The one who caught the colossal pass says, trying to be humble, “Well, I was in the right place at the right time and just happened to put out my hands and catch a right-good pass. You know, some of the credit goes to the quarterback, the team, and my mother.” Champion players in the locker room after the game either give credit to themselves or to chance. Heaven will know none of that. If a reporter in heaven were to ask one of the redeemed to tell about it, he would say, “Look, I’m a sinner, but God loved me. Christ left heaven to die for me and the Holy Spirit led me to trust in Christ.” They will give credit to the grace of God, the grace of Christ, and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

God not only gets credit for our glory, He also gets credit for our growth (1:11). The last phrase in verse 11 says, “with power,” God’s power. For believers to grow, they have to depend on God’s power. In the final analysis, God’s grace and power bring believers growth and glory. There is a song that says it well:

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;
He giveth more strength when the labor's increased.
To added affliction, He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials, He multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed e'er the day is half done;
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving has only begun.

His love has no limits, His grace has no measure;
His power no boundary known unto men.
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

J. E. Myhill

Summary: The way to pray for persecuted saints is to pray that they grow and glorify God by God's grace and power.

Our first inclination is to pray for relief or, if we get spiritual, to pray for strength. We're not only to pray for relief and relaxation, nor are we to stop when we've asked for support and strength. We need to pray for grace and glory.

Growth is like climbing a mountain. It is uphill and demands determination. Sometimes, believers meet opposition, such as high wind. In 1971, a party started an ascent to reach the top of Mt. Everest. Later, the leader, Col. Hector Gatica Tolosa, reported by radiotelephone that winds of 100 miles per hour made it impossible for them to continue the climb. Likewise, God's children are buffeted by stormy gales and contrary winds. What can other believers do for them? Obviously, pray, but pray for what? If you were at the foot listening to that report, how would you pray? Would the winds stop, or would they have the strength to hang on and come down? When climbing Mt. Everest that may not be a bad idea, but it's not enough on Mt. Zion.

We need to pray that God gives the climbers grace to go on and reach the top! Some will object, "But the winds are 100 miles per hour!" I know that, humanly speaking, that may seem impossible, but that's why we need to pray: because it is then that we tap into God's grace and power. So, when high winds are coming at a saint, pray for strength and support, grace and glory.

IS PROPHECY PROFITABLE?

Is prophecy really profitable? Consider some of the problems.

Prophecy causes divisions. Take the issue of the Rapture. Some say the Rapture will take place before the Tribulation. Others contend it will take place in the middle of the Tribulation. And still others, argue that it will take place after the Tribulation. There are good and godly men on all sides of the Rapture question. Sometimes, they have been kind to each other; unfortunately, sometimes, they have not. Prophecy causes divisions.

Prophecy causes diversions. Some Christians get so caught up in the details of prophecy that they get diverted from the New Testament's major task and main thrust. Some Christians only study prophecy, and some preachers only speak about prophecy. They never lead anyone to the Master or anyone into maturity. Prophecy causes some to be diverted.

Prophecy causes disturbance. New believers or immature believers sometimes hear about the Lord's imminent return and get shaken. They do everything from getting emotionally upset to stockpiling food, quitting their jobs, and moving to the country on top of a mountain. Prophecy causes disturbances.

So, the question is, is prophecy profitable? Evidently, God's answer to that question is "Yes." Some estimates are that at the time the Bible was written, as much as 25% of it was prophetic. Of course, some prophecies have been fulfilled; many have not.

If prophecy is valuable and profitable, how? Many answers from various parts of the Scripture could be given to that question. In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul gives several reasons why prophecy is profitable. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is a significant list. These words were penned against the backdrop of false information about prophecy that had produced some negative results.

Do not Be Disturbed

The Content of the Disturbance Paul begins by saying, "Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us as though the day of Christ had come" (2:1-2). In the Greek text, there is one article uniting "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" and "our gathering together to Him." His coming means our gathering together unto Him (Hiebert). This seems to be a summary statement of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Paul is speaking to them about the Rapture. Paul appeals to them not to be disturbed. The phrase "shaken in mind" denotes a rocking motion (Hiebert), a shaking up and down like a building in an earthquake (Acts 16:26), or a ship tossed on a stormy sea (Lightfoot). Figuratively, it is used of being rendered insecure. The Thessalonians were shocked and shook. The Greek word translated "troubled" means "alarmed."

They were disturbed because they thought the day of Christ had come. There is a textual problem with the phrase "the day of Christ." The critical text reads, "the day of the Lord." If the day of the Lord is the correct reading, the believers at Thessalonica thought that the Tribulation had come (Hiebert). The majority of manuscripts, however, contain the phrase "the day of Christ." What is the meaning of "the day of Christ?" Some students of the Scripture contend that

the day of Christ is another term, at least in this passage, for the day of the Lord (Clarence E. Mason Jr., pp. 352-359, esp. p. 359). There is another possibility. The expression “the day of Christ” or similar expressions, such as “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ,” “the day of Jesus Christ,” and “the day of the Lord Jesus,” appear elsewhere in the New Testament. In all other passages, this expression refers to the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 1:10; 2:16).

Thus, the believers at Thessalonica were disturbed because they thought they had missed the Rapture (“the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him”) and the Judgment Seat of Christ (“the day of Christ”), meaning they were in the Tribulation. After all, the Tribulation Period will be a time of famine, war, a worldwide holocaust (Rev. 8:7-13; 9:1-18). If they thought they were in that period, why should they not be shaken?

During a time of tension with sporadic gunfire in the streets of the Middle East, a man from that war zone visited Dallas, Texas. Every fall, the University of Texas and the University of Oklahoma, a great football rivalry, meet on the neutral ground of the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, Texas, to have their annual football game. The night before the game, students from both universities pile into the streets of downtown Dallas with a great deal of horn-blowing, cruising, fireworks, drunkenness, etc. The man from the Middle East, who was staying in a hotel nearby, heard the noise and thought there was fighting in the streets. He immediately jumped under the bed and stayed there for hours. Believing he was in the midst of a war, he was alarmed. The Thessalonians thought they were in the Tribulation, which caused them to be deeply disturbed.

The Cause of the Disturbance What would make the Thessalonians believe that they were in the Tribulation? The answer is that they thought they had received some communication by Paul himself. The phrase “as if from us,” which includes Paul, Silas, and Timothy (see 1:1), modifies all three phrases in verse 2, namely “either by spirit or by word or by letter.” “By spirit” means “through” some spiritual gift, such as a prophetic utterance (Hiebert) or maybe even an ecstatic utterance (Milligan). In other words, the gossip around the church at Thessalonica is that either Paul, Silas, or Timothy had said while exercising a spiritual gift, such as prophecy, that the Tribulation had begun. “By word” means “through” some discourse (Milligan) or conversation, that is, a verbal or vocal utterance (Hiebert). Or, the rumor roaming around the church at Thessalonica was that either Paul, Silas, or Timothy had said in a conversation that the Tribulation had already started. “By letter” means just that, “through” a letter. This does not refer to 1 Thessalonians (Lightfoot; Milligan; Hebert). The tale being told around the church at Thessalonica was that Paul, Silas, or Timothy had written a letter in which they said the Tribulation had come. This rumor provoked Paul to sign this epistle with his own handwriting (3:17).

The Result of the Disturbance By one or all of these means, the message had gotten to Thessalonica that either Paul or one of his companions was of the opinion that the Tribulation had begun. As a result, they had been deceived. Paul says, “Let no one deceive you by any means” (2:3a). The Greek word translated “deceived” is a strong Greek word meaning “to deceive thoroughly.” They had received false information and believed it. No doubt, the fact that they were experiencing persecution and were suffering for the cause of Christ (1:4-5) confirmed it to them. They thought their tribulation was the Tribulation.

They had received false information about prophecy and were deceived, shaken, and alarmed. False information can do that. Periodically, Christians today get false information concerning prophecy and they are shocked. Within my lifetime, I have met Christians who were told that JFK was the Antichrist. He wasn’t really killed in Dallas; he was hiding and would

stage a comeback any day. I've also met Christians who believed that Henry Kissinger was the Antichrist because his name adds up to 666. There have even been reports that Jimmy Carter was the Antichrist. One summer, in a series of special meetings where I was the speaker, I had a song leader tell me that he had been with an evangelist who had figured out that Christ would return the next September. As a result of these kinds of reports, Christians have done things like stockpiling food and moving to the mountains.

Perhaps the classic illustration is the "Great Disappointment of the nineteenth century. A Baptist preacher named Miller concluded that Jesus Christ would return in 1844. At one point, the date was set for October 22. A sign in a Philadelphia store window read, "This shop is closed in honor of the King of Kings, who will appear about the 20th of October. Get ready, friends, to crown Him Lord of all." Two hundred left the city. Many gave up their occupations. Farmers left their crops in the field, anticipating the coming of Christ.

Because Paul did not want them to be disturbed, he gave them information to teach them that they were not in the Tribulation. In the following verses, he teaches that several things must happen before the Tribulation can begin.

Do not be Deceived

Beginning with verse 3 and continuing through verse 12, Paul has one fundamental point: "Let no one deceive you by any means," meaning either by using a spiritual gift, a rumor, or a letter. Paul's argument in this extended section is that the Thessalonians should not be deceived because they are not in the Tribulation. Furthermore, they are not those who will be deceived in it.

First, the Falling away must come Paul explains ("for") that they should not be deceived by any means "for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first" (2:3b). The Greek word translated "falling away" means "defection, apostasy, revolt." Outside the Bible, it was used of political defection, but in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, and in the New Testament, it always means a religious revolt (Milligan; see Acts 21:21, the only other place this word appears in the New Testament). The idea is to abandon a formerly professed position (Hiebert) deliberately. This refers to an apostasy within the Christian church (Lightfoot; Hiebert).

