

GOD OF WRATH, GOD OF PEACE

1 Thessalonians 5

Dr. George O. Wood

We turn again today to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 5. Instead of reading the chapter in its entirety at the beginning, I'd like to just walk through this chapter with you this morning on a verse-by-verse basis.

As we have shared together from the Thessalonian letter, I've indicated that one of the basic problems in the Thessalonian church was the concern for what had happened to those who had died who were Christians. Where were they? And how would they fit into the whole scheme of the resurrection from the dead? Paul, in chapter 4, has let them know what is going to happen. These departed ones are with the Lord and they will return with the Lord when He comes again. In a marvelous, beautiful way, we shall also see their bodies being physically resurrected from the dead. They shall rise first and we who remain shall be caught up with them to meet them in the air.

So that one concern, the Thessalonians had regard for the dead in Christ.

The second concern of the Thessalonians had to do with when the day of the Lord was coming. When was the Lord himself returning? As we shall see when we move into 2 Thessalonians, that is a persistent problem that remains with him, because some held that the day of the Lord had already passed. The Thessalonians are individuals who lived in light of the knowledge that Jesus Christ comes again. I suppose there are two possible false attitudes to have in respect to the return of Christ.

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One false attitude is the attitude that was manifested by many of Thessalonica. The attitude of feverishness, of letting go of normal responsibilities, normal duties, in order to sit idly around, waiting for the Lord to come. In fact, Paul had to continually drag these people back on earth. We saw how he did it in chapter 4. In the first 12 verses of that chapter, he talks to them about their down-to-earth responsibilities. Then in verses 13–18, he talked about meeting the Lord in the air. He does the same thing all over again in chapter 5. The chapter is really split in two parts. Verses 1–11 speak about eternal themes: being ready to meet the Lord. And verses 12–28 speak about our down-to-earth responsibilities once more. That a feverish kind of activity which results in unsettledness is to be avoided.

Then a cold type of indifference is also to be avoided. A blasé attitude toward the return of Christ.

Perhaps the best word to describe our response, emotionally and spiritually, toward the return of the Lord is an ardent expectation. An attitude of “Maranatha—the Lord comes,” which sees the Lord’s coming as neither an escape hatch out of the problems of this world nor as some kind of personal convenience for us. But it sees it in its true perspective—that God himself is the Lord of earth and history and has a day that He’s appointed to intersect time with eternity, to establish His kingdom and His rule for all times, of which rule and kingdom we shall be a part.

Here writing to the Thessalonians, Paul shared with them the good news and also the news of the coming of the day of the Lord. In this coming, he first of all describes the meaning of the coming, in verses 1 and 2. In verse 3, he describes the method of the coming. And in verses 4–11, the manner in which the day of the Lord occurs.

I. First, the meaning of the day of the Lord.

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“Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:1–2, NIV). Paul indicates to these Thessalonians that they do not need any further teaching about times and dates. The implication being that they have already been taught. The phrase “times and dates” is a crucial one, understanding what Paul means by the “coming of the day of the Lord.” The word for “time” is the word from which we get “chronology.” It came to mean a duration of time, time as a movement, time as progression. The word for “dates” has to do with the attributes or the characteristics of time. It has to do with suitable time. For example, in modern Greek it may mean the “time of day.” The other meaning is “weather.” If we were to understand a basic difference between the two words, it may be when you spend five minutes in a dentist’s chair, as opposed to spending five minutes holding your girlfriend’s hand.

Christians wanted to know how long it would be from Christ’s ascension till His return. What will be the duration? And what will be the suitable time in which He will intersect eternity in the compass of history. We know of certain qualities of the day of the Lord, certain aspects associated with the day of the Lord. But we don’t know the specific suitable moment in which Jesus will return. And the Thessalonians had instructions about that. The Lord himself had given the church that instruction, just prior to His ascension into heaven. We see it in Acts 1:6, where the disciples come to Jesus on the mount of Ascension and say to Him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or the dates which the Father has fixed by his own authority.” We’re not to know the duration or the suitable moment in which He will come again.

