

A FREE STUDY RESOURCE

With These Words

Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians

“Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

1 THESSALONIANS 4:18 (NET)

By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions follow The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

Soli Deo Gloria

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INTRODUCTION

Two Letters to a Frightened Church

Sometime around the year 50, in the busy port city of Thessalonica, a small congregation of brand-new Christians was afraid. They had come to faith only months before, under the preaching of a traveling apostle named Paul, and almost at once the trouble started. Their neighbors turned hostile. Some of them were dragged before the city authorities. Paul himself had to slip out of town under cover of night. And then, while he was gone, two questions began to gnaw at them.

The first was grief. Some of their number had died, and the young believers were not sure what that meant. Had the dead missed out? When the Lord returned, would those who had already died somehow be left behind?

The second was fear. A rumor had spread — perhaps from a forged letter, perhaps from someone claiming a prophecy — that the day of the Lord had already come, that the great and terrible day they had been taught to expect was somehow already upon them, and that they had missed it or been caught unready.

Paul wrote two letters to answer them. We call them First and Second Thessalonians, and they are among the earliest words in the New Testament — older, almost certainly, than any of the four Gospels. They are short. They are urgent. And they are, from first line to last, pastoral. Paul is not sitting down to write a treatise on the end of the world. He is writing to frightened people, and his aim is to comfort them.

That word — comfort — is the key to this whole study. After Paul describes the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, he does not say, “Now you have the timeline.” He says, “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The teaching is given for consolation. It is meant to be the thing you say to a brother or sister at a graveside, the thing you hold onto when the world feels as though it is coming apart. That is what these letters are for. That is what this study is for.

Why These Letters, Why Now

There is a reason a confessional Lutheran study of the Thessalonian letters is worth your time, and it is not only that they are beautiful, though they are. It is that few letters in the New Testament have been more thoroughly pressed into the service of a system that is foreign to them.

If you have spent any time at all in American Christianity, you have met these letters before, whether you knew it or not. The “rapture” of believers caught up to meet the Lord in the air comes from 1 Thessalonians 4. The mysterious “man of lawlessness” who exalts himself in the temple of God comes from 2 Thessalonians 2. These passages have been mined for charts and timelines, matched against the morning headlines, and stitched into a vast speculative system of secret rapturings, seven-year tribulations, and a future Anti-christ to be spotted on the news. For a great many readers, that system simply is what these letters are about.

This study takes a different path — the older path, the one the Church walked for most of its history before the nineteenth century. It reads these letters the way Paul wrote them: as apostolic, pastoral, Christ-centered words of comfort to a suffering church. It does not treat the Bible as a code to be cracked. It treats it as the living voice of God, spoken to console and to steady his people.

If you came up in that speculative world — if you grew up with the charts, read the novels, sat through the prophecy conferences — you are especially welcome here. This study will be honest about where that system goes wrong. But its goal is never to win an argument. Its goal is to hand you something far better than a timeline: the sure and certain hope that Christ has died, that Christ is risen, and that Christ will come again, and that nothing in heaven or on earth can separate you from him.

Who This Study Is For

This is a study for ordinary Christians. You do not need Greek. You do not need a seminary degree. You do not need the book of Revelation memorized or a chart of the end times on your wall. You need a Bible, a willingness to read, and the ordinary faith of the baptized.

It is written for adult Sunday school classes, midweek Bible studies, and small groups — and for the layperson who simply wants to read these letters carefully and well. Each session is built to be taught by a layperson, not only by a pastor. If you are that teacher, take heart: you are not being asked to become an expert. You are being asked to open the Word with your people and let it do its work.

A particular word to those who carry old wounds. Some who pick up this study were formed in churches where the end times were a source of constant anxiety — where faith was measured by readiness for a secret rapture, where every war and rumor of war was a sign, where the gospel itself sometimes got buried under fear. If that is you, this study is offered gently. We will speak plainly about what Scripture does and does not teach. But the aim is never to shame anyone for what they were handed in good faith. The aim is to set down a heavy burden and pick up a light one.

How We Will Read: Five Commitments

Every study comes with assumptions, and it is more honest to state them than to pretend they are not there. Five commitments shape the way this study reads the Thessalonian letters. They will surface again and again across the sessions.

Eschatology is comfort, not a timeline. The doctrine of the last things — death, resurrection, judgment, the return of Christ — is given to console God’s people, not to feed our curiosity. When Paul teaches about the Lord’s coming, he ends with “encourage one another.” We will read these letters for the comfort they were written to give.

God rules the world in two ways. Confessional Lutherans speak of the two kingdoms, or two governments. With his left hand, God orders the world through earthly authority — government, law, family, work — restraining evil and preserving a measure of peace. With his right hand, he rules through the gospel, giving forgiveness and life by Word and Sacrament. Keeping these two straight will untangle some of the hardest passages in these letters, including the famous “restrainer” of 2 Thessalonians 2.

The Antichrist is an office, not a face in the news. Following the Lutheran Confessions — the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope — this study understands the “man of lawlessness” not as a single future politician to be identified from the headlines, but as any office or authority that sets itself in the place of Christ, binding consciences beyond the Word and adding human conditions to the free gift of salvation. The spirit of antichrist, as the apostle John says, was already at work in the apostles’ own day, and has been ever since.

Election is for comfort, never for anxiety. Twice in these short letters Paul grounds the believer’s security in God’s prior choosing (1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). Following the Formula of Concord, this study reads the doctrine of election the way Scripture uses it — as a deep well of assurance for the troubled conscience, not as a riddle to keep you up at night. You are not asked to peer into God’s hidden counsels. You are pointed to Christ, in whom you were chosen.

The answer to fear is the means of grace. When the Thessalonians were afraid, Paul did not give them a better technique for reading the times. He pointed them back to what they already had: the Word they received as the very Word of God, the hope sealed to them, the fellowship of the body. For us the answer is the same, and even more concrete — the name of the Triune God placed on us in Baptism, the body and blood given for us at the altar, the absolution spoken over us. When the end-times fear rises, the answer is not a chart. It is your Baptism.

A Word About the End Times

Because these letters deal so directly with the return of Christ, it is worth saying plainly, once and at the outset, what confessional Lutherans believe about the last things — so that no later session has to stop and argue it all over again.

Lutherans confess a single, visible, glorious return of Jesus Christ. On that day he will raise all the dead, judge the living and the dead, and bring his people into life everlasting. We do not expect a secret coming followed years later by a public one. We do not expect a thousand-year earthly reign of Christ before the end. The Augsburg Confession (Article XVII) explicitly rejects the notion of an earthly kingdom of the godly before the resurrection. There is one return, one resurrection, one judgment, one life everlasting. This is why the elaborate end-times systems so common in our day sit so awkwardly on these letters: they divide what Scripture joins, and they schedule what Scripture leaves veiled.

A word of precision, though, so that we are fair to the text. When this study speaks against “the rapture,” it does not mean that the catching-up of believers is unbiblical. It is right there in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 — the living are caught up together with the raised dead to meet the Lord in the air. That is a real and glorious promise, and we will treasure it. What we set aside is not the event but the system: the secret, silent, years-early removal of the church that later teachers built on top of that single verse. The promise is Paul’s. The apparatus built on top of it is far younger, and is usually traced, in its developed form, to teaching that arose in the nineteenth century. We will keep the one and gladly let go of the other.

And we will hold all of this with a certain humility. Paul tells the Thessalonians that the man of lawlessness will be revealed “in his time,” and he deliberately leaves some things veiled — most famously the identity of the “restrainer” who holds back lawlessness for now. We will not pretend to more certainty than the text gives us. But the things left in shadow are held within the bright certainty of God’s sovereignty. He restrains, and he reveals, in his time. The not-knowing is not a cause for fear. It is one more place to rest in the God who holds all times in his hand.

About the Text We Use

Scripture quotations in this study are from the NET Bible (New English Translation), which is freely available online at netbible.org and may be quoted without charge in non-commercial work like this one. Where the NET’s wording differs sharply from the translations you may have grown up with, the notes at the back say so. Rather than reprinting long passages, the sessions will regularly ask you to open your own Bible and read the text for yourself — which is, after all, the habit this study most wants to build. Any transla-

tion will serve. Keep your Bible open beside this book; the point is never to read about the Word in place of reading the Word.

Where this study draws on the Lutheran Confessions, quotations and citations follow *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. The Confessions are cited sparingly and by their standard references — the Augsburg Confession (AC) by article, the Smalcald Articles (SA) by part and article — so that you can look them up in whatever edition you have to hand. These are not the private opinions of the author. They are the public confession of the Church, drawn from Scripture, offered here as faithful guides to what the Word teaches.

The Shape of the Study

This study moves through both letters in eleven sessions, in two parts. Part One, Sessions One through Seven, works through First Thessalonians, from the church's election in the opening chapter to the closing instructions and benediction of chapter five. Part Two, Sessions Eight through Eleven, works through Second Thessalonians, from the righteous judgment of God to the workbench of the final chapter. Eleven sessions fit comfortably within a typical quarter of adult Sunday school, with a little room to spare for an opening or a closing week — though any session may be stretched across two weeks, or two lighter ones combined, as the needs of your class and the richness of the text dictate. The material should serve the class, never the other way around.

Each session is a single teaching manuscript, written for the class. It can be read aloud, handed out, or studied at home, and it carries the whole teaching. If you are leading, you will find that each session breaks at its headings into four to seven natural movements, which makes it easy to stop for questions, to pick up again the following week, or to spread a session across two. Notes on sources and on the harder claims are gathered at the back of the book rather than in the sessions themselves, so that nothing interrupts the reading. You need not use every word. Use what serves your people.

A Closing Word

These two letters were written to people who were grieving and afraid, and they were written to comfort. That is still their work. Whatever brought you to this study — curiosity, a teaching assignment, old wounds, or simple love for the Word — the prayer behind every page is that you would close it more settled than you opened it: surer of Christ, less afraid of the future, and ready to do for one another exactly what Paul told the Thessalonians to do.

Encourage one another with these words.

Soli Deo Gloria

Part One

First Thessalonians

Comfort for a Waiting Church · Sessions One through Seven

SESSION ONE

Chosen and Called

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1

Most of the letters in your mailbox begin with your name, end with a signature, and contain almost nothing in between that anyone would read twice. Paul's letters are not like that. Every line is freighted. And the opening chapter of his first letter to the Thessalonians turns out to be something like the overture to a symphony — nearly every theme he will develop across both letters is sounded here, quietly, in the first few bars. Election. The power of the gospel. Faith, love, and hope. Affliction and joy held together in the same hand. And before the chapter is out, the great theme that will dominate everything to follow: waiting for the Son of God to come from heaven.

So we begin where Paul begins. Open your Bible to the first chapter of First Thessalonians and keep it open beside you. This study will always assume the text is in front of you, not merely described to you.

A Church Born in Trouble

It helps to know a little about the place. Thessalonica was no backwater. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, a busy seaport straddling the great east-west highway of the empire, a free city proud of its standing and its loyalty to Rome. Its leaders were called politarchs — a title Luke gets exactly right, down to the local vocabulary. Into that proud, Rome-loyal city Paul walked with a message about a crucified Jewish teacher who had risen from the dead and who was, in fact, the world's true Lord. You can already feel the friction.

Luke tells the story in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. For three Sabbaths Paul reasoned in the synagogue from the Scriptures, showing that the Messiah had to suffer and rise, and that this Messiah was Jesus. Some were persuaded — some Jews, a great many God-fearing Greeks, and a number of the city's leading women — and a church was born. But the preaching stirred up a jealous mob, a riot broke out, and when the crowd could not find Paul they dragged his host Jason and some of the new believers before the politarchs. The charge they shouted is one of the most revealing lines in the whole account: these men act against the decrees of Caesar, they said, claiming that there is another king — Jesus.

Whatever the accusers meant by it, they had stumbled onto the truth. There is another King, and he is coming. That very night the brothers sent Paul and Silas out of the city under cover of darkness, and Paul was forced to leave behind a congregation only weeks old, surrounded by hostility, its founding preacher gone. Much of what we read in these two letters — the talk of affliction, the anxious and tender love, the worry over whether these young believers would stand — flows from that abrupt parting. Keep it in mind through the whole study. Paul is not writing to a settled, comfortable church. He is writing to people he loves and had to abandon, already suffering for a faith only months old. And the first thing he does, before a word of instruction or correction, is give thanks.

A Letter Begins

The letter opens with three names: Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. Silvanus is the man Luke calls Silas; Timothy is the young coworker Paul loved like a son. Paul rarely traveled or worked alone, and he rarely wrote alone. The gospel had come to Thessalonica through a team, and the letter comes from a team. It is a small reminder, easy to miss, that the Christian faith is not a solo expedition. It arrives through people, and it gathers people.

Then comes the address, and one little phrase in it deserves a long pause. The letter is written to the church of the Thessalonians “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In God. The church is not first of all an organization in a particular city; it is a people located in God himself. Strip away the building, the schedule, the roster, and what remains is a body of people whose true address is in the Father and the Son. That is who they are before they are anything else, and it is who you are.

And then the greeting Paul uses in nearly every letter he writes: “Grace to you and peace.” The order is not accidental. Grace comes first; peace follows. Peace is not the precondition of grace but its fruit — the settledness that arrives once grace has done its work. In four words Paul has compressed the whole gospel: God gives, and the gift brings rest. We will watch him unfold those four words for the rest of the letter.

Three Words That Shape a Life

Paul gives thanks. He says he does it always, constantly, holding the Thessalonians up before God in prayer. And what he gives thanks for is a triad you may have heard before, the three great Christian words: faith, love, and hope. But notice exactly how he says it. He thanks God for their work of faith, their labor of love, and their endurance of hope. Each of the three words has a verb attached to it. Faith works. Love labors. Hope endures.

Here is a place to go slowly, because it is a place where confessional Lutherans and many of their Christian neighbors talk past one another. Does Paul commend the Thessalonians’

works? He plainly does. Does that mean their works are what save them, that they have earned God's favor by their faith's working and their love's laboring? It does not. The grammar itself guards us here. It is the work of faith — work that flows out of faith, not work that produces it. It is the labor of love and the steadfastness of hope — fruit hanging on a tree, not roots holding it up.

Our Lord said it as plainly as it can be said: a good tree bears good fruit. He did not say that bearing fruit is what makes the tree good. The fruit is the evidence of a life already made alive. So when we read of the Thessalonians' active faith and laboring love, we are not reading a list of achievements that bought their standing with God. We are reading a description of what happens when the gospel takes hold of real people. Faith is never alone — it always works, always loves, always hopes — and yet it is faith alone, not its working, that lays hold of Christ. Lutherans have insisted on both halves of that sentence for five hundred years, and 1 Thessalonians 1 holds both halves together without strain.

This matters, and not only as a fine point of doctrine. A great many people have been taught — sometimes without anyone ever quite saying it out loud — that God's acceptance of them rises and falls with their performance. Under that teaching, verses like these become a scale to be weighed on: Is my faith working hard enough? Is my love laboring enough? Paul is not weighing the Thessalonians on a scale. He is giving thanks. He reads their working faith and laboring love not as a verdict but as a gift, evidence that the living God has been at work among them. That is law and gospel rightly distinguished inside a single verse, and hearing it here will train your ear for the rest of the letter.

These three words quietly map the rest of what Paul will write, like a table of contents hidden in a sentence. Their faith will be tested by affliction — the faith Paul sends Timothy to check on when he can no longer bear not knowing whether it survived. Their love is the brotherly love he will urge them to show more and more. And their hope, set on the returning Lord, is what will wobble when some of their number die. Paul names all three in thanksgiving, then spends two letters tending each in turn. The overture really does contain the symphony.

One more thing about the third word. The hope Paul names is not a vague optimism. It is, in his words, hope in our Lord Jesus Christ — hope fixed on a person, and specifically on that person's return. Already in verse three, before he has said anything explicit about the end, the forward lean of the whole letter is there. These are people whose hope is steadfast precisely because it is anchored in someone who is coming back.

How Paul Knew They Were Chosen

Then Paul says a word that has frightened at least as many people as it has comforted. He calls the Thessalonians brothers loved by God, and he says he knows that God has chosen

them. Election. Chosenness. For many Christians that word lands like a cold draft under the door, because it seems to raise a terrible and unanswerable question: Am I one of the chosen? Is there a hidden list somewhere with names on it, and how could I ever know whether mine is there? More than one sincere believer has lost sleep, or lost assurance entirely, staring into that question.

So watch carefully what Paul does next, because it is the whole Lutheran instinct in a single move. He does not say, “I know you are chosen because I have climbed up into heaven and read the secret counsels of God.” He says he knows their election because of something he watched happen with his own eyes. The gospel came to them not in words only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit, with deep conviction. Paul reasons from the visible to the invisible. The Word arrived, the Spirit worked, faith was born, lives were changed — and from that footprint, that unmistakable evidence, Paul concludes that these people were chosen by God.

This is exactly where the Confessions tell us to look, and where they tell us not to. When the Formula of Concord takes up election, it warns in the sternest terms against brooding over the hidden God, against prying into a secret divine ledger to see whether our name is written there. That way lies either despair or false security. Instead it sends us where God has promised to be found: to Christ, and to the means by which Christ comes to us — the preached Word, the water of Baptism, the bread and the cup. Election is real. But it is not a riddle to be solved by introspection. It is a comfort to be received through the gospel.

There are two ditches on this road. On one side is despair: the believer who searches his own heart for proof that he is chosen, finds it as cold and divided as every human heart is, and concludes he must not belong to God after all. On the other is presumption: the person who decides he is one of the elect and therefore need not trouble himself about repentance or the Word or the Supper. Both ditches are dug by the same shovel — looking for election inside ourselves, or up in the secret will of God, instead of in Christ, where God has actually placed it. Paul keeps them on the road by pointing outward, away from their own hearts and toward the gospel that found them.

Picture a man trying to break into a locked office to read a sealed will and learn whether he has been remembered in it — anxious, suspicious, never quite certain. Now picture the one who wrote it coming out and putting the gift into his hands, with his name spoken over it. God has not left us to break into heaven and read the sealed decree of his election. He has come out to us in his Son — in the water, in the Word, in the bread and the cup. Election is not the locked document down the hall. It is the gift already given.

So how would you know whether you are one of the chosen? Not by turning inward to inspect the temperature of your faith, and certainly not by hunting for your name on some hidden roster. You would know the same way Paul knew about the Thessalonians: the gospel came to you. You were baptized into the name of the Triune God. You hear the Word

preached. Christ is given to you, again and again, in ways you can see and hear and taste. That is the visible footprint of an invisible election. When the old anxiety rises — do I really belong to God? — the answer is not found by looking harder at yourself. It is found by looking at Christ and his gifts. Look there. Paul did.

The Word That Does Things

Linger another moment on how Paul describes the gospel's arrival, because it tells us something Lutherans care about a great deal. The gospel, he says, did not come to them merely in words, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. He is not contrasting the words with something else that came alongside them. He is telling us what those words carried. When the gospel was preached in Thessalonica, it was not bare information passing from one set of ears to another. The Holy Spirit was riding the Word, doing through it what no human speaker could do — creating faith where there had been none.

This is why Lutherans call the Word a means of grace and not merely a means of instruction. It is the instrument the Spirit uses to reach into a human heart and make it alive. Which is why Paul describes them as people who received the Word — a gift handed to them, not a prize they seized. And they received it, he says, in much affliction, yet with the joy of the Holy Spirit. The two arrive in the same breath. Not affliction followed eventually by joy once the trouble passes, but joy in the midst of it, joy the trouble cannot touch because its source is the Spirit and not the circumstances. They became imitators of Paul and of the Lord — and this is one of the deepest ways they did it, for he himself walked the road of suffering and joy at once.

There is a quiet claim hiding in all of this. If the Spirit works through the Word, then the most ordinary-looking things in the life of a church are not ordinary at all — a sermon preached to a handful of people, a Bible opened on a kitchen table, a text read aloud in a class like this one. These are the tools the Spirit has chosen. We are forever tempted to think something more dramatic is required before we can be sure God is at work. Paul says no. The Word came, and that was the power. You do not have to wait for lightning. You have the Word, and the Spirit has bound himself to it.

An Echo Heard Everywhere

Something then happened that no one planned. The Word that had sounded into Thessalonica began to sound back out of it. Paul reaches for the language of a trumpet blast or a peal of thunder — the word of the Lord, he says, sounded forth from them — rolling out across the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia and, he says with a touch of wonder, just

about everywhere. Their faith had become so well known that Paul found his missionary work already done for him before he arrived; other people were telling him about the Thessalonians rather than the other way around.

It is worth seeing what this was and what it was not. It was not a campaign. The Thessalonians did not draw up a strategy to broadcast themselves across the Aegean world. The sounding-forth was overflow — the natural, almost involuntary spilling-over of a Word that had genuinely taken hold. A Word that does things in people will, sooner or later, do things through them. The same gospel that came in to them went out from them, and it went out not because they were impressive but because the Word is living and active and refuses to stay put.

There is real comfort tucked into this for anyone who has ever felt they have nothing to offer. The Thessalonians did not become known across the Roman world because they were eloquent or strategic or impressive. They were a small, persecuted, brand-new church in a hostile city. What sounded forth from them was not their excellence but the Word itself — the same Word that had first come to them. You are not the power in your own witness, and that is good news, because it means the weight does not rest on you. The Word is the power. Your part is to receive it, to let it dwell in you richly, and then simply to be where people are. The sounding-forth has a way of taking care of itself.