Some Bible teachers have suggested that this is a reference to the Rapture (English; Wuest), but the rapture is never said to be a "departure," a word which denotes an act on the part of people departing, whereas the people in the rapture are passive, not active. In addition, this is an unlikely term because the rapture was just called "gathering together."

There is a sense in which there was a falling away even in the first century (Lk. 8:13; Heb. 3:12; 1 Jn. 2:19). In another sense, there has been a falling away from the faith throughout church history and especially within the last 100 years. For example, in January of 1945, Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "I am a liberal in theology. Of course, I do not believe in the virgin birth or in that old-fashioned substitutionary doctrine of the atonement, and I don't know any intelligent Christian minister who does." Shailer Mathews, once the dean of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, wrote, "The appeal of postmortem awards and punishments is distinctly out of fashion. Such beliefs have lost their appeal. The postmortem life has no bearing on conduct. The Fifth Annual Report of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism said, "They are saving the ship of Christianity by throwing overboard her cargo. With what zeal, the Fosdicks, the Shailer Mathews, and the rescuers toss out the virgin birth,

atonement, and resurrection. How long will men sail the seas with an empty ship? They will go ashore and enjoy the life of the atheist. We welcome the aid of the modernists and pledge our fullest cooperation in ridding the world of any serious acceptance of Christian theology” (the source of these quotes is unknown).

Second Thessalonians 2:3 does not talk about a general apostasy. In the Greek text, the article “the” occurs before “falling away.” Verse 5 indicates that the Thessalonians knew about which apostasy Paul was speaking. Unfortunately, that knowledge does not exist today. All that can be said is that it seems connected with the man of sin and, therefore, occurs during the Tribulation. What is clear is that the Tribulation has not started because the apostasy has not come.

Second, the Antichrist must be Revealed The second thing Paul says must happen before the Tribulation can begin is that the man of sin must be revealed. He says, “and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2:3c-4). Who is the man of sin? The phrase “man of sin” is not his name; it is a description of his character (Lightfoot). He is a man characterized by sin (Hiebert). Nor is the title “son of perdition” his name. It is a description of his destination (Milligan). He is going to perdition, that is, he will perish. Judas was called the son of perdition (Jn. 17:12).

It is also evident from this passage that this individual is the adversary of God. In fact, he is opposed to and exalts himself above every god (2:4) or, for that matter, anything that is worshiped. He will seek to replace all gods, including heathen gods, and all that is worshiped—things and persons—every conceivable object connected with religion with himself (Hiebert). The result will be that he will sit in the Temple of God and proclaim to the whole world that he is God. This, then, is the little horn of Daniel and the beast of Revelation, commonly called the Antichrist.

Paul teaches in this passage that the Tribulation cannot begin until the Antichrist is revealed. He does not say until the Antichrist is born, but until the Antichrist is revealed. When will that take place? Daniel offers some helpful information. He tells us that the Antichrist will make a covenant with the Jews at the beginning of the Tribulation (Dan. 9:27). That means that the Antichrist will have been alive many years before the Tribulation begins, for he will have had to grow to manhood. He will be revealed, at least to discerning people, when he makes a covenant with Israel. That will signal the start of the Tribulation. In the middle of the Tribulation Period, the Antichrist will break the covenant with Israel, go to the Temple in Jerusalem, and claim to be God. Daniel calls that the “Abomination of Desolation” (Dan. 9:27). Ultimately, he will be judged and will perish (that is why he is called the “son of perdition” in 2:3). Paul gives more details about his ultimate demise in verse 8.

Paul’s point is that the Tribulation will not start until the Antichrist is revealed. He will be revealed at the beginning of the Tribulation when he makes a covenant with Israel and will later, namely in the middle of the Tribulation, claim to be God.

Paul reminds them, “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?” (2:5). When he was there, Paul had taught this very truth. Had they remembered it, they would not have been so easily disturbed by the false rumors they had heard. This reminder also assures them that he was not contradicting himself or advancing some new truth in opposing the teaching that the Tribulation was already present (Hiebert).

Third, the Restrainer must be Removed At this point, Paul moves from what will happen in the future (2:4) and what he told them in the past (2:5) to what they know in the present (2:6). He

further reminds them, “And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time” (2:6). The Antichrist will not be revealed until a third thing must happen before the Tribulation can begin. As he has explained, that day cannot begin until the Antichrist is revealed, but he now says the Antichrist is being restrained, that is, being prevented from being revealed until his time comes, which is divinely appointed. Just as Christ will come at a time appointed by the Father, so the Antichrist has a time appointed by the Father when he will be revealed.

Paul now explains (“for”) this restraining. He says, “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed” (2:7-8a). The passage is unmistakably clear. The Restrainer must be removed (2:7) before the lawless one is revealed (2:8). The problem in this passage is who or what the Restrainer is. From this passage, it is evident that the Restrainer is a power. It is referred to in verse 7 by the neuter “what.” Yet, the Restrainer is also a person, for in verse 7, the Restrainer is referred to as “he,” a masculine pronoun in Greek. So, the Restrainer is both a person and a power, but beyond that, who or what is the Restrainer? Answers range from the apostle Paul to Satan. One of the most common is that the Restrainer is the Roman government and the Roman emperor. Those who hold to this view contend that the Roman Empire held back evil by its advanced system of laws. The problem with this position is that the Roman Empire collapsed and was removed, so to speak, and the Antichrist was not revealed. Another possibility is that the Restrainer is the Holy Spirit. The best argument in favor of that interpretation is that whoever the Restrainer is, he must restrain the Antichrist whom Satan energizes. Therefore, the Restrainer must be more powerful than Satan himself. Not even Michael the archangel was that powerful (Jude 9). Only God qualifies, and He is here as the person of the Holy Spirit. So, the Restrainer is the Holy Spirit.

There are two problems with that interpretation. The first is the word “restraining” in verse 6. It is in the neuter gender in the Greek text. The Holy Spirit is a person, not just a power. Therefore, it is argued this could not be a reference to the Holy Spirit. The answer to that problem is that the Greek word “spirit” is neuter, so verse 6 is in the neuter. Besides, verse 7 is masculine. This argument favors the view that the Restrainer is the Holy Spirit. Who or what else could be referred to in the neuter and masculine terms?

The bigger problem is: how can it be said that the Holy Spirit is removed? Will not people be saved during the Tribulation Period? How can that happen if the Holy Spirit is not here? The answer is that the Holy Spirit was “here” in the Old Testament, and people were saved. Yet Jesus said He would “come” at Pentecost (Jn. 16:13). So, the real question is: in what sense did the Holy Spirit come if He was already here? The answer is that He came to baptize believers into the body of Christ (Acts 1:5; 11:15-16; 1 Cor. 12:13). He will be removed, then, in the sense that He will no longer be baptizing people into the body of Christ, yet He will still be here in the sense of doing His regenerating work.

Now, if that’s true, there is a profound implication in this passage. If what is being removed is the Holy Spirit in the sense of His baptismal work, when the Holy Spirit is removed, the church, the body of Christ, goes with Him. Let me put it like this. Either the Holy Spirit will be withdrawn from the hearts of believers and they will not only go through the Tribulation, but they will go through it without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, or when He is withdrawn, all believers who have been baptized into the body of Christ, namely the church, will be taken with Him. Since believers can’t be “un-indwelt,” the only alternative is that believers depart with Him.

Other New Testament indications indicate that the church will not go through the Tribulation. The book of Revelation is the most detailed discussion of prophecy in the New Testament. Chapters 2 and 3 depict seven churches of John's day. Chapters 4-18 describe the Tribulation and chapter 19 declares the Second Coming of Christ. The word "church" occurs twenty times in the book of Revelation. Nineteen of those are in chapters 1-3, but in the chapters that describe the Tribulation Period, namely chapters 4-19, the word "church" does not occur once. It does not happen again in the book of Revelation until Revelation 22:16. Where was the church during the Tribulation Period? Evidently, it was not on earth. The most detailed description of the Tribulation in the Bible never mentions it one single time.

Summary: Do not be disturbed by being deceived into thinking you are in the Tribulation because the Tribulation cannot start until there is a defection from the faith and the Man of Sin is revealed and he cannot be revealed until the Restrainer is removed.

False information about the future produces deception and disturbance. Correct teaching about the future prevents deception and disturbance and, by implication, produces stability in an unstable world.

Is prophecy profitable? Some might be tempted to say "No" because it disturbs them. The truth of the matter is that the opposite is the truth. False information may produce disturbance, but correct teaching prevents disturbance. Prophecy is profitable for the simple reason it prevents deception and disturbance.

To say the same thing another way, God wants us to live in peace. He tells us not to be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to let our request be known, and He will give us peace that is beyond understanding (Phil. 4:6-7). One thing that produces peace is prayer. Another thing that produces peace is prophecy. In John 13, Jesus told the disciples that He was about to leave (Jn. 13:33). He told Peter that he would deny him three times (Jn. 13:38). It is unfortunate that there is a chapter break at this point in the text because, in the original, the next statement is Jesus saying, "Let not your heart be troubled, you believe in God, also believe in me" (Jn. 14:1). They were no doubt disturbed by what Jesus told. Still, Jesus told him not to be troubled because of what they knew about the future.

In December of 1969, I traveled north between Manchester, Tennessee and Murfreesboro, Tennessee, a mountainous area. It was difficult, if not impossible, to pass. In front of me was a slow-moving trailer and behind me was a tailgater. I could not pass the vehicle before me because we were on a two-lane road in mountainous terrain. I was becoming impatient and aggravated. In that situation, I knew something about what was about to happen. I knew I would come to a stoplight outside Murfreesboro, Tennessee, a few miles and a few minutes later. After that, there would be a four-lane road and I could pass the vehicle in front of me. That knowledge of what was coming gave me stability and patience in the meantime. Knowledge of the future can affect the present. Study Bible prophecy and be stable. Ignore it and run the risk of getting shook.

