

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 24: 1 Thessalonians**

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**I. Introduction**

In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches us how to pray using these words, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We are all quite familiar with these words; but do you think it will ever happen? Do you think there will ever be a time when God’s will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven? As we near the end of our survey of the New Testament we now turn to the books of I & II Thessalonians. The last few weeks we’ve been looking at letters in the New Testament that have been written about false teachers. How to spot them. What to do with them. Now, as we turn to Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, we’ll continue to have in mind various errors in the church—but we’ll also consider Paul’s emphasis on Jesus’ second coming—when all things that are false will be forever done away with and the true light of the glory of Christ will shine for eternity.

**II. Purpose & Background**

Turning to purpose and background, let’s look at 1:4-6, where we’ll see the context that led Paul to write this letter: “4*For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”* Paul had preached this good news in the large city of Thessalonica and founded a church there during his second missionary journey, as related in Acts 17. He only spent a few weeks there but his visit was successful—we read in Acts 17:4 that “4*And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”*

But after that, fierce persecution arose and the believers smuggled Paul out of the city in the night. Because Paul left abruptly and without having spent much time among them, *he had never finished teaching the basic matters of Christianity, and the church’s foundations were not complete and solid. Several strange problems had grown up after his premature departure. Apparently, some individuals in Thessalonica opposed this new religion by accusing Paul of being a money-grubbing self-promoter. As soon as circumstances became difficult, they said, he snuck out of town. There were also doctrinal difficulties.* Chiefly, *The Thessalonians worried that if a Christian died before Christ returned, he or she would be lost forever.* *So Paul* sent Timothy to find out how the Thessalonian church was doing – if they still held to the word they’d heard from him. Timothy has returned with a good report, and so Paul writes this letter around 51 AD to defend his ministry among them, clarify basic doctrine about death and the Second Coming, and reassure the Thessalonians with hope.

**III. Outline**

To see how he did that, let’s look at an outline of the letter and see how it’s structured. As you’ll see in your handout, 1 Thessalonians falls into two parts. In Chapters 1-3, Paul’s main purpose is the defense of his ministry. He opens the letter, prays the for the Thessalonians (1:2-3), and expresses confidence in their salvation – that’s 1:4 – 1:10. Next, he describes his ministry among them, defends it against false accusations, reiterates his desire to visit them again, and recounts Timothy’s good report – that’s 2:1 – 3:10. He concludes this section with another prayer in 3:11 – 13.

 Then, in keeping with his claims to love them, he moves on in Chapters 4-5 to exhort and teach them in response to their specific weaknesses and failings. First, he reminds them of the need to live lives pleasing to God in 4:1-12. Then, he spends about a chapter, in 4:13 – 5:11, on the main doctrinal exposition that the letter is known for: death, the Second Coming of Jesus, and the final judgment. His purpose in all of this is simply encouragement. As he writes in the middle of this section, in 4:18, “*18Therefore encourage one another with these words.”* (4:18). And finally he concludes, as in many of his letters, with instructions and greetings in 5:12-28.

OK. So that’s the basic structure. As we dive in to consider these words more carefully, we’ll look at three major themes. First, we’ll begin in the first haf of the letter, looking at Paul’s **pastoral ministry** among the Thessalonians. Then we’ll see two themes in the second half: first, Paul’s exhortations to the Thessalonians on basic **signs of the Christian life**, and finally, his teaching about the second coming of Christ. And in all of this, our focus should be on better understanding what *our lives* should look like in light of Jesus’ soon and certain return.

(IV. Major Themes) A. So, first, Pastoral Ministry.

 The first half of Paul’s letter is largely about his pastoral ministry among the Thessalonians. What I’d like to do is take an overview of what he says and identify from it seven key signs of Paul’s ministry, and by extension any genuine Christian ministry. But these aren’t just things that we should look for in a godly pastor, but signs that should characterize all of our lives as servants of Christ in his church.

