



LESSONS 1-8

SUMMER 2020

NOON DAY BIBLE STUDY

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

Standing Firm in These Last Days

Information Used for Study Only!

PRINTED SCRIPTURE NISB –The Message Bible (MSG) – Feel free to use the translation of your choice.

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Resources/Used for Study Only:

1. Kay Arthur, *Standing Firm In These Last Days*, Harvest House Publisher, Eugene, Oregon, @1996
2. A Bible. *The Message* (MSG) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson
3. The Life Application Study Bible, *New International Version*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1988
4. David Guzik ©2018

STANDING FIRM IN THESE LAST DAYS

1 Thessalonians

INTRODUCTION

1 Thessalonians -The Message Version (MSG)

Jesus is coming ... and we're filled with questions: How should we live in the light of His coming? How are we going to handle the pressures of society? The cravings of our flesh?

Should we stop working and do nothing but "serve Him" until He comes? Or should we grab all we can from life in case Jesus comes before we have tasted all that life has to offer?

What about the suffering and affliction we've encountered since we came to believe in Jesus Christ? Are those who scorned, mocked, and even afflicted us going to get away with their cruel and unfeeling behavior? Is there justice – a day of reckoning, or will His coming preclude all that?

What will His coming be like? What will happen to those who hoped to see His coming but died before He came? What will happen to those who believe and are here when He comes? If the day of the Lord is coming and it's a day of darkness and destruction, where will we be when it comes?

Saints, if these are questions that cross your mind from time to time or maybe even linger there, then we have chosen just the right book to study. As we study these next eight weeks, we will find not only answers to these questions, but we will find valuable words of exhortation and comfort to equip us to stand firm and be found "without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

If we will give this study approximately 70 minutes each week, we will be awed at what we learn and at the transformation that results as we simply put the truths we glean into action. Studying the Word of God in this manner is transforming because we are brought face-to-face with the Word of God in a way that allows us to see truth for ourselves. Remember that truth sets us apart unto our God and Father.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES & ENGAGED LEARNING

As we read each chapter, let's train ourselves to ask the "5 W's and an H": who, what, when, where, why, and how. Asking questions like these helps us see exactly what the Word of God is saying. When we interrogate the text with the 5 W's and an H, we'll ask questions like this:

- a. What is the chapter about?
- b. Who are the main characters?
- c. When does this event or teaching take place?
- d. Where does this happen?

- e. Why is this being done or said?
- f. How did it happen?

Always begin your study with prayer. As you do your part to handle the Word of God accurately, remember that the Bible is a divinely inspired book. The words you are reading are truth, given to you by God that you might know Him and His ways. These truths are divinely revealed. Therefore, ask God to reveal His truth to us, to lead you and guide us into all truth. He will, if we will ask.

Authorship, Historical Background, Theme and Purpose. Paul established the church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (in about A.D. 51). He wrote this letter a short time later to encourage the young believers there. He wanted to assure them of his love, to praise them for their faithfulness during persecution, and to remind them of their hope – the sure return of their Lord and Savior.

Paul begins this letter with a note of affirmation, thanking God for the strong faith and good reputation of the **Thessalonians (1:1-10)**. Then Paul reviews their relationship – how he and his companions brought the gospel to them, how they accepted the message, and how he longed to be with them again. Because of his concern, Paul sent Timothy to encourage them in their faith.

Paul then presents the core of his message – exhortation and comfort. He challenges them to please God in their daily living by avoiding sexual immorality, loving each other, and living as good citizens in a sinful world.

Paul comforts the Thessalonians by reminding them of the hope of the resurrection. Then he warns them to be prepared at all times, for Jesus Christ could return at any moment. When Christ returns, those Christians who are alive and those who have died will be raised to new life.

Paul then gives the Thessalonians a handful of reminders on how to prepare themselves for the second coming – warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone, be kind to everyone, be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks, test everything that is taught, and avoid evil. Paul concludes his letter with two benedictions and a request for prayer.