WHAT IS THE WORLD COMING TO?

When the car was invented, it was so slow it took two days to travel from Los Angeles to San Francisco. There was no such thing as a motel. People who made this trip either camped out or stayed in a hotel. In 1925, architect Arthur Heineman built the first motel in San Luis Obispo, California, halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. He coined the term motel, meaning motor hotel. For a two-room bungalow with a kitchen and an adjoining private garage, the guest paid \$1.25 a night. The state is planning a bullet train that will travel between Los Angeles and San Francisco in less than three hours. What's next?

The advancement that I've seen in my lifetime has been incredible. In my lifetime, we've gone from phonograph records to reel-to-reel tape to eight-track, cassette, CDs, iPods, and iPhones. What's next? I've seen the world go from public telephones to pagers to cell phones to smartphones, which are smarter than I am. What's next? What is the world coming to?

Lawlessness is Restrained

Lawlessness is Loose Paul says, “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (2:7a). Paul calls lawlessness “the mystery of lawlessness.” The Greek word translated “mystery” means a secret that has been revealed. In the New Testament, the word mystery does not mean mysterious or unintelligible, but something previously hidden, unknown, and unrecoverable by human search until it is revealed by God (Hiebert).

What is the sacred secret of lawlessness? It is that lawlessness is loose, but we can see that. What God tells us is that Satan is behind the lawlessness, so the spirit of lawlessness—Satan-inspired lawlessness—is in the world.

Suppose that in a ghetto neighborhood, there was a lot of crime by young people. If you lived in the neighborhood, you would know there was lawlessness, but if you were in the police department, you would know that all those “hoods” have a “boss,” that behind the crime, there was a “head.” In a similar fashion, it is evident that there is lawlessness in the world. What believers know is that the lawlessness has a head—Satan.

Lawlessness is loose in the world. When Paul said that, he was talking about his day! Lawlessness has been loose since Satan tempted Adam and Eve. What characterized Paul's day will characterize the last days (2 Tim. 3:1-5; notice “last days” in verse 1 and “from such people turn away” in verse 5). There is nothing new under the sun.

I heard of a fellow who studied the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries BC. He found five characteristics of the people living in that day: 1) the imminent outbreak of international hostility, 2) the breakup of the home, 3) the rebellion of the youth in their lack of respect for parents or the elderly, 4) corruption in politics, and 5) the chuckholes in public roads (source unknown). There is nothing new under the sun.

Commenting on the literature written in America, Pitirim Sorokin, formerly professor of sociology at Harvard, lamented: “There has been a growing preoccupation of our writers with the social sewers, the broken homes of disloyal parents and unloved children, the bedroom of the prostitute, a cannery row brothel, a den of criminals, a ward of the insane, a club of dishonest politicians, a street corner gang of teenage delinquents, a hate-laden prison, a crime-ridden

waterfront, the courtroom of a dishonest judge, the sex adventures of urbanized cavemen and rapists, the loves of adulterers and fornicators, of masochists, sadists, prostitutes, mistresses, playboys. Juicy loves, orgasms, and libidos are seductively prepared and served with all the trimmings. (Pitirim Sorokin. *The American Sex Revolution*. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956, cited by Billy Graham, pp. 21–22). The year was 1956. There is nothing new under the sun.

Psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote, “In a discussion of the sin of lust, we have to allow for a considerable shift in the social code during the past century. It has been called a revolution, and perhaps it is. Many forms of sexual activity which for centuries were considered reprehensible, immoral, and sinful anywhere, and their public exhibition simply anathema, are now talked and written about and exhibited on the stage and screen.” (Menninger, p. 138). The year was 1978. There’s nothing new under the sun.

Lawlessness is loose today. God said do not murder. We kill babies before they’re born and call it a woman’s right to choose. How much worse can it get when a mother kills her own baby? Young men use automatic weapons to indiscriminately kill children in school. Mark my words, euthanasia is next.

God said do not commit adultery. According to the Guttmacher Institute, about half of teens (boys or girls) in the US between 15 and 19 have had sex at least once. If you live in the San Fernando Valley, the world capital of pornography is in your backyard. According to the Center for disease control and prevention, in 2011, 40% of all births in America were to unmarried women.

God said do not steal. According to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, robbery is defined as the taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear. Based on that definition, there were 408,217 robberies in 2009. The estimated loss was \$508 million. Firearms were used in 42.6% of the robberies. 2.2% were bank robberies. 2.4% were in service stations. 5.4% were in convenience stores. 13.7% were in businesses. 16.9% were in residences. 16.6% were classified as miscellaneous. 42.8% were said to be on the street or highway.

God said do not lie. There are no statistics online. Calculators do not go that high.

We live in a lawless society. There are cases today when the government decides there are certain laws they will not enforce! We are no longer a nation that lives by law.

Lawlessness is the attitude that the law does not apply to me. When that happens, we become a law unto ourselves. We speed when we are in a hurry. We use a cell phone (texting) while driving if that is what we feel like doing. We lie and justify it by calling it a white lie. We live by the law of “Does it benefit me” rather than the law of “Is it the right thing to do.” Lawlessness is not just sitting in Congress. It is sitting in church. We go to church if feel like it. We get there on time if it does not inconvenience us.

Lawlessness is Restrained “Only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way” (2:7b). The Restrainer is the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to baptize people into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), which is the church (Eph. 1:22-23). The Holy Spirit, in the presence of the church in the world, prevents the spirit of lawlessness to completely dominate the world.

The illustration of lawlessness is a crime, criminals, and a crime boss. Let’s suppose this crime boss had a young fellow he wanted to put in charge of the whole district. That young fellow wanted the job, but if he took it, those around him would know who he was and what he was doing. That might not be a problem except that in this young fellow’s case, he had an aged

godly mother who was terminally ill. His mother thought he was a “good boy” and he didn’t want to disappoint her. So, he might say to the crime boss, “My mother will die shortly; when she does, I will take the job.” The presence of the mother restrains lawlessness to a degree. The removal of the mother would mean this “lawless one” would increase and be revealed.

The Lawless One will be Revealed

Who “and then the lawless one will be revealed” (2:8a). When the Restrainer is removed, the lawless one will be revealed. Notice that Paul talked about lawlessness in verse 7 and now the lawless one in verse 8. The lawless one (2:8) is the man of sin (2:3). This is the Antichrist. Just because the Antichrist is referred to as the lawless one does not mean that he is without any law. The expression “lawless one” simply means that he will set himself up in rebellion against God’s Law. As Paul said in verse 4, he opposes and exalts himself above God. Yet, he claims to be God and, as God, you can be sure he will lay down some laws of his own, namely that others must worship him.

What When the Restrainer is removed, the personification of lawlessness, namely the lawless one, will be revealed. In other words, that sinister individual has not yet been revealed, but the spirit that will characterize his career is already at work. After the departure of the Restrainer, the world will be prepared for his revelation.

The Lord will Return

The Lawless One will be Destroyed Having mentioned for a third time in this passage that the Antichrist will be revealed (see “the man of sin” in verse 3 and the “lawless one” in verses 6 and 8), Paul goes on to say, “whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth” (2:8b). The Greek word translated “consume” means to “destroy.” This refers to the person of the Antichrist. Christ will destroy him with the “breath of His mouth.” The expression “breath of His mouth” can mean either 1) His mere command or 2) His mere breath (Isa. 11:4). As terrible as the power of the Antichrist is, the mere breath of the Lord’s mouth will be sufficient for his destruction (Milligan). The expression indicates the ease with which the Lord will destroy him (Hiebert).

To put the same thing another way, the mere breath of the Lord will destroy the Antichrist like the blast of a fiery furnace will destroy a small pile of hay. Did you ever build a pyramid with a deck of cards? You begin by leaning two cards against each other, making an A-frame and continue until you have completed a row. Then, by laying cards on top of the row, you build another row that is shorter than the first. You continue in a similar fashion until you reach an apex. Imagine someone blowing the whole thing over with one big breath. In a similar fashion, the breath of the mouth of the Lord, with just that much ease, will destroy the Antichrist.

It’s not only his person that will be destroyed, it is his program as well. Paul adds, “and destroy with the brightness of His coming” (2:8c). The Greek word translated “destroy” means “to render idle, inactive, inoperative.” This is a reference to the program of the Antichrist (Hiebert). The Lord will destroy the person of the Antichrist with the breath of His mouth. He will destroy the program of the Antichrist with the brightness of His coming, that is, His mere appearance and presence.

Imagine two kids, two brothers, playing a game in the middle of the bedroom floor. It’s getting late, so their mother comes in and says, “It’s time to go to bed.” They get ready, crawl in

bed, and mother tucks them in for the night. As she leaves, she turns out the light. Suppose the kids start talking and one says, “We didn’t get to finish our game.” The other suggests, “Let’s get the flashlight and finish. Mother will never know.” So, they crawl out of bed and, with the aid of a flashlight, continue their game. Now, mothers have eyes in the back of their heads and bionic ears, so their mother appears in a few moments and hits the light switch. The brightness of her coming destroys the operation in the middle of the floor. Likewise, Christ will destroy the program of the Antichrist with the brightness of His appearance.