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But what are you to know? “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). When the Lord is questioned about the future, He takes people to the present and says, “The future is Mine. The present is yours. You get filled with the Holy Spirit.”

What a reassurance to us as believers in this day, when there’s a great emphasis on prophecy. Much of which is healthy, but some tends to be unhealthy—an overinvolvement with all the details of the future, so much so we begin to get cross with other Christians with details we may have differences about. That’s not the Word of the Lord. The Word of the Lord is: We don’t know the duration or the suitability. But we’ve got things to do right here and now.

What is the day of the Lord anyway? The day of the Lord is coming. Perhaps in order to understand the day of the Lord, we’d have to kind of leaf through our Bibles to get some key Scriptures that speak to us about the day of the Lord. I’m going to take you through some Old Testament Scriptures and some New Testament Scriptures in order to highlight what exactly the day of the Lord is.

Perhaps the first mention of the day of the Lord, chronologically, is in the eighth century B.C., in the ministry of the prophet Amos, who declares this about the day of the Lord in 5:18: “Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! [He’s speaking to the people who perceive that God has a day in which their national expectations would raise them high. God would judge all the heathen, but they wouldn’t be judged.] Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?” (Amos 5:18–20, NIV).

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Isaiah prophesies of the day of the Lord when he indicates, in 2:12, “For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high.” And Isaiah 13:9–11 “See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless” (NIV).

The prophet Joel sees this day in 1:15, “Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.”

The prophet Zephaniah also speaks of that day in 1:14–18, “The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD’s wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth” (Zephaniah 1:14–18, NIV).

What an awesome message the Old Testament is giving us on the day of the Lord. That, while there are lessons in the Old Testament of the day of the Lord being a bright experience for the redeemed, it is an awesome day—the outpouring of God’s final judgment upon the world.

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John the Baptist was dominated by this thinking when he began his ministry and the New Testament begins. In Matthew 3:7, he preaches to the Pharisees and Sadducees and says, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” Of course, we see how much Jesus surprises John the Baptist in the Gospels, in that Jesus’ ministry was not one of wrath in this age but one of peace. Jesus goes on to indicate the day of judgment is coming.

So the day of the Lord is a day of wrath—wrath for the wicked, wrath for the world, wrath for the unbeliever. How does that day seem for Christians? The New Testament has a beautiful word for it. It is “the day of Jesus Christ.” 1 Corinthians 1:8 says, “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Philippians 1:6, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” While there are terms like that referring to the believers, Revelation goes back to the Old Testament theme also, of the day of the Lord being an outpouring of God’s wrath. Revelation 6:16–17 says, “They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” And again Revelation 14:9 says, “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.” And all of Revelation 16 shows the very end-time moment of the Tribulation period, when no longer is the wrath of man or the wrath of the Antichrist being experienced, but the wrath of God himself, which comes in sudden cataclysmic judgments upon all the world, knowing that the day of the Lord is coming, which is why Jesus has come.

Jesus operated, you see, with a sense of history. He knew where it had begun, He knew where it was then and He knew where it was going. Jesus himself declares, in the beginning of His

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ministry, John 3:36, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life. He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him.” Is it any wonder that the writer of Hebrews says, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Hebrews 2:3). “The day of the Lord cometh.” And that’s what Paul is telling the Thessalonians. That is the meaning of the day of the Lord. A day of faith before the believer, a day of judgment upon the world. How is the day of the Lord going to come? What is its method? “While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape” (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

The two characteristics of the manifestation of the day of the Lord as a day of wrath upon the unbeliever are that the unbeliever is marked for delusion and for destruction. Deluded by feelings that he lives in a world which is secure. We use the phrase in our society “law and order.” In the day in which the Lord returns, that hunger for law and order in society will be strongly evident. Society, when the day of the Lord intersects it, will have been made stable enough that people are saying “peace and security.” The Scriptures teach us that man ultimately is never going to bring paradise to earth. That only God can bring heaven to earth. Any other viewpoint is simply a delusion and, in the midst of that delusion, the day of the Lord shall come. That delusion will be followed by destruction. Then sudden destruction shall come.