 1. So, let’s dive in. The first sign of a genuine Christian ministry? Prayer. *Paul prays for these young Christians. In fact, his prayers constitute on of the most constant and recurring aspects of the letter. He thanks God for what he has already done in the church, and he asks him to do still more.* Look at 1:2-3 with me: “*2We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”* specifically mentioning “*your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”*  (1:2-3). For another example, turn to 3:9-13: “*For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, 10as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? 11Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, 12and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, 13so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”*

Note how Paul characterizes his prayer. He says that “*remembering before our God and Father”* (1:3) their work and faith and love. Praying for others is considering evidences of how God’s Spirit has been at work in them and thanking God; and it is considering their needs and directing these requests to the Father. It’s amazing to think that when we are meeting with God individually, we can come before him and intercede for our brothers and sisters in Christ, which this book teaches us is a selfless and generous way to spend our time with the Lord. And note how Paul prays for them in light of the second coming of Christ. He prays that they would be holy and blameless before him at his coming. We should learn from Paul; he focuses his prayer on what is most important, what is eternally lasting. The emphasis is not so much on their circumstances, but their faith, love, and holiness, which is a great model for our prayers.

 2. But then, a second mark of a genuine gospel ministry: Self-sacrifice. *In his missionary journeys, and not least in his trip to Macedonia, Paul showed he was willing to sacrifice his own safety. He did not benefit by it.* Look at chapter 2, verses 1-3: “*For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. 2But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we ahd boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. 3For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive.”* (2:1-3). *Paul did not preach the gospel to the Thessalonians with selfish concern for himself and his own gain, but with pure motives, to please God, not men.* Do we only share the good news with others when it’s convenient? Do we only speak of Jesus when we’re confident it won’t diminish our reputation? Or are we willing to sacrifice our standing and our comfort for the sake of the Gospel like Paul?

 3. Third. Motherly love. *Motherly love is also a sign of genuine ministry. Paul writes* in 2:7-8, “7*But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 8So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”* *Paul was not harsh, but gentle. He did not take from them but was delighted to share with them.*

 4. Fourth, Fatherly integrity and encouragement. *Next, Paul says that he exhibited a fatherly lifestyle among them, and now he encourages them with fatherly counsel.* We see this in 2:10-12:*“10You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. 11For you know how, like a father with his children, 12we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”* (2:10-12). Even as Paul instructs us on the purity and care that should characterize all of us as we speak to other Christians, by way of analogy he gives us wisdom for parenting as well - Paul assumes that a godly father encourages, comforts, and urges his children toward godliness.

 5. Fifth, Desire for fellowship. Paul desires to be with the Thessalonians and fellowship with them. They are not just his friends. They are his spiritual family. He writes, in 2:17, “*17But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face.”* (2:17). *Several times Paul mentions his desire to return and see them*. In the next chapter he repeats “we also long to see you,” (3:6) and “*10as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face”* (3:10). *Such a desire for fellowship is another evidence of a genuine ministry*. Think of God’s kindness in designing us this way: the more we mature in ministering to his people, the more we desire to spend even more time doing so. God shapes the desires of our hearts the more we soak our hearts in His word! You can’t escape Paul’s love for the Thessalonians as you read this letter -- it’s challenging! If you want to grow in your love for your fellow church members here at CHBC, I’d encourage you to read this letter a few times this week - it only takes 15 or 20 minutes - and ask as you read, “do I love and cherish my church the way Paul loved this church he had only spent a few weeks or months with?” Let Paul’s love serve as an example for us.

 6. Sixth: joy. When we minister faithfully, joy results. *Several times Paul says that he rejoices because of* the Thessalonians. In chapter 2:19-20 he writes “*19For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20For you are our glory and joy.”*  And in chapter 3 he says, “*9For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.”* (3:9). A godly pastor or elder is one who finds evident joy in knowing and leading his flock.