Paul had written the Thessalonians earlier to help them grow in the faith, comforting them by affirming the reality of Christ's return. Just a few months later, however, word came from Thessalonica that some had misunderstood Paul's teaching about the second coming. Responding quickly, Paul sent a second letter (**2 Thessalonians**) to this young church. Second Thessalonians, therefore, continues the subject of 1 Thessalonians and is a call to continued courage and consistent conduct.

Almost 2,000 years later, we stand much closer to the time of Christ's return; but we also would be wrong to see his imminent appearance as an excuse for idle waiting and heavenward gazing. Being prepared for His coming means spreading the gospel, reaching out to those in need, and building the church, His body. As you read 2 Thessalonians, then, see clearly the reality of his return and your responsibility to live for Him until that day.

WITHOUT BLAME AT CHRIST'S RETURN – IS IT POSSIBLE?

1 Thessalonians 1 - The Message Version (MSG)

1 I, Paul, together here with Silas and Timothy, send greetings to the church at Thessalonica, Christians assembled by God the Father and by the Master, Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace be with you! God's robust peace!

Convictions of Steel

2-5 Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you're in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God our Father. It is clear to us, friends that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions.

5-6 You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated the Master. Although great trouble accompanied the Word, you were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit!—taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble.

7-10 Do you know that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore—you're the message! People come up and tell us how you received us with open arms, how you deserted the dead idols of your old life so you could embrace and serve God, the true God. They marvel at how expectantly you await the arrival of his Son, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescued us from certain doom.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. According to the text, who is the author of 1 Thessalonians?
2. To whom was 1 Thessalonians written?
3. Who suffered and was afflicted?
4. What was the reason they suffered?
5. When did their affliction, suffering, or tribulation occur? Where?
6. How were they afflicted, or how did they suffer?

WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE YOU BELIEVED?

1 Thessalonians 2 -The Message Version (MSG)

1-2 So, friends, it's obvious that our visit to you was no waste of time. We had just been given rough treatment in Philippi, as you know, but that didn't slow us down. We were sure of ourselves in God, and went right ahead and said our piece, presenting God's Message to you, defiant of the opposition.

No Hidden Agendas

3-5 God tested us thoroughly to make sure we were qualified to be trusted with this Message. Be assured that when we speak to you we're not after crowd approval—only God approval. Since we've been put through that battery of tests, you're guaranteed that both we and the Message are free of error, mixed motives, or hidden agendas. We never used words to butter you up. No one knows that better than you. And God knows we never used words as a smoke screen to take advantage of you.

6-8 Even though we had some standing as Christ's apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important, with you or anyone else. We weren't aloof with you. We took you just as you were. We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did.

9-12 You remember us in those days, friends, working our fingers to the bone, up half the night, moonlighting so you wouldn't have the burden of supporting us while we proclaimed God's Message to you. You saw with your own eyes how discreet and courteous we were among you, with keen sensitivity to you as fellow believers. And God knows we weren't freeloaders! You experienced it all firsthand. With each of you we were like a father with his child, holding your hand, whispering encouragement, showing you step-by-step how to live well before God, who called us into his own kingdom, into this delightful life.

13 And now we look back on all this and thank God, an artesian well of thanks! When you got the Message of God we preached, you didn't pass it off as just one more human opinion, but you took it to heart as God's true word to you, which it is, God himself at work in you believers!

14-16 Friends, do you realize that you followed in the exact footsteps of the churches of God in Judea, those who were the first to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ? You got the same bad treatment from your countrymen as they did from theirs, the Jews who killed the Master Jesus (to say nothing of the prophets) and followed it up by running us

out of town. They make themselves offensive to God and everyone else by trying to keep us from telling people who've never heard of our God how to be saved. They've made a career of opposing God, and have gotten mighty good at it. But God is fed up, ready to put an end to it.