The Lawless One will Deceive Having established that once the Antichrist is revealed, he will ultimately be destroyed, Paul explains that when he does come, he will deceive many whom the Lord will also destroy. He says, “The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders” (2:9). Satan will energize the lawless one to work miracles (Milligan). Those miracles are called “power, signs, and lying wonders.” He will have power, that is, the power to perform miracles. These miracles will be signs, that is, they will be miracles with a meaning. He will use them as signs of his supernatural strength. Furthermore, these miracles will be “wonders.” They will provoke astonishment and amazement in the beholder, but these miracles are “lying,” that is, they belong to the realm of falsehood. It is of interest to note that Satan has the power to perform the supernatural and he can give the power to perform miracles to the man of sin. In Exodus 7, Moses and Aaron went into Pharaoh and cast down their rods, which immediately became serpents. Pharaoh then called in his magicians and they did the same thing (Ex. 7:10-11). Not all supernatural phenomenon is divine phenomenon.

The lawless one will not only perform miracles, but he will also come “with all unrighteous deception among those who perish” (2:10a). Satan will energize him to perform miracles so that he can deceive people. He has “all unrighteous deception.” Every form of deception that unrighteousness can conceive will be used (Hiebert). The inward purpose of the outward display of power will be to deceive. He will not deceive the elect, however; he will deceive those who, like himself, are headed for destruction. The Greek noun translated “perdition” in verse 3 comes from the verb translated “perish” in verse 10. People follow the Antichrist, all right, right to destruction.

Followers will be destroyed Next, Paul explains why they will perish and, in the process, explains that about which they were deceived. There are two reasons why they will perish. The first is, “because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2:10b). The truth is the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:14). If they had received (Greek: welcomed) that truth, they would have been saved, but they had no desire for it at all (Lightfoot). Hence, the expression, “they did not receive the love of the truth.”

The second reason they will perish is that “And for this reason, God will send them a strong delusion, that they should believe the lie” (2:11). Because they rejected the gospel, Paul emphatically states that *God* sent them a strong delusion. First, they chose to reject the good news. Then, God deliberately sent them “a strong delusion.” The expression “strong delusion” is difficult to render in English (Lightfoot). The Greek word translated “strong” is the word “working” and the one rendered “delusion” means “error.” This was a “working of error” that they believed (Hiebert; see ASV). The immediate purpose was that they might believe *the* lie (Lightfoot; Hiebert). The lie in verse 11 is the opposite of the truth in verse 10. More specifically, the lie of verse 11 is the one pictured in verse 4. It is the lie *par excellence*, the crowning deception of Satan in passing off the lawless one as God (Hiebert). The delusion that the devil deliberately declared is now divinely confirmed in those who perish because they voluntarily accepted it and, thus, deserve it.

This does not mean that it is God's fault that they perish. Notice carefully that they first rejected the truth. Then God sent them a "working of error." He did not send them a delusion so much as He sent them a "working of delusion." As a result of their rejection of the gospel, the responsibility for their destination and destruction is decidedly at their feet.

The ultimate purpose of God sending them this delusion was "that they all may be condemned who do not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2:12). The Greek word translated "condemned" is the word for "judged," although, in this context, it is obvious that they will end up condemned (Milligan). Rather than believe the truth, they took pleasure in unrighteousness. Sin deceives people (Heb. 3:12). They deserve the destruction that is their destiny.

Spiritual deception leads to death. In the 1970s, the leader of the People's Temple was politically involved. He was chairman of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission. He met with the governor of California (Jerry Brown), the vice president of the United States (Walter Mondale), and even the wife of the president (Rosalynn Carter), not once but several times. The Peoples Temple established a community in Central America dedicated to total economic, racial, and social equality. On a trip to Central America, the lieutenant governor of the state of California declared that their leader was "one of the finest human beings." Their leader was heralded for "his hatred of racism, sexism, elitism, and mainly classism," which is what prompted him to make a new world for the people—a paradise in the jungle. The members of the People's Temple believed in their leader and the mission of the church. They left all their money to the Soviet Union. They sincerely believed, but they were deceived. On November 18, 1978, 909 Temple members died because their leader, Jim Jones, told them to drink a Flavor Aid liquid. They believed the wrong thing. They were deceived. They drank the Kool-Aid.

Summary: Lawlessness is loose, but it is limited until the lawless one is revealed, and then the Lord will come to destroy him and his followers. The world is coming to the lawless one, but the Lord is coming to the world to destroy the person and the program of the lawless one.

The point of this passage is don't be deceived (2:3, 10). Unbelievers can be deceived (2:10). By not welcoming the truth of the gospel, the people in this passage were deceived into believing a lie. In their case, they fell for the Antichrist and followed him straight to hell. Unbelievers are deceived today by believing that being religious is what it takes to get to heaven.

Believers can be deceived (2:3). By not listening to the Word of God as delivered by Paul, they were deceived into believing they were in the Tribulation. Those who do not stand on the Word will fall for anything. Believers today are deceived by believing that the way to be spiritual is by being religious.

As I recall, we had stopped for gas or to eat. I don't remember that part of the story. What I remember is that wherever it was, when we got back on the freeway, I was stopped from getting. I was stopped—for speeding! I had no idea I was speeding. It was not my intent to speed. In fact, I believed I was keeping the speed limit. I was deceived. After that, I decided not to trust my judgment. I put the car on cruise control.

WHO DOES IT, YOU OR GOD?

When spiritual things occur in your life, who does it, you or God? For example, when you were saved, who did it, you or God? Some say God does. He elects, woos, and wins us to Himself. Others say, “No”; you must choose God. Then you are chosen. Who is right? Who does it, you or God? Or take the spiritual life. Some say God does it. They point to passages like Jude 24, “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior who alone is wise be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.” They say, “See, God does it.” Others insist that the individual believer must do it. They point to passages like Jude 21: “Keep yourselves in the love of God looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” Besides, look at all the commands in the epistles. It is obvious that the individual believer must obey. Who is right? Who does it, you or God?

In the latter part of 2 Thessalonians 2, for the second time in 2 Thessalonians, Paul gives thanks for them, exhorts them, and prays for them. In this thanksgiving/command/prayer, Paul answers, “Who really does it?”

In Salvation, both God and Believers have a Part

God does it Paul says, “But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2:13). For the fourth time in his two epistles, Paul gave thanks to God for the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:2; 3:9; 2 Thess. 1:3; 2:13). In this passage, he thanked God for their salvation which, as he indicates in this passage, God brought to pass. He says, for example, “God from the beginning chose you for salvation” (2:13). This was something that God did and something He did “from the beginning,” that is, from eternity past (Hiebert). He chose them “for salvation.” The Greek word translated “for” in the Greek text indicates that this was the purpose for God’s choosing (Hiebert). He chose them that He might save them. He accomplished this salvation “through sanctification by the Spirit” (Greek: “in the sphere of sanctification of the Spirit”). The Holy Spirit so worked in us so as to set us apart unto the Lord. He convicted of sin (Jn. 16:8) and testified of Christ (Jn. 15:26). Then He regenerated (Titus 3:5) and sealed us (Eph. 4:30). In short, God chose individuals for salvation and accomplished it through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let me illustrate. Suppose there was a prison with a hundred guilty prisoners in it and the governor decided to pardon all one hundred. Imagine him sending an aid to the prisoners to tell them that. The aid gathered them together in the yard, delivered the message, and, in unison, all one hundred said, “Go where? We like it here!” (Sinners love their sin.) When the governor heard the report, suppose he went to the prison and personally talked to ten men, convincing them to leave. Likewise, men are guilty and deserve to be punished, but God has provided pardon for all. Men, however, are not seeking God. Rather, they are seeking the pleasures of unrighteousness. So, God chose some and personally, through the Holy Spirit, convicts and converts them.

You Do It Salvation is not solely and only of the Lord. People have a part. In the latter part of verse 13, Paul says, “and belief in the truth.” People’s part is to believe. In verse 12, Paul said that the unsaved people in the Tribulation would not believe the truth. In verse 11, he says they believed the lie, but Paul says the Thessalonians believed the truth, namely, the truth of the gospel. First Corinthians 15 teaches that the gospel is that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Cor. 15:3,4). That is what they believed to be saved, but the point here is that they had a part in salvation, which is belief in the truth.

In 1803, George Wilson was charged with mail train robbery and murder. He was convicted and sentenced to death by hanging. Three weeks before the execution, Thomas Jefferson mailed him a pardon. Wilson tore it up, but when the time came for the execution, he requested to be released. The prison refused, saying he did not have a pardon. He argued that the moment the president had signed the pardon, he was free to go. The case went to the Supreme Court. Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that a pardon is only a pardon if it is received. If a man rejects the pardon, he must pay the penalty. George Wilson died by hanging.

Even though God has provided redemption for the world in the cross of Christ, individuals must choose to believe in Christ to be saved. Even after the pardon has been provided and there has been a personal presentation by the Holy Spirit Himself, the individual must respond.

Having indicated that the individual must believe the truth, Paul adds, “To which he called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2:14). In other words, by means of the gospel, God called individuals to the truth. He did that for the ultimate purpose that they might obtain the glory of Jesus Christ. In eternity past, God chose (2:13). Historically, in time, God called men by the gospel, convicted them by His Holy Spirit, and they believed the truth of the gospel (2:13-14). In eternity future, believers will obtain the glory of Jesus Christ (2:14). The glory and honor that belongs to Christ will be shared with His saints when He returns. Those who suffer for Him here will reign with Him there.

When it comes to salvation, who chooses—God or the individual? The answer is both. God chooses, God calls, convicts, converts, and crowns with glory. Nevertheless, the individual must believe.

In the final analysis, it is impossible to understand how both God and people do it. Theologians have attempted to relieve the tension between these two truths by denying either one or the other of them. The problem is not with the spiritual reality; it is with the mind of humans, which is so small it cannot comprehend eternal truth.