Turned, Serving, Waiting

Paul ends the chapter by repeating what everyone else was already saying about the Thessalonians, and in doing so he gives us one of the most compact descriptions of the Christian life anywhere in his letters. The reports all said the same thing: that the Thessalonians had turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven. Three verbs carry the whole thing. They turned. They serve. They wait.

They turned — away from the dead idols they had worshiped, toward the living God. That is conversion, repentance and faith together, the about-face that the gospel works. They serve — the turning was not the end but the beginning of a life given over to the God who had claimed them. And they wait — and with that third verb the great theme of both letters finally steps into the open.

Do not pass too quickly over what they turned from. Turning to the living God meant turning their backs on the gods they had served all their lives, the gods their neighbors still served, the gods woven into the city's commerce and festivals and civic loyalty. It was costly and conspicuous, and surely part of why the trouble came. We are tempted to read "idols" as a quaint problem of the ancient world. But an idol is whatever we look to, in the place of God, for what only God can give: security, identity, a future we can count on. Heard that way, the endless end-times speculation that haunts so much of modern Chris-

tianity can harden into an idol of its own — a chart we trust to tell us we are safe. To turn to the living and true God is to turn from all of it, and to wait for his Son rather than for our own certainties about the calendar.

Look closely at how Paul introduces it, because it sets the key for everything that follows. He says they wait for God's Son from heaven, the Son whom God raised from the dead, Jesus — and then this — our deliverer from the coming wrath. The very first time the return of Christ is mentioned in this letter, it is described as rescue. Not as terror, not as a countdown to be survived, but as deliverance. And the word Paul uses is a present-tense word: the one who is rescuing us, even now, on into that final day.

Hold onto that, because it is the keynote of this whole study. When the world talks about the end, it talks about dread — collapse, catastrophe, the worst imaginable. When much of popular Christianity talks about the end, it is not always so different; the mood is anxiety, the posture is bracing for impact. But when Paul talks about the end to this frightened young church, he talks about a Son coming from heaven to rescue his people. The believer waits for Christ's return the way a child waits for a parent to come home — not the way a defendant waits for a verdict. There is enormous comfort in that single shift, and we will spend much of this study unpacking it.

It is hard to overstate how much rides on that one reframe. To a church burying its dead and bracing for the next wave of hostility, Paul does not say, "Hold on and try to survive what is coming." He says, in effect, that the One who is coming is the very One who has already begun to rescue them — and that he is coming for them. The same return the world should rightly dread is, for those who are in Christ, the best news there could possibly be: the homecoming, the reunion, the end of every affliction. Fear looks at the end of the world and sees an ending. Faith looks at the same horizon and sees a face.

Notice, too, that the waiting is not idle. It sits right between serving and the Lord's coming. The Thessalonians do not climb a hill to scan the horizon for signs; they serve the living God while they wait. That is the shape of a healthy Christian hope: not calculation, not panic, not a withdrawal from ordinary life to watch for the end, but faithful service rendered with one eye on the One who is surely coming. We will have a great deal more to say in the sessions ahead about how he comes and what it will be like. For now Paul asks only that we notice the posture he commends — turned, serving, waiting — and the tone in which he commends it, which is the tone of comfort.

The Overture and the Symphony

Step back now and hear the whole overture at once. Look at what a single short chapter has told us. God chose the Thessalonians. The choosing became visible when the gospel arrived among them in power. The Word did not merely inform them; it made them alive.

The life it made now shows itself in working faith, laboring love, and enduring hope. The Word that came in has sounded back out across the world. And this whole new people now lives leaning forward, serving God and waiting for his Son to come from heaven and complete the rescue he has already begun.

That is why this session is called Chosen and Called. The two belong together. God chose, and the call came — through a Word that does exactly what it says. Everything else in the Christian life, everything we will read across these two letters, grows out of that root and leans toward that horizon.

And if you have come to this study carrying fear — fear of the end times, or the quieter and more personal fear that you might not really be among the chosen at all — then hear the first chapter once more before we go any further. Paul's confidence that the Thessalonians were God's own did not rest on how well they were performing. It rested on the gospel that had reached them and taken hold. That same gospel has reached you. It is the reason this book is in your hands. You are chosen and called. And so, with the Thessalonians, we wait — serving the living God, unafraid of the day, and encouraging one another with these words.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWO

The Word You Received

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:1–16

When a traveling teacher left a city as abruptly as Paul had left Thessalonica — hustled out under cover of night, never to return — it was easy for his enemies to fill the silence with insinuations. The ancient world was crowded with wandering philosophers and religious salesmen who blew into town, worked a crowd, collected what coins they could, and moved on before anyone thought too hard about it. Paul's opponents seem to have suggested that he was simply one more of these: a flatterer, in it for the money or the applause, a coward who fled at the first sign of trouble and proved by his very absence that he had never cared for the Thessalonians at all. Discredit the messenger, and you discredit his message.

So the first half of this chapter reads, on its surface, like a man defending his reputation — and it is that. But it is never only that. Paul defends his conduct not because his pride needs defending but because the gospel does. If the Thessalonians come to believe that the Word was carried to them by a fraud, they may quietly let go of the Word itself. Paul's whole concern is to keep the messenger from standing in the way of the message — and then, in the great sentence at the center of this passage, to remind them that the message was never really his to begin with. Open your Bible to the second chapter of First Thessalonians.

Not in Vain, and Not at Ease

Paul begins where he always prefers to begin with this church: not with an argument but with what they already know. You yourselves know, he says, that our coming to you was not in vain. It was not empty, not fruitless, not the hit-and-run of a con man. They had seen the fruit with their own eyes — a church was standing where none had stood before.

Then he reminds them of something no swindler's story could survive. Just before he reached Thessalonica, in Philippi, Paul and Silas had been seized, stripped, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison — the account is in Acts 16. He arrived still carrying the marks on his back. And what did he do, fresh from a public flogging, in yet another hostile city? He spoke. Boldly. In the face of much opposition. The point is simple: this is not how a man behaves who is in it for easy money and a warm welcome. No huckster walks out of one beating into another for the sake of a message that keeps getting him beaten. The boldness, he is careful to say, came not from his own temperament but in our God.

And what he was so bold to declare he calls, here and throughout, the gospel of God — God's, not Paul's. The possessive matters, and we will come back to it.

That phrase — boldness in our God — is not a compliment Paul is paying himself. He does not say he was brave by nature, or that the beatings no longer frightened him. The boldness was in God: a courage given, not summoned up. This matters for every Christian who has gone silent out of fear and then despaired of ever being braver. What carried Paul from the jail at Philippi into the synagogue at Thessalonica was the courage God supplies in the moment it is needed, and rarely a day before. Paul is not a different species of believer. He is a man who kept being handed courage, and kept using it.

Tested and Entrusted

Then Paul names, one by one, the very things his accusers had likely thrown at him — and denies them under God's own witness. His appeal, he says, does not spring from error, or from impurity, or from any attempt to deceive. Those three were the stock-in-trade of the religious confidence man: he is either deluded or deliberately deluding others; he is morally compromised, often in the tangled and exploitative ways those traveling cults were known for; and he is a manipulator, working people with guile. Paul says his ministry was none of these.

Instead he reaches for a different picture entirely, and it is one of the most important pictures in the whole letter. He says that he and his coworkers had been approved by God and entrusted with the gospel — tested, found fit, and then handed something precious to carry. The word is the language of stewardship. A steward does not own what he carries; he is responsible for delivering it faithfully, exactly as it was given to him. And so, Paul says, we declare it not to please people but God, who examines our hearts.

Slow down here, because this single sentence sorts the faithful minister from the false one more cleanly than anything else in the passage. The people-pleaser shapes his message to his audience; he reads the room and tells it what it wants to hear, because his standing depends on their approval. The steward does the opposite. Because he answers to the God who reads hearts, he is free — free to say the hard thing, free to withhold the flattering thing, free to deliver the message as given rather than as preferred. A minister who must please his hearers will, in the end, always tell them what they want. A minister accountable to God can tell them the truth. That freedom is not arrogance; it is the relief of a man who has only one Judge to satisfy, and has already been judged righteous in Christ.

So there was no flattery — the con man's first tool. No cloak thrown over greed. And no hunting for glory from people, though as an apostle he could have demanded honor and support. He had every right to be a burden and refused to be one. The shape of true min-

istry is already emerging by contrast: it points away from itself. The faithful steward labors to get out of the way so that what he carries can be seen. Hold that thought. Much later we will meet its exact opposite — a man of lawlessness who exalts himself and points the world to his own seat.

One more phrase is worth lingering over: God who examines our hearts. To the dishonest it is a terror — no motive hidden, no pious mask left in place. To the steward it is a strange comfort. Paul does not have to manage his reputation before every critic in Thessalonica, answering each new slander to the end of his days, because the only verdict that matters has already been rendered by the One who sees to the bottom. A man who lives before the God who examines hearts is freed from the tyranny of living before everyone else. He has an audience of One — and that One, in Christ, already regards him with favor. This is not the dread of being watched. It is the rest of being fully known, and loved even so.

A Mother and a Father

Having cleared away the slander, Paul turns to what his ministry actually looked like, and he does something tender and a little surprising: he reaches for the images of a mother and a father, both, within a few short verses.

First the mother. We became little children among you, he says — and then, in the same breath, like a nursing mother caring for her own children. It is hard to imagine an image further from the grasping salesman. A nursing mother does not perform for her children or extract anything from them; she gives herself, her own body and rest and time, for their life. And that, Paul says, is exactly what happened: so deeply did he and his coworkers care for the Thessalonians that they were glad to share with them not only the gospel of God but their own selves. The con man gives a performance and takes your money. The true minister gives the gospel and then gives himself on top of it. You had become very dear to us — that is the line, and it is the opposite of everything his enemies alleged.

Then, woven right in, the labor. Paul reminds them that they worked night and day, so as not to be a burden to anyone, even while preaching. This is the apostle at his tent-making, supporting himself with his own hands so that no one in that young church could ever mistake the gospel for a thing being sold. The gospel was free, and Paul went to exhausting lengths to make sure it always looked free. There is a quiet dignity here, too, in ordinary work: the great apostle was not above a trade, and his labor served his ministry rather than competing with it. Honest work and the work of the gospel sat side by side in the same tired hands.

And then the father. Like a father with his own children, Paul says, he exhorted them, encouraged them, and charged them to live in a way worthy of God. Each one of them — not crowd-work, but the patient attention of a father who knows his children one at a time.

And see where the charge points: worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. There is that word again from our first session — calls. The God who chose them now calls them forward. The summons to live a certain way is not the ladder by which they climb to God; it is the path home, walked by people God has already claimed. Law in the service of the gospel: the father charges his children to walk worthy precisely because they already belong to him.

Why did Paul need both pictures, the mother and the father? Care that is all mother — all tenderness, all nursing, all comfort — can curdle into a sentimentality that asks nothing of anyone and leaves people exactly as fragile as it found them. Care that is all father — all exhortation, all charge, all walk-worthy — can harden into a cold demand that crushes the very people it means to strengthen. Paul will have neither by itself. He cherishes like a mother and he charges like a father, because the people in his care need both: to be held and to be summoned, to be comforted and to be called forward. That double shape — tenderness and exhortation in the same set of hands — is simply law and gospel worn as a face. A faithful church learns to do both, and to discern which one a given soul needs on a given day.

The Word You Received

And now we reach the sentence the whole passage has been moving toward, the one that turns a defense of Paul into a statement about God. Paul says he gives thanks to God constantly for this: that when the Thessalonians received the word they had heard from him, they did not accept it as a human message, but as it truly is — God's message, which is at work among those who believe.

Read that again, because everything in this session bends around it. Paul has spent twelve verses establishing his integrity, his gentleness, his labor, his fatherly care. And then, at the hinge, he tells us that none of it was finally the point. What the Thessalonians received was not Paul. It was God's own word, spoken through Paul's mouth. The man mattered — a fraud could have driven them off before the Word ever reached them — and yet the man was never the power. The power was in the Word, because the Word was God's.

This is the Lutheran doctrine of the Word in a single line, and it is worth saying plainly what it claims. When the gospel is rightly preached, the preacher's voice is only the instrument; the Word itself is God's, and it carries God's own power. The same thing we saw in our first session — that the gospel came not in word only but in power and the Holy Spirit — Paul now states from the other side: the hearers received the human words and found them to be the divine Word. That is not a trick of pious imagination. It is what the Word actually is. The Spirit does not work apart from it or alongside it; the Spirit works

through it, which is why Lutherans call the Word a means of grace and not merely a means of information.

See, too, how this knits back into our first session. There we said you discover your election not by peering inward but by looking to the gospel that reached you. Here is the other half of that comfort: the gospel that reached you was not a merely human word that might or might not hold — the opinion of one more religious man among many. It was the word of God. So when your assurance is shaken, when you wonder whether any of it is true or whether God really means it toward you, you are not leaning on Paul's sincerity or your pastor's competence or your own fragile grip. You are leaning on the word of God, which does not return empty and is even now at work in you. The ground of your confidence is as solid as God's own speech.

And Paul adds one more thing about this Word, almost in passing, though it may be the most comforting phrase in the verse: it is at work in you believers. The Word is not inert. It is not a record of something God said once, long ago, now sitting quietly on a shelf. It is at work — the Greek word is the one from which we get our word energy — actively doing things, even now, in everyone who believes. The same Word that first created their faith was still at work creating, sustaining, comforting, shaping. It had not finished with them, and it has not finished with you.

Consider what this means for an ordinary Sunday. You sit in a pew. A man you may know all too well — his quirks, his limitations, the sermon that ran long last month — stands up and opens the Scriptures and preaches Christ to you. The temptation is to weigh him: was that a good talk, did he hold my interest, do I find him impressive? But if what he brings is the Word of God rightly preached, then you are not finally listening to him at all. You are receiving the word of God, which is at work in you. That single shift — from evaluating the messenger to receiving the message as God's own — is among the most freeing things a Christian can learn. It frees you from being a connoisseur of preachers and makes you a recipient of God.

But how would you know the difference, when both arrive through a human voice? Not by the polish of the delivery. There are spellbinding speakers who offer nothing but a human message in fine clothes, and halting, unimpressive preachers through whom the Word of God comes with power. The test is not eloquence; the test is Christ. Where Christ crucified and risen is held out — where sins are actually forgiven and the gospel actually given, not merely admired — there God's message is being spoken, however plain the voice. Where it has quietly become advice for better living, or commentary on the headlines, something has gone missing no matter how skilled the speaker. The hunger to be entertained is the appetite of a consumer. The Thessalonians were not consumers of Paul; they were recipients of God.

In Good Company

The chapter ends on a harder note, and we will not rush past it, because these few verses are among the most misunderstood and most cruelly misused in all of Paul's letters, and honesty requires that we say so out loud.

Paul's immediate aim is consolation. The Thessalonians are suffering at the hands of their own neighbors, and Paul tells them they have thereby become imitators of the churches of God in Judea — those first Jewish-Christian congregations — who had suffered the very same things from their own countrymen. The point is solidarity: you are not alone, and you are not being singled out for punishment. You are suffering exactly as God's people have always suffered, in the best of company, joined to a long line of the faithful who were hated for the same gospel. To a frightened church, that is genuine comfort. Your affliction is not a sign that God has abandoned you. It is a sign that you belong to him.

This is one of the steadiest comforts in Scripture. The prophets were hounded and killed. Jesus told his disciples to rejoice when they were persecuted, because that is how the prophets before them were treated. The apostles were beaten and walked away counting it an honor. Suffering for the gospel has never been the exception in the life of God's people; it has nearly been the rule. So when hostility comes, the right question is not "What did I do wrong?" but "In whose company has this placed me?" — and the answer is a long and honorable line reaching back through the Judean churches to the prophets, and forward to every believer who has paid something for the name of Christ. You are not an oddity. You are an heir.

But then Paul speaks sharply of those who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, drove the missionaries out, and tried to keep the gospel from reaching the Gentiles. And here we must stop and speak carefully, because for many centuries these words were torn from their setting and turned into a weapon — a charge of collective, inherited guilt against the whole Jewish people, the poisonous slander of "Christ-killers" that fueled ghettos and expulsions and pogroms and worse. Christians did that. At times people who called themselves Lutheran did that. We do not get to read this verse as though that history never happened, and we do not get to pretend the misuse was a small thing. It was a grievous sin, and it is still a temptation, and it must be named and refused.

So read the words as the man who wrote them would have us read them. Paul is himself a Jew — an Israelite, a son of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. In another letter he writes that he could wish himself accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his own people, and he insists in the strongest terms that God has not rejected them. The Lord he says was killed was a Jew; the prophets were Jews; Paul and Silas and Timothy were Jews; the Judean churches held up here as models were Jewish believers. Paul is not pronouncing a curse on a whole people — his own people, whom he loved to the point of agony. He

is describing specific opponents who had opposed the gospel, persecuted the churches, and labored to keep the message from the Gentiles. He is naming a pattern of hostility to God's messengers — a pattern, not a pedigree.

Even the difficult closing line, that wrath has come upon them completely, is debated as to its meaning, and it is not the gloating of an enemy. Remember whose pen this is. The same man wept over his kinsmen and longed for nothing more than their salvation. Whatever the line means, it is the grief of a brother over those refusing the rescue held out to them. And so the takeaway for the persecuted Thessalonians, and for us, is twofold. First, comfort: your suffering puts you in the company of the faithful, not under the frown of God. Second, sobriety: opposition to the gospel is old, persistent, and serious. But contempt for any people can never be drawn from these verses. A reading of this passage that leaves hatred in your heart toward anyone has misread it as badly as Paul's first enemies misread Paul.

Treasure in Clay Jars

Step back and notice the strange shape of what Paul has done. He has spent an entire passage talking about himself and his coworkers — their integrity, their gentleness, their labor, their love — and then told us, at the center of it, that none of that was ever the treasure. The treasure was the Word. The messengers were only the clay jars that carried it. Paul cared a great deal about being a faithful jar, because a cracked and filthy vessel can make people doubt what it holds. But he never confused the jar with the gold inside.

The image is one Paul will reach for again, writing to another church: we have this treasure in jars of clay, he says, so that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. That is the whole logic of this chapter in a single line. The very ordinariness of the messengers — their weakness, their plainness, the plain fact that they bleed and tire and eventually die — is not a flaw in God's plan but part of its design, so that no one mistakes the power for theirs. A church that has grasped this is steady in a way that a church built on a magnetic personality can never be, because its confidence was never in the jar to begin with. When the impressive leader falls, or simply slips out of the city by night as Paul did, the gold remains.

This is how a frightened, suffering church is able to stand — and even, as we have seen, to suffer well and in good company. Not because it has found an impressive enough leader, but because it has received the word of God, which is at work in it. The leaders will come and go. Some will be gifted and some will be dull; some will encourage you and some will disappoint you; all of them, every last one, are clay. But the Word they carry, when it is God's Word rightly preached, is God's own, and it brings God's own power to bear on you, and it does not stop working.

So receive it as what it really is. Stop weighing the gold by the dents in the jar. The next time the Scriptures are opened over you — in a sermon, in a study like this one, at a bedside, at a graveside — listen past the voice that is speaking and hear the One who is finally speaking through it. That is what the Thessalonians did, and Paul could not stop thanking God for it. It is also, as it happens, why being apart from them was such agony for him that he could hardly bear it — which is exactly where the rest of this chapter turns, and where we will go next.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION THREE

Longing to See You

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13

For two chapters Paul has been teaching — about election and the powerful Word, about faithful ministry and the Word received as God’s own. Now, for a little while, he stops teaching and simply lets us see his heart. What follows is the most personal passage in the letter, and perhaps one of the most personal things Paul ever wrote. There is no argument to track here, no doctrine being defended. There is only a man who loves a group of people almost unbearably, who was torn away from them before he was ready, who has been frantic with worry over them, and who has just received news that has flooded him with relief. If you have ever lain awake over someone you love and could not reach, you already understand this passage from the inside.

And yet — this is the lovely thing — even here, even at his most raw and human, Paul cannot speak for more than a few sentences before the coming of Christ rises into view. Twice in this short passage the return of the Lord breaks the surface, and both times it is bound up with love. The people Paul loves are, he says, his crown at Christ’s coming; and his deepest prayer for them is that they be found ready and blameless when that day arrives. For Paul, love and the last day are not two subjects. They are one. Open your Bible to the end of chapter two, beginning at verse seventeen.

Torn Away

Paul reaches for a startling word to describe the separation. He says they were separated from the Thessalonians — and the word he chooses is the language of bereavement, the verb for being orphaned. He had called himself their nursing mother and their father in the previous chapter; now he describes the parting as a kind of family death, a household ripped apart. He is quick to add that it was only for a short time, and only in person, not in heart — but the wound was real. This is not the cool detachment we sometimes imagine in the great apostle. Paul loved these people the way a parent loves a child, and being kept from them hurt like grief.

See the qualification Paul slips in even amid his grief: separated in person, not in heart. The bond between Christians is not finally a matter of proximity. Paul was far away, blocked from returning, and yet the heart-tie was unbroken — he carried these people with him, prayed for them, belonged to them still. This is the communion of the saints in ordinary clothes: a fellowship distance can stretch but not sever, because what joins be-

lievers is not the same room but the same Lord. Anyone parted from a congregation they loved knows both the ache and the comfort. The miles were real. So was the heart.