The word for “destruction” here carries the idea of utter and hopeless devastation and ruin. The destroying of everything which has made life significant and worth living. That destruction is likened to a pregnancy. As a woman is pregnant with child, so this age is pregnant with the day of the Lord. As in pregnancy there is a certainty of delivery, so with the day of the Lord—there shall be a certainty of its existence. As with pregnancy, even though that is certain, the timing is not. So with the day of the Lord. The day or the hour, we do not know. As with pregnancy there

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is pain, so birth pangs are associated with the collapse of the world order and with the cries of men and women who are without God, to the extent that the day of the Lord upon the world can be described as coming with the pangs of birth—intense and sudden pain.

II. If that is how the day of the Lord is going to come, what then is the message of the day of the Lord for believers?

Verses 4–11 describe that message to us. First of all, it examines us, “But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness” (1 Thessalonians 5:4–5). Will the coming of the Lord be sudden? Yes. Will it be sudden for the believer and for the unbeliever? Yes. Will the coming of the Lord take the believer by surprise? No. That day shall not come upon you as a thief. You live momentarily with the knowledge and the good news that Christ will return. It’s as natural for you to take your next breath as it would be natural for you to meet Him in the air. You are “sons of the day” and “children of light.” The day of the Lord is a day of thick darkness and gloom. But that is not your characteristic. You are children of light. This word examines us as defined where we are in the realm of God’s light, whether we walk in darkness or walk in the light.

Once the Lord examines us, as to whether we are God’s children or children of evil, the message of the day of the Lord then exhorts us. Verse 6–8 say, “So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (1 Thessalonians 5:6–8, NIV). Essentially, this exhortation, this word to walk in God’s ways, comes to us in two ways. Be awake, be alert, keep watching. The second way is to be sober.

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A. The idea “to be awake” means to let your mental processes be in such a state that you don’t go to sleep in the days we’re living in right now. The idea of being awake is the opposite of indifference. The disciples fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane. They weren’t awake. They weren’t watching. They were indifferent. But we, who are believers that wait for the day of the Lord to come, are awake.

Often watching for the day of the Lord involves that Spirit of prayer. Jesus, in Mark 13, says, “Watch and pray.” And in Colossians 4, we are told to watch and pray. But in addition to keeping awake, in terms of seeing events and analyzing the fact that we live, possibly, in the age in which Jesus will return...

B. We’re also to be sober. This carries a moral connotation. It’s the opposite of being drunk. It’s the opposite of losing control of yourself. It’s the opposite of being inebriated by anything—passion, drugs, alcohol, thoughts that are ungodly. We have one master—the Lord Jesus Christ. So to be sober is the opposite of moral indifference. To be sober and to be awake means that in our age, we as Christians are going to essentially have the same response as Noah in his age. Jesus said, “But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” (Matthew 24:37–38, NIV). There is nothing wrong with eating. There’s nothing wrong with drinking, provided you know what to drink. And there is nothing wrong with giving in marriage. I think it’s a great thing when people are given in marriage. The characteristic in Noah’s day is presented in Scripture: not so much sinfulness, in the moral sense, as the idea of skepticism. And a taunting kind of a thing. The believer knows the coming of the Lord. Our age has the ability to stupefy us, to make us insensitive to being watchful. Think of what television alone has done to our sensitivity. I would exhort Christians, if you read fiction and

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watch fiction, don't become lost in the world of fiction. Keep both feet in the real world. The real world, which sizes up the fact that we do live in an age in which Christ may return and that Christ's coming is the most real fact of history that is yet to be. Be sober. A characteristic of a Christian is that he keeps perspective on the issues that are really crucial and cardinal to his faith. Be sober—that's the present tense. Put on the armor—that is in the past tense imperative, which means, "Put your armor on and leave it on. Quit taking the thing on and off. Keep it on." What is your armor? Nothing physical, but simply love and faith are the breastplate over your heart. And something for your head—salvation.