17-20 Do you have any idea how very homesick we became for you, dear friends? Even though it hadn't been that long and it was only our bodies that were separated from you, not our hearts, we tried our very best to get back to see you. You can't imagine how much we missed you! I, Paul, tried over and over to get back, but Satan stymied us each time. Who do you think we're going to be proud of when our Master Jesus appears if it's not you? You're our pride and joy!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who is the main focus of 1 Thessalonians 2? Who do the authors talk about the most in this chapter? Why do you think they speak of these individuals?
2. What do you learn about the expected behavior of mothers and fathers from these verses?

HOW DO YOU DELIVER THE GOSPEL IN AN EXEMPLARY WAY?

1 Thessalonians 3 -The Message Version (MSG)

1-2 So when we couldn't stand being separated from you any longer and could find no way to visit you ourselves, we stayed in Athens and sent Timothy to get you up and about, cheering you on so you wouldn't be discouraged by these hard times. He's a brother and companion in the faith, God's man in spreading the Message, preaching Christ.

3-5 Not that the troubles should come as any surprise to you. You've always known that we're in for this kind of thing. It's part of our calling. When we were with you, we made it quite clear that there was trouble ahead. And now that it's happened, you know what it's like. That's why I couldn't quit worrying; I had to know for myself how you were doing in the faith. I didn't want the Tempter getting to you and tearing down everything we had built up together.

6-8 But now that Timothy is back, bringing this terrific report on your faith and love, we feel a lot better. It's especially gratifying to know that you continue to think well of us,

and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you! In the middle of our trouble and hard times here, just knowing how you're doing keeps us going. Knowing that your faith is alive keeps us alive.

9-10 What would be an adequate thanksgiving to offer God for all the joy we experience before him because of you? We do what we can, praying away, night and day, asking for the bonus of seeing your faces again and doing what we can to help when your faith falters.

11-13 May God our Father himself and our Master Jesus clear the road to you! And may the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master Jesus arrives with all his followers.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Note the motive and the integrity of those who presented the gospel. What did it cost them to share the gospel?
2. What do you learn about the expected behavior of mothers and fathers from these verses?

WHAT PLACE HAS SUFFERING IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD OF GOD?

1 Thessalonians 4 -The Message Version (MSG)

You're God-Taught

1-3 One final word, friends. We ask you—urge is more like it—that you keep on doing what we told you to do to please God, not in a dogged religious plod, but in a living, spirited dance. You know the guidelines we laid out for you from the Master Jesus. God wants you to live a pure life.

Keep yourselves from sexual promiscuity.

4-5 Learn to appreciate and give dignity to your body, not abusing it, as is so common among those who know nothing of God.

6-7 Don't run roughshod over the concerns of your brothers and sisters. Their concerns are God's concerns, and he will take care of them. We've warned you about this before.

God hasn't invited us into a disorderly, unkempt life but into something holy and beautiful—as beautiful on the inside as the outside.

8 If you disregard this advice, you're not offending your neighbors; you're rejecting God, who is making you a gift of his Holy Spirit.

9-10 Regarding life together and getting along with each other, you don't need me to tell you what to do. You're God-taught in these matters. Just love one another! You're already good at it; your friends all over the province of Macedonia are the evidence. Keep it up; get better and better at it.

11-12 Stay calm; mind your own business; do your own job. You've heard all this from us before, but a reminder never hurts. We want you living in a way that will command the respect of outsiders, not lying around sponging off your friends.

The Master's Coming

13-14 And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus.

15-18 And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence—we have the Master's word on it—that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they'll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God's trumpet blast! He'll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise—they'll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the clouds to meet the Master. Oh, we'll be walking on air! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. So reassure one another with these words.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who is behind affliction?
2. What kind of affliction did Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy suffer? Where did it come from?
3. What kind of affliction did the Thessalonians suffer?
4. What do you learn about those who inflict this kind of suffering?

YOU SANCTIFIED ENTIRELY – BODY, SOUL, AND SPIRIT

1 Thessalonians 5 -The Message Version (MSG)

1-3 I don't think, friends, that I need to deal with the question of when all this is going to happen. You know as well as I that the day of the Master's coming can't be posted on our calendars. He won't call ahead and make an appointment any more than a burglar would. About the time everybody's walking around complacently, congratulating each other—"We've sure got it made! Now we can take it easy!"—suddenly everything will fall apart. It's going to come as suddenly and inescapably as birth pangs to a pregnant woman.