So he tried to go back. Again and again — and he breaks into the first person singular to underline it: I, Paul, tried, more than once. Every time, something stopped him, and Paul names what: Satan thwarted us. Neither rush past that line nor make theater of it. Paul takes the devil seriously, as Scripture does and as confessional Christians always have: there is a real adversary who opposes the gospel and works to keep God's people apart. Paul does not give us the mechanics — the hostility he had fled, official obstruction, illness, something else; he simply discerns an enemy's hand in it. The point is sobering and steadying at once: the obstacles to Christian fellowship are not always random.

But keep a finger on this thread, because Paul will pick it up again at the very end of the passage, and the way he picks it up changes everything. For now the adversary appears to have the upper hand — Paul thwarted, the family kept apart. Hold that tension. It does not last.

A Crown at His Coming

Then Paul asks a question that lifts the whole passage off the ground. What is it, he asks, that he is really living for? What is his hope, his joy, the crown he will have to boast of when he stands before the Lord Jesus at his coming? And he answers his own question without hesitation: it is you. You are our glory and joy.

Sit with how extraordinary that is. Paul — who will one day stand before the returning Christ, who might be expected in that moment to think of his own labors, his sufferings, the churches he founded as monuments to his work — says that what he will hold up on that day, his victor's wreath, is not an achievement at all. It is people. These particular, ordinary, struggling people in Thessalonica. The crown Paul wants to wear before Christ is the faces of those he loved and served.

This is quietly revolutionary, and it tells us what a Christian life is finally for. We are tempted to measure our lives by what we built or earned or accomplished — a portfolio to present to God one day. Paul measures his by whom he loved into the kingdom. At the coming of Christ the things will be ash; the people will still be there. And see how naturally that coming has slipped into the passage. Paul did not change the subject from love to the last things; for him they were never two subjects. The last day is the horizon against which love finally shows what it was worth.

And this is not a truth reserved for apostles and pastors. Paul's crown was a church because a church was whom he had been given to love and serve; yours will be made of whomever you have been given. The parent who raised children in the faith, the teacher

who opened the Scriptures to a restless class, the friend who kept praying for someone long after it seemed pointless, the quiet believer who simply loved the people God set in front of them — each of them is storing up the very crown Paul describes. On the last day no one will be asked to produce a résumé. The question will be far more personal than that, and the joy of those who hear it will be measured in faces.

When We Could Bear It No Longer

Unable to go himself, and no longer able to stand the not-knowing, Paul did the next best thing — and it cost him. He sent Timothy, his most trusted coworker, the young man he loved like a son, and in sending him Paul chose to be left behind alone in Athens. Anyone who has ever waited for word about someone they love knows what that small sentence holds. Twice in these verses Paul says he could bear it no longer. The great apostle, the rock under so many churches, was very nearly undone by worry over whether this one young congregation would hold.

See what Paul actually did with his anxiety. He did not merely worry, and he did not merely pray, though he did both. He sent a person. Unable to come himself, he gave up his most valued companion so the Thessalonians would not stand alone. A letter would come later; first they needed someone in the room. The church has always needed more than ideas mailed in from a distance. It needs people sent: someone to sit with the grieving, to steady the wavering, to say the true thing in person when a frightened believer cannot hear it any other way. Paul's love did not stay an emotion. It got on the road, in the form of Timothy.

Timothy's assignment was specific: to strengthen them and to encourage them in their faith — to make their faith firm and to comfort them in it. And the danger Paul feared was just as specific — that the afflictions they were suffering might shake them loose, might move them off the foundation. So Paul reminds them of something he had told them plainly while he was still with them, something every Christian needs to hear and almost no one is told: that we are destined for this. Affliction is not a detour from the Christian life. It is part of the road. Paul had warned them in advance that suffering was coming, precisely so that when it came they would not read it as a sign that something had gone wrong, or that God had turned away, or that their faith had failed.

This cuts against a lie that runs deep through much of modern Christianity — the quiet assumption that if you are truly walking with God, things should go well, and that hardship therefore means you have lost his favor. The Thessalonians had been taught the opposite, and so they were braced. Lutherans call the truth Paul is teaching here the theology of the cross. God characteristically works not around suffering but through it. He is found not in the places of glory and ease where we instinctively look for him, but in weakness, in the

cross, in the very afflictions we assume must signal his absence. The believer who expects God only in success will be ambushed by every hardship. The one who has learned the theology of the cross knows the road home runs through Good Friday, and that the God who seems most absent in the dark is never nearer.

The alternative has a name too, and it is alive and well in our own day. Lutherans call it the theology of glory — the instinct that looks for God in strength, success, health, and visible blessing, and quietly reads hardship as evidence of his disfavor. It is the engine under every promise that enough faith will make you well and wealthy, and under every private suspicion, when the diagnosis comes or the money runs out, that God must be abandoning us. It cannot make sense of a suffering Christian, and so it leaves that Christian doubly afflicted: by the trouble, and by the fear that the trouble means God is gone. Paul will have none of it. He points these new believers to a Lord who saved the world from a cross, and tells them the servants should not expect a smoother road than their Master walked.

Still, Paul was anxious, and he names his fear without embarrassment: that the tempter — the same adversary from a few verses earlier — might have tempted them past their breaking point, and that all his labor among them would turn out to have been for nothing. It is a very human fear, and a deeply pastoral one. Notice what Paul was afraid of. Not for his reputation, not for his record. He was afraid for their faith.

Good News of Your Faith

And then the news came, and you can almost feel the letter exhale. Timothy returned from Thessalonica, and what he brought back Paul describes with a word he reserves almost everywhere else for one thing only — the gospel itself. Timothy, he says, brought us good news — the verb is the one Paul uses for preaching the gospel — good news of your faith and love. It is the only place in all his letters that Paul uses the gospel-word for something other than the gospel, and it tells you exactly what the report meant to him. To hear that this church was still standing, still believing, still loving, was for Paul a kind of gospel.

It is worth feeling the weight of the wait before we feel the relief. Paul had been in Athens and then moved on to Corinth, working and preaching, and all the while not knowing. Had the young church survived the storm? Had the new believers, with no apostle to lean on, quietly slipped back to their old gods when the pressure mounted? Had his weeks of labor among them been swept away the moment his back was turned? There is a particular helplessness in loving people you cannot reach and cannot help — in handing them over to God and to a single messenger, and then simply waiting. Paul knew that helpless-

ness intimately. So when Timothy at last appeared on the road with word from Thessalonica, the relief was not mild. It broke over him like sunrise.

Their faith and their love had held. And there was more: Timothy reported that the Thessalonians remembered Paul warmly and longed to see him as much as he longed to see them. The affection ran in both directions. So Paul writes a line that may be the emotional peak of the whole letter — in all his own distress and affliction, he says, he was comforted about them through their faith. There is the comfort word again, the word that beats like a pulse through these two letters; only here it runs in an unexpected direction. We expect the apostle to comfort the struggling church. Instead the struggling church comforts the apostle. Their faith was Paul's consolation in the middle of his own hardship.

And then the most striking line of all: for now we live, he says, if you are standing fast in the Lord. Now we live. Paul's very sense of being alive rose and fell with whether these people were standing firm. This is not unhealthy dependence; it is love. To love someone is to bind your own well-being up with theirs, so that their standing becomes your life and their falling your grief. Paul loved the Thessalonians like that. It is, not incidentally, exactly how Christ loves us — he so binds himself to us that our life has become his joy.

There is a lesson here about how God strengthens his people. We tend to picture faith as a private transaction between the lone believer and God. Watch how it works in this passage: Timothy strengthens the Thessalonians, their faith strengthens Paul, and Paul's letter will strengthen them again in turn. Faith travels through the body, believer to believer, each one a means by which God holds up another. You are not only meant to receive comfort from the fellowship; you are, perhaps without ever knowing it, one of the means by which someone else is kept on their feet. The command that closes the next chapter — encourage one another with these words — is this dynamic turned into an instruction.

Supply What Is Lacking

The relief overflows into worship. Paul asks how he could ever thank God enough for all the joy these people have brought him, and he tells them he is praying — night and day, earnestly — for two things. The first is simply to see their faces again. The second is more surprising: he prays that he might supply what is lacking in their faith.

That phrase deserves a second look. Paul has just spent a paragraph celebrating their faith — calling it good news, saying it kept him alive. In the very next breath he says it has things lacking, gaps still to be filled. Both are true at once, and the Christian life lives in that tension. There is no stage at which a believer arrives at a complete faith with nothing lacking; there is only faith that is alive and therefore still growing. This is why Paul keeps writing. The whole second half of the letter — holiness, the dead in Christ, the day of the

Lord — is Paul supplying what was lacking. A commended faith is not a finished faith. Yours is real, and yours is unfinished, and both are good news.

This guards us from two opposite errors. The first is perfectionism — the demand that a real faith must already feel finished, must have conquered every doubt and sin, so that the honest believer concludes he must not really believe at all. The second is complacency — the shrug that says, since I am saved, there is no lack to be supplied and no further reason to sit under the Word. Paul cuts between them. The Christian is at one and the same time fully accepted in Christ and still under construction — righteous already by faith, and yet a work God has not finished. That is why a believer with genuine faith keeps coming back to be taught and fed: not to become a Christian, but to become a finished one.

Blameless at His Coming

The passage closes the way so much of Paul closes — by turning to prayer. And this prayer is worth reading slowly, because it gathers up every thread of the passage and ties them to the coming of Christ.

First, Paul prays that God our Father and the Lord Jesus would direct his way back to them. And here, at last, is the thread from the beginning. Back in verse eighteen, Satan hindered the way. Now Paul lays the way in the hands of God. He does not pretend the adversary is unreal — he named him twice — but he knows perfectly well who actually governs the road. Satan may hinder; God directs. The adversary is real, but he is not sovereign, and the same path the enemy blocked Paul now entrusts, without anxiety, to the God who opens and shuts as he pleases. That is the right Christian posture toward the devil: take him seriously, and fear him not at all, because he is a creature on a leash.

Luther, who contended with the devil more openly than most and never once pretended he was a metaphor, put the whole balance into a single line of his great hymn: one little word can fell him. The adversary is strong, and malicious, and no figure of speech — but set against the Word of God he is nothing, and his defeat is already certain. The Christian therefore lives in a strange freedom: clear-eyed about a real enemy, and entirely unafraid of him. We do not whistle past the devil as though he were imaginary, and we do not cower before him as though he were in charge. We name him, resist him, and then get on with the work and the joy of the gospel — because the road home is in the hands of the One the enemy cannot defeat.

Then Paul prays for them — that the Lord would make them increase and overflow in love for one another and for everyone, the way his own love overflows for them. And notice where that growing love is headed, because it is the goal of the entire prayer: that their hearts would be strengthened in holiness, to be blameless before our God and Father at

the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. There it is, the second time the return of Christ surfaces in this passage, and again it is fused to love. The point of growing in love is to be found ready — hearts made firm, made holy, made blameless — on the day the Lord returns with all his holy ones.

And do not miss who does the work in that prayer. Paul does not ask the Thessalonians to make themselves blameless, as though holiness were a project they must complete in time to pass inspection. He asks that their hearts be strengthened — and the strengthening, the sanctifying, the making-blameless is God's work, not theirs. Blamelessness on that day is not an achievement the believer presents to God; it is a gift God works in the believer and then crowns. How can people who know themselves to be sinners stand blameless before a holy God at the coming of Christ? Only because the One who began the good work in them is himself committed to finishing it, and because the righteousness they will wear on that day was always Christ's and never their own. The prayer can be confident precisely because its answer does not finally depend on us.

We will say a great deal more in the sessions ahead about that coming — about who the saints are who come with him, about the dead who will rise. For now hold the shape of the prayer: the road home is in God's hands and not Satan's; the growth God works in us is growth in love; and the whole of it is aimed at a single day, when the Lord comes and his people are presented to him, established and blameless. The eschatology that frightens the world is, for those who are in Christ, simply the day they are at last brought home complete.

The Heart of the Letter

This passage is the warm beating heart of the letter, and it has shown us something the doctrine alone could not. We have seen what the powerful Word and the great election actually produce when they take hold of a real life: not a cold theologian, but a man undone by love — frantic over a struggling church, weeping with relief at good news, praying through the night for people who were, by every worldly measure, no one in particular. Election and the Word are not abstractions. This — this love — is what they grow.

Let that correct a certain picture of doctrine we may carry without noticing. We sometimes imagine that the more seriously a person takes theology — election, the Word, the means of grace, the last things — the colder and more argumentative they must become, as though right doctrine and warm love pulled in opposite directions. Paul is the standing refutation. The man who wrote the towering arguments of Romans is the same man weeping with relief over a little congregation in Macedonia. Sound doctrine did not make Paul less tender; it made him more. The truth about a God who chooses, and calls, and comes

for his people is not an idea to be debated at arm's length. It is a fire that, wherever it truly catches, burns its way out into exactly this kind of love.

And we have seen that for Paul, love and the last day were never two things. The people he loved were his crown at Christ's coming; the love he prayed would grow in them was aimed at the day they would stand blameless before the returning Lord. If you have been taught to think of the end times as a frightening subject best left to charts and experts, let this passage begin to retrain you. The coming of Christ, in Paul's hands, is where love arrives at its destination. It is the homecoming toward which every act of Christian love has quietly been pointing all along.

Paul's worry has turned to joy, and his prayer now is simply that they keep growing until the day. His next words — the instruction that begins in chapter four — are Paul doing exactly what he just prayed to do: supplying what is lacking in their faith. That is where we go next.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION FOUR

A Life Pleasing to God

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

With a single word — finally — Paul turns a corner, and it is worth noticing exactly which corner he turns, because the whole shape of the Christian life is hidden in it. For three chapters he has spoken almost entirely of what God has done: God chose them, God called them, God’s Word came in power and went to work in them, God will keep them and bring them home blameless. Now, for the first time at any length, Paul tells them how they ought to live. He moves from the indicative to the imperative — from “here is what God has done” to “now here is how you walk.” And the order is not an accident. The order is the gospel.

Lutherans describe this with a distinction worth learning, because it keeps the Christian life from collapsing into either despair or pride. They speak of two kinds of righteousness. There is the righteousness we have before God, which we do not produce at all — Christ’s own righteousness credited to us through faith, entirely apart from anything we do. And there is the righteousness we live out before our neighbor, the visible righteousness of a life that loves and serves. The first is the root; the second is the fruit. The deadly mistake is to confuse them — to imagine that the life we live is what secures our standing with God. Paul spent three chapters on the gift before he breathed a word about the walk. Only now does he turn to how they live. Open your Bible to the fourth chapter, and read it as what it is: not a ladder up to God, but the shape of a life that belongs to God already.

This is the great rediscovery of the Reformation. Where the order got reversed — the life made the condition of the gift, holiness the entrance fee for acceptance — the result was either a treadmill of never being sure you had done enough, or a brittle pride in those who imagined they had. Many who come to a study like this carry the scars of some version of that reversal: a Christianity in which God’s love always seemed to hang on the next performance, the next surrender, the next decision more sincere than the last. Paul cuts the wire. Acceptance first, settled and free; and then, only then, the life. Get that order right and the commands that follow become a gift. Get it backward and even the loveliest verses in this chapter turn into a whip.

Walk and Please God — More and More

Watch how Paul frames the exhortation, because every word of it guards the gospel. He does not bark commands from on high; he asks and urges them, as a brother, in the Lord

Jesus. And what he urges is telling. He reminds them that they already received from him how they ought to walk and to please God — and then he adds three words that change the whole tone: just as you are doing. He is not lighting a fire under people who have done nothing. He is acknowledging that the fire is already lit. His charge is simply this: do so more and more.

That little phrase — more and more — tells you nearly everything about how sanctification actually works. It is not a switch that flips once from off to on. It is not a line you cross a single time and never think about again. It is growth: increase, abounding, a life that keeps deepening in the direction it is already headed. The Thessalonians were already walking in a way that pleased God; Paul wanted them to walk that way more. This is the ordinary texture of the Christian life — not one dramatic transformation followed by coasting, but a long, slow, Spirit-worked deepening that is never finished in this life. We will never in this world reach the point where there is no more and more left to grow into. And that is not a failure to be ashamed of. It is simply what it means to be a living thing that is still alive.

There is a name for what Paul is doing here: the third use of the law. The law does more than one thing. It restrains evil in the world; and it accuses us, exposing our guilt and driving us out of ourselves to Christ — that accusing work is its sharpest and most necessary office. But for those who already belong to Christ it does a third thing: it guides, showing the redeemed the concrete shape of love. Paul is not preaching the law to frighten the Thessalonians into faith; they already have faith. He is holding it up as a lamp, to show people who are already God's where their feet should walk. A Christian still needs teaching — not in order to be saved, but because the flesh that clings to us is forgetful and the new life needs direction.

Pause on that small phrase, to please God, because it hides a question that has tortured tender consciences for centuries. How could anything a sinner does ever please a holy God, when even our best works are shot through with mixed motives? The confessional answer is freeing. The works of believers please God not because the works are flawless — they never are — but because the worker has already been accepted in Christ. A father delights in his small child's lopsided gift, not because it would survive inspection, but because he loves the child. So with God and the works of his children. Pleasing God is not a bar we clear by excellence. It is what our works become once we ourselves have been accepted.

This Is the Will of God

And then Paul says something that has quietly answered one of the most anxious questions a believer ever asks. People agonize over “the will of God for my life” — which job,

which town, which person to marry, as though God's will were a hidden combination we must crack or else forever miss the life we were meant to have. Paul cuts straight through all of it with one sentence: this is God's will, that you become holy. God's will for you — the thing he has plainly revealed and is unmistakably committed to — is that you be made holy. Not that you decode some secret map of your future, but that you become, by his own working, the kind of person who reflects his character.

Notice two things buried in that one phrase. First, sanctification is called the will of God: it is God's project, God's doing, something he wills and works, and not merely something he hopes we will manage to pull off on our own. The same God who chose and called and justified is the God who sanctifies; it is his work from the first step to the last. The believer is not handed a goal and left to reach it alone. And second, Paul refuses to leave "holiness" as a warm and weightless abstraction. He makes it concrete at once — and the very first concrete thing he names is one our age would have very much preferred he leave alone.

The older Lutherans drew a distinction here that heads off a particular torment. There is God's hidden will — his secret counsels, the unsearchable reasons behind the shape of a given life — and we are forbidden to go climbing after it, exactly as we saw with election. And there is God's revealed will, plainly published in his Word, which we are simply to receive. The anxious believer forever tries to read the hidden one, divining from circumstances and open or closed doors what God is secretly up to. Paul will not send us there. He points instead to the revealed will, and it could not be plainer: this is the will of God, your sanctification. Stop straining to read the sealed letter. Read the open one. It says: be holy, for I myself am making you so.

In Holiness and Honor

God's will, Paul says — that you become holy — means this: that you keep away from sexual immorality. He goes on, that each of you learn to govern his own body, his own vessel, in holiness and honor, and not in the grip of lust like the pagans who do not know God. Before we go a step further we must simply be honest that this is among the least fashionable things the New Testament says, and that a confessional church does not get to quietly skip it because the surrounding culture has changed its mind. Paul roots the Christian sexual ethic not in prudishness but in two things he names directly: in holiness, because the body, like the whole person, belongs to God and is being made holy; and in honor, the dignity of treating oneself and others as more than instruments of appetite.

And he makes a point we rarely hear made anymore: that sexual sin is never the private, victimless thing our culture insists it is. To sin in this way, Paul says, is to wrong and defraud one's brother — to take what was not ours to take, to damage marriages and families and the very trust on which a community rests. There are no solitary sins in the body

of Christ; what we do with our bodies reaches out and touches others, and God himself, Paul says soberly, is the avenger of such wrongs. That is the law, and it has teeth, and we are not permitted to file them down.

But we never preach the law's teeth without the gospel's embrace in the same breath, because the law's sharpest work is not finally to make us behave but to drive us to Christ. So let it be said as plainly as the warning was: there is no sexual sin — none, however old, however hidden, however shameful — that the blood of Christ does not fully cover. The same passage that calls God an avenger says, a breath later, that this same God gives his Holy Spirit to you. The God who demands holiness is the God who supplies it. If these verses have found an old wound in you, hear both halves: the standard is real, and you have not met it, and neither have I; and Christ has met it in our place, bore the avenging himself upon the cross, and now pours out the Spirit by whom a different life slowly becomes possible. The call is not to scrub yourself clean in order to be accepted, but to live out of an acceptance already given.

Paul drives it home with the gravest possible warning, and the warning doubles as the deepest comfort. To reject this teaching, he says, is not to disregard a man — not Paul, not a preacher, not the church's mere opinion — but to disregard God himself, the God who gives you his Holy Spirit. Sit with what that implies. The Christian's body has become the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit; holiness is therefore not an arbitrary rule clamped on from outside, but the fitting life of a temple in which God has chosen to make his home. And the reason Paul gives is the very thread we have followed through the whole letter: God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. He chose us, he called us — and the call was always, from the beginning, a call into holiness. Sanctification, it turns out, is simply election arriving at its destination in an actual human life.