Paul, in Ephesians 6, goes on in more detail to describe what the armor of the Christian is. But without pausing to compare here, let it simply be noted that nowhere in the Christian's armor does he have a piece for his back. When we turn away and run from conflict, the Lord's not with us like when we stand. Faith and love—the characteristics of Christians who are waiting for the coming of the day of the Lord.

We see, in Thessalonians 5:8, the mention of faith, love, and hope. These are the three words that are dominant in the Thessalonian letter. We saw them in the first chapter—"work of faith."

"Labor of love." "Steadfastness of hope." Faith, hope, and love are the qualities which are to be evident when Christians are together.

This message of the day of the Lord also encourages, verses 9–11, "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (NIV). "In this world," Jesus said, "you will have tribulation, you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Yet there is a trouble which is not from man but from God—a day of wrath. So salvation, which we have in God, is something

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which saves us from something and saves us unto something. We are saved from the wrath of God. And we are saved unto Christ and unto eternal life.

I suppose, with all of us coming from various church backgrounds and theological divisions, we've all been taught different things pertaining to the day of the Lord and the return of Christ for the saints. Within the prophetic fields, there are three dominant views as to when the Lord will return. Will He return before the tribulation? Will He return during the tribulation? Will He return at the end of the tribulation? This is a question which comes about for Christians who sincerely want to be ready to meet the Lord. I've thought, within Christian experience, that we've desired the Lord to come before the tribulation, because we as Americans are accustomed to rather easy living. There have been Christians all through the ages that have lost their lives, sometimes in very bitter and cruel ways. The Scriptures so plainly teach that what the Christian should realize is that he is saved from the wrath of God.

"In the world," Jesus said, "you will have tribulation." He's not necessarily saying, "You'll go through the tribulation." But, "In the world you will have tribulation." "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." The Scriptures teach us that God is coming for His saints before the exercise of His wrath. He is coming for us before He outpours His wrath on the world. Search as you will through the Scriptures and never will you find the children of God going through the wrath of God. The word "elect," which are understood to be the saved of Israel in the time of tribulation, are never described as going through the wrath of God.

They go through the tribulation. They go through the wrath of the antichrist. But God, in the exercise of His justice and judgment, has far superior strength to anything that any man, even the Antichrist, can dish out. Therefore, Paul says, "Encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). You are saved from the wrath of God.

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That ought to make us as Christians literally stand up and praise the Lord. Saved from God's wrath! Paul's not writing to believers to give them all the details relating to the coming of the Lord and the day of the Lord. But He's writing to give us that emotional, spiritual assurance that we need and must have. We are saved in a day when the world's on fire.

"Build one another up." That word is "edifice," "to build." Put your blocks in place, your spiritual blocks of belief. Get built up with this great truth. Psalm 2 has a fascinating retrospect on this. "Why do the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing?" Then the Psalm goes on to describe the rebellion of earth against God. "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you perish in your way" (Psalm 2:12).

What is this age? An opportunity to kiss the Son, to know the God of peace and grace rather than the God of wrath. Wouldn't it be great if Paul had ended with 1 Thessalonians 5:11, at a beautiful point in the epistle? But he does one more "Let's go back down to earth."

III. Verses 12–28 speak of our practical duties while we're waiting for the day of the Lord.

Verses 12–15 speak of our relationship with other Christians and with society at large. We see the responsibilities that are laid out for members of the Christian community. We also see responsibilities that are laid out for leaders in the body of Christ. We see responsibilities that are laid out for both leaders and members.