4-8 But friends, you're not in the dark, so how could you be taken off guard by any of this? You're sons of Light, daughters of Day. We live under wide open skies and know where we stand. So let's not sleepwalk through life like those others. Let's keep our eyes open and be smart. People sleep at night and get drunk at night. But not us! Since we're creatures of Day, let's act like it. Walk out into the daylight sober, dressed up in faith, love, and the hope of salvation.

9-11 God didn't set us up for an angry rejection but for salvation by our Master, Jesus Christ. He died for us, a death that triggered life. Whether we're awake with the living or asleep with the dead, we're alive with him! So speak encouraging words to one another. Build up hope so you'll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind. I know you're already doing this; just keep on doing it.

The Way He Wants You to Live

12-13 And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love!

13-15 Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part. Our counsel is that you warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.

16-18 Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.

19-22 Don't suppress the Spirit, and don't stifle those who have a word from the Master. On the other hand, don't be gullible. Check out everything, and keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted with evil.

23-24 May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it!

25-27 Friends, keep up your prayers for us. Greet all the followers of Jesus there with a holy embrace. And make sure this letter gets read to all the brothers and sisters. Don't leave anyone out.

28 The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Where will the people mentioned be?
2. Who is going to be with Him?
3. How do they get to be with Him?
4. What will they be like – what will be the status of body, soul, and spirit?
5. Who is coming with Him?

STANDING FIRM IN THESE LAST DAYS

2 Thessalonians

INTRODUCTION

2 Thessalonians - The Message Version (MSG)

Second Thessalonians is the ninth of Paul's letters. Of the 27 New Testament books, Paul wrote 13. Nine of these books are letters to local churches (like the one in Thessalonica).

Paul needed to address the three troubles the church in Thessalonica faced:

- Persecution from outside. Paul puts the church's situation in context. They're being identified with Jesus, and therefore the world hates them now. But what happens later, when Jesus returns? God will give them relief and judge their persecutors (2 Thes 1:6–7). Jesus will be glorified, and so will His saints (2 Thes 1:10–12). What happens when Jesus returns? Justice.

- Despair from false doctrine. Someone has told the church that Jesus had already returned and gathered His own to Him—possibly even by forging a letter from Paul (2 Thes 2:2). Paul reminds the church of his teachings regarding the return of Jesus, and the things that must happen beforehand—including the appearance of the mysterious “man of lawlessness” (2 Thes 2:3).

- Busybodies in the church. A few Thessalonians had fallen off into undisciplined lives: they weren't working, and they weren't holding to Paul's traditions. Some had become “busybodies,” people getting involved in other's work without contributing themselves (2 Thes 3:11). Paul reminds them of the example he set: how he worked among them with his own hands (2 Thes 3:7–8). He also leaves instructions for dealing with those who would reject his teachings in this letter (2 Thes 3:14–15).

Paul cared about the church he'd established, and the message he sends them still informs the way we should think about Jesus' coming and the work we should do in the meantime.

WHAT'S THE FATE OF THOSE WHO AFFLICT THE CHILD OF GOD?

2 Thessalonians 1 -The Message Version (MSG)

1-2 I, Paul, together with Silas and Timothy, greet the church of the Thessalonian Christians in the name of God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ. Our God gives you everything you need, makes you everything you're to be.

Justice Is on the Way

3-4 You need to know, friends, that thanking God over and over for you is not only a pleasure; it's a must. We have to do it. Your faith is growing phenomenally; your love for each other is developing wonderfully. Why, it's only right that we give thanks. We're so proud of you; you're so steady and determined in your faith despite all the hard times that have come down on you. We tell everyone we meet in the churches all about you.