Just like the eyes cannot see both sides of a coin simultaneously, neither can the mind of man comprehend these two spiritual realities at the same moment. In fact, the two aspects of salvation are inseparably linked together in verse 13 with one preposition. Paul says salvation is “*through* the sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2:13).

In the Spiritual Life, both God and Believers have a Part

You do it Second Thessalonians 2:13-17 contains a thanksgiving (2:13-14), an exhortation (1:15), and a prayer (1:16-17). The thanksgiving deals with salvation, while the exhortation and the prayer discuss the spiritual life.

Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2:15). The word “therefore” relates this exhortation to God’s choice and call discussed in verses 13 and 14. Since God had chosen them and called them and will ultimately crown them with glory, *they* should stand fast and hold the

traditions. The work of God does not exclude human effort (Milligan). The Thessalonians were exhorted to “stand fast.” This is an allusion to verse 2, which says they were shaken in mind and troubled (Hiebert). They were to not be shaken but to stand firm. Furthermore, they were to hold onto the traditions that they had been taught. The Greek word translated “tradition” means “to hand over, to transfer.” The picture in this word is that of something being handed to someone who in turn, hands it to someone else. That which they had been taught had been handed over to them by someone who had received it from someone else, the implication being that the authority was not in the messenger but in someone beyond him (Lightfoot).

God gave the message to the apostles, who in turn gave it to others, who were responsible for giving it to those beyond them (2 Tim. 2:2). Now that they had received truth, they were to hold it fast. This is an allusion to verse 3 (Hiebert). Paul is telling them not to be deceived and depart from the truth but rather to hear, heed, and hold fast the truth handed down to them from heaven. This is a command. They were to do it. They were not to allow themselves to be moved away from the truth they heard taught by Paul personally or from the truth they received in written form in his epistle to them.

Some Christians have so hung up on the fact that God works in their lives that they have forgotten that they have a part: obeying God’s commands. I once talked with a lady who had been taught to let go and let God. She implied that she was to do nothing. In her case, she had a weight problem. So, I told her to stop eating. The cause of fat is food. Her response to me was that she was trusting God, to which I said, “Great, but you need to stop eating.” That was a revelation to her. She emphasized that God was to do it, but she had missed the fact that she was to do it.

God does it That is not to deny that God has a part in our spiritual lives. Paul concludes this prayer graph with a prayer that emphasizes that. He says, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work” (2:16-17). God has worked in their lives in the past. In the Greek text, the phrase “who loved us” probably refers to just God the Father and not to both the Father and the Son (Lightfoot: which is not to deny that Christ also loves us). The Greek word translated “loved” is in the aorist tense, suggesting that this love was the act expressed in giving His Son to die for us on the cross (Rom. 5:8). By His grace, God has given believers everlasting consolation (Greek: “eternal encouragement”), as well as “good hope,” which is hope that is beneficial to the one who receives it. These gifts were by grace, not by human merit.

Paul’s prayer is that Jesus Christ Himself and God the Father, who has worked in their lives in the past, might “comfort” their hearts. The Greek word translated “comfort” in verse 17 is the same as the one translated “consolation” in verse 16, except that the first is a noun and the second is a verb. This looks back to 2 Thessalonians 2:2, where they were shaken and troubled. Paul is praying for their comfort and encouragement.

Paul also prays they might be “established ... in every good word and work.” The Greek word translated “establish” means “to fix, set fast, to make fast.” This goes back to verse 3, where he told them not to be deceived, and verse 15, where he told them to hold fast to the traditions they had been taught, as he prays here that they would be established in every good word and beyond every good *work*. If they held fast to the truth, it would have a practical effect on their lives, producing good works instead of instability.

The point is that God has a part in the believer’s spiritual life. When the children of Israel departed from Egypt, God parted the Red Sea. Better than two million of them managed the

impossible long trip through the desert, but God rained manna from heaven. They conquered Jericho, but God collapsed the wall. Likewise, believers today witness, but God gives the increase. So much so is that truth that Paul could say in 1 Corinthians 3, “Neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (1 Cor. 3:7).

Ultimately, the point of the passage is that both the individual believer and God have a part in the spiritual life. In verse 15, Paul exhorted them to stand fast. Then, in verses 16 and 17, he prayed that God would comfort their hearts. In verse 15, he exhorted them to hold fast to the traditions they had been taught. In verses 16 and 17, he asks God to establish them in every good word and work. Who does it? Both God and the individual believer.

The Black preacher said it well: “What eber de good Lord tell me to do in dis blessed Book, dat I’m gwine to do. If I see it in dat I must jump troo a stone wall, I’m gwine jump at it. Goin’ troo it belongs to God; jumpin’ at it—’longs to me.”

Summary: In salvation and the spiritual life, the believer and God have a part.

In this passage, Paul gives a thanksgiving, an exhortation, and a prayer. He pauses to praise, preach, and pray, but a close and careful look at the details reveals that he is discussing salvation and the spiritual life. He is saying that believers go to one extreme or the other. The super-spiritual saint says, “Let go and let God. Pray and do nothing.” On the other extreme is the energetic, sometimes emotional, and emphatic saint who says, “Let’s go and let’s get busy. Let’s work;” they have no time for the Lord and His Word.

Who’s right? The answer is both. It’s not either/or; it is both/and. We must work as if it all depends on us and pray as if it all depends on God.

On one of D. L. Moody’s journeys across the Atlantic, there was a fire in a ship’s hull. The crew and some of the volunteers stood in line to pass buckets of water. A friend said to Mr. Moody, “Let us go to the other end of the ship and pray.” The evangelist replied, “Not so fast, sir. Let’s stand right here and pass the buckets and pray at the same time.”

PRAYING FOR GOD'S WORK

Prayer for the work of the Lord is a pain and a puzzle. It is a pain because it doesn't relate to us personally. It is one of our duties we don't naturally do. When we perform this duty, we don't immediately get anything out of it. Furthermore, it is a puzzle. When things are going well, it doesn't seem to be needed. When God is working, is one to pray that He will work? When things are not going well, maybe the work should deteriorate and die. In the book of Revelation, the Lord said that He would take away a church's candlestick. Perhaps when a church's light is not shining, it should also lose its candlestick.

When are we to pray for the Lord's work? In 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5, Paul requested prayer (1:1-2), and he prayed for them (1:3-5). Both parts involved the work of the Lord. Gleaning in this part of the vineyard of the Word of God will reap insights in praying for the Lord's work.

Pray for the Lord's Work when it is Hindered

The Word Swiftly Advance Paul says, "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you" (3:1a). The phrase "the word of the Lord" is a reference to the gospel (1 Thess. 1:8; Hiebert). Paul is requesting prayer that the gospel will run swiftly. What does that mean? It can mean either 1) swiftly, rapidly, advance, or 2) advance without being hindered. The last phrase of verse 1 says, "Just as it is with you." They were the pattern for what they were to pray for Paul.

When Paul wrote the Thessalonian epistles, he was in Corinth. Acts 18:1-18 records that he had an open door and opposition. He had an open door in that many believed, even the chief ruler of the synagogue. Yet, there was opposition because the Jews made an insurrection with one accord against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat. As he was experiencing opposition in Corinth, he wrote to Thessalonica requesting prayer for himself in the Lord's work, teaching us that we are to pray for the Lord's work when it is being hindered. In their case, the gospel swiftly advanced but was bitterly opposed. Therefore, "run" refers to the swift advance of the gospel, not necessarily without obstacles (Hiebert).

A pastor once told me that he baptized fifty people in the first six months at his new church. That seemed great to me, but he said, "In my last church in Michigan, I baptized one hundred forty-three in the first six months." That pastor could write to the folks in Michigan and say, "Pray for us that the gospel will spread here as it did with you."

The Word be Honored Paul not only prayed that the gospel would swiftly advance but that it would be honored. He says, "and be glorified just as it is with you" (3:1b). The Greek word translated "glorified" means "to magnify, praise, honor." Hiebert suggests that the gospel is honored and admired for its inherent qualities when men see a demonstration of its transforming power in the lives of believers.

In seminary, I pastored a small church in a rural town in Texas. The Lord blessed the preaching of the Word. Attendance increased. Believers started to grow and folks began to get saved. The gospel was beginning to "swiftly advance." The gospel not only advanced, it was admired. A man in that town had not exactly been the most moral man in his younger years. On top of that, he was critical of the church in general and Christians in particular. In his opinion,

people who went to church were hypocrites. One day, he had a massive heart attack. I'd never met him, but when I heard that he had a heart attack, I went to see him in the hospital. When I entered the room, he was asleep. As he awoke, he saw me. Later, concerning that experience, he said, "Can you imagine having a heart attack and waking up with a preacher on your bed!" To make a complicated story condensed, he trusted Christ. His life was transformed. His face was radiant, and he told everyone in the county that he had been saved. When people saw the transformation in his life, the gospel was honored.

Workers be Delivered Finally, Paul requests prayer "that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith" (3:2). As Paul explains ("for"), the problem is that not all have faith, that is, not all have trusted Christ. In Corinth, he was opposed by unsaved Jews, which is probably the opposition to which he is referring here. These unsaved men were "unreasonable and wicked." The Greek word translated "unreasonable" means "out of place, perverse, outrageous," and the one rendered "wicked" means "bad or evil" in the active sense of the word, that is, this word describes the kind of person who is not content to be corrupt himself; he wants to corrupt others as well. The word "delivered" implies that these unsaved, unreasonable men opposed Paul in his work. Therefore, he is asking that he be delivered from these unregenerate, outrageous Jews who were corrupting others against him.