In respect to members, verses 12–13, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other" (NIV). The Thessalonians, in terms of personal relationships, had two problems. One problem was that there had been some members who quit work waiting for the Lord to return. That's evident from the epistle.

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Evidently, the leaders have had to admonish them, to say, “Get back to your job, get back to your family, get back to work.” There were perhaps some that were resentful of that admonition.

To compound the matter, all these people had been saved at about the same time. Perhaps about eighteen months before this letter was written. Some of them had become leaders in the church, although the New Testament never uses the term “leader” or “leadership” in reference to a ruling elder. It always uses the term “servant” or some other term. Because the true Christian leader is a servant, not somebody holding a title. But these all had been converted about the same time, but some of them had been promoted to a place of service. Others looked around saying, “I was saved about the same time they were. Why are they telling me what to do?” So Paul’s saying, in respect to leaders, “You’re to do this—respect them.” The King James says “know”—“know the value of” or “respect.” “Respect” and “esteem,” “to highly regard.” And more than that—to be at peace among yourselves. Let the bond of peace be the rule in Christian community. No one going his own way saying, “I don’t need the others. I’ve got my own little thing in mind. I don’t need Christian community. I don’t need Christian love. I don’t need the body and to be a part of the body.” The church grows best through cell division, which is healthy and normal. Be at peace among yourselves.

For leaders, these admonitions are given. They are to labor. “Respect them who labor over you” (verse 12). Obviously you can’t give respect to someone who isn’t laboring. Places of responsibility in Christian community are not stations where people have privilege and titles, but stations where work is done. Labor.

And also Christian leaders are over you in the Lord and, furthermore, they admonish you. And sometimes that’s not a pleasant task for a leader, for a member in the Christian community who has responsibility for exhortation. But that is nevertheless a needful thing, if we’re all to come

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into conformity with the image of Jesus. It's much easier to just say pleasant things. But there are times of admonishment.

Within the group, both members and those who are leading—the idle—are to be admonished.

The word for “idle” does not so much refer to a person who isn't working, as it does to refer to an unruly person. That's the meaning of the word that is used to describe the soldier who fell out of rank and went away and did his own thing. Admonish the idle.

And “encourage the timid [or, “faint-hearted”]” (verse 14). The word for “faint-hearted” is fascinating. It's the word from which we get the word “psyche.” It means “little souled”.

Basically, it refers to persons who are bothered with an inferiority complex, who feel that they've got lost in the crowd and have nothing to give to Christ. “Encourage the little souled. Help bring them up to a place of courage.”

I love the way the Lord administers discipline in this letter through Paul. I would hate to think of what would happen if you admonished the little souled and encouraged the idle. That would be disastrous for both groups. The word in the Christian community gives us a sensitivity to one another, to help us to know a word in due season to the right person. So that one word to one person is not the same word to another person. The Lord would have us know the appropriate word to be shared based on the individual need.

Not only that, but “help the weak” (verse 14). There are those who were weak in the Thessalonian church. Maybe weak physically—sick. They may be weak because they've gone through persecution. They may be weak because they're sorrowing over their loved ones who've departed. They may be weak because they've fallen into temptation. But the Lord says help them, “Be patient with everybody.”

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The word for “patient” is different than the word we encountered in chapter 1, which meant “remaining under.” This is a word that means “long tempered.” “Be long tempered.” And it’s the opposite, of course, of being short tempered. “In the Christian community, don’t have people with short fuses. Have a long fuse. Be patient.” Isn’t that a good rule for all of us within family? That’s hard. Be long tempered toward one another. Be patient.

And “don’t repay evil for evil, but always try to be kind” (1 Thessalonians 5:15). Let your values, let your response be Christlike, as the Lord has given to us at the end of Matthew 5, when He speak about retaliation.