 7. And finally, hope. Paul has hope for the Thessalonians. His hope isn’t in *them*, that they’ll endure on their own – his hope is in the electing God who has chosen them, as he says in 1:4. And above all, he hopes for Christ’s return. Look at 5:23-24: “*23Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”* Paul’s ministry is characterized by hope *for* the Thessalonians based on his hope *in* God’s promises and Christ’s return.

 So then. Seven marks of genuine Christian ministry. Prayer. Self-sacrifice. Motherly love. Fatherly encouragement. A desire for fellowship. Joy. And hope. Through it all you see Paul’s driving passion for people and his ultimate hope in Jesus Christ. And you see a good model for our own lives.

 We can use these 7 marks to reflect on our own ministry in this church. Ministry is not for just pastors and elders; it’s for all of us. And so Paul’s example is useful for all of us. Why do we love others in this church? Paul’s most practical motivation seemed to be that he wanted a front-row seat to observe the supernatural power of God at work in the hearts of these believers, so that he could rejoice before God because of them. That’s a great example for us—especially in contrast to the mixed motives we so often have. How did he avoid making people his “projects?” He loved them. He earnestly desired to be with them. His heart was torn when he had to leave. Did he only serve when it was convenient? Certainly not. And that self-sacrifice only compounded his joy.

 And, of course, you can use this book beyond just reflecting on your own personal ministry. Use these chapters to encourage and exhort other Christian friends. Use them to evaluate a pastoral ministry at a church you may consider joining—or at your own church. A church you consider joining must have solid doctrine – it must cling to the same gospel that Paul declares in 5:9-10 of this book. But you should also look for the careful, compassionate type of leadership that Paul exemplifies in his relationship with the Thessalonians. And, finally, we can use these passages to encourage faithful ministers of the gospel who are following the pattern laid out by Paul. That’s the first half of the book. Before we move to the second half, ***any questions?***

**B. Signs of a Christian Life**

Paul doesn’t limit himself to describing what a genuine ministry looks like. In chapters 4 and 5 Paul writes and tells them what effect a genuine ministry should have on their lives. As you’ll recall from earlier, these exhortations sandwich the core of the letter, the section of the coming of the Lord at the end of chapter 4. So we should be thinking of these exhortations especially in terms of “how should we live in light of Christ’s coming return?” Paul begins this section in 4:1-2 by writing, “*4Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. 2For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.”* Paul follows with, you guessed it, seven points.

1. First, pursue sexual purity. Just after telling them to please God, Paul then spends several sentences repeatedly and specifically telling them to avoid sexual sin, drawing a clear link between the two. Paul writes in 4:3-8, “*3For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. 8Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”* The connection between obeying God and maintaining sexual purity may actually have been a new idea to the Thessalonians. *Sexual promiscuity was even more accepted and practiced in the ancient pagan world than in our own world*, so it was worth Paul’s time to emphasize the point. Note that Paul does *not* treat sexual sin as something private, or as a “victimless crime.” He emphasizes “*no one transgress and wrong his brother,*” (4:6). Sexual sin always involves others—including God. “*8Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God,”* (4:8).

2. Second, we should live lives of brotherly love. Verses 9-10: “*9Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more,”* (4:9-10).

3. Third. Respectability. Paul wants the Thessalonians to live in such a way as to earn the respect of others. Look at 4:11-12, “*11aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”* The point is not that Paul wants Christians to be focused on polishing their reputation. This is not a popularity contest. No, it is in some ways precisely by doing the opposite of what would lead to popularity and success—by striving to lead a quiet life and mind your own business—that we win not popularity, but genuine respect for the Godly way of life we follow. *You do this not so that others will think well of you but so that the gospel will be commended.* So, far from the coming of the Lord inciting panic, it should spur us on to continue being faithful in respectable and quiet ways.