Underneath the whole sexual ethic lies a conviction about the body that the Christian faith has always held and our culture has largely lost. The body is not a disposable shell housing the “real” you, to be used as appetite dictates and discarded at death. Christianity will have neither the old contempt for the body that treats it as a prison to escape, nor the new worship of it that treats it as a toy to indulge. This body was made by God, is being made holy by God, is at this moment a temple of the Holy Spirit, and is destined not for the trash heap but for resurrection. What you do with your body matters eternally, because the body matters eternally. Paul grounds sexual holiness exactly there — in holiness and honor, the fitting treatment of a thing God has made, claimed, indwelt, and fully intends to raise.

Taught by God to Love

Then Paul's tone softens, and he says something lovely. On the matter of brotherly love, he tells them, he hardly needs to write at all — because they have been taught by God to love one another. Taught by God. It is a remarkable phrase, and Paul chose it carefully. He does not say they were taught by him, or by their leaders, or even by the Scriptures alone. He says God himself has been their teacher in the school of love.

This is the new covenant in miniature. God promised through the prophets that one day he would write his law not on tablets of stone but on human hearts — that he would put his Spirit within his people and teach them, every one, from the inside out. That is exactly what has happened to the Thessalonians, and to every believer since. The same Holy Spirit named only a verse earlier is the inward teacher who bends a hard heart toward love. This is why love is the surest sign that the Word has truly done its work in someone: no one finally drums it up by willpower; it is fruit the Spirit grows. And so even here, in the one area where they are already excelling, Paul gives the same gentle charge as before — do this more and more. There is no ceiling on love this side of heaven. The most loving Christian you have ever known is still, at this moment, being taught.

See what kind of love Paul names first. The word is brotherly love — love within the family of faith, for the people God has actually set down beside you. Not love for humanity in the abstract, which costs nothing and warms no one, but love for these particular, sometimes difficult, brothers and sisters in this particular church. The congregation is the first school of love, and a demanding one, because we do not get to choose our family. And see how God does the teaching: not by a private inner whisper alone, but through the Word preached, the Supper shared, the body gathered week by week. God teaches love largely by setting us among people we must learn to love, and feeding us together at one table until we do. Even here, do more and more — and then he widens it, for this love is meant to overflow the walls of the church toward everyone.

The Quiet Life and Honest Hands

And then Paul says something that can sound almost comically ordinary after the heights of holiness and Spirit-taught love. Aspire to lead a quiet life, he says — and the phrase is a striking wordplay in the Greek, something like be ambitious to be unambitious — attend to your own business, and work with your own hands. After sanctification and sexual holiness and divine instruction in love, the apostle's next great exhortation is, in effect: settle down, tend to your own affairs, and get to work.

There is a great deal of theology in that plainness: the doctrine of vocation. Luther saw, as few before him had, that the holy life God wills is not lived by escaping ordinary work for

something more “spiritual,” but in and through the humble callings of daily life. The Christian is sanctified at the workbench and the kitchen sink, at the plow and the desk, raising children and doing honest labor with honest hands. These stations are not distractions from the life of faith. They are where God has assigned us to love our neighbor — and, more astonishing still, the masks behind which God himself is at work. When God feeds the hungry, Luther said, he most often does it not by dropping bread from heaven but through the farmer and the miller and the baker. Your job, your chores, your quiet daily duties — these are where your sanctification takes on flesh.

So the quiet life is not a lesser, second-tier Christianity for people not spiritual enough for great things. Very often it is the great thing. To live quietly, to mind your own affairs instead of meddling in everyone else’s, to support yourself by honest work and so be a burden to no one and a help to many — this is the active righteousness of faith, worked out in the dust of the world. Paul gives two reasons for it, and both look outward, away from the self. The first is witness: that you may walk properly before outsiders, so the watching world might see in the orderly, diligent, peaceable lives of Christians something quietly worth wanting. The second is love: that you depend on no one, and so have something left over to give. A quiet, working life is not selfish withdrawal. It is one of the most ordinary and most powerful sermons a Christian will ever preach.

There is something quietly radical in this for our own moment. Paul tells these Christians to be ambitious about being unambitious — to want, of all things, a quiet life — in a world that prizes the loud life, the visible life, the life that builds a platform and weighs in on everything. He tells them to attend to their own business in an age that has turned minding everyone else’s into a daily sport. And he sets them free in the doing of it. You are not required to be remarkable, or to fix the whole world, or to hold an opinion on every controversy. You are required to love the neighbor God has given you, in the station where he has placed you, faithfully and quietly and well. The pressure to be significant is among the heaviest burdens the modern Christian carries, and Paul lifts it clean off.

One more thing runs under the surface here, and it points ahead. A church can grow so feverish about the end of the world that it stops living in this one — quits working, abandons ordinary duty, and waits in idle excitement for the Lord to drop out of the sky. That disorder will be a real problem by the time Paul writes his second letter. Here he heads it off. What does the apostle prescribe for a people living in bright expectation of Christ’s return? Not feverish withdrawal, but quiet faithfulness in their callings. The right way to wait for the Lord is to go to work. The farmer plowing his field, the mother feeding her children, the worker doing his job well — these are not failing to take the Lord’s coming seriously. They are taking it exactly as seriously as Paul means them to.

Pleasing to God Already

Step back and see what Paul has done in these twelve verses. Having spent three chapters on the gift, he has begun to describe the life — and he has been careful, at every turn, never to let the life become the gift. Sanctification is God's will and God's work: God chose us, called us into holiness, gives his Spirit, teaches us himself to love. Our part is not to manufacture any of it but to walk in it, more and more, receiving the law now not as a terror that condemns but as a lamp for the feet of people who already belong to God. And the path it reveals runs not up through some higher plane, but straight across the most ordinary ground there is: a pure body, a loving heart, a quiet life, and a pair of working hands.

This is what it looks like to please God — and notice, please, that it is the portrait of people who are already pleasing to him in Christ, learning bit by bit to live like who they already are. The believer does not labor in order to become accepted. The believer, already accepted, labors because the Spirit set within will not sit still. That is the whole engine of the Christian life, and in these twelve plain verses Paul has just let us watch it run.

Hold the two halves of that together, because the holding of them is itself one of the great Lutheran instincts. The Christian is, at the very same moment, fully a saint and still a sinner — already pleasing to God in Christ, and still very much in need of growing more and more. Keep only the first half and you drift toward a smug perfectionism that has quietly stopped paying attention to its own sin. Keep only the second and you sink toward a despair that has forgotten it is loved. Hold both, as Paul does, and you are kept honest and kept hopeful at once: honest enough to admit how far you still have to grow, and hopeful enough to grow without fear, because your acceptance never rode on your progress in the first place. That is the strange freedom in which a Christian labors at holiness — working hard precisely because there is nothing left to win.

He has one more thing to give this church, though, and it is the thing they needed most of all. For all their growing holiness and their Spirit-taught love and their quiet faithful work, there was still a wound here that none of it had healed — a grief, and underneath the grief a fear, gathered around the graves of those who had already died. Paul turns to it next. And there, at last, he will speak the words this whole study takes its name from. That is where we go.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION FIVE

The Dead in Christ

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

We have arrived at the passage. For four chapters and a study, we have watched Paul circle this church with thanksgiving and instruction and aching love — and underneath all of it, the whole time, there has been a wound he had not yet touched. The Thessalonians were grieving. In the short months since Paul had been torn away from them, some of their number had died, and a fear had crept in among the living that was, to them, almost unbearable: that their dead had somehow missed it. That when the Lord came at last in glory, those who had not lived to see it would be left out, would arrive too late, would be at some terrible disadvantage at the very moment everyone had been waiting for. These new believers did not yet know what to do with a grave.

So Paul finally turns to it, and what he writes is at once the most comforting passage in the letter and, by a wide margin, the most misused. These are the verses that gave us the word “rapture.” These are the verses pulled onto charts and timelines, mined for clues about secret departures and seven-year countdowns, and stitched into a vast machinery of speculation that, for a great many modern Christians, is simply what this passage is about. We are going to read it differently — which is to say, we are going to read it the way Paul wrote it, and the way the church read it for most of its history before the nineteenth century. We are going to read it as comfort. Paul tells us plainly, at the beginning and again at the end, exactly what these words are for, and it is not for charts. Open your Bible to the fourth chapter, verse thirteen.

Why had the death of a few believers thrown this young church into such confusion? They appear to have expected the Lord so immediately that the death of a fellow believer before his coming struck them as an anomaly that should never have happened. Their hope was pitched so entirely on a return any day now that they had not reckoned with the plain possibility that some of them would die first. That is a cautionary tale. An eschatology kept always at fever heat — forever certain the end is upon us this very year — is brittle, and it shatters against the ordinary facts of life and death. Paul does not cure their over-excitement by lowering their hope. He cures it by deepening it, until it is strong enough to hold a grave.

Grief With Hope

Paul begins by telling them he does not want them to be uninformed about those who have fallen asleep — and notice already the tenderness of his vocabulary. He does not say “the dead.” He says those who are asleep. It is the gentlest word in the language for the hardest fact in the world, and it is not merely a euphemism to soften a blow he is afraid to land. It is a theological claim. For the one who belongs to Christ, death has been changed from an ending into a sleep — something temporary, something from which one wakes, something that has lost its old finality. You do not grieve over a sleeper the way you grieve over what you believe is simply gone. You wait for them to open their eyes.

Then comes one of the most pastorally important sentences in Scripture, and one of the most frequently misquoted. Paul does not say, “Do not grieve.” He says: do not grieve like the rest who have no hope. The difference is the whole gospel. He does not hand these mourners a stiff upper lip or scold them for their tears. He assumes they will grieve — death is a real enemy and the loss of those we love a real wound — and does not ask them to pretend otherwise. What he changes is not whether they grieve but how. There is a grief with no floor under it, for whom the dead are simply gone; and there is a grief shot through with hope, which weeps at a graveside and means every tear, and knows underneath the weeping that it will see this face again. Christianity has never asked anyone to stop mourning. It has only put a bottom under the grief.

This matters enormously for how we care for one another, and it guards us against a certain cruelty that sometimes passes for piety. When a believer is shattered by loss, the answer is never to tell them they ought not to be sad, as though a strong faith meant dry eyes. Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus — wept, knowing he was about to raise him minutes later. If the Lord of life can weep at a tomb he is about to empty, then no Christian needs to be ashamed of tears. We do not deny the darkness of death; we name it for the enemy it is. But we grieve as people who already know how the story ends.

Be clear about what Paul is promising, because it is far more than what most people mean by “life after death.” The hope is not merely that the soul survives, drifting into some bodiless existence while the body rots. The ancient world already believed that; the immortality of the soul was a respectable Greek idea, requiring no resurrection and no Christ at all. Paul announces something the philosophers never dreamed of: the resurrection of the body. The dead in Christ will rise — raised bodily as their Lord was raised bodily, to a life more solid than this one, not less. The Christian hope has never been escape from the body into a misty spiritual realm. It is the redemption of the whole person — the very thing the grave seemed to have stolen, handed back transformed.

Because He Rose

Then Paul gives the ground of the hope, and it is crucial to see that he does not ground it in a general optimism about the afterlife, nor in the immortality of the soul, nor in a vague sense that surely things work out in the end. He grounds it in a single historical fact: Jesus died and rose again. That is the whole foundation. Because one particular grave outside Jerusalem could not hold one particular man on one particular morning, the graves of all who belong to him have had their locks broken too. Our hope for our dead is not a hope that death is not really so bad, or that the departed live on in our memories, or that their energy returns to the universe. It is the hope that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will, in exactly the same way and on the same authority, raise them.

The whole hope hangs on a small phrase Paul keeps using: the dead in Christ. Not the dead in general, not the worthy dead — the dead in Christ. Their resurrection is sure for one reason: they are joined to him, baptized into him, members of his own body. And he has already risen. Elsewhere Paul calls him the firstfruits, the first sheaf of a harvest whose ingathering is now guaranteed. A single grave has already been emptied, by name, in history; everyone united to that risen Lord is bound to follow him out of theirs, because you cannot finally bury a member of a body whose Head is alive forevermore. The resurrection of the dead is simply the resurrection of Jesus, working its way out to the last of his people.

And Paul says something about those sleeping ones that begins, very gently, to turn the Thessalonians' fear inside out. He says that when the Lord comes, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Bring them with him. The dead in Christ are not waiting in some holding place to be collected as an afterthought; they are not left behind to catch up later. When the Lord descends, they come with him, in his very train. Far from being at a disadvantage, the dead are, if anything, already nearer the center of the event than the living. The very people the Thessalonians were grieving as the ones who would miss the coming turn out to be the ones who arrive with the King.

The Dead Are Not Left Behind

Paul now answers the specific fear head-on, and he does it with unusual weight, telling them that this comes by a word from the Lord — he is not floating an opinion but delivering something he received on the Lord's own authority. And here is the answer: we who are alive at the coming will not precede those who have fallen asleep. The living will not go first. Whatever the Thessalonians had feared — that their dead would be too late, would trail behind, would somehow be left out — Paul flatly denies it. The dead are not behind the living. If anything, the order runs precisely the other way.

For, Paul says, the dead in Christ will rise first. There is the reassurance, made unmistakable. The first thing that happens when the Lord comes is not the gathering of the living but the raising of the dead. The very ones the Thessalonians were weeping over will be the first to stir, the first to rise, the first to be raised incorruptible. Their tears had been, in a sense, exactly backward. They had grieved the dead as the ones left out. In fact, the dead go first.

And consider how Paul describes the coming itself, because the description alone is enough to dismantle a great deal of what has been built on these verses. The Lord himself, he says, will descend from heaven — not send a representative, not slip in quietly, but come down himself — with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. Hold those three sounds in your mind for a moment. A shouted command. The voice of an archangel. A trumpet blast that splits the sky. This is the single loudest, most public, most unmissable event the human imagination can hold. The whole creation will hear it. Whatever else this coming is, it is not quiet, and it is not secret. Keep that firmly in hand; we are going to need it shortly.

Caught Up Together

Then, Paul says, once the dead in Christ have risen, we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. And here is the word everyone has heard, even those who have never once opened this letter. The phrase “caught up” translates a Greek verb that the old Latin Bible rendered with a word from which we get our English term: the rapture. So let us say it clearly and without flinching, because some of you have been told the opposite somewhere along the way: the catching-up is real. It is right here, on the page, in the inspired text. There will be a moment when the living people of God are caught up to be with their returning Lord. We do not deny the rapture. It is Paul’s own word, and it is a glorious promise.

But notice carefully what kind of moment it is, and to whom it happens. It happens together — the word is emphatic, and it is the hinge of the whole passage — the living caught up together with the risen dead. This is not the separation the Thessalonians feared; it is the exact opposite of it. It is a reunion. The living and the dead, the ones who remained and the ones who had slept, gathered up into one single company at last, no longer parted by the grave. Every line of the passage has been bending toward that one word, together, and now it arrives. The wound was separation. The cure is reunion.

What These Words Do Not Say

Now we must say carefully what this passage does not say, because so much has been hung upon it that simply is not here — and the difference is no quibble. For roughly a century and a half, an influential system has read these verses as the proof-text for a secret rapture. The idea is that Christ will come invisibly to snatch the church away years before he comes again in public, sparing believers a coming tribulation and leaving the rest of the world to wonder where everyone went. It is the world of the prophecy charts and the bestselling novels and the bumper stickers warning that the car may suddenly be unmanned. And whatever the sincerity of those who hold it, it cannot be drawn from this text — for at least four reasons that lie right on its surface.

First, this coming is not secret. We have just heard it — the cry of command, the archangel's voice, the trumpet of God. A passage that goes out of its way to describe the noisiest event in the history of the world cannot honestly be made to teach a silent, invisible, unnoticed removal. The secret-rapture reading has to quietly turn down the volume on the very verses it claims as its foundation, and that alone should give us pause.

Second, see what the catching-up is for. The living are caught up to meet the Lord in the air — and the word for meet was often used in the ancient world of a particular custom. When a king approached a city, its citizens streamed out through the gates to meet him — not to be carried off themselves, but to welcome him and escort him in. That is the picture. The church does not go up in order to leave; it goes out to meet the descending King and bring him home. The motion of the passage is the Lord coming down to his world and his people pouring out to receive him — not believers evacuated off the planet. The destination is not somewhere else. The destination is the Lord.

Third, there is only one coming in this passage — one descent, one trumpet, one gathering of the living and the dead, all at once. Paul knows nothing here of two comings separated by years, a quiet one for the church and a loud one later for the world. He describes a single, public, glorious arrival at which everything happens together. The elaborate two-stage timetable has to be imported from elsewhere and laid down over the text like a transparency; it is not read out of these verses, it is read into them.

And fourth — the point that does more work than all the grammar combined — the system itself is young. For something like eighteen centuries, a secret pretribulation rapture was not part of the church's mainstream reading of this passage. The developed idea is usually traced only to the early nineteenth century and the teaching of John Nelson Darby, spread first through the footnotes of a popular study Bible and, in our own time, through a wildly successful series of novels. It is a recent arrival in the long life of the church. That does not by itself make it false — but it should make us humble and careful before treating as

the plain and obvious meaning of Scripture something that the apostles' own readers, and the church for the overwhelming majority of its history, did not find here.

Why does getting this right matter, beyond the satisfaction of a correct interpretation? Because the speculative system does real damage to real faith. It breeds a low-grade fear — a constant scanning of the headlines, a quiet dread of being left behind — in the very people Christ died to set free from fear. It has driven a long parade of predictions that fail and, each time, corrode the credibility of the gospel in the watching world. It tempts believers to disengage from the world God placed them in, for why tend a garden about to be abandoned. And worst, it swaps the solid comfort of the resurrection for the thin comfort of a hoped-for escape. Paul wrote these words to drive fear out of grieving people. A reading that pours the fear back in has gotten something badly wrong.

None of this is said unkindly, and least of all toward those who were handed this system in good faith and have held it as part of their love for Christ. Many of you reading these pages were given those charts by people who genuinely loved the Lord and wanted nothing more than for you to be ready for his coming. The aim here is not to win an argument or to make anyone feel foolish for what they were taught. The aim is to give the passage back to you as what it actually is — not a coded schedule to be decrypted, not a strategy for landing on the right side of a future disappearance, but a word of pure comfort spoken to people standing at a grave. And when the machinery is stripped away, what remains is not less than the system promised. It is immeasurably more.

Always With the Lord

Because look at how Paul ends the description — not with a date, not with a warning, not with a getaway, but with a destination, and the destination is a Person. And so, he says, we will always be with the Lord. That is the whole point. That is what every other line in the passage has been quietly serving all along. The resurrection of the dead, the catching-up of the living, the great reunion of the sleeping and the waking — all of it terminates here: always with the Lord. Forever in his presence. Never parted from him again, and never again parted from one another.

This is the deep difference between the comfort Paul actually offers and the comfort the speculative systems counterfeit. The systems offer escape — the relief of being whisked out before the worst arrives, of being safely on the winning side of a catastrophe. Paul offers union. He does not say, “Take heart, you will avoid the trouble.” He says, “Take heart, you will be with the Lord, and with one another, and nothing will ever separate you again.” The Christian hope is not finally about what we escape. It is about whom we will be with. Heaven is not first of all a location we are evacuated to; it is the unveiled presence of Christ and the reunion of all who are his, world without end. For the Thessaloni-

ans, weeping over fresh graves, this was everything: the people you have buried, you will see again; and all of you together will be with the Lord; and it will never, ever end.

Do not pass quickly over what “with the Lord” means, because it is the destination toward which the whole Bible has been moving from its first pages. The story is God’s relentless determination to be with his people: walking with them in a garden, dwelling among them in tabernacle and temple, becoming one of them in a manger under the name Immanuel, God with us. And it ends, in the Bible’s last great vision, with a voice from the throne declaring that the dwelling place of God is now with man, and that he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. The deepest ache of the human heart was never for a place but for a presence — to be at last with the One we were made for, and with those we have loved and lost. Paul promises exactly that, without end.

Encourage One Another

And then Paul writes the sentence this entire study takes its name from. Therefore, he says — having told them about the sleeping dead and the descending Lord and the great reunion and the unending presence — therefore encourage one another with these words.

Stop and let that land, because it is the key that unlocks not only this passage but the whole subject of the last things. Paul does not say, “Therefore calculate the times.” He does not say, “Therefore watch the headlines,” or “Therefore work out where we are on the chart.” He says: comfort one another with this. These words — the resurrection, the reunion, the presence — are given to be spoken from one trembling Christian to another. They are words for a hospital room and a graveside and a sleepless three in the morning. They are what you say to the widow, to the grieving parent, to the friend who is afraid to die. The doctrine of the last things, in Paul’s hands, is not a puzzle for the curious or a weapon for the certain. It is medicine for the brokenhearted — and it is meant to be administered by ordinary believers to one another, in love.

And see who is given the comforting to do. Paul does not say, “Leave these heavy matters to the learned.” He hands the word to the whole congregation and tells them to speak it to each other. This is the priesthood of all believers at the bedside: an ordinary Christian, with no credential but a shared faith, leaning close to a frightened friend and saying the truest words in the world — the Lord is risen, and so will you be; you will see them again; we will all be with him, together, and forever. The church has done exactly this for two thousand years, at funerals and deathbeds and in the small dark hours. You do not need a degree to administer this medicine. You need only to know the words, and to love someone enough to say them.

This is why our study bears the name it does. With these words — not with charts, not with speculation, not with fear, but with these words — the people of God are to comfort

one another. Everything we have been saying from the first session about reading the last things as consolation rather than calculation is, in the end, simply Paul's own instruction taken at face value. He told us what these words are for. They are for comfort.