Not long after graduating from seminary and starting traveling as an evangelist, I held a meeting in a small Baptist church. One night, I preached a sermon on sin in the believer's life, including broken relationships. In the middle of the invitation, the pastor went to a man in the congregation, and as I could see from the platform, the man waved him off with a backhanded gesture. After the service, the pastor said, "You're probably wondering what was going on, so let me explain."

He told of a recent conflict between the song leader and the piano player over who should pick out the hymns for the service. The situation degenerated to the point that a motion was made in a church business meeting that the song leader be responsible for choosing the hymns. At that point, the husband of the piano player stood up, marched to the front and, pacing back and forth in a rage, argued vehemently that his wife, the piano player, be the one to choose the hymns. At the climax of his tirade, he shook his fist in the face of the pastor and said, "If you want to settle this, meet me out back!" Needless to say, relationships between them had been "strained" ever since. The sermon had convicted the pastor, and he was attempting to reconcile with this hostile man in the middle of the invitation. Unfortunately, the man would not listen to him.

The pastor continued, "The man's father was a wealthy, godly man who recently died. His son took over the business and feels he must take his father's place in the church. I don't think this man knows the Lord, but some people follow him because of his father. What am I to do?"

There are things they do not teach you in seminary! I had to confess to the pastor that I didn't know what to do. A bit down and dejected, I went to the motel where I was spending the week and asked the Lord what I should tell the pastor. The next morning, in reading the Scriptures, I came upon this passage in 2 Thessalonians. I felt the Lord had dropped the answer right in my lap. I shared with the pastor that we needed to pray that he would be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men so that the gospel could have a free course and be honored. We prayed. Several days later, I had to leave, but within the month, the pastor wrote me to tell me that a miracle had happened. This man called to say he had decided to attend another church. The pastor, through prayer, had been delivered.

When the work of the Lord is hindered, pray that the Word of the Lord will advance swiftly, be admired and that the workers of the Lord will be allowed to work without being trapped by

outrageous opposition. Notice that when the work is hindered, pray for the message's success and the messengers' safety.

Pray for the Lord's Work when it is Progressing

The Work was Progressing In verse 3, Paul expresses confidence that the work of the Lord will progress and continue. He says, "But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one" (3:3). In contrast to some men who have no faith and are thus faithless, the Lord is faithful. He is faithful to establish believers. The Greek word translated "establish" is the same one that was used in Paul's prayer in 2 Thessalonians 2:17. The Thessalonians had been shaken (2:2). Paul prayed that God would establish them (2:17). Now he expresses confidence that God will do what he asked Him to do (3:3). Furthermore, Paul is confident that God would not only establish them but guard them against the evil one. The expression "evil one" can either mean 1) from evil or 2) from the evil one. Virtually all commentators say it is the evil one, that is, Satan (Lightfoot; Milligan). The evil one (3:3) is the father of evil men (3:2). God may allow an evil man to oppose Paul, "But don't worry," Paul is saying, "God will not allow the evil one to get believers. God has rescued believers from Satan's grip and will not allow Satan to get them back.

The work was going well at Thessalonica because of the faithfulness of the Lord. It was also progressing well because of the obedience of believers, for Paul adds, "And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you" (3:4). In verse 3, Paul expressed the confidence that God was faithful to establish them. Yet, now, in verse 4, he recognizes that believers must be obedient, which is another reminder that the work of the Lord in the believer does not leave the believer passive (2:13-17).

Paul was confident that the Thessalonians were, at the moment, and would, in the future, be obedient. In 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, he instructed them on sexual purity and brotherly love. There is not a word about either of those in 2 Thessalonians. Apparently, they were obeying the instructions he had sent to them. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22, he told them about personal piety and public worship. There is not a word about either of those subjects in 2 Thessalonians. Again, they must have been obedient to his early instructions.

Paul is confident that they are currently obeying his instructions, and he also expresses confidence that they will be in the future. No doubt this refers to 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3. They had been deceived and were disturbed. This letter corrected the misconceptions and they would no doubt, as a result, calm down, but without a doubt, it refers to what he is about to say in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 (Milligan). In fact, the word "command" occurs again in verses 6, 10 and 12. In a sense, this confirmation in the present and future obedience is preparation for what is coming in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. At any rate, the work was progressing at Thessalonica because the believers were being obedient.

A little boy wrote an essay on a mule: "The mule is a stronger bird than the goose or turkey, and it is different. He has two wings on the side of his head, and he has two feet to walk with and two more to kick with, and is awfully backward about going forward." The believers at Thessalonica were not backward about going forward. They were progressing well in obedience to the Word of God.

Paul Prayed for Them Yet, even though things were going well, Paul prayed for them. He said, "Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ" (3:5). This is the third prayer in this epistle (1:11-12; 2:16-17; 3:5) and one of the rare instances

of a prayer addressed directly to Jesus. Paul prayed that the Lord would direct their hearts into the love of God. In Revelation 2:4, the Lord Himself lamented that the Ephesians had left their first love. In 1 John 2:15, John commands the believers in Ephesus not to love the world. Believers can leave their love for the Word and latch onto some love for the world. Or, to say the same thing another way, an undue attachment to any of the things of this earth soon chills our affections for God. For us, the ever-present danger of materialism can do that. For the Thessalonians, persecution could have done that. Paul knows that if we are to grow in our love for the Lord, no amount of possessions or persecution can cause us to fall and fail.

Many waters cannot quench love,
Nor can the floods drown it.
If a man would give for love
All the wealth of his house,
It would be utterly despised.
Song of Solomon 8:7

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow
strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

Paul also prayed that God would direct their hearts “into the patience of Christ.” The Greek word translated “patience” is means “endurance” and suggests “remaining under,” perhaps under some burden. Paul is asking that they might have the same endurance in the face of their trials that Christ exhibited (Milligan).

Christ was persecuted; He suffered. Yet, He endured it all. Peter tells us, “When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23). The Thessalonians were being persecuted; they were suffering. Paul is asking that God give them the same endurance in times of trouble and trial that Christ had when He was on the earth.

The work, then, at Thessalonica was doing well. It was progressing. The Lord was faithful and these believers were obedient. Yet, Paul prays for them that God would direct their hearts in love for Him and into the endurance of Christ. The lesson here is obvious. We need to pray for the Lord’s work even when it is progressing. As the mother feeds the family when it is sick and when it is well, as the teacher instructs the class when they are failing and when they are passing, so we are to pray when God’s work is hindered and when it is doing well.

Summary: Believers are to pray for the Lord’s work when it is hindered and when it is progressing.

Too many believers are so self-absorbed that all they ask for in their prayers is for themselves. If they get beyond themselves in their prayer life, it is only to people that they know. Only a few ask God to do something for *His* work.

We might not understand all the whys and wherefores of prayer, particularly concerning the work of the Lord, but by example and exhortation in the Scriptures, we know we are to pray for God’s work on the earth. Chafer said, “The reason for human intercession in the divine plan has

not been wholly revealed.” Spurgeon observed, “Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom.” So, we need to pray for God’s work when things are hindered and when things are progressing. When things are hindered, prayer will get them going. When things are going well, prayer will keep them going.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was one of the greatest preachers in the history of the Christian church. Thousands gathered to hear him every Sunday. Once, in July, five ministerial students decided to travel to London to listen to him. They wanted to determine what made him so effective. They had to arrive long before the service began to get a choice seat. While they waited, a member of the church came by and introduced himself to them. When he found out the purpose of their visit, he asked them if they would like to see the church’s heating apparatus. It was a hot day and they were not interested in the heating plant, but they accepted the offer since there was nothing else to do. The man led them down some steps and opened a door. In a subdued voice, he said, “There, gentlemen, is our heating apparatus.” They saw about 700 people praying for the service that was soon to begin. Then, they discovered that their host was Charles Haddon Spurgeon himself.

John Mansfield said, “God warms his hands at a man’s heart when he prays.”

DEALING WITH THE DISORDERLY

Have you ever been on a jury? The jury's job is to determine if someone is guilty of breaking the law. Sometimes, it is the jury's job to determine the punishment of one found guilty. It is that second function of the jury I want us to consider. Let's suppose that somebody in our church was disorderly and was disturbing the church. There is no question but that the person was guilty. Everyone could see that. The question is, what should be done? What should the punishment be?

There is a case in the New Testament where a church member was out of line and bothering people in the church. Paul wrote a letter to the church telling them what they should do in that case. The exact specifics of that case are not likely to happen today, but the principles are applicable today.

The Express Command to the Church

Disorderly Paul says, "But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (3:6). The expressed (English: "clearly stated") command to the church is for the church to withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly. What does Paul mean by withdraw and what does he mean by disorderly?

The word translated "disorderly" means "out of order, out of place." It was used of a soldier who was not keeping rank. In this passage, it is used of those who had stopped working. In verse 11, Paul identifies the disorderly as those "not working at all, but are busybodies." The problem, then, is that some had quit their jobs. They had stopped working for a living and they were disturbing the church by being busybodies. Most commentators feel that this problem was related to the misunderstanding of prophecy (Milligan). The Thessalonians believed that the day of Christ had come (2:2). Perhaps some reasoned: "The Lord must be about to return any minute. Let's stop working and wait." Doctrinal misconception always results in practical misconduct. Apparently, some believers assume that since the Lord would return any moment, it really didn't make much sense to plow their fields and fix their houses as if they were going to be here indefinitely. Some even gave up working entirely.

Their idleness produced another problem. Verse 11 says they not only had ceased working for a living, but they had also become "busybodies." In Greek texts, there is a play on words. Literally translated, the Greek text reads, "not working, but working around." We would say in English, "Not busy, but busybodies." They were not only working, they were interfering with the work of others. They were probably visiting the homes of members to discuss prophecy.