5-10 All this trouble is a clear sign that God has decided to make you fit for the kingdom. You're suffering now, but justice is on the way. When the Master Jesus appears out of heaven in a blaze of fire with his strong angels, he'll even up the score by settling accounts with those who gave you such a bad time. His coming will be the break we've been waiting for. Those who refuse to know God and refuse to obey the Message will pay for what they've done. Eternal exile from the presence of the Master and his splendid power is their sentence. But on that very same day when he comes, he will be exalted by his followers and celebrated by all who believe—and all because you believed what we told you.

11-12 Because we know that this extraordinary day is just ahead, we pray for you all the time—pray that our God will make you fit for what he's called you to be, pray that he'll fill your good ideas and acts of faith with his own energy so that it all amounts to something. If your life honors the name of Jesus, he will honor you. Grace is behind and through all of this, our God giving himself freely, the Master, Jesus Christ, giving himself freely.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you think was Paul's primary reason for writing this second epistle?
2. Ask the 5 W's and an H about those God will pay with affliction:
 - Who are these people? How are they described?
 - What have they done? How have they related and/or responded to God?
 - Where are they now? What will be done to them? By whom?
 - Where will they be? For how long?

WHEN WILL THE DAY OF THE LORD COME?

2 Thessalonians 2 -The Message Version (MSG)

The Anarchist

1-3 Now, friends, read these next words carefully. Slow down and don't go jumping to conclusions regarding the day when our Master, Jesus Christ, will come back and we assemble to welcome him. Don't let anyone shake you up or get you excited over some breathless report or rumored letter from me that the day of the Master's arrival has come and gone. Don't fall for any line like that.

3-5 Before that day comes, a couple of things have to happen. First, the Apostasy. Second, the debut of the Anarchist, a real dog of Satan. He'll defy and then take over every so-called god or altar. Having cleared away the opposition, he'll then set himself up in God's Temple as "God Almighty." Don't you remember me going over all this in detail when I was with you? Are your memories that short?

6-8 You'll also remember that I told you the Anarchist is being held back until just the right time. That doesn't mean that the spirit of anarchy is not now at work. It is, secretly and underground. But the time will come when the Anarchist will no longer be held back, but will be let loose. But don't worry. The Master Jesus will be right on his heels and blow him away. The Master appears and—puff!—the Anarchist is out of there.

9-12 The Anarchist's coming is all Satan's work. All his power and signs and miracles are fake, evil sleight of hand that plays to the gallery of those who hate the truth that could save them. And since they're so obsessed with evil, God rubs their noses in it—gives them what they want. Since they refuse to trust truth, they're banished to their chosen world of lies and illusions.

13-14 Meanwhile, we've got our hands full continually thanking God for you, our good friends—so loved by God! God picked you out as his from the very start. Think of it: included in God's original plan of salvation by the bond of faith in the living truth. This is the life of the Spirit he invited you to through the Message we delivered, in which you get in on the glory of our Master, Jesus Christ.

15-17 So, friends, take a firm stand, feet on the ground and head high. Keep a tight grip on what you were taught, whether in personal conversation or by our letter. May Jesus himself and God our Father, who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts of unending help and confidence, put a fresh heart in you, invigorate your work, enliven your speech.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who will be present? Who will be absent? Who will be involved?
2. What do you know about that day?
3. When will it happen?
4. Where will it take place?
5. Why will it come?
6. How will it come or happen?

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO LEAD UNDISCIPLINED LIVES?

2 Thessalonians 3 -The Message Version (MSG)

Those Who Are Lazy

1-3 One more thing, friends: Pray for us. Pray that the Master's Word will simply take off and race through the country to a groundswell of response, just as it did among you. And pray that we'll be rescued from these scoundrels who are trying to do us in. I'm finding that not all "believers" are believers. But the Master never lets us down. He'll stick by you and protect you from evil.

4-5 Because of the Master, we have great confidence in you. We know you're doing everything we told you and will continue doing it. May the Master take you by the hand and lead you along the path of God's love and Christ's endurance.