4. Fourth, Being awake to God. Having detoured to talk directly about the second coming, Paul returns to his list of exhortations in chapter 5:4-8: “*4But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. 5For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. 6So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. 7For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. 8But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.”* (5:4-8). *We are to be awake to God. We are not asleep but awake, alert, and self-controlled.* Paul wants Christians not to be dulled by this world, deceived by the attractive appearance of its passing pleasures, or blind to the realities that God has made known in his Word. No, we are to be spiritually awake—focused on God’s truth and inwardly directed to the truth that we know but do not yet see.

 5. Fifth, Encouraging others. Paul goes on, “*11therefore encourage one another to build one another up, just as you are doing. 12We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 15See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always see to do good to one another and to everyone.”* (5:11-15) We are to encourage everyone. *Paul especially calls us to give encouragement in two particular cases.* First, encourage your pastors and elders. They work hard to be wise and Godly spiritual shepherds for you. Do we encourage them? Do we tell them we appreciate them? Second, Paul tells us to encourage the weak. Weakness is often a temptation to discouragement, so Paul tells Christians to be especially diligent in encouraging those who lack strength in various ways. I wonder if you know someone in this situation that you could encourage, even this week?

 6. Sixth, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, and us, to Live a God-centered life. He says in 5:16-18: “*16Rejoice always, 17pray without ceasing, 18give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* *How can you be joyful always? If you center your life on God, regardless of what happens at work, regardless of what happens at home, regardless of what happens at church, you can be joyful.* Well, how do we make God the center of our lives, *so that* we by the Spirit’s power do “pray without ceasing” (5:17) and “give thanks in all circumstances,” (5:18)? It starts with remembering the good news of grace that we’ve received, as Paul says in 5:9-10: “*9For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.”* This amazing Gospel is what changes the foundation of our life so that God is at the center.

7. And finally, seventh, live a discerning life. As Paul nears his conclusions, he says, “*19Do not quench the Spirit. 20Do not despise prophecies, 21but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22Abstain from every form of evil.”* (5:19-22) These are timeless exhortations applicable in every circumstance. “Test everything.” Life is short. Don’t waste it on stupid, evil things. Think carefully before you believe something, do something, say something, or promise anything. Evil is everywhere; if we would avoid it, we must pray for discernment.

Those are the ways we are to behave in light of the end of the world. Love each other. Focus on living respectable, quiet lives of faithfulness. Don’t waste your time or energy. Encourage others. ***Any questions on this section on the Christian life?***

**C. The Second Coming**

 So, why should we live in these ways as Christians? The answer, and our final theme in 1 Thessalonians, is because of the second coming -- because Jesus is coming back. That is the great truth animating Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, and the point towards which all history is converging. We should live pure and holy lives because Jesus is coming back and we want to live lives worthy of him. We should minister to others because Jesus is coming back and we want others to be prepared. We should spread the gospel because Jesus is coming back and we want everyone in the world to have heard about him before he comes in final judgment.

 We should keep in mind four things about Jesus’ return. First, it will certainly happen. Second, we will all witness it, regardless of when it happens, and will all be subject to his judgment. Third, if you are a Christian, the doctrine should be an encouragement to you. Fourth, no one knows when Jesus will return.

 First, **Jesus *will* return**. Paul describes that glorious day in 4:16-17. “*16For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”* (4:16-17) Jesus himself taught that he will return, and we see more images of his return throughout the book of Revelation. Scripture is clear and consistent: Jesus is coming back!

 Second, **we will all witness his return**. Evidently the Thessalonians were discouraged because some of them had died and the others thought the ones who died would miss out on Jesus’ return. Paul writes to encourage them, in 4:13-15: “*13But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.”* He speaks of death as “sleep” to indicate that, for Christians, it is not the end. Not only will our souls go immediately to be with Jesus in heaven, even our bodies will be resurrected from this “sleep” with Jesus in the new creation.[[1]](#footnote-1) We learn too from Revelation that non-Christians will also be resurrected to receive their final judgment. No one will miss out on Jesus’ return. It is the one event in history that all human beings who have ever lived will experience together.