There was probably another problem. It is not specifically mentioned in this passage, but there is a hint or two here that it was present. In verse 8, Paul says, "Nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked." In verse 10, he says, "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat," and in verse 12, he exhorts, "that they work in quietness and eat their own bread." Since they had quit work, they had no money to buy food. They were probably appealing to members to meet their needs or pestered the leaders to provide money from the deacon's fund.

Putting all of the bits and pieces of information together from this passage and its extended context, the situation seemed to be something like this: they thought the Lord was coming at any

moment. They got so excited they stopped working for a living. They started interfering with others and maybe even living off of others. Paul says they were disorderly—out of line. They ought to be working.

Discipline Paul commands the church at Thessalonica to withdraw from those living disorderly. The Greek word translated “withdraw” means “to gather up and hence to withdraw.” It was used for furling a sail and girding up a robe (Lightfoot). To withdraw from a person was like hauling in a sail from a wind. That sounds severe! Does that mean that just because the fellow quit his job everyone is to quit him? That is not exactly the picture. Much, much more had occurred before Paul gave such drastic advice.

The latter part of verse 6 says that this disorderly brother who had quit his job was not walking “according to the tradition which he had received from us.” The Greek word translated “tradition” is the same as that used in 2 Thessalonians 2:15. It means “handed down.” This message had come from a messenger, but it had been given to him. Thus, the authority was not the messenger but someone above him. This disorderly brother had been handed the truth. He had been taught. That’s part of what made his disobedience so serious. Paul explains all of this in detail in verses 7-10.

Details In the first place, this fellow should have known better by Paul’s example. Paul explains (“for”), “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us” (3:7a). The Greek word translated “follow” means “mimic, imitate, the same word used in 1 Thessalonians 1:6, where Paul told them that they had imitated him. Here, he says that is exactly what they should have done. They should have imitated him specifically in his example of working.

His example concerning work consisted of three things. First, it is a simple fact that he worked. He says, “for we were not disorderly among you” (3:7b). As has been stated, “disorderly” in this passage is a reference to not working (3:11). Thus, Paul is saying, “Our example is that we worked at a secular job.” Second, his example concerning work consisted of the fact that he did not take support for his ministry. He states, “nor did we eat anyone’s bread free of charge” (3:8a). That does not mean that he refused an invitation to dinner. This means that he refuses to depend on them for his living (Hiebert). Third, he worked night and day. He says, “but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you” (3:8b). He made tents by day and disciples by night. The Greek words he uses to describe his work indicate that he labored to the point of fatigue and toiled under hardship.

Paul’s example of working at a secular job was all the more impressive because he had the authority to take support from them. As he states, “not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us” (3:9). He had the right or authority to take money for them for the support of his ministry, but he did not do it so that he could give them an example to follow.

Paul was a trained rabbi. Rabbinic law declared that a rabbi must not take pay for teaching. He must have a trade and satisfy his daily needs with the work of his hands. They were sure that a scholar lost something when he became so academic and withdrew from life that he forgot how to work with his hands. So, rabbis were bakers, barbers, carpenters, and masons. It is fascinating that although that was Paul’s background, he did not carry it into the New Testament. He consistently insisted that those taught pay the teacher (Gal. 6:6), that the laborer was worthy of his wages (1 Tim. 5:18).

Apparently, Paul’s practice was to not accept money from churches he started, but he did accept money from them after they were established (Phil. 4:15-16). Giving up that right allowed him the freedom to say, “You know that you should work from my example.”

They knew that they should work not only from Paul's example but also from his exhortation. As he goes on to explain, "For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (3:10). When he was personally there, he not only practiced this truth, he preached it. Notice he said "will not work," not "could not work." Refusal to work, not ability to work, is the issue. The congregation at Thessalonica had not only been instructed but, in a sense, they had been warned—several times. In his first epistle, he told them, "work with your hands as we commanded you" (1 Thess. 4:11). He also commanded, "Warn those who are unruly" (1 Thess. 5:14). The Greek word translated "unruly" in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 is the same Greek word translated "disorderly" in 2 Thessalonians 3:11. Church members had been told to admonish loafers.

Some claim Paul is quoting a Jewish idea. They had a proverb that says, "He who does not teach his son a trade teaches him to steal." Others contend that it comes from Greek worship, that is, it was a maxim coined by some industrious workman as he forbade his lazy apprentice to sit down to dinner. Still others suggest that this was an ancient proverb built off of Genesis 3:19. God, the Greeks, the Jews, and just men everywhere agree that if one does not work, he should not eat (Hiebert). This disobedient, disorderly man knew that from Paul's example and exhortation.

Paul brings up his personal practice and his public preaching because, as he explains in the next verse ("for"), he had heard that there was a problem with this very issue at Thessalonica. He says, "For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies" (3:11). The fact that they were not working was a serious problem. It was compounded by the fact that they were interfering with others (*cf.* 1 Tim. 5:13). The point is that these idle busybodies had been instructed and warned, yet they persisted to "walk disorderly" (3:6).

Church discipline is not to be the first response. It is one of the last resorts. Matthew 18 instructs that when someone sins, he first should be visited privately, then by a small group, and finally, only after other avenues have been pursued is it to be taken before the church. Titus 3 speaks about church discipline "after the first and second admonition" (Titus 3:10). One gets the impression from reading the New Testament that the church should almost be reluctant to discipline. Nevertheless, when there is overt sin, especially sin that is affecting others, and there has been instruction, warning, and due process, the church must discipline.

The Explicit Command to the Disorderly

Start Working In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-11, Paul has spoken to the church in general. He began by addressing them as "brethren." At this point, he speaks directly to the disorderly brother saying, "Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread" (3:12). "Those who are such" is a reference to those who are walking disorderly, not working at all, but who are busybodies (3:11). These he commands and exhorts, which means that he gave an authoritative command and a brotherly exhortation to them all at the same time (Hiebert). The command is that they work, that is, that they are to steadily engaged in regular employment.

Stop Disturbing Furthermore, he desires that they work "with quietness." "Quietness" is the same Greek word he used in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, where he told them to "aspire to lead a quiet life." It denotes an inward peace and tranquility reflecting itself in outward calmness and opposes fussy activity as a busybody (Hiebert; see 3:11).

Stop Living off Others The meaning of “to eat their own bread” is that they should support themselves and stop living off of other believers or the church.

By addressing the disobedient directly and telling him to obey the Word that he had already given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul indicates that the purpose of discipline is obedience. This is a significant issue. The purpose of church discipline is not punishment but restoration to obedience. All Paul desired in this situation was for these believers to return to work.

The Exact Command to the Church

Do not be Discouraged At this point in the passage, Paul once again turns his attention to the congregation at large. He says, “But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good” (3:13). In contrast to the disobedient (3:12), he speaks to the obedient ones (3:13). Previously (3:6-11), he told them what to do in relationship to the disorderly. Now, he gets more specific. There are three specific things all the members of the assembly are to do in this situation. First, they are told, “Do not grow weary in well-doing.” In contrast to those who were walking disorderly and being busybodies, these were “doing well”; they were doing what was right, noble, honorable, and upright. They had not quit their jobs or succumbed to the persecution. Paul urges them not to grow weary (Greek: “to lose heart”). Perhaps Paul feared that the example of the disorderly might have had a bad effect on the obedient. He is urging them not to give up doing what is right. They would grow weary in following these instructions.

Note the Disorderly Secondly, he commands, “And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed” (3:14). Since some did not obey Paul’s admonition in 1 Thessalonians 4:11 and 1 Thessalonians 5:14, he contemplates that there might be someone who would refuse to obey his command in this letter, namely the exhortation to go back to work as given in 2 Thessalonians 3:12. In such a case, the congregation is to “note” that man. The Greek word translated “note” means “mark.” In this case, everyone knew who these people were.

Withdraw Socially The congregation is also instructed to “not keep company with him that he may be ashamed.” The word translated “company” is a vivid Greek. The root word means “to mix or mingle.” A prefix that means “to interchange” was added to that, and another prefix that means “with or association” was added. The thrust of this word, then, is to have an intimate association with an individual as a close friend (Hiebert). In verse 6, Paul instructed the congregation to withdraw from an unrepentant, disobedient believer. As evidenced by verse 14, the withdrawal is a social withdrawal from intimate, close fellowship with him. First Corinthians 5 indicates that you would not invite him to your home for a meal nor accept an invitation to his (1 Cor. 5:11).

That sounds hard and harsh, but it has a positive purpose. The purpose stated in this verse is “that he may be ashamed.” When sinners sin, they rationalize and justify themselves. In this case, they were probably saying, “Look, I have a good reason for not working; the Lord is coming back.” By marking those individuals out and withdrawing close fellowship with them, the church says, “Yes, the Lord is coming, but He wants us to occupy until He comes. You should be ashamed of yourself for not working.”

Black sheep are to be blacklisted until they become obedient lambs.

Admonish the Offender The withdrawal could be carried too far, so Paul adds, “Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (3:15). To withdraw does not mean that

you would not speak to him. In fact, he is not an enemy; he is a brother. As a disobedient brother, he needs to be admonished, a Greek word that means “to put in mind,” to warn. It implies blame and calls attention to faults and defects, yet its tone is brotherly. One commentator says, “While its tone is brotherly, it is big brotherly” (Morris). The Greek word translated “enemy” means “hate, hateful, hostile.” Don’t be nasty; be nice. Don’t be hateful and hostile; be gracious and gentle. Admonish him as a brother, that is, as a close relative, as a dear loved one.

Summary: The way to deal with the disobedient disturbing the assembly is to be an example to them, instruct them, warm them, and, if they do not respond, put social pressure on them.

The principles apply today, even when no one disobeys or disturbs the assembly. We are to be examples. We are to instruct one another. We are to warn one another. We are to put social pressure on the persistent disobedient. And we must do it with the right attitude, the altitude of brother to brother.