Not only do you have relationships within Christian communities, but you have relationships with yourself. “Rejoice always,” verse 16. Rejoice always. When you break your leg, do you say, “Thank you, God, that I broke my leg”? Is that the appropriate way to rejoice? The appropriate response might be, “Thank You, Lord. Evidently some quality of my spirit is going to be developed through this occasion and I will rejoice.” Always rejoice.

Why? There are terrible things that happen to us as believers. Deaths. Sicknesses. Financial reverses. The destroying of dreams happens. How do we rejoice always? By reckoning with the fact that no matter what is happening to us, God is always doing a good thing in us. Rejoice.

“Pray constantly” (verse 17). The word for “constantly” is the word which is used of a person who had a cough. That doesn’t mean he coughed all the time, but his routine was always being interrupted by the cough. So when we pray constantly, we’re speaking of an attitude of prayer which finds us in communion with the Lord, that so continues to interrupt the routines of life.

It’s fascinating to see how Paul prays constantly in practice in the letter of the Thessalonians. In chapter 1 he prays—verse 2, “We thank God for you.” In chapter 2:13, “We thank God for you.” In chapter 3:11–13, he says a little prayer right in the middle of the letter to the Thessalonians.

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And he closes the letter with a prayer. It's kind of descriptive of his relationship with them.

“Pray constantly and give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18). Which is, of course, a corollary to joy. Someone has called these three phrases—“rejoice always,” “pray constantly,” and “give thanks in all circumstances”—the standing orders of the gospel. They're in effect for all people of all times.

We're also called to be discerning. We're called to discern in reference to the Spirit. “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19). We're called to discern in reference to prophesying.

“Do not despise prophecy” (5:20). And we're called to discern in respect to testing. “Test everything. Hold fast to that which is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (5:21–22).

“Do not quench the Spirit.” The action is in the present tense, which indicated that that activity was currently going on at Thessalonica. And therefore, Paul's words could be translated, “Stop quenching the Spirit.” How do you quench the Spirit? You can quench His gifts. Maybe the Thessalonians thought, “We're above those Corinthians and won't have any of this gift stuff going on around here.” Maybe that was the way they were quenching the Spirit.

There's another way to quench the Spirit too. A way to quench Him by sinking into despondency, and we refuse to let the Spirit lift us out. Grieving and quenching the Spirit by idly whiling away the hours of the days without being productive for the Lord. A way to quench the Spirit is by acting in disobedience to what the Lord has for us to do. All are ways of quenching the Spirit. The Christian is one who encourages the Spirit to go ahead and keep working.

And also, “Do not despise prophesying.” The word “prophesying” is someone who speaks on behalf of God to us. It can be done through the vehicle of a sermon, a book, a servant of the Lord on a spontaneous occasion. Don't despise that.

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And in reference to the ministry of the Spirit in prophecy, “Test everything.” Don’t leave your head or your Bibles at the door when you walk into this building. Keep your Bible in your hand and your head on your neck and test everything. When it is of the Spirit, it will be universally agreed to by the body. There will be a witness which we share in common.

“Abstain from what is evil, hold to what is good.” Be discerning. Paul also indicates, “Be holy” (verses 23–24). “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it” (NIV). It’s something we work at. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). We seek to bring our lives in subjection to Christ. We hear the admonition in Thessalonians: Be holy. Increase and abound in purity. But in the final respect, God gives holiness to us. He gives sanctification. Wholly He will give it to us, so we’ll be kept sound and blameless in body, in spirit and in soul at the coming of Jesus.

Then Paul, in verse 24, says, “The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it” (NIV). When he gets done with his prayer, in verse 23, he doesn’t pause and say “I hope the Lord does that. That’d be nice.” With an affirmation, he closes by saying, “I’m so confident of God, that He who is faithful will actually do this in your life.” What a way to end a prayer. “Lord, we pray that it’s in Your will and therefore You’ll do it.”