6-9 Our orders—backed up by the Master, Jesus—are to refuse to have anything to do with those among you who are lazy and refuse to work the way we taught you. Don't permit them to freeload on the rest. We showed you how to pull your weight when we were with you, so get on with it. We didn't sit around on our hands expecting others to take care of us. In fact, we worked our fingers to the bone, up half the night moonlighting so you wouldn't be burdened with taking care of us. And it wasn't because we didn't have a right to your support; we did. We simply wanted to provide an example of diligence, hoping it would prove contagious.

10-13 Don't you remember the rule we had when we lived with you? "If you don't work, you don't eat." And now we're getting reports that a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings are taking advantage of you. This must not be tolerated. We command them to get to work immediately—no excuses, no arguments—and earn their own keep. Friends, don't slack off in doing your duty.

14-15 If anyone refuses to obey our clear command written in this letter, don't let him get by with it. Point out such a person and refuse to subsidize his freeloading. Maybe then

he'll think twice. But don't treat him as an enemy. Sit him down and talk about the problem as someone who cares.

16 May the Master of Peace himself give you the gift of getting along with each other at all times, in all ways. May the Master be truly among you!

17 I, Paul, bid you good-bye in my own handwriting. I do this in all my letters, so examine my signature as proof that the letter is genuine.

18 The incredible grace of our Master, Jesus Christ, be with all of you!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The final chapter of Paul's epistle begins with a request for prayer.
 - What does Paul ask the Thessalonians to pray for them (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy)?
 - Why do you think he asks them to pray for this?
 - What did you see as you compared 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and 3:3-5 with 2 Thessalonians 3:1-3?
2. What was meant by traditions? What did you learn from 2 Thessalonians and then what you learned from Mark 7:1-3?
3. How is the church to deal with and respond to the following:
 - Those who lead undisciplined, unruly lives?
 - Those who want to eat, but refuse to work?
4. What is the most significant truth or example you encountered for your own life over the last eight weeks? Why?

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK OF 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is also the first letter the apostle wrote. It was written to a struggling, yet vigorous church that was only a few months old, made up of Christians who had just come to Christ under Paul's ministry. This is a delightfully revealing letter, showing the heart of the apostle toward these new Christians, and also showing the struggles that were present in the early church.

We sometimes get much distorted conceptions of these early Christians; there's a tendency to regard them as always triumphant, always waging the battle with vigor, and always winning great victories in Christ's name. But they also had very severe problems, some of which are reflected in this letter. It was written about 50 A.D., and may well be the first part of our New Testament to be written. Most scholars feel that the gospels were written about this same time or shortly afterward, though some hold that the gospel of Matthew,

and perhaps of Mark, appeared about 43 or 45 A.D. At any rate, this letter is at least one of the earliest Christian writings.

The account of Paul's founding of this church is recorded in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. After he and Silas were thrown into prison in Philippi because of their preaching of the Gospel, an earthquake shook down the prison doors and freed the prisoners. Paul was then freed by the Roman magistrates, and he left Philippi and went to Thessalonica. Many of the places where Paul preached have crumbled into ruin, but Thessalonica is still a thriving, bustling metropolis. It was then the capital of Macedonia, but it is now in Greece proper, and is called Salonika.

From the account in Acts, we learn that Paul had only been there about three weeks when persecution began and he had to leave the city for his own safety. He went down to Athens and from there he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how these Christians were doing. He was very disturbed about them; he felt that perhaps the persecution they were undergoing would drive them from their faith.

He went on to Corinth where he founded a church after several months of difficult labor. After some time, Timothy returned to him at Corinth, bringing word of how the Thessalonians were doing, and of some of the problems they were facing. As we read this little letter through, we can recognize them as the kind of problems that we also face.

For one thing, wherever the Apostle Paul went, he was hounded by a group of Jews who spread the rumor that because he was not one of the original twelve, he was not a genuine apostle. This was not only a problem for Paul, but also for the Thessalonians. Furthermore, the pagans of Thessalonica were severely persecuting the Christians -- threatening them, and taking away their property -- so these early Christians, perhaps only three or four weeks old in the Lord, were called upon to endure hard things for the cause of Christ.