I have one brother, four years younger than myself, and no sisters. Growing up, we were not close, but when I trusted Christ, I had the honor of leading my brother to the Lord. We then became not only brothers but friends, but because of school, seminary, and the service, we were separated for a number of years. In the meantime, my brother drifted away from the Lord. During those days, I admonished him as a brother. He knew I loved him. I’d stuck with him through lean years and I had gone after him like a shepherd seeking a wandering sheep. Now, I admonished him. I put the Word of God in his mind. I’ve often put my arm around him and said, “I love you, but I must tell you, you need to come back to the Lord and obey the Word.” It worked. He did. We must treat those who are out of line like brothers.

THE PROBLEM WITH PROPHECY

A knife is a good and valuable instrument. It can be helpful in a kitchen or in the woods, but it can be abused in the hands of the wrong person. Of course, that's true with almost anything, including a car, a rope, a brick, etc. It's even true of the biblical teaching concerning the future. The Bible is sprinkled with a heavy dose of the healthy doctrine of prophecy. Throughout the Scriptures, beginning in Genesis through Revelation, there is one prediction after another. Prophetic truth was revealed and recorded in every instant to help the hearers. Unfortunately, just as a knife can be misused, so the prophetic word can be misunderstood and do harm. There is a problem with prophecy.

Paul encountered the problem produced by the misuse of prophecy in the case of the church at Thessalonica. Initially, he was only there for a short time. Nevertheless, he had a great amount of fruit. After his departure, he was eager to return but was hindered. Finally, he sent Timothy to minister to them and to report back to him. Timothy returned with a good report, a question they had about prophecy, and some indications of a few needed spiritual adjustments.

As a result, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. The postman who delivered Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica is unknown today. Evidently, he is the one who informed Paul about the problem prophecy had produced at Thessalonica. Somehow, a report had gotten back to Thessalonica that Paul, Silas, and Timothy, either through a prophetic utterance, a letter, or just in normal conversation, had suggested that the day of Christ had come. Their present persecutions seem to confirm such a report. Some of them became so disturbed that they quit their jobs, anticipating the any-minute return of Jesus Christ. To complicate matters, they became busybodies. Thus, the misunderstanding of prophetic truth produced an enormous practical problem at the church at Thessalonica. Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to correct the situation. He also wanted to comfort them amid their persecution.

Second Thessalonians is in the form of an ancient letter, which customarily consisted of a salutation, a thanksgiving, a prayer, followed by the body of the book and concluding with personal greetings and a benediction.

Salutation The salutation of 2 Thessalonians identifies the authors as Paul, Silas, and Timothy, the recipients as the church of Thessalonica, and greets them with the standard greeting of grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1-2).

Thanksgiving Paul uses the thanksgiving section of the epistle to encourage them in their persecution (1:3-10). He does this by thanking God for their spiritual growth, telling them that he boasts of them among other churches. He also does this by reminding them that God is just allowing saints to be persecuted and repaying the persecutors. At the Second Coming of Christ, they will experience relief because it is then that God will punish all sinners and glorify His saints.

Prayer In the prayer following the thanksgiving (1:11-12), Paul prays for their spiritual growth and that the name of the Lord Jesus will be glorified in them and them in Him, all of which will be accomplished "according to the grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:12).

Instruction: the Tribulation has not Come

In the first major section of the body of the book, Paul gives instruction (2:1-12), followed by another thanksgiving (2:13-15) and prayer (2:16-17).

Instruction The Thessalonians were deeply disturbed because they thought that they had a report from either Paul, Silas, or Timothy saying that the Tribulation had come. Paul instructs them not to be “soon shaken in mind or troubled” (2:2) or to be deceived. He assures them that the Tribulation cannot come until 1) there is an apostasy and 2) the man of sin is revealed. He reminds them that he had taught them those things when he was with them (2:5). Furthermore, the man of sin cannot be revealed until the Restrainer is removed, and when He is, the lawless one will be destroyed (2:6-8). Before the lawless one is destroyed, he will deceive those who do not believe the gospel (2:9-12). Paul began this extended discussion by urging the Thessalonians not to be deceived, and he concluded it by talking about the fact that the Antichrist would deceive people in the Tribulation. His overall point is that they should not be disturbed or deceived thinking that they are in the Tribulation because it had not started in which people who don’t know the gospel will be deceived.

Thanksgiving Paul concludes this section of 2 Thessalonians by thanking God for their salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth (2:13-14). He exhorts them to stand fast and hold fast to that which they have been taught (2:15).

Prayer He prays that God would comfort and establish them (2:16-17).

In a sense, the sum of the second chapter of Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians is that they not be disturbed (2:2, 15, 17) or deceived (2:3, 15, 17).

Injunctions: Pray and Discipline the Disorderly

Prayer Paul concludes the book’s first major section with a prayer (2:16-17). He opens the second major portion of the body of the book by requesting prayer and praying for the Thessalonians (3:1-5). He requests prayer that the Word of the Lord may be swiftly advanced and honored. He also requests that they pray that the workers of the Lord will be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men. At the same time, because of the faithfulness of the Lord and the obedience of believers, he is confident that the Word will progress at Thessalonica. Yet, he prays that the Lord will direct their hearts into the love of God and the endurance of Christ (3:5).

Discipline The major injunction in the second major portion of the book is that they would practice church discipline (3:6-15). In a very real sense, this is the essence of the problem, at least the practical problem, and the climax of the book. Apparently, they stopped working because some felt that the Tribulation had already started. Since Paul had demonstrated by his example, declared by his appeal, and denounced a person not working in his epistle, he instructed the church to exercise church discipline for those who had quit their jobs and become busybodies. He pleads and commands those who are guilty to return to work (3:12). Just in case admonition is disobeyed, like similar injunctions in the first epistle, he instructs the church to mark those people and socially withdraw from them. At the same time, they are not to treat the disobedient as enemies but admonish them as brothers.

Prayer He concludes with a prayer which says, “Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all” (3:16). This is the fourth prayer in this epistle (1:11-12; 2:16-17; 3:5). It begins with “now,” which in the Greek text is a connective

particle with a slight contrastive flavor. It's almost as if Paul says that without the Lord's help, all the efforts he had just instructed them to put forth would be in vain.

In the concluding prayer in the first epistle, Paul designated God as the God of peace (1 Thess. 5:23). Here, he uses the title "the Lord of peace." This is the only place in his epistles where Paul uses the phrase "the Lord of peace" and is a reference to the Lord Jesus (Milligan; Hiebert). The word "Himself" is emphatic.

Peace was an appropriate prayer in their situation. Paul desired that they have inner tranquility of soul in the midst of their persecution and for their troubled heart over the misunderstanding concerning prophecy. He requests that the Lord be with them in every circumstance. The concluding "the Lord be with you all" does not exclude those walking disorderly (Lightfoot; Milligan). Peace is a gift from the Lord, but His presence mediates it.

In 1555, Nicholas Ridley was burned at the stake because of his witness for Christ. On the night before Ridley's execution, his brother offered to remain with him in the prison chamber to be of assistance and comfort. Nicholas declined the offer and replied that he meant to go to bed and sleep as quietly as ever he did in his life. Because he knew the peace of God, he could rest in the strength of the everlasting arms of his Lord to meet his needs.

Personal Greeting After the prayer, Paul concludes with a personal greeting, "with my own hand which is a sign in every epistle; so I write" (3:17). In other words, Paul took the pen from the amanuensis and added these two last words in his own handwriting, which, he says, was his habit (Lightfoot; Milligan). At the beginning, Silas and Timothy were identified with him as authors of this epistle. By now, it is evident that Paul is the author. He is the one who dictated the letter (Hiebert). Earlier in this letter, he referred to a possible forgery that had come to them with his name on it (2:2). Perhaps he is calling attention to his personal signature to reassure them that this is not a forgery.

Benediction Paul concludes with his usual benediction of "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen" (3:18). This is the same benediction as occurs at the end of 1 Thessalonians (5:28), except he adds the word "all." He had a special reason for inserting that here. He would not want to run the risk of seeming to exclude those members whose conduct he had rebuked (Lightfoot; Milligan; Hiebert).

Summary: Although they were experiencing persecution, they were not in the Tribulation, so they should not be disturbed or cease working, and they should discipline those who do.

Prophecy can become a problem. When it is misunderstood and misapplied, prophecy becomes a problem. Those doing that should be disciplined. Do not focus on the coming of the Antichrist. Focus on the coming of Christ.

Prophecy should be a positive, practical benefit in the lives of believers. The Bible is full of prophecy. Dr. George Sweeting once estimated that "more than a fourth of the Bible is predictive prophecy.... Both the Old and New Testaments are full of promises about the return of Jesus Christ. There are over 1800 references to prophecy in the Old Testament, and seventeen Old Testament books give prominence to prophecy. Of the 260 chapters in the New Testament, there are more than 300 references to the Lord's return—one out of every 30 verses. Twenty-three of the 27 books in the New Testament refer to the coming of the Lord.... For every prophecy on the first coming of Christ, there are eight concerning the Second Coming."

In the case of the Thessalonians, they were experiencing persecution. It was the prophetic truth of God's justice at the Second Coming of Christ that Paul used to sustain them in the midst of it (1:3-10).

Years ago, a hydroelectric dam was to be built across a valley in Maine. The people in the town were to be relocated, and the town itself was to be submerged. During the time between the initial decision and the completion of the dam, the town, which had once been well-kept, fell into disrepair. Why keep it up now? Explained one resident, “Where there is no faith in the future, there is no work in the present.” That makes sense. On the other hand, where there is faith in the future, there is work in the present.

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