There remains a real question Paul has not yet answered, and you can almost feel the Thessalonians already asking it. If the Lord is coming like that — suddenly, gloriously, and no one knows the day — then what of us who are still alive and waiting? When will it be? How are we to live in the meantime, not knowing the hour? That is exactly the question Paul takes up as the letter turns to its next paragraph, and it is where we will go next. But he has already given this grieving church the one thing they needed more than any answer about timing — the thing to hold onto no matter when the day turns out to come. The dead in Christ will rise. We will all be together. And we will always be with the Lord. Comfort one another with these words.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION SIX

Sons of the Day

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

In the previous passage Paul comforted the grieving with the truth about those who had died. Now he turns to the question still burning in the minds of those who were very much alive: when? If the Lord is coming — suddenly, gloriously, the dead rising and the living caught up — then surely the very next thing anyone would want to know is the date. How long? What are the signs? How will we know it is near? It is the most natural question in the world, and it has launched ten thousand prophecy charts. Paul's answer is one of the most bracing and liberating things in the whole letter: he refuses to give it, and then he shows them why the question itself was the wrong one to be asking.

What follows is the New Testament's great correction to the entire instinct of date-setting — and, just as importantly, its replacement of that instinct with something far better. Paul will not tell the Thessalonians when the day is coming, because he insists that no one can and no one is meant to. But he will tell them how to be ready for it, and his answer quietly relocates readiness from a thing we cannot have — information about the timing — to a thing we already possess in Christ. Open your Bible to the fifth chapter of First Thessalonians.

Admit at the outset how perennial this temptation is. Nearly every Christian generation has produced its confident prophets of the date — sincere men who studied the wars and rulers and calendars of their own moment and announced, in all earnestness, that the end was upon them. They were always wrong, and rarely by a little. Each failed prediction did real damage: it made the watching world a little more certain that Christian hope is the stuff of cranks, and left those who had believed it disillusioned, sometimes shipwrecked. The instinct behind it is sympathetic — we want to be ready, and knowing the schedule feels like the way. But Paul is about to tell this church that the whole project is misguided, and that there is a far better way to be ready than knowing a date God has deliberately kept to himself.

Concerning the Times and Seasons

Paul opens the subject only in order to set it aside. Concerning the times and the seasons, he says — using the very words a curious church would have leaned forward to hear more about — you have no need for anything to be written to you. It is a striking refusal. Here was the perfect opening for a timeline, a list of signs, a sketch of the sequence of the end.

And Paul simply declines to provide one. He does not say the day is far off, and he does not say it is near. He tells them they do not need the information they were no doubt itching to have.

Why not? Because, he says, they already know the one thing about the timing that actually matters: the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Sit with that image, because it settles the whole question of date-setting all by itself. A thief does not send word ahead. He does not publish his schedule or drop hints about which night he will come; the entire point of a thief is that you do not know when to expect him — if you knew, he would not be a thief at all. By choosing this image — and he is borrowing it directly from the Lord Jesus, who used it first — Paul is telling us that the timing of the day is, by its very nature, unknowable. It is not a code we have so far failed to crack. It is a thing God has deliberately hidden.

The phrase Paul reaches for — the day of the Lord — is not new with him. It rings through the Old Testament prophets, where it names the appointed time of God's decisive coming to judge and to save. And the prophets had a sharp word for those who longed for it with too much eagerness and too little self-examination. The Lord's day of judgment, Amos warned a complacent people, would bring darkness and not light to those who presumed upon it — not the triumph they expected but the judgment they had grown comfortable ignoring. Paul stands in that prophetic line. The day of the Lord is real, and it is coming, and it is two utterly different things to two different kinds of people: salvation to those who belong to the Lord whose day it is, and ruin to those who kept saying "peace and security" and went on sleeping. The same dawn that gladdens the child of the morning blinds the thief still caught out in the open.

This is the quiet death of every prophecy chart ever drawn. Across the centuries, sincere and earnest people have pored over current events and ancient numbers, certain they had at last worked out the date — and the date has come and gone, again and again, and the Lord has consulted none of their calendars. He told us he would not. To set a date for the day of the Lord is not bold faith; it is, however unintentionally, a flat contradiction of what the Lord himself plainly said about it. The thief does not send an invitation.

And Paul names what the unprepared will be saying at the very moment it comes: there is peace and security. It is the slogan of a world gone comfortably to sleep — perhaps even an echo of the empire's own confident propaganda, the Roman peace that promised safety to everyone who trusted it. Just when the world is most certain it has everything under control, Paul says, sudden destruction comes upon it, the way labor pains seize a pregnant woman — unannounced, unstoppable, and, in that last image, strangely full of promise, for labor pains are the threshold of a birth. But for those who said peace and security, there will be no escape. The same day that is comfort to one company of people is cata-

strophe to another — and the difference between them is not who managed to see it coming. The difference is whom they belonged to.

Sons of the Day

And now comes the turn, and it is one of the most important pivots in the entire letter: But you. But you, brothers and sisters, Paul says, are not in the darkness for the day to overtake you like a thief would. Notice carefully what he does and does not say. He does not say, “But you have figured out the timing, so you alone will see it coming.” The believers are no better informed about the date than anyone else; the day comes like a thief upon the whole world, the church included. What Paul says is something else entirely — the day will not surprise you, not because you know when it is, but because of who you are. You are sons of the light and sons of the day. A word about that phrase before we go on, since it is about to carry the whole session: “sons” here is a Hebrew idiom of belonging, not a statement about who is included. Paul is addressing the entire congregation, women and men alike — the same idiom that calls James and John sons of thunder, or that has Jesus tell his hearers to become sons of light. To be a son of the day is to belong to the day. Every baptized person in that room was one, and so is every one in yours.

This is the great inversion, and it is worth dwelling on, because it lifts an enormous burden off the shoulders of anxious people. The world assumes that readiness for the end is a matter of information — of knowing the schedule, reading the signs, being among the clever few who finally cracked the code. Paul says readiness is a matter of identity. If you already belong to the day, the arrival of the daylight is no ambush. Think of it: a thief in the night terrifies the household asleep in the dark, but a thief holds no terror whatsoever for the dawn itself. You do not need to know the hour the sun will rise if you are a child of the morning. The believer is not someone who has discovered when the day is coming. The believer is someone who already belongs to it.

Light and darkness are among the oldest words in the Bible’s vocabulary, and Paul is leaning on all of it at once. In the beginning, God spoke light into a formless dark. The prophets promised that upon a people walking in darkness a great light would dawn. John announces that the light has come into the world and the darkness could not overcome it; Jesus calls his hearers to become sons of light. To be a son of the day is to belong, already and irreversibly, to that advancing dawn — to live now, in the half-light of a world still mostly in shadow, as people who carry the morning inside them. The day of the Lord will not import something foreign into the believer’s life. It will flood the whole creation with the light the sons of the day have been living in all along. They are not waiting for a stranger, but for the full sunrise of a light they already know by name.

And notice where that identity came from, because the Thessalonians most certainly did not manufacture it for themselves. They were made sons of the light — called out of darkness, as Peter says, into God’s marvelous light; buried and raised with Christ in their baptism; transferred, as Paul tells another church, out of the domain of darkness and into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son. “Sons of the day” is not a rank they earned by vigilance or achieved by superior watchfulness. It is a gift they were given — the very same gift this whole letter has been describing from its first page: chosen, called, claimed. Their readiness for the last day rests on exactly the same ground as everything else in their lives: not on what they have done, but on what God has made them.

Awake and Sober

So then, Paul says, drawing out the conclusion: we must not sleep as the rest, but must stay alert and sober. And here we have to tread carefully, because the words “stay alert” and “watch” have been pressed into service for precisely the kind of feverish sign-scanning Paul has just ruled out. To “watch” for the Lord, in much popular teaching, has come to mean poring over the news for prophetic clues, tracking wars and rumors of wars, forever asking whether this latest crisis is at last the one. That is not remotely what Paul means. He has just finished telling them the timing is unknowable and the question is the wrong one. The watchfulness he commands is not of the eyes scanning the horizon but of the heart staying awake.

To be awake and sober, in Paul’s sense, is a way of living, not a way of speculating. It is the opposite of the spiritual sleep and drunkenness of those who belong to the night — the moral stupor of a life lived as though God were not coming at all, dulled by the world’s pleasures and its anxieties into forgetting who and whose it is. To be sober is to be clear-headed about reality: that we belong to God, that the Lord truly is coming, that this life is lived under his eye and toward his day. The drunk man at midnight has lost track of all of it. The sober son of the day has not. Wakefulness is simply living, here and now, in the steady awareness of the One who is surely coming — not with the jangling nerves of a man straining to hear a burglar, but with the settled attentiveness of a household that knows its Master is on the road home.

There are two ways to lose this sobriety, not one — and a good deal of popular Christianity has fallen into the second while warning loudly against the first. The obvious danger is the drunkenness of the world: the stupor of forgetting God altogether, anesthetized by comfort into living as though no one were coming at all. But there is another intoxication, subtler and far more pious, and it is the thing this study has been written against — the breathless drunkenness of end-times excitement, forever agitated, forever reading the morning news as prophecy. That, too, is a loss of sobriety. The sober Christian is neither

asleep to the Lord's coming nor drunk on speculation about it. Sobriety here is simply sanity: taking the coming with full seriousness, and the timing with none at all.

And Paul tells us exactly what this sober wakefulness is dressed in, and it turns out to be an old friend. Since we are of the day, he says, we must stay sober by putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet our hope for salvation. There they are again — faith, love, and hope, the same three that opened this letter back in the first chapter. The armor of the waiting Christian is not a chart, and not a stockpile, and not a survival plan. It is faith, love, and hope: faith that holds fast to Christ, love that pours itself out toward the neighbor, and the hope of salvation that guards the mind like a helmet against despair. To be ready for the day of the Lord is simply to be clothed in these — to go on believing, go on loving, go on hoping — in the ordinary daylight of an ordinary, faithful life. That is the whole of Christian readiness. Not knowing the hour. Wearing the armor.

See what kind of equipment it is. Armor, not weaponry — a breastplate and a helmet, the gear of one who stands his ground and is kept, not of one who storms the gates of heaven to seize what he wants. The waiting Christian is not on the offensive against the future, trying to force it or predict it. He is protected — heart guarded by faith and love, mind guarded by the hope of salvation — and kept safe through whatever comes. And the letter has now come full circle. It opened with Paul giving thanks for their work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope. Near its close those same three stand watch over them as armor. They are not only how the Christian life begins; they are how it is guarded to the end.

Not Destined for Wrath

Then Paul gives the deepest reason of all that the sons of the day need not fear that day, and it reaches all the way back into the eternal purpose of God. For God did not destine us for wrath, he says, but for gaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Destined. Appointed. It is the language of God's own settled and ancient purpose, and it is meant to be the bedrock under a believer's feet. The day of the Lord brings wrath upon a world that kept saying "peace and security" — but God did not appoint his people for that wrath. He appointed them for salvation.

This is worth saying with confessional precision, because it is one of the places where the comfort of election shines most brightly. God has destined his people for salvation; he has not — and Scripture is careful never to say otherwise — destined anyone for wrath in the same way. The wrath that falls on the last day falls upon sin, and upon those who would not have the salvation God held out to them; it is never the carrying-out of some cold decree that doomed them from eternity past. What God has decreed, what he has destined and appointed for those who are in Christ, is salvation — and that appointment is the very

thing that lets a Christian look toward the day of the Lord without terror. You are not waiting around to find out which way God will finally decide about you. He has already decided, and decided for you, in Christ, before the foundation of the world.

See how directly this strikes at the anxiety so many believers carry into the last things. The day of the Lord terrifies the person who is, deep down, still trusting his own performance — who suspects that when the books are opened, the verdict will turn on whether he prayed enough or kept himself clean enough. For him the coming of the Judge can only be dreadful, because the case still feels open. But the gospel says the case is closed. The verdict has been rendered, in Christ, at the cross and the empty tomb, and it does not hang on the believer's wavering grip but on God's settled purpose. This is why assurance is not arrogance. The Christian faces that day with peace not because he is confident in himself, but because he has stopped looking at himself at all.

And on what does that salvation rest? Not on our wakefulness, not on our sobriety, not on how well we managed to wear the armor — but, Paul says, on our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us. There it is, the cross, set down as the foundation under the whole passage. He died for us. The reason the day holds no wrath for us is that the wrath has already fallen — on him, in our place, at Golgotha. And then Paul adds a phrase that gathers up both of the last two sessions into a single breathtaking promise: he died for us so that whether we are alert or asleep we will come to life together with him.

Hear what he has just done. “Alert or asleep” — in the running language of these two chapters, that most likely means whether we are alive or dead when the day arrives, though the same words can be read of moral wakefulness, and the note at the back sets out both. The ones still awake, still living, and the ones who have fallen asleep in death — both, Paul says, will live with him. It does not matter in the least which side of the grave the day happens to find you on. The dead in Christ will rise; the living in Christ will be caught up; and the whole point of both, the single destination of all of it, is that we might live with him. The grieving of chapter four and the waiting of chapter five meet right here, in one promise that covers every believer in every condition: living or dead, awake or asleep, you will live with him. Nothing — not death, not even the day of the Lord itself — can take that from you.

Build One Another Up

And so, for the second time in two chapters, Paul lands the whole towering subject of the last things in the same humble place. Therefore, he says, encourage one another and build up each other, just as you are in fact doing. We heard it at the close of the last passage — encourage one another with these words — and here it comes again, now with a builder's image added to it: build one another up. The doctrine of the day of the Lord,

exactly like the doctrine of the resurrection before it, is given not for speculation but for construction — for the strengthening of trembling people by one another's hands.

That word *build* pictures the church as something under construction — a building going up stone by stone, each believer set into the wall and bearing weight for the others. The truth about the last things is, in Paul's hands, a builder's tool: you take the resurrection and the day of the Lord and the promise of living with him, and you use them to set another stone more firmly in place, to shore up a wall sagging under grief or fear. This is unfashionable in an age that imagines faith as a private affair between the lone individual and God. Paul will not have it. The last things are given to the church, to be used by the church, upon the church — not a scatter of solitary survivors each clutching a private hope, but a single building going up together, holding one another up until the Builder returns to finish what he began.

Notice, too, the gentle commendation tucked into the very end of it: just as you are doing. Paul is not laying a new chore on them. He is blessing something already happening among them, and asking only for more of it. This is what a healthy church does with the truth about the last things. Not draw charts, not stoke fear, not busy itself sorting the saved from the doomed, but turn to one another and build one another up. Remind the frightened of whose they are. Remind the grieving that they will live with him. Remind the drowsy to stay awake in faith and love and hope. The last things were never meant to be a spectator sport. They are a means of mutual encouragement, placed into the hands of ordinary Christians to use gently on one another.

The Right Way to Wait

Put the two passages side by side now and you have the whole of it. To the grieving, Paul says: your dead will rise, and you will all be with the Lord. To the waiting, he says: you cannot know the day, and you do not need to, because you are sons of it already. In both, the same comfort and the same refusal — the refusal to turn the last things into a calendar to be cracked or a disaster to be dodged, and the comfort that, living or dead, awake or asleep, the people of God will live with him.

So this is the right way to wait, and it looks almost nothing like what the charts have trained so many to expect. The Christian waits not by scanning the headlines but by living soberly in the light. Not by calculating the date but by resting in an identity already given. Not by stockpiling against catastrophe but by putting on faith and love and hope each ordinary morning. Not by dreading the wrath but by trusting the Christ who already bore it. And not alone, but together — building one another up, speaking these words to one another, until the day dawns and the long waiting is finally over. The son of the day does not

lie awake in the dark dreading the sunrise. He gets dressed, goes to work, loves the neighbor, and watches for the dawn with joy.

Paul has one more set of things to say to this church — a swift burst of final instructions about life together, about leaders and the discouraged, about prayer and the Spirit and the examining of all things — the last brushstrokes of the letter. That is where we will go next, to bring First Thessalonians to its close.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION SEVEN

Kept Blameless

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28

Paul has just finished saying the largest things a person can say. The dead in Christ will rise. The living will be caught up. The day comes like a thief, and it does not matter, because you are sons of it already. Whether we are awake or asleep, we will live with him. Having climbed that high, the letter now does something that can feel almost like a stumble: it comes down, fast, into the ordinary furniture of a congregation's life. Acknowledge your leaders. Admonish the undisciplined. Comfort the discouraged. Do not repay evil for evil. Pray. Give thanks. Do not extinguish the Spirit. Examine what you are told. Greet one another.

It is a swift burst of instruction, one line after another, and it is easy to read it as a postscript — the sort of tidying a writer does when the real letter is finished and the page is nearly full. It is nothing of the kind. This is where the whole letter lands. Everything Paul has taught about the last things has been aimed, from the beginning, at a company of people who have to get along with one another between now and the day. Here is what that looks like on a Tuesday. Open your Bible to the twelfth verse of the fifth chapter of First Thessalonians.

There is a shape to what follows, and it helps to see it before we walk through the pieces. Paul begins with the ministry God has placed among them, moves out to the differing needs of the people in the pews, then to the habits of a life lived toward God, then to the testing of what they are told — and finally, when the commands are all given, he stops commanding altogether and prays. That prayer is the hinge of the passage. Everything he has just told them to do, he now asks God to accomplish in them. The exhortations are real, and they are not the ground they stand on.

Those Who Labor Among You

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who labor among you and preside over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them most highly in love because of their work. It is the first thing on the list, and in a letter this pastoral that placement is not accidental. A church living under pressure, waiting for a day it cannot schedule, needs a settled relationship with the men who bring it the Word.

The reason Paul gives is not the one we might expect. He does not ask for esteem because these men are impressive, or gifted, or personally admirable. He asks for it because of their work. The honor attaches to the labor, and the labor is the delivery of the Word of God to people who need it. This is the same congregation Paul told, back in the second chapter, that he and his companions had come to them not as flatterers or peddlers but as men entrusted with a message that was not their own. Clay jars, carrying a treasure. The jar is honored for the sake of what it carries.

Paul does not give these men a title at all. He describes them by what they do: they labor among you, they preside over you in the Lord, they admonish you. Three verbs, no office name — the work itself identifies them. And that middle phrase does real work: preside over you in the Lord. Their authority is not personal and not unlimited. It is authority under Christ and inside his Word, which means it reaches exactly as far as the Word reaches and not one inch farther. A leader who binds a conscience where Scripture has not bound it has stepped outside the only jurisdiction he was ever given.

That single sentence protects a church from both of the ditches it can fall into. On one side is the congregation that will not be taught — that treats the man in the pulpit as an employee with opinions and receives nothing from him it did not already agree with. On the other is the congregation that has made him a personality, gathered around the preacher rather than the preaching, so that when he leaves or fails, the faith of the people goes out the door with him. Paul walks between them. Honor the office, love the man, receive the Word — and remember which of the three is holding you up.

Then comes a line that reads like an afterthought and is not: be at peace among yourselves. Paul has just told a suffering church to expect the resurrection of the dead, and now he tells them to stop bickering. The two belong together more closely than we usually admit. The comfort of these letters travels along human wires. It moves from one believer to another in conversation, at a bedside, over a table — and a congregation at war with itself cuts every one of those wires. “Encourage one another with these words” requires a fellowship in which people are still speaking to one another. Peace among yourselves is not a nicety. It is the working condition of comfort.

Different Needs, Different Words

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the undisciplined, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient toward all. Four instructions in a single breath — and this may be the most practically useful sentence in the letter for anyone who cares for other Christians. Paul does not tell the church to say one thing to everybody. He tells them to look at the person in front of them and speak accordingly.

The three groups are genuinely different. The undisciplined are the ones out of step — the word Paul uses appears to carry the sense of a soldier out of rank, a man who has left the line the rest are holding. We will meet these people again, and at greater length, in the last chapter of the second letter; they need a straight word, and Paul says so. The discouraged are the small-souled, the ones running low: perhaps the very people who had been weeping over their dead, or lying awake wondering whether they would be ready. The weak are those who cannot at the moment stand on their own, in faith or conscience or body. And over all three, patience.

What Paul is describing here is nothing less than the pastoral art that confessional Lutherans have always called the right distinction of law and gospel — and he is placing it in the hands of ordinary church members, not only pastors. The admonition that would set the undisciplined man back on his feet would flatten the discouraged woman entirely. The comfort that is exactly right for her would let him go on as he is. Same Word, same God, same church — and the wrong one, given to the wrong person, does harm. It takes love to tell them apart, and it takes patience to keep trying when you have guessed wrong.

Patience is the only one of the four that applies to everybody. Be patient toward all. Paul seems to assume that the people doing this work will get it wrong — will bring the firm word where the gentle one was needed, will coddle where they should have spoken plainly, will misread the person in front of them. Of course they will; we are not very good at seeing one another. The instruction is not be accurate. It is be patient, with the undisciplined and the discouraged and the weak, and with one another in the fumbling attempt to help. A church that waits for perfect discernment before opening its mouth will never say anything at all.

Then Paul closes the paragraph by ruling out the one response that comes most naturally to a persecuted congregation: see that no one pays back evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all. He will have a great deal more to say about God's justice when we reach the second letter. Here he simply forecloses the option. The Christians of Thessalonica were being genuinely wronged, and Paul does not tell them the wrong is imaginary or that it does not matter. He tells them it is not theirs to settle — and then he widens the field, past the fellow believer, to everyone. Even them. Especially them.