Third, this doctrine should be an **encouragement** and a prompting to hope and holiness for Christians. Paul gives the Thessalonians a remarkable exhortation after describing the end of the world, in 4:18: “*18Therefore encourage one another with these words.”*  Jesus’ return should be an encouragement to us. It is the fulfillment of our hopes, it’s the vindication of our expectations. When Jesus returns, all wrongs will be righted, all apparent injustice corrected. Some Christians view the end with alarm, fear, or dread. The end will indeed be fearsome because it will be accompanied by God’s wrath—but we Christians are spared of that! *SHARE GOSPEL…* Jesus returns to gather his people to himself, finally and forever. For us his return is only the end of this fallen world marred by sin and death; it is the beginning of the new creation in which as Revelation says, “*4he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:4).

Fourth, we don’t know when Jesus will return and we shouldn’t try to figure it out. Naturally some Christians then, as now, became preoccupied with the idea of Jesus’ return and apparently spent some time arguing about when it was going to happen. Paul writes to discourage them from such speculation, in 5:1-3 “*1Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. 2For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”* (5:1-3). God explicitly says in his word that we do not and cannot know the day or hour of Jesus’ return. We should not listen to anyone who claims to have figured it out. We should, however, remain in eager expectation and preparedness, leading Godly and sober lives so that we will be ready by Jesus comes.

Isn’t it amazing how practical all of this gets in 1 Thessalonians? You could almost think of the second half of his letter as “the end of the world, made practical.” So often, this topic invites fevered speculation and silly fantasies -- whether it’s the latest series of end-times-themed novels or a fascination with the identity of the “man of lawlessness” that is mentioned in 2 Thessalonians. But that kind of teaching and speculation is utterly foreign to Paul’s practical, Christ-centered, encouraging explanation of the end of time. One way we could apply this part of the book is by evaluating how much time we spend thinking about the past, the present, and the near future… and then compare that with how often we look forward to eternity with Christ. Hoping in eternity, Paul says, shapes the way that we live now - because it stirs our hope in the Christ who is returning. ***Any questions?***

**Conclusion**

I hope we can see how the doctrine of the future, even though certain details about it are mysterious, so fundamentally shapes the content of our belief and practice as followers of Christ. Why has Paul’s ministry been characterized by the seven aspects we looked at - things like self-sacrifice, prayer, joy, and concern? Because he deeply desires the Thessalonians to be prepared for that final day. Why should our lives as Christians be characterized by those other seven features, such as brotherly love, sexual purity, discernment? Because we are those who because of the Gospel of God’s mercy don’t have to fear Christ’s return. Instead, our greatest desire is God’s glory - that he would be glorified and made much of by his people as we wait for all his good promises to come to fruition.

Listen to how Jonathan Edwards spoke about our longing for this coming day of the Lord: “The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to Heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the ocean.”[[2]](#footnote-2) We look forward to that day because of the glory of God.

Let’s pray.

1. It may be useful here to anticipate questions about what happens when Christians die. Paul uses the term “asleep,” but Paul is not teaching the doctrine of “soul sleep,” which is the idea that “when believers die they go into a state of unconscious existence, and the next thing that they are conscious of will be when Christ returns and raises the mto eternal life” (Grudem, Systematic Theology, 819). Paul is not indicating that Christians have to wait until the second coming for their souls to be united to God; he is merely showing that for Christians, death is temporary in the same way that sleep is temporary. The plain teaching of scripture is that when people die, the souls of believers go immediately into God’s presence, and the souls of unbelievers go immediately to eternal punishment (Grudem, 816, 822). 2 Cor. 5:8 – “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord;” Phil. 1:23 – “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;” Luke 23:45 – “Today you will be with me in paradise.” At the second coming of Christ, believers will receive resurrected bodies – “For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52). As Grudem summarizes, “When Christ returns the souls of believers will be reunited with their bodies, their bodies will be raised from the dead, and they will live with Christ eternally (817). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From Iain Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography, p. 143, cited in Donald Whitey, Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)