Then Paul gives these final words to the Thessalonians. “Brothers, pray for us” (1 Thessalonians 5:25, NIV). In the position he was in, he needed prayer as well. And then he says, “Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss” (verse 26, NIV). Four times, when Paul closes a letter, he uses that phrase—“holy kiss.” Once when Peter is writing in 1 Peter 5, he calls it an “agape kiss.” A kiss of love. “Greet one another with a kiss of love.” Those two words put together with “kiss” are

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fascinating for Christian behavior. In Biblical days, it was the custom for the men to kiss the men and the women to kiss the women. The kiss should be holy, but it should also be the kiss of love.

Woe to people who kiss one another simply with the kiss of holiness and look at one another to determine if they meet the checklist of external holiness before they kiss. They're kissing one another in holiness, but not in love. And woe to those who kiss in love but not in holiness.

The Scriptures tell us something about sensitivity to one another. Every time the church neglects a doctrine, the world comes along and destroys it; or a group comes along and makes a heresy out of it. The early Christians were not only in verbal contact with one another but they were in physical contact with one another. Some strands of modern psychology have pushed sensitivity training to a point where it is an immoral relationship. But there is a beauty that comes in wholesome Christian relationship where we have the liberty to greet one another with a holy kiss. Or translated into modern English, "A good handshake all around and slap one another on the back! Be in close contact with each other. Be sensitive to each other."

Paul also, in verse 27, indicates this letter is to be read in the church. He indicates also that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is to be with us.

Looking back over the First Thessalonian letter, in chapter 5, sometimes we hear people say, "I would like to be in the generation that was on earth when Jesus Christ returns." I'd like to make a statement at this point: I believe I am in the last generation. We interpret the word "last" in a liberal sense. Remember that one of the prophets I read from this morning said, "The day of the Lord is near." And yet it's been a long time since they said that word. So how could it be near? First of all, we only have so many years to live. When he dies, eternity intersects time and no longer is time counted in seconds and minutes and hours like we do. It's a different thing all together. In a sense, the day of the Lord is always simply one generation away.

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I expect, within my generation, to meet the Lord. There are two ways I can meet Him. I can meet Him by meeting Him in the air at His coming. I can meet Him by death. For me, the world ends when I die. That doesn't mean I'm going to go to sleep somewhere for five thousand years till Christ returns. It means that I'm going to be with Him, no longer related to this world as a world system. But for me, the world ends when I die. I will meet Christ in my generation. All of you are going to meet Christ in your lifetime too. All of us, in our generation, will meet the Lord. Is Thessalonians practical for us, then? How does this speak to people who are living on the edge of death? On the precipice of eternity? It calls us to the here and now. It says, "Let's enjoy worshipping the Lord. Let's serve Him. Let's go all out to please Him. Let's be about the Master's business. Let's put our talents to work. Let's not idly stand by and watch in the heavens for signs. Let's look and work till Jesus comes and occupy till He comes."

Closing Prayer

We thank You, heavenly Father, for this healthy word of Scripture. I pray for people in here who have lived in mortal dread of Your return or of their own death. It's possible for such fears to afflict persons who really believe in You. That happened at Thessalonica. Through the opening of Your Word, I pray that You would simply bind all these fears and anxieties and cause us to realize that when we are in You, we are really in You. That means, as we have seen in this letter, that You have placed us, first of all, in a spiritual relationship and we're more in You and than we are in this world, even in this building today. We are really in You. We thank You that You have saved us from the wrath to come. Cause these very practical words of apostolic wisdom and insight to be a part of our obedience as Christians, as we live our lives out before You. If You come today, welcome home, Jesus. We are ready to meet You. If You continue for a space yet beyond today, we live every moment today in the conscious awareness of Your presence,

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delightfully before You. We're thankful that for us who believe, You have pledged Yourself to be the God of grace and peace. We praise you for that. In Jesus' name, amen.