Rejoice, Pray, Give Thanks

Always rejoice, constantly pray, in everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Three commands in eight words, and they have been used to bludgeon more grieving Christians than almost any other verse in Paul. So we should be careful here, and read them for what they say.

Paul is not ordering these people to feel cheerful. He is writing to a church with fresh graves in it — he has spent an entire chapter on their grief, and he never once told them to stop grieving. He told them to grieve differently, as people with hope. Joy in the New Testament is not a mood a Christian is required to manufacture and display; it is what happens in a person who keeps being told the truth about Christ. Nor does the text say to give thanks for everything, as though the believer must call the funeral good. It says in everything — in the middle of it, from inside it, there is always something to thank God for, because Christ is still risen and you are still his.

Constant prayer, likewise, is not a technique or an endurance feat. It is what it looks like to live with the door open — a running conversation with a Father who is always there, resumed a hundred times a day and never really ended. The man who prays without ceasing is not the man who never gets up off his knees. He is the man for whom speaking to God has become as ordinary as breathing, so that trouble and joy alike turn into prayer before he has decided to pray.

And consider where this church was standing when Paul told them to give thanks. They had been run out of the synagogue, hauled before the city authorities, cut off by their own neighbors, and had buried some of their number before the Lord returned. This is not counsel written from a comfortable study to people whose lives are going well. It is written to the afflicted, and it assumes that even there — especially there — the believer has something in hand that no circumstance can reach. Thanksgiving is possible in the dark not because the dark is good, but because the thing you are thankful for was never made of daylight.

And then the phrase that carries the whole thing: this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Christians spend enormous energy trying to discover the will of God for their lives, usually meaning a decision — the job, the move, the person. Paul says the will of God is standing in plain sight, and it is this. Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks. Not in the abstract, and not on your own strength, but in Christ Jesus — which is to say, from inside the life he has already given you. These are not conditions you meet in order to be his. They are the shape of a life that already is.

Test Everything

Do not extinguish the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt. But examine all things; hold fast to what is good. Stay away from every form of evil. Here Paul is steering between two ditches again, and this time the road is narrow.

The image behind the first command is fire. To extinguish the Spirit is to throw water on something God has lit — to shut down, out of suspicion or sheer tidiness, what God is actually doing among his people. A congregation can do this without noticing. It happens

whenever the safe course becomes the only course, whenever a word that would have done real good is left unsaid because someone might be uncomfortable. Paul says: do not put out the fire.

But he says the next thing in the same breath, and the church that keeps only half of this counsel has kept none of it. Examine all things. Not everything that claims to come from God does. This church knew it: a rumor was already loose among them that the day of the Lord had come, and by the time Paul writes the second letter he will be warning them about a report or a letter passed off as his own. Deception was not hypothetical in Thessalonica. It arrived wearing the right clothes.

The answer Paul gives is neither swallow it whole nor trust nothing. It is examine it — and the standard for the examining is the apostolic Word they had already received, the Word he thanked God they welcomed as what it really is, the Word of God. That is the measure. Anything that comes claiming the Spirit's authority is laid alongside the Scriptures, and what agrees is held fast, and what does not is let go. This is not cynicism; a cynic tests nothing because he has already decided. It is discernment, and it is the plain duty of ordinary Christians, not the private preserve of experts. Then Paul adds the last word on the subject: hold fast to what is good, and stay away from every form of evil. Examine, then hold. Both halves, or neither.

There is a pattern for this elsewhere in the same missionary journey. When Paul preached in Berea, Luke tells us, the people there eagerly received the message and then examined the Scriptures carefully every day to see whether these things were so — and Luke calls them more open-minded than the Thessalonians for it, not more suspicious. They did both at once: received it gladly, checked it carefully. That is the posture Paul is asking for here, and it is the reason confessional Lutherans have always insisted that the Scriptures norm everything else, including the church's own teachers and confessions. Not because pastors are untrustworthy, but because the Word is the only thing in the room that cannot be wrong.

The God of Peace Himself

And now the commands stop. Now may the God of peace himself make you completely holy, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept entirely blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul has just handed this church a demanding list — honor your leaders, sort out your quarrels, calibrate your care, refuse revenge, rejoice, pray, give thanks, test everything. Any honest reader has begun by now to do the arithmetic and come up short. And precisely there, Paul turns from telling them what to do and asks God to do it.

This is the most important sentence in the passage, and everything else in it hangs from this hook. Sanctification — the whole business of being made holy, of actually becoming in practice what God has declared you to be — is here a prayer, not an assignment. The God of peace himself does it. Not the believer, gritting his teeth. Not the congregation, through a better program. Him. The commands remain commands; Paul means every one of them. But they are not the engine, and the Christian who reads them as an engine will either despair or start lying to himself about how he is doing.

Then that arresting phrase: your spirit and soul and body, kept entirely blameless. Paul is not handing us a technical anatomy of the human person here; he is piling up words to say all of you, every part, nothing left out. And note which part he refuses to leave off the list. The body — the aching, aging, dying body — is included in what God is making holy and keeping blameless for the day. Of course it is. This is the same letter that told them the dead in Christ will rise. What God intends to raise, he is not indifferent to now. There is no corner of you that God has written off.

And then, for anyone still doing the arithmetic: he who calls you is trustworthy, and he will in fact do this. Read that slowly, because it is the last assurance of the first letter and one of the great sentences of the New Testament. The confidence does not rest on the sincerity of your effort or the steadiness of your grip. It rests on the character of the One who called you — the same calling Paul thanked God for in the opening chapter, the same choosing that has run under this entire letter like bedrock. He is trustworthy. He will do it. Not you. He.

Kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. That phrase has been waiting in this letter for a while; Paul prayed something very close to it back in the third chapter, that God would establish their hearts blameless in holiness at the coming of the Lord. It returns here as the goal of the whole thing. And it is a promise about a day, not a verdict on this afternoon. Blameless is where God is taking them, by his own work, and the standing they have in the meantime is the standing Christ won — not a score they are running up. The Christian is not kept blameless by managing to be blameless. He is kept.

One Church, One Word

Brothers and sisters, pray for us too. It is a small line and easy to skip, and it tells you what kind of man is writing. The apostle who has just prayed the God of peace over them turns and asks them to pray for him. He is not above the fellowship he is instructing; he is inside it, needing what they need. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss, he adds — in that culture the ordinary warmth of family, made holy because these people now genuinely are one. Whatever the local equivalent is where you sit on a Sunday morning, the point stands: these people belong to each other.

Then Paul does something unusual, and the force of it is easy to miss: I call on you solemnly in the Lord, he says, to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. The verb is stronger than it sounds in English — the note at the back gives the more literal sense, I put you under oath before the Lord. This is not a request. It is a solemn charge, the strongest verb in the closing lines, and it is spent on making sure the letter gets read out loud to everybody. Not filed with the leadership. Not summarized for the congregation. Read — to all of them.

Consider what that means for a young church with no New Testament, most of whose members likely could not have read the letter for themselves if they had owned a copy. The comfort in this letter reaches them one way: somebody stands up in the assembly and reads it aloud, and they hear it. Which is exactly what Paul told them the Word does — it comes, it is heard, it is received as the Word of God, and it works. Faith comes by hearing. The last command of First Thessalonians is that the Word be publicly read to the whole congregation, and that is not a housekeeping detail. It is the letter putting itself into the very means by which God comforts his people.

That charge deserves a moment, given everything the letter has just said. Paul does not tell them to keep the parts about the resurrection for the mature, or to spare the grieving the chapter about the dead in Christ, or to shield the anxious from the day of the Lord. All the brothers. The whole letter. He appears to have believed that the frightened people in that room needed the words about the last things more than anyone, because those words were written for them in the first place.

And then the last line: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. He opened with grace and peace, and he closes with grace, and everything in between — the resurrection, the day of the Lord, the leaders and the discouraged and the examining of prophecies — sits inside that bracket. Grace at the front, grace at the back, grace holding the whole thing together.

Until the Day

Stand back and see what Paul has done with the end of this letter. He has taken the highest doctrine in the New Testament — the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the day of the Lord — and brought it to rest on a congregation's Sunday. A pastor honored. A quarrel settled. A discouraged member cheered up. A wrong left in God's hands. A thanksgiving offered in a hard week, a claim examined against the Scriptures, a letter read aloud to everyone in the room.

That is what waiting looks like. Not a chart on the wall, not a bag packed by the door, not a wary eye on the news — but a church living together in the ordinary means God has given, until he comes. And the whole of it held up, from underneath, by the promise that the

God of peace himself will finish what he started in these people. They are not asked to keep themselves blameless. They are asked to live like the sons of the day they already are, while he keeps them.

And see how much of this passage is simply the church being the church. Leaders bringing the Word; members carrying it to one another according to need; prayer and thanksgiving rising; teaching tested against the Scriptures; the letter read aloud to everyone; grace pronounced over the whole assembly. This is the fifth of our commitments in plain daylight: when these people were afraid, Paul did not hand them a better method for reading the times. He handed them back the ordinary means God had already given them — the Word, the fellowship, the prayers — and told them to use them on one another.

For a teacher, this is a good place to let a class breathe before turning the page. The first letter has run its full course now, from a young church's election in the opening chapter to the grace pronounced over them in the last line, and everything hard in between was answered with comfort. It might be worth asking your people, before moving on, what they will carry out of these five chapters into an ordinary week — and whether there is someone in their life who needs to hear one of these words this month.

That is the end of the first letter. It leaves this church honored, instructed, prayed over, and kept. But the pressure on them did not lift. Before long the persecution grew heavier, and a false word about the day of the Lord — possibly a letter forged in Paul's own name — got loose among them and shook them badly. Paul wrote again. The second letter is where we go next, and it opens exactly where a suffering church needs its pastor to open: with the justice of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

Part Two

Second Thessalonians

Steadfastness Under Pressure · Sessions Eight through Eleven

SESSION EIGHT

Worthy of the Kingdom

Reading: 2 Thessalonians 1

We come now to the second letter, and the air has changed. Probably only a short time has passed since Paul wrote the first one, and two things have happened in Thessalonica. The persecution that was already pressing on this young church when Paul wrote before has grown heavier, not lighter — they are, he says, in the thick of it now, enduring afflictions even as he writes. And a second trouble has crept in alongside the first: a report has been going around, perhaps even in a letter forged in Paul's own name, claiming that the day of the Lord had already come — and the rumor has thrown the frightened church into fresh alarm. Paul will deal with that second problem in the next chapter. He begins, in this one, with the first.

And he begins exactly where a pastor ought to begin with a suffering people — not with a rebuke and not with a lecture, but with thanksgiving, and then with the one assurance a persecuted church needs more than any other. For persecution always raises the same agonizing question in the hearts of those enduring it: Does God see this? Does he care? Will he ever do anything about it? Is there any justice at all in the end, or do the cruel simply win? Paul's answer fills this chapter, and it is yes — God sees, God cares, and God will most certainly set it right. Open your Bible to the first chapter of Second Thessalonians.

A Faith That Grew Under Fire

Paul opens with a thanksgiving so warm that he says he is positively obligated to offer it — we ought always to give thanks for you, as is right — and the reason is striking, given everything we know about their circumstances. Their faith, he says, is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of them for one another is increasing. Remember what Paul prayed at the very heart of the first letter: that the Lord would make them increase and abound in love, and that he might supply what was lacking in their faith. Here, only a few months later, that prayer is visibly being answered. The faith has grown. The love has increased. The “more and more” he had urged on them has actually happened.

But look at the soil it grew in. This faith flourished not in ease but under persecution, in the very afflictions they were enduring as the letter was written. We might have expected the opposite — that pressure would shrink a young faith and quietly snuff out its love. Sometimes it does. But here, in God's strange economy, the fire meant to consume the faith fed it instead. This is the theology of the cross showing its fruit: God works through

affliction rather than around it, and a faith pressed hard against the cross often grows roots it would never have grown in easy sunshine. Paul is so moved that he boasts about them — brags, really — in the other churches: look at the Thessalonians; look how they stand.

Picture what their persecution actually looked like, because it was not yet, so far as we know, the executioner's sword — and that makes it more relevant to most of us, not less. As Acts records, the trouble in Thessalonica came as mob hostility, public accusation, and the social and economic cost of walking away from the old gods. These were people losing standing, livelihood, friendships, and safety because they confessed Jesus as Lord in a city proud of confessing Caesar. Few of Paul's readers across the centuries have faced the lions; a great many have faced exactly this — the slow grind of being the odd one out. And it was in that pressure, Paul says, not in spite of it, that their faith and love grew. Whatever form the cost takes for you, the promise holds: what the enemy means for shrinking, God is able to use for growth.

Worthy of the Kingdom

Then Paul makes a claim about their suffering that we have to handle with real care, because the words can be made to say something Paul never meant. Their steadfast endurance under persecution, he says, is evidence of God's righteous judgment, to make them worthy of the kingdom of God, for which they are in fact suffering. Worthy of the kingdom. To an ear trained in the gospel, that phrase can set off every alarm — does Paul mean they are earning the kingdom by suffering well enough? Has the apostle of grace suddenly turned the kingdom into a wage paid out for endurance?

He has not, and the rest of the chapter will make that unmistakable — but even here the works-righteousness reading falls apart. Paul does not say their suffering earns the kingdom; he says their endurance is evidence of God's righteous judgment, a visible mark of something already true. It does not purchase a verdict; it reveals one. It is the fruit by which you can see that these are people God is already counting as his own, on whom the coming judgment will fall as vindication rather than wrath. And the suffering is for the kingdom — on its behalf, in its cause — not a coin paid into it. We will come back to this at the end of the chapter, where Paul says outright whose work this “worthiness” is.

There is real comfort in this, too, for anyone suffering for the faith and secretly wondering whether their endurance counts for anything at all. Paul says it counts for a great deal: it is evidence, a visible token, that you belong to the kingdom and that God's righteous judgment is even now on its way to vindicate you. Your faithfulness under pressure is not invisible to God, and it is not meaningless. It is the very mark of a citizen of a kingdom that is surely coming.

Paul is drawing on a thread that runs all through the New Testament: the settled link between suffering and glory. The Lord pronounced blessed those persecuted for righteousness' sake, and said the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Paul writes elsewhere that if we suffer with Christ we will also be glorified with him. This is not because suffering buys glory; it is because suffering for the name of Christ is the mark of those who belong to him, and those who belong to him are bound for glory. The persecution is the badge, not the bill. So when Paul says their endurance shows them worthy of the kingdom, he means something like what Jesus meant in the beatitude: the kingdom belongs to such as these — given, not earned — and their willingness to suffer for it is the family likeness of its heirs.

The God Who Sets Things Right

Now Paul states the assurance the whole chapter has been building toward, and for a persecuted people it is everything. It is right, he says, for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give rest to you who are being afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven. There it is in a single sentence: God will set it right. The tables will be turned. Those who made the saints suffer will themselves face the just judgment of God; the saints who suffered will be given rest. The deep moral ache of every oppressed believer — that the cruel seem to prosper and the faithful seem to lose — is met head-on with a promise. It will not always be so. A reckoning is coming, and it is just.

We must not move past this too quickly, because it touches something the comfortable can easily underestimate and the suffering cannot live without. A faith that promised no judgment at all would be no comfort to the persecuted; it would be a cruelty. Tell the martyr, tell the believer beaten for the name of Christ, tell the family whose lives were torn apart by the malice of others that God will simply overlook it all, wave it away, let it stand forever unaddressed — and you have not offered them grace. You have offered the abandonment of justice. The promise that God will judge is not the dark underside of the gospel; for the wronged, it is part of the good news itself. Evil will not have the last word. The accounts will be settled. The God who sees will act.

And notice what this does for the persecuted in the meantime. Because vengeance belongs to God — because he himself has promised to repay — the suffering Christian is set free from the need to repay for himself. He does not have to nurse his bitterness, plot his retaliation, or let the wrong done to him curdle slowly into hatred, because the case is in higher hands than his own. “Vengeance is mine,” the Lord says elsewhere; “I will repay.” To the believer that is not a threat but a release. You may hand the whole crushing weight of the injustice over to the one Judge who can be trusted with it, and walk away free — free to endure without bitterness, and free even to love the enemy, precisely because you are no longer the one who has to settle the score.

This is also the answer to a cry that runs through the Scriptures and through every honest heart that has watched evil go unpunished. How long, O Lord? the psalmists ask; will the wicked triumph forever? In Revelation the martyrs under the altar cry out with the same words. The longing for justice is not a sub-Christian impulse to be ashamed of; it is the ache of people made in the image of a just God, and Scripture never scolds it. It answers it. God will judge; the accounts will be settled; the long patience that now lets the wicked run — and gives them, and us, time to repent — will one day end in perfect justice. The delay is not indifference; it is mercy, holding the door open a while longer. But the door will close, and the God who seemed asleep will be shown to have been awake the whole time.

Flaming Fire

Then Paul describes that judgment, and the language turns as severe as anything in either letter. The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, he says, and with flaming fire he will mete out punishment on those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus; they will undergo the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his strength. There is no softening this, and we should not try. The judgment is real. Hell is real. The same coming that is rescue and reunion for the people of God is, for those who have set themselves against him, ruin.

But look carefully at how Paul defines that ruin, because it is more revealing than the flames. The heart of it, he says, is to be away from the presence of the Lord. That is the essence of the punishment — not first of all fire and torment as physical images, but exclusion, separation, banishment from the presence of God forever. And here the whole vision of the end that runs through these two letters snaps into focus. For the believer, we have heard again and again, the end is to be with the Lord — always with the Lord, caught up to meet him, living with him whether awake or asleep. The end of the impenitent is the exact photographic negative of that: away from the presence of the Lord. The two destinies are, at the very bottom, presence and absence. Heaven is to be with him forever. Hell is to be without him forever. The same day that ushers the sons of the day into the unveiled presence they were made for shuts out, at their own insistence, those who would not have him.

And notice on whom this falls: on those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel. It is not arbitrary, and it is not a matter of God hunting down the unlucky. The gospel — the good news of a rescue freely offered in Christ — has gone out into the world, and these are the ones who would not have it, who refused the very deliverance held open to them. Paul is not gloating here, and neither may we. There is a long and ugly tradition of preaching this kind of text with a certain relish, as though the destruction of the wicked were a

spectacle laid on for the enjoyment of the righteous. That is a grotesque distortion of it. The same apostle who wrote these words wept over those who rejected the gospel and could wish himself accursed for their sake. The right response to the reality of judgment is never glee. It is sober gratitude that we ourselves have been rescued from a fate we deserved no less than anyone else, and a fresh urgency to hold out to others the gospel that can still, today, be obeyed.

One word under all of this is worth drawing out: the Lord will be revealed — unveiled — from heaven. For now, Christ is hidden. He reigns, but his reign is veiled, and to all appearances the world runs as though he were not King at all; the cruel prosper, the faithful suffer, and the surface of things looks like injustice quietly winning. The day of the Lord is the lifting of that veil — the moment reality is shown for what it always was. On that day it will be plain to every eye that Christ was King the whole time, that the persecuted saints were the true royalty, and that the world's verdict on them was exactly backwards. Judgment, seen this way, is not God importing some new severity into a gentle world; it is the truth about the world coming out into the open. And because that unveiling belongs to him and not to us, we are spared the terrible work of deciding who is in and who is out.

Glorified Among His Saints

And then Paul tells us what that day is finally for, and it is breathtaking. The Lord comes, he says, on that day to be glorified among his saints, and admired among all who have believed. Stop and let the strangeness of that settle on you. The day of the Lord — this cosmic event of fire and judgment and the unmaking of the world's injustice — has as its very purpose the glory of Christ, and the place that glory will be put on display is in his saints. In these saints. In the very people the world has been despising and beating and dragging before its magistrates. In the lowly, persecuted, thoroughly unimpressive little congregation at Thessalonica, and in every congregation like it ever since.

This is the great reversal at the dead center of the gospel, now written across the sky. The world looked at these Christians and saw nothing worth a second glance — a handful of nobodies, the sort of people you could persecute without fear of consequence. On that day the world will look again and see the glory of Christ blazing out of them. The despised church turns out to be the showcase of the Redeemer's glory. If you have ever felt small and overlooked in your faith, hold this verse close. The glory is coming, and it is coming to shine out of precisely the people the world wrote off.

And see how a person comes to be among those in whom Christ is glorified on that day. Paul adds a small but decisive phrase: among all who have believed — and you did in fact believe our testimony. The doorway into that company is not worthiness, not achievement, not even the bravery of their endurance. It is faith. They are in because they be-

lieved — the only credential named in the verse, and the same one held out to every reader of this letter. The glory is shared, too, not solitary: Christ admired among all who believed, a whole company lit up together with the glory of their Lord. The persecuted Christian does not limp into eternity alone. He takes his place in a vast assembly of the faithful, every one of them shining with the same borrowed glory, and every one there for the same reason.

Made Worthy by Grace

And now Paul returns to that troubling word — worthy — and resolves it completely, in case anyone had begun to read his own letter against the gospel. To this end, he says, we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power. Read that slowly, because every clause is a hammer-blow against works-righteousness. Who makes them worthy? God does. Whose power fulfills their good resolves and their works of faith? His power, not theirs. The worthiness Paul spoke of back in verse five is not something the Thessalonians manufacture by suffering bravely enough; it is something God works in them and then graciously credits to them. They are not climbing toward the kingdom up a ladder of endurance. They are being made worthy of it, by the God who called them, through his own power at work within them.