In that city, as in all the Greek cities, sexual promiscuity was common -- was even regarded as a religious right -- and to live a life of chastity was to be regarded as a freak. Therefore, as is the case today, there was great pressure upon these new Christians to fall into line with the common sex practices of their day.

Then the major problem of this church was that the second coming of Jesus Christ was greatly misunderstood. The apostle had evidently told them something, but they were confused about this, which produced another grave problem. Some of them were expecting Christ to come back so imminently that they had actually stopped working and were waiting for him to come. Since they weren't earning a living, somebody had to take care of them, and they were leeches on the rest of the congregation. Also, there were tensions developing between the congregation and the church leaders which needed some admonition to settle, and finally, there were those who were somewhat indifferent to the

Holy Spirit's work among them, and to the truth of God as it was being proclaimed in the Scriptures.

Do those problems sound familiar? We can consider ourselves in very similar circumstances as this church at Thessalonica. The letter itself divides simply into two major divisions. In the first three chapters the apostle is just unloading his heart to them concerning his relationship to them, and this is followed by a very practical section with advice on how to behave in the midst of the pressures in which we live.

In this first section Paul pours his heart out for these early Christians. He is afraid they might have misunderstood his leaving Thessalonica, as though he had abandoned them to persecution, so he reminds them that he had just come through a terrible time of persecution himself in Philippi, and that his own heart was deeply concerned for them. The key to this is in the very beginning:

We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope... (1 Thessalonians 2-3a RSV)

Those three things marked these Thessalonian believers -- their work of faith, their labor of love, and their endurance in hope. These are detailed more clearly farther down, in the latter part of verse nine, where we read, "how you turned to God from idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9b RSV)-- that was the work of faith; they turned to God from these pagan idols they were worshipping, and "to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9c RSV) -- that was their labor of love; they became an available instrument for the love of God, and third, "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." (1 Thessalonians 1:10 RSV). And there is the expression of the patience, waiting in hope for his Son from heaven.

Now interestingly enough, those three things also form a little outline, built right into the text, to guide you in understanding the first three chapters. The work of faith, the labor of love, and the patience of hope -- chapter one, chapter two, chapter three.

We might say of these early Christians, "they dropped out, tuned in, and turned on." They dropped out of the stream of society, the world in which they lived, (not out of contact with it: in fact, they spread the Gospel through the whole area); they dropped out of the attitudes, the power structures, and the values of the world in which they lived. And they tuned in to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and received the word.

Here the apostle is reminding us that the word he spoke was not the word of men: it came "not only in word," he said, "but also in power and in the Holy Spirit." (1 Thessalonians 1:5b RSV). And they turned on, as they waited with expectation for the coming of the Son

of God. They has a reason for living, they had a purpose, and they had a hope in the midst of the hopelessness around them.

An archaeological excavation team, working in this very city of Thessalonica, has turned up an ancient, first-century graveyard. And there among the pagan tombstones they found one which was inscribed in Greek with these words: "No Hope." But here, in a church in the midst of that city, there were those who had found the endurance based on hope; they were looking for the coming of the Son of God. That is what keeps the heart calm in the midst of perils and persecutions. That is what makes it possible to watch the world apparently coming apart at the seams and maintain quietness; God is in control, and he knows what he's doing. And thus Paul encourages these Thessalonians with these words.

If you persevere in what you are learning and professing, as we saw when we studied 1 Thessalonians 3, it demonstrates the reality of your faith. I feel like Paul when he wrote, "Now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 3:8).

As you can see from these verses, God chose you from the beginning for salvation. It is a salvation which comes about through sanctification of the Spirit AND faith in the truth. Just think, my brothers and sisters, how your faith is being built up as a result of saturating yourself with truth these past eight weeks.

And what awaits you and I? The glory of the Lord Jesus Christ which we will gain at His coming. "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

The "letters" were what we just studied ... the Word of God given through a man who stood firm. Keep the tradition, Saints!

Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all! (2 Thessalonians 3:16)