And then Paul seals it with the word that governs the whole chapter and forbids any other reading: all of this, he says, happens so that the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified in them, and they in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. According to grace. There is the key that locks the door against every works-righteous misreading of “worthy of the kingdom.” From the growing of their faith, to the enduring of their persecution, to the worthiness they are granted, to the glory they will one day share — all of it, every single link in the chain, is according to grace. The suffering did not buy the kingdom. Grace gave the kingdom, and grace even gave them the faith to suffer for it well. Paul has bracketed the whole chapter — the worthiness language at the front, the word grace at the back — so that we cannot possibly mistake whose work our salvation is.

The second letter is doing what the first one did: it puts grace underneath everything. In the first, Paul gave three chapters to the gift before a single word of command. Here, in far fewer lines, he surrounds all his talk of worthiness and endurance with the flat declaration that it is God who makes them worthy, by his power, according to his grace. Tucked inside that is a comfort for the weak. If even the endurance is God’s gift — if it is his power that fulfills their every resolve for good — then the trembling believer who fears he cannot hold on is not finally relying on his own grip. He is being held. The perseverance the kingdom requires is the perseverance grace supplies. You are not asked to manufacture the

faith to endure; you are asked to receive it, and keep receiving it, from the God who has promised to finish what he began.

The Comfort of a Just God

Step back and see what Paul has given this battered little church. He has told them that their suffering is not meaningless — that their endurance is itself the evidence of a verdict already secured in their favor. He has promised them that God sees, that God is just, and that the day is coming when the tables will turn: rest for the afflicted, and a reckoning for those who afflicted them. He has set them free from the corrosive need to avenge themselves, by placing vengeance in the hands of the one Judge who can be trusted with it. He has told them honestly that judgment is real and its essence is to be shut out of the presence of God forever — and that they, the sons of the day, are not bound there but into that presence. And he has promised them that on the last day the very glory of Christ will shine out of their despised and persecuted lives. All of it, from first to last, according to grace.

Notice that this is the very same comfort we have been tracing all along, now turned to a new angle. To the grieving, the last things meant reunion: your dead will rise, and you will all be with the Lord. To the persecuted, the last things mean justice: God will set it right, and Christ will be glorified in you. The end of the world is good news for the believer not only because of whom we will be with, but because of what will at last be made right. The doctrine of the last things comforts the brokenhearted and the wronged alike.

Stand back across the whole study so far and you can see just how wide this comfort reaches. To the grieving, the last things came as reunion — your dead will rise, and you will all be with the Lord. To the fearful, they came as identity — you cannot know the day, and need not, for you are sons of it already. And now, to the persecuted, they come as justice — God sees, God will repay, and Christ will be glorified in you. There is no condition the human heart can be in that the doctrine of the last things does not reach and steady: bereaved, anxious, wronged, weary, afraid. This is precisely why we have insisted from the very first session on reading these things as comfort rather than calendar. A calendar serves only the curious. This comfort meets the brokenhearted exactly where they are, whoever they are, and hands each of them the same Christ.

But Paul has not forgotten that second trouble — the rumor, the false report, the claim that the day had already come and somehow been missed. The frightened church needs that lie answered, and answering it will take Paul into the strangest and most sobering passage in either letter: the unveiling of the man of lawlessness. That is where we go next.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION NINE

The Man of Lawlessness

Reading: 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12

We arrive now at the strangest and most sobering passage in either letter — the one with the man of lawlessness, the temple, the restrainer, and the strong delusion. It is the passage the speculative systems love best, mined endlessly for clues about a future world dictator and a coming great tribulation, and it is one of the most misread paragraphs in the whole New Testament. So we will need to take it slowly and carefully. But before we do, it is worth noticing the one thing that frames everything else, because it changes how the entire passage must be read: Paul wrote these frightening words in order to calm a frightened church.

That is the great irony of the chapter. A false report had gone around Thessalonica claiming that the day of the Lord had already come — and the church, instead of being comforted by the doctrine of the Lord's return, had been terrified by it. Eschatology, which Paul had given them as consolation, had been turned into a weapon of fear in the hands of deceivers. And so Paul writes to settle them down. “Do not be quickly shaken,” he says at the very start; and a few verses after this passage ends, he will turn from this whole dark scene straight to “God chose you.” The passage about the Antichrist is bracketed, beginning and end, by comfort. We must read it that way — or we will read it exactly as the deceivers did.

And there is a posture this passage asks of us, set by Paul's own handling of it. He is utterly firm about some things and deliberately reticent about others, and he rests the whole of it in the sovereignty of God. We will try to imitate him: firm where Paul is firm, content not to know where Paul leaves things veiled, and resting, through all of it, in the God who restrains and reveals in his own good time. Open your Bible to the second chapter of Second Thessalonians.

Do Not Be Quickly Shaken

Paul names the trouble at once. Concerning the coming of the Lord and our being gathered together to him — the very things he had comforted them with in the first letter, the return of Christ and the great reunion — he begs them not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed. Something had badly unsettled them: a spirit, a spoken word, perhaps a letter forged in Paul's own name, claiming that the day of the Lord had already come. We cannot be certain exactly what the claim meant — that the Day had somehow dawned and

they had missed it, or that they were already inside its terrors — but the effect is clear enough. The church was rattled, frightened, knocked clean off balance.

Notice what this tells us. The danger Paul is fighting here is not that the church had grown too relaxed about the end and needed to be scared into alertness. It is the opposite. They were too frightened, destabilized by a false teaching about the end, and Paul writes to steady them. This is worth holding onto, because it is exactly the pattern this whole study has been tracing. Bad eschatology terrifies. It shakes people, alarms them, knocks them off their feet. And the apostolic response to eschatological fear is never to crank the fear up higher; it is to calm it with the truth. Whatever else this passage turns out to be, it is medicine against panic, written by a pastor who could not bear to watch his people shaken.

The Man of Lawlessness

Paul's first move is to tell them the Day cannot already have come, because certain things must happen first — and chief among them is the appearing of a figure he calls the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction. Let no one deceive you, he says — and deception will be the keyword of this whole passage — that day will not come until the rebellion comes first and this lawless one is revealed. He describes him in terms drawn straight from the Old Testament's great tyrants: one who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god, who takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

Now everything depends on how we read that figure, and here the confessional Lutheran tradition parts ways sharply with the popular one. The popular reading expects a single future individual — a world dictator who will arise at the very end of history, to be identified from the headlines, his number decoded, his rise tracked on charts. The confessional Lutheran reading is altogether different, and it takes its cue from where Paul says this lawless one sits: not on a throne in some future world capital, but in the temple of God, claiming divine prerogative. He arises, in other words, not out in the world but inside the sphere of God — within the church. And the rebellion that precedes him is not first of all a political revolution but an apostasy, a falling away within the visible people of God.

This is why the Lutheran Confessions identify the man of lawlessness not as a mysterious end-times politician but as an office. In the Smalcald Articles it is the papal office — the authority that had seated itself in the place of Christ over the consciences of his people, binding them beyond the Word of God and adding human conditions to the free gift of salvation. Say this carefully, exactly as the Confessions meant it. The charge is not against Roman Catholic believers, many of whom love Christ and rest in his mercy; it is not a slur against persons at all. It is a charge against an office — against any authority that seats itself in the temple of God and claims what belongs to Christ alone. And it is broader than

any single institution. Wherever an office, a hierarchy, a teacher, or a system installs itself between Christ and the sinner, demanding the trust that belongs to God alone and binding the conscience with what God has not commanded — there the spirit of the lawless one is at work.

Heard this way, the figure is not a riddle to be matched against tomorrow's news. He is a recurring and recognizable reality, and the test for spotting him is not political but theological. It is the very test we met back in the second chapter of the first letter, where we watched the difference between the faithful steward and the counterfeit. The faithful minister points always away from himself to Christ. The lawless one does the precise opposite: he points to himself, seats himself in the holy place, and demands what is Christ's. Ask of any authority that claims your soul: does it hand you to Christ, or does it stand in his place? That question, and not the morning headlines, is how the man of lawlessness is known.

The image of a self-exalting figure seating himself in God's temple was not new to Paul's readers; it had a long and terrible history behind it. Daniel had foreseen a ruler who would magnify himself above every god, and the Jewish people had watched it happen in the flesh when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple in Jerusalem and demanded worship — the abomination of desolation the Lord himself would later take up. Caligula had attempted something similar within living memory, ordering his own statue set up in the temple. Paul is drawing on a recognizable pattern, not sketching a one-time prophecy: again and again a power arises that will not be content to oppose God from the outside but insists on seating itself in the holy place. That is the point. The man of lawlessness is a recurring shape history has worn many times — which is why he is discerned by the pattern, not awaited as a single novelty.

Already at Work

And now Paul says the thing that settles the whole question of how this passage is to be read — the single most important sentence in it for our purposes, and the one the speculative systems must quietly step around. After reminding them, a little wearily, that he had told them all of this in person already, he says: the hidden power of lawlessness is already at work.

Already. At work. Not “will be at work in some distant future,” not “waits offstage for the final act,” but already operating in Paul's own day, even as he wrote. This is the exegetical key, and it changes everything. If the lawlessness was already at work in the first century, the man of lawlessness cannot be merely a single individual still waiting to be born at the end of time. It is a present reality, an ongoing power already moving through the world and the church — awaiting only its full unveiling in its appointed time. The popular read-

ing has to treat the whole figure as wholly future. Paul says it is already running, and John says the same in his letters: the spirit of antichrist is already in the world, and many antichrists have already come. The confessional reading is not a theory imported from outside; it is taking Paul at his word.

The Reformers did not invent this reading in a fit of controversy. The unease had been building for centuries. The Waldensians from the twelfth century onward, the Franciscan Spirituals in their long quarrel with Rome, and after them John Wyclif and Jan Hus had already said it plainly. An office claiming universal dominion over souls, binding consciences beyond the Scriptures, had begun to look like the very thing Paul described. The Reformers' identification was the mature judgment of that long disquiet, not a fresh insult flung in anger. But the principle they recovered is larger than the quarrel that produced it, and this is exactly where we must not grow smug. The test — does this authority seat itself in Christ's place and bind the conscience beyond his Word? — does not politely exempt Protestants. A Protestant preacher, a celebrity ministry, a movement, a denomination, even a self-appointed prophet of the end times can install itself in the temple just as surely as any pope, demanding a trust and an obedience that belong to Christ alone. The lawless one is not finally a Roman problem or a Catholic problem. He is a temptation that stalks every place where the gospel is preached — our own pulpits and our own hearts included.

What Restrains

Which brings us to the most genuinely mysterious thing in the passage — the one point where we must be honest that we do not fully know what Paul meant. There is something, he says, that restrains the lawless one now, holding him back so that he is revealed only at the appointed time. He speaks of it twice: once as a force, “what holds him back,” and once as a person, “the one who holds him back.” And then Paul does something maddening to every curious reader since: he simply declines to explain. “You know what holds him back,” he says — they knew, because he had told them in person, but he never wrote it down, and so we do not.

It is worth being honest, as a confessional matter, that the church has never been given a binding answer to this question. The Lutheran Confessions speak clearly about the identity of the Antichrist; they say nothing authoritative about the identity of the restrainer. This is open ground, where faithful Christians have held different views in good conscience, and no one is bound to any of them. So we hold our conclusions here loosely — more loosely than anywhere else in these two letters.

That said, the Lutheran instinct does have a center of gravity, and it flows from the two-kingdoms doctrine we have met before. The oldest and most widely held Christian read-

ing, going back to the early fathers, understood the restrainer as ordered government — in their day, the Roman Empire and the rule of law it maintained; in ours, lawful authority as such. Read this way, the restrainer is God's own work of the left hand: the ordering of temporal authority that holds chaos and lawlessness in check, so that the gospel may run its course in a measure of peace. When that ordered authority decays, lawlessness is loosed. This reading sits naturally with everything Lutherans confess about how God governs the world through the magistrate and the sword, and it is where most confessional Lutherans have landed.

A second reading, also worth knowing, takes the restraining force to be the preaching of the gospel itself — that the lawless one cannot be fully revealed until the good news has run its appointed course among the nations. This one carries its own Lutheran resonance, for it makes the very Word of God the restraining power, holding back the dark until the light has finished its work. And a third reading takes the restrainer to be the Holy Spirit. Here we must be careful, because two quite different claims travel together under that heading. That the restraining power is the Spirit of God is an old suggestion, and a Christian may hold it without embarrassment. What is not old is the further claim that has dominated popular American teaching — that the Spirit is withdrawn from the earth when the church is raptured away years before the end. That addition is bound up with the very speculative system we have already had cause to question, and it is that part, not the older identification, which we may set aside with some confidence.

It is worth pausing, too, over why God would restrain the lawless one at all, rather than simply letting history run on to its end. The restraint, whatever its form, is plainly an act of mercy. So long as lawlessness is held in check, so long as the worst is kept from fully erupting, there is time — time for the gospel to keep going out, time for sinners to keep being gathered in, time for repentance that will be impossible once the end has come. We met this same patience in the previous chapter, where God's delay in judging was revealed as kindness, holding the door open a while longer. The restraint of the lawless one is of a piece with it. The God who holds back the dark is not dragging his feet; he is making room — room for mercy, room for one more to be saved before the appointed hour finally strikes.

But see what Paul does not do. He does not hand us a chart. He veils it — and the veil is of a piece with everything else he has said about the timing of the end: that it comes like a thief, that we cannot know the times and seasons, that the lawless one is revealed only in his time, which is God's time. The restrainer's identity is left in shadow on purpose, and the shadow is meant to throw us back onto the sovereignty of God. We do not need to know what restrains, because we know who restrains and who reveals. The mystery here is not a gap that should unsettle us. It is one more invitation to rest in the providence of a God who holds the whole of it — the timing, the restraining, the unveiling — in his hand.

Slain by a Breath

And then, having built up this towering and terrible figure — the lawless one, the self-exalting usurper, the mystery already at work and straining against its restraint — Paul disposes of him in half a sentence. The lawless one will be revealed, he says, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

Sit with how that lands. All that menace, all that blasphemous self-exaltation, all that satanic power and counterfeit glory — and the Lord Jesus undoes it with a breath. Not a war, not an epic contest between two great powers; a breath. The words echo Isaiah, who said the coming One would slay the wicked with the breath of his lips. The lawless one sets himself up in the temple and claims to be God; Christ exhales, and it is over. And see the instrument, because it is what this whole study has been pressing on us: the breath of his mouth is his Word. The same Word the lawless one set himself against — the Word whose place he usurped — is the Word that destroys him at the last. However large the counterfeit looms, however long the hidden power of lawlessness has been at work, he is no match for the Word of Christ. One breath, and the whole edifice falls.

And what is true of his final defeat is true of his lies right now, in the small daily skirmishes of an ordinary Christian life. The believer does not fight deception with cleverness, or by being sharp enough to see through every falsehood on his own. He fights it the way Christ finally destroys the counterfeit: with the Word. The lie is undone by the truth of Scripture, by the plain gospel, by the confession the church has handed down. This is why a Christian steeped in the Word is so hard to deceive — not because he is shrewder than other people, but because he carries the same breath that will one day topple the lawless one altogether. You do not have to out-argue every deception. You have only to keep close to the Word.

The Strong Delusion

Paul has two things left to say about the lawless one, and both concern deception, which has been the thread running through this whole passage. First, he tells us where the lawless one's power comes from: his coming is by the activity of Satan, with all power and false signs and wonders. Notice that word — coming. The lawless one has a coming of his own, a counterfeit that apes the coming of Christ; he is a parody, a dark imitation of the real thing, with counterfeit miracles and counterfeit glory, all of it on loan from Satan. This is how deception always works: not as an obvious lie, but as a convincing imitation of the truth, close enough to fool.

And who is fooled? Here Paul is careful, and we must be too. The deception works, he says, on those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. The deceived are not innocent victims who simply drew the short straw. They are people who, when the truth was held out to them, would not love it — who preferred the lie. The deception lands exactly where the love of truth has already been refused. This matters enormously, because it tells us that no one is deceived against their will, dragged off by a power they sincerely resisted. The door to the strong delusion is always opened from the inside, by a heart that did not want the truth in the first place.

Which is the only way to understand the hard sentence that follows: therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false. At first hearing this sounds as though God himself becomes the deceiver — but read it in its place and you can see what Paul means. This is the language of judgment, the same thing Paul describes in the opening chapter of Romans, where God, faced with people who suppress the truth and will not have him, finally gives them up to the very things they have chosen. God's sending of the delusion is not the arbitrary deceiving of the innocent; it is the just confirmation of a choice already made. To those who insist, again and again, that they will not love the truth, God at last grants them their wish and hands them over to the lie they preferred. It is a door finally allowed to close that they themselves had been slamming all along.

And here is the pastoral word this somber passage yields — the comfort hidden inside the warning — because a tender conscience, reading about a strong delusion, will at once begin to fear: what if it is me? What if I am the one being deceived and cannot even tell? Hear the answer in Paul's own description of the deceived: they are those who refused to love the truth and took pleasure in unrighteousness. The very fact that you love the truth, that you tremble at the thought of being deceived, that you want Christ and his Word — that is the surest possible sign that you are not among them. The strong delusion falls on those who do not want the truth. The anxious believer who clings to Christ and longs to be kept in the truth has, by that very longing, already been kept. Fear of deception is not the mark of the deceived. It is very nearly its opposite.

From the Counterfeit to the Chosen

Step back from the whole dark passage now and notice its shape, because the shape is itself the message. Paul builds up the most frightening figure in either letter — the apostasy, the lawless one in the temple, the satanic power, the strong delusion — and at every single turn he hems it in with the sovereignty and the victory of God. The lawless one is revealed only in God's time. He is held back, even now, by God's restraint. He is destroyed, in the end, by a single breath of Christ. And the deception touches only those who would not have the truth. The believer who reads this passage rightly comes away not more afraid

but less — because the towering enemy turns out to be, from first to last, a creature on God's leash, doomed by a word.

And notice that Paul has done more here than answer one church's panic; he has shown us how to hold the whole subject of the end. He is immovable about what God has made plain — that the Day has not yet come, that the lawless one is real, that Christ will surely win. He is content not to know what God has veiled — the restrainer's name, the timing, the precise shape of things to come. And he rests the entire matter in the sovereignty of God, who restrains and reveals in his own appointed time. Firm, reticent, and resting, in that order: that is the posture this passage teaches, and it is the cure for both diseases of eschatology at once — the cold curiosity that turns the end into a puzzle to be solved, and the hot fear that turns it into a terror to be survived. Hold tightly what God has spoken; hold loosely what he has hidden; and rest, through all of it, in the God who has the whole of it firmly in hand.

And that is precisely where Paul takes them next, the very instant this passage ends. Having shown them the counterfeit, he turns without pausing for breath to the real thing, and to them: but we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved. That is where our next session begins. Paul will not leave a frightened church standing and staring at the Antichrist; in the space of a single sentence he turns their eyes to the God who chose them before the foundation of the world. That is where we go.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TEN

Chosen from the Beginning

Reading: 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17

Remember where we just were. We have spent a whole session in the dark company of the man of lawlessness — the apostasy, the figure in the temple, the satanic counterfeit, the strong delusion falling on those who refused to love the truth. It is the most frightening passage in either letter, and Paul knew exactly what it would do to a church already rattled by false rumors of the end. So watch what he does the instant that passage ends. He does not say, “Therefore be vigilant.” He does not say, “Therefore make certain you are ready.” He does not pile one more burden onto frightened people. He says: but we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you.

That is the pivot, and it is the whole pastoral genius of the chapter. From the man of lawlessness to “God chose you” — from the terror to the election — in a single stroke of the pen. Having shown them the counterfeit and the deceived, Paul turns their eyes at once to the real thing and to themselves: you are not among the perishing who refused the truth; you are the beloved, the chosen, the called. The answer to eschatological fear, it turns out, is not a sharper lookout or a better chart. It is the oldest and deepest comfort there is — that before the world began, God set his love on you and chose you for himself. Open your Bible to the thirteenth verse of the second chapter.

And so we come, at last and head-on, to the doctrine that has been quietly threading through this whole study from the very first session: election. We have touched it again and again — in how Paul knew the Thessalonians were chosen, in the call that ran through both letters, in the promise that God had not destined us for wrath but for salvation. Now Paul states it outright and makes it the bedrock of comfort under a shaken church. It is a doctrine that has frightened many and consoled many, and almost everything depends on how it is held. Held the way Paul holds it here, it is nothing but good news.

Beloved, and Chosen

Look first at how Paul addresses them, because the love comes before the choosing in the very order of his words: brothers beloved by the Lord. Before he says a syllable about election, he names them as those the Lord loves. That is not decoration. It tells us the atmosphere in which the whole doctrine is to be breathed. Election is not a cold transaction

in a divine ledger; it is the outworking of love. These are the beloved, and it is because they are beloved that they were chosen.

And then the word itself: God chose you. There it is, plainly, with no hedging. The salvation of the Thessalonians did not begin with their decision, their insight, their good sense in believing the gospel when it came. It began further back than that, in God. He chose them. Paul will say in another letter that God chose his people in Christ before the foundation of the world, and he says something very like it here. (There is a small wrinkle worth knowing, and your Bible may carry it in a footnote. The oldest manuscripts divide between two nearly identical Greek phrases. One means that God chose them from the beginning, which is the reading printed here; the other means he chose them as a first fruit, an early and pledging harvest. Faithful scholars line up on both sides. And here is the comforting part: it does not finally matter for the doctrine. Either way the point is the same — the choosing was God's, and it came first.) Whether we read it as from the beginning or as a first fruit, the ground does not shift beneath us: salvation began with God's gracious initiative, never with ours.

This is, when you let it land, an enormous relief. If my salvation began with my choosing, then it is only ever as secure as my grip — and my grip, as I know all too well, is weak, slippery, and forever failing. But if it began with God's choosing, before I existed, before the world existed, then it does not rest on my grip at all. It rests on his. The frightened believer, lying awake wondering whether he has enough faith, enough vigilance, enough certainty, is asking the wrong question entirely. The question was never whether your grip on God is strong enough. It is whether his grip on you is — and that grip was fastened before the foundation of the world.

Why not simply avoid this doctrine, as many well-meaning Christians would prefer? Election is hard; it has been abused; it raises questions that make people uncomfortable. But it stands in the Scriptures, Paul places it at the very heart of his comfort, and the Confessions insist that, rightly handled, it is one of the most consoling truths God has given us. So we do not skip it; we refuse to twist it into a terror. Its great gift is assurance. The same logic that says God chose you before the world began says he will not lose you before it ends. The One who began this good work in you, Paul writes elsewhere, will bring it to completion; the choosing that started in eternity does not run out of strength halfway through your life. Your perseverance rests, in the end, not on yours but on his.

Through the Spirit and the Truth

But now we must be careful. The moment people hear “election,” they tend to picture exactly the wrong thing: a sealed decree up in heaven, a hidden list of names, a divine decision made out of sight that we can only anxiously guess at. And the question that always

follows is the tormenting one: how can I know whether my name is on the list? Watch how Paul heads that off, because it is the whole Lutheran instinct in a single clause. He does not point them upward to a hidden decree. He tells them how the choosing actually reaches them and shows itself: God chose you, he says, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

There it is. Election is not a bare decree we must squint at from below. It is worked out, made real, brought all the way home, through means we can actually stand in: the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and belief in the truth — which is to say, faith in the gospel. God's eternal choosing does not hover in the sky forever out of reach; it lands, in time, in a person who hears the gospel, is worked upon by the Spirit, and comes to believe the truth. And that means the place to look for evidence of your election is not inward, into the murk of your own heart, and not upward, into the hidden counsels of God, but right here: at the gospel that found you, the Spirit who is at work in you, the truth you have come to believe. Do you believe the gospel? Then you may know you were chosen — because that very faith is the Spirit's own work in you, the visible end of an invisible election.

And notice the sharp contrast Paul is drawing with the passage just before. The perishing, he had said, are those who refused to love the truth. And the chosen? They are those brought to belief in the truth. The very thing the lost rejected is the thing the elect were given to embrace. Which tells the anxious believer everything he needs to know: if you love the truth, if you cling to the gospel, if you tremble at the very thought of being among the deceived — you are, by that very fact, standing on the opposite side of the line from those who refused it. Your love of the truth is itself the fingerprint of the God who chose you.

Notice, too, how the whole Trinity crowds into this single verse, because that is itself a quiet comfort. The Father is the one who chose. The Spirit is the one who sanctifies. And the truth that is believed is the gospel of the Son, Christ himself. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all named here, all at work in the one rescue of one ordinary little church in Macedonia. Your salvation is not the project of a distant God who set something in motion long ago and then withdrew to watch from far off. It is the joint work of the whole God-head — the Father choosing, the Son redeeming, the Spirit applying it all to you through the Word — three persons, one God, entirely bent on bringing you home. When you feel small and forgotten, that is worth holding onto: the full attention of the triune God has been fixed on your salvation since before the foundation of the world.

Called Through Our Gospel

Paul carries the chain one link further. To this, he says, God called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Trace the links and you

have one of the great chains of the gospel, the same one Paul lays out at greater length in his letter to the Romans: God chose, God called, God will glorify. It begins in eternity with the choosing; it reaches down into time through the call; and it ends in eternity again with the glory — the very glory we heard about in the first chapter, Christ glorified in his saints, the saints sharing his glory.

And see how the call comes: through our gospel. Not a private revelation, not a mystical experience, not some inner certainty they worked up on their own — the gospel Paul and his companions preached to them. The eternal decree became the effectual call through the ordinary means of a man standing up in Thessalonica and preaching Christ crucified and risen. This is what we saw in the first session: Paul knew they were chosen because the gospel came to them in power. The footprint of election is the gospel that reached you. To know that God chose you before the foundation of the world, you do not climb up to read the decree. You look at the gospel that called you and trace it backward: this Word reached me; therefore the Spirit was at work; therefore I was chosen.

Not a Decree Behind God's Back

Election has done terrible damage where it has been held wrongly, and brought pure comfort where it has been held as Paul holds it. We met the two ditches in the first session: despair, the believer who hunts in his own heart for proof that he is among the chosen and concludes that he is not; and presumption, the man who decides he is certainly elect and therefore need not trouble himself with repentance or the Word. Both are dug by the same shovel — looking for election in the wrong place. The Confessions steer us between them by sending us, every time, to Christ and to the gospel, which is exactly where Paul has just sent the Thessalonians.

One more thing must be said carefully. The passage sets two groups side by side — the perishing and the chosen — and a certain cast of mind leaps at once to the conclusion that God must have chosen the one for heaven and the other for hell, with equal deliberation, before either was born. The Lutheran church does not confess that, and Scripture does not teach it. Look at how Paul describes the two. The chosen are saved because God chose them; the whole credit goes to grace. The perishing are perishing because they refused to love the truth; the whole fault is their own. They are not mirror images. Salvation is entirely God's doing; damnation is entirely the sinner's own. God elects his people to salvation in Christ; he decrees no one to destruction. Hold those two truths in their proper asymmetry, and election remains what Paul means it to be: not a terror that might have doomed you in secret, but a comfort that secured you in love.

And here a tender conscience may press one more anxious question: yes, but did Christ die for me? If only some are chosen, how do I know I am not among the others? The

Lutheran church answers as plainly as it can. Scripture says God desires all people to be saved, and that Christ died for all — not for a select few, but for the whole world. We do not pretend to resolve the mystery of why, then, not all are finally saved; the Confessions refuse to rationalize it, and so will we. But we never let election eat away at the universal offer. The gospel comes to you with no asterisk and no fine print: Christ died for you; his body and blood were given for you; you are invited, freely, to believe. You do not have to peer into some secret decree to find out whether the offer is sincere. It is, and it has your name on it. Receive it — and you will discover, looking back and never forward, that you were chosen all along.

So if the doctrine has ever frightened you — if the word “election” has ever sounded like a lottery you might have lost before you were even born — hear it now the way Paul means it. He raises it not to unsettle the Thessalonians but to steady them; not as a question mark hung over their salvation, but as the bedrock laid beneath it. The whole point of telling a frightened, shaken church “God chose you” is that there is nothing more solid in all the universe to stand on. Your salvation does not finally depend on the strength of your faith on a given morning, or the steadiness of your feelings, or your success at staying undeceived. It depends on a choice God made before the world was made, and carries out through his Spirit and his gospel, and will most certainly bring to completion. That is not a doctrine to be afraid of. It is a doctrine to rest your entire weight upon.

Stand Firm, Hold Fast

And now, having laid down that bedrock, Paul builds a single command on top of it — and the order is everything, as it always is in these letters. So then, brothers, he says — so then, because you were chosen and called and are bound for glory — stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us. Notice that the command comes after the comfort, and grows up out of it. Election does not make the believer passive, as though being chosen meant nothing he did could matter anymore. It does the very opposite: it gives him the one solid place to plant his feet so that he is able to stand firm. You can only stand firm on ground that will hold your weight, and election is the ground that holds.

And what does standing firm look like for a church shaken by false reports? It looks like holding on to the traditions they were taught — the apostolic teaching handed down by Paul’s spoken word and by his letters. Be clear about what he means by “traditions,” because the word can mislead a modern ear. He does not mean later human inventions piled on top of the Word — the very kind of man-made requirement the man of lawlessness uses to bind consciences. He means the opposite: the apostolic deposit itself, which would shortly be written down as our New Testament. The defense against deception is not cleverness, and not frantic vigilance against every fresh rumor. It is to hold fast the apostolic Word, and to refuse to be moved off it by any spirit or letter or voice, however urgent.

There is a quiet but important truth in this for our own age, which is no less full of urgent voices and confident new revelations than Thessalonica was. The Christian is not asked to chase down and personally refute every deception that arises; that would be a full-time labor, and a losing one. He is asked to hold fast something far simpler and far stronger — the Word once delivered. Stand on that, and the deceptions may come and go around you like weather, blowing in and blowing out, and you will still be standing when they have passed.

This is, in the end, the practical answer to every fear we have traced through these two letters. How does a grieving, anxious, persecuted, deception-rattled church actually go on living in hope? Not by mastering a system, not by achieving certainty about the timeline, not by working up stronger feelings — but by standing firm on the Word once delivered. The believer's footing, day by day, is the gospel he has heard, the Scriptures he reads, the confession the church has handed him to hold. And he does not stand alone. Paul writes "stand firm" to a whole congregation, in the plural — they hold the same Word together, confess the same faith together, prop one another up when one of them begins to waver. The lone Christian is easy to topple. A church standing together on the apostolic Word, holding fast one confession, is not. That is how the people of God outlast the deceptions of every age: shoulder to shoulder, feet planted on the Word.

Eternal Comfort Through Grace

Paul ends the chapter the way he so often ends things — by turning from instruction to prayer, gathering up everything he has said and lifting it Godward. And the prayer is, fittingly for this study, soaked through with the language of comfort. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, he prays, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

Three things in that short benediction are worth having. First, the source: he names the Lord Jesus and the Father together — and in the Greek the verbs are singular, the Son and the Father acting as one to console their people. Second, its description: eternal comfort and good hope, given by grace. Not a momentary reassurance worn off by morning, but a consolation as lasting as God himself, and a gift rather than a wage. Third, its aim: that God would encourage their hearts and strengthen them in every good thing they do or say. The two things this shaken, rumor-rattled church most needed are exactly the two Paul asks for them: comfort, and steadiness.

That is the whole of what Paul has been doing through this entire chapter, distilled into a single prayer. He took a church terrified by a lie about the end, and he did not scold them and did not frighten them further. He told them they were beloved and chosen from be-

fore the world began, called through the gospel, bound for glory, secured by grace. He set them on the solid ground of the apostolic Word and told them to stand. And then he prayed that God himself would work in them the very comfort and steadying he had been describing. Eternal comfort and good hope, through grace. There is no better answer to fear in all the world.

Whose Are You?

Step back and see the shape of the whole chapter, because it is one of the most pastorally perfect movements in all of Paul. He raises the most frightening specter in either letter — the man of lawlessness, the deception, the perishing — and then, without so much as pausing for breath, he answers every bit of that fear with a single word: chosen. Whose are you? That is the question that hangs over the whole dark first half of the chapter, and Paul answers it in the second: you are God's — chosen by him before the foundation of the world, beloved, called, kept, and bound for glory. The deceived belong to the lie they preferred. You belong to the God who chose you. And nothing — no rumor, no deceiver, no man of lawlessness, no terror about the end — can unfasten a grip that took hold of you before the world was even made.

That is the deepest comfort this study has yet reached, and it is the answer to every fear we have met along the way. To the grieving: your dead will rise. To the anxious: you are sons of the day. To the persecuted: God will set it right. And to the frightened, shaken, wondering-if-they-will-make-it believer: God chose you from the beginning, and he will not lose you. Stand firm, hold fast the Word, and rest your whole weight on the choice he made before time began.

This is, in a sense, where the whole study has been heading. From the very first session we have watched Paul meet fear after fear — grief, anxiety, persecution, deception — and answer each one not with a calendar but with the gospel. Here he reaches the bedrock beneath all of it: that the God who comforts the grieving and steadies the anxious and vindicates the persecuted is the same God who chose his people before the world began and will most surely bring them home. There is no deeper word of comfort than that — and it is exactly the kind of word Paul told us, back in the first letter, that we are to use on one another. When a brother or sister is shaken, by death or by fear or by the lie that the end is upon them, this is among the truest things you can ever say to them: you are God's, chosen and beloved, and he will not let you go. Comfort one another with these words.

Paul has only a little left to say — some final, practical instructions about prayer and work and the disorderly few who had stopped working in their eagerness for the end. The towering doctrine of the last things comes all the way back down, in the final chapter, to the workbench and the daily round. That is where we will go next, to bring the letters, and this study, home.

Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION ELEVEN

Not Weary in Doing Good

Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3

We have come a very long way. We began with a frightened young church in a hostile city; midway through the first letter we stood with them at a graveside, weeping over their dead. We have climbed since then through the resurrection and the catching-up, the day of the Lord and the sons of the day, the life of a congregation waiting together, the righteous judgment of God, the man of lawlessness in the temple, and the eternal choosing of God before the foundation of the world. These are some of the highest and most soaring matters in all of Scripture. And now, in this final chapter, Paul brings every bit of it back down to earth and sets it on a workbench. After the resurrection and the Antichrist and election, his closing concern turns out to be this: that some people in Thessalonica had stopped working, and needed to be told to get back to it.

That descent is not an anticlimax. It is the point. One of the deepest convictions running through this whole study has been that the doctrine of the last things is meant to shape ordinary life — to comfort the grieving, steady the anxious, sustain the persecuted, and now, here at the very end, to send the waiting back to their daily work. Bad eschatology had not only frightened this church; it had disordered it. And Paul's cure for both the fear and the disorder is one and the same: come back down to earth, hold fast the Word, love your neighbor, and get to work. This is where the letters come home — and where our study comes home with them. Open your Bible to the third chapter of Second Thessalonians.

Pray That the Word Runs

Paul begins his close, as he so often does, by asking for prayer — and notice what he asks them to pray for. Not for his comfort, not even first of all for his safety, but that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, just as it had among them. The image is of the Word running, racing forward unhindered, free to do its work in city after city. Here is the man's deepest desire laid bare: that the gospel would keep running. He asks, too, to be delivered from wicked and evil men — for, he says, with a kind of sad realism, not all have faith. The Word runs, but it always runs into resistance; there are always those who will not have it.

Dwell a moment on that picture of the running Word. Paul does not ask them to pray that he would be a more effective preacher, or that the church would grow by clever effort; he

asks them to pray that the Word itself would run. It is the Word that does the work, not the men who carry it — a truth we met back in the second session, where the Thessalonians received what Paul preached not as a human message but as God's. Isaiah had heard the Lord promise that his word would not return empty but would accomplish what he sent it to do. That is the confidence beneath Paul's request. The church's task is not to supply the power — the Word has its own — but to pray it forward and get out of its way. We pray; the Word runs; God gives the increase.

And then he turns the whole thing on a single word. Not all have faith, he has just said — and then: but the Lord is faithful. A small play on words and an enormous comfort. His faithfulness will do two things for this church: he will strengthen you, and he will protect you from the evil one. There is the standing-firm theme once more — but see who does the strengthening. In the previous chapter Paul commanded them to stand firm; here he tells them who keeps them standing. Both are true at once, and the second is the ground of the first. You are commanded to stand firm by the very Lord who has pledged to keep you on your feet.

Directed to Love and Steadfastness

Paul says he has confidence in them — but look closely at where the confidence is placed. He has confidence in the Lord about them, that they are doing and will go on doing what he has commanded. His trust is not finally in their willpower or their track record; it is in the Lord at work in them. And then he prays a small prayer that is worth carrying in your pocket: may the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Those are the two things he asks the Lord to steer their hearts toward, and together they make a fitting summary of the whole pastoral burden of these letters. The love of God — that they would rest in being loved and chosen, the comfort we have traced from the first session to the last. And the steadfastness of Christ — the patient endurance that he himself showed, and that they would need for the long wait and the unrelenting pressure. Love to rest in, and steadfastness to keep going: a heart directed to those two is a heart equipped for anything that may come.

Eschatology Comes Home to the Workbench

And now Paul turns to the practical trouble weighing on him, and it is, of all things, idleness. Some among the Thessalonians had simply stopped working. We are not told why, but the likeliest explanation ties the whole letter together: if you have been told the day of the Lord has already come — the very rumor that frightened them in chapter two — why

bother working at all? Why plant a field or keep a trade if the end is upon us? Over-heated eschatology produces exactly this: people so consumed with the end of the world that they stop living faithfully in the middle of it.

There is a deep principle here, and it cuts against an instinct that has tempted the church in every age: the supposition that the more spiritual a person becomes, the less he should be bothered with ordinary life — that real devotion floats upward, away from the dishes and the timesheet and the carpool. The gospel will not allow it. The God of the Bible made a material world and called it good, became flesh within it, and is even now redeeming it; the hope he gives does not pull us up out of ordinary life but plants us more firmly in it. Christian hope does not abandon duty; it intensifies it. The believer who truly expects his Lord is not the one who quit his job to wait on a hilltop, but the one found faithfully at his post when the Master returns.

Paul will have none of it, and he meets it first with his own example. You know how you ought to imitate us, he says: we were not idle among you; we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; we worked night and day so as not to be a burden to a single one of you. He had every right, as an apostle, to be supported by the churches — and he deliberately set that right aside, laboring with his own hands precisely so that he could put this example in front of them. The great apostle worked an ordinary trade so that no one could ever claim the gospel made men idle.

Then comes the famous line, and we must handle it with care, because few verses in all of Scripture have been more often wrenched out of shape: if anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat. Hear exactly what it says — and what it does not. It says: if anyone is not willing to work. It is about the unwilling, the able-bodied who simply refuse, and not about those who cannot work. It is not, and was never meant to be, a word against the sick, the disabled, the elderly, the person who longs for work but cannot find it, or the one whom life has knocked flat. Scripture overflows with God's tender concern for exactly those people, and this verse has no quarrel with them whatsoever; the same Paul who wrote it spent years gathering money for the poor. Its target is narrow and specific: the able person who could work and will not, and who expects others to carry him. And to such a one, Paul says, the loving thing is not to subsidize the idleness, but to let its natural consequence do the teaching that words have failed to do.

See, too, the sharp little diagnosis Paul makes of them: they are not doing their own work, he says, but meddling in the work of others. There is a wordplay buried in the Greek — not keeping busy, but being busybodies — and it names a very real pattern. People with no honest work to occupy them rarely sit quietly; they become meddlers, minders of everyone's business but their own. Idleness is not a harmless rest; it curdles into the disordering of the whole community. So the command is plain and almost gentle: work quietly, and earn your own living. It is the charge he gave in the first letter — aspire to a quiet life,

work with your own hands — resting on the same truth we met there: ordinary work is a holy calling, the place God assigned us to love our neighbor. The cure for end-times fever turns out to be a day's honest work.

Say it plainly, against a long human suspicion to the contrary: work itself is not a curse. God gave Adam a garden to tend before there was any sin in the world; labor was part of paradise, not part of the fall. Sin made work hard — frustrating, sweat-stained, often thankless — but it did not make work bad. And the gospel, which restores what sin spoiled, restores us in time to glad labor: to the dignity of contributing rather than only consuming. This is why Paul treats honest work as a Christian calling and not a regrettable necessity. The waiting Christian does not despise his work as a distraction from holier things. He receives it as itself a holy thing, and does it, as Paul says, quietly and well.

Do Not Grow Weary

Then, having dealt firmly with the idle few, Paul turns to everyone else — the faithful many who had kept working, kept loving, kept standing — with a far more tender word: but you, brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing what is right. The faithful need that word as much as the idle need their rebuke, because there is a particular exhaustion in doing the right thing for a long time with no end in sight. The persecution had not let up. The wait had stretched on. And now there were idle troublemakers in their own midst on top of it. It would have been the easiest thing in the world simply to get tired.

To them Paul says, in effect: do not let it wear you down. Keep doing good. The same God who establishes you and guards you, the same Lord whose own steadfastness your hearts have been directed toward, will sustain you in the well-doing too. Weariness in doing good is one of the quietest dangers in the whole Christian life — not a dramatic falling away, just a slow giving-out, a gradual running-down of the engine — and Paul names it and heads it off with a single sentence. The faithful are not asked here to do something spectacular. They are asked simply not to quit.

And tucked into that gentle command is the doctrine of the last things doing its proper work. Why not grow weary in doing good? Because, as Paul tells another church, in due time we will reap, if we do not give up. The harvest is coming. The wait is long, but it is not endless and it is not pointless; there is a day appointed when every faithful labor will be gathered in. This is the exact opposite of the escapism the bad eschatology had bred. Rightly held, the hope of the Lord's coming does not make the Christian idle; it makes him durable. It lets him keep doing good through the long, unglamorous middle, when the end is not in sight and the reward is not in hand.

As a Brother, Not an Enemy

Paul gives one last instruction about the idle and disobedient, and it is a small masterpiece of how the church is to handle those who will not listen. If anyone refuses to obey what he has written, Paul says, take note of him and do not associate closely with him, so that he may be ashamed. That is real discipline, and it has teeth: the community is not to carry on as though nothing at all were wrong. But then comes the sentence that keeps the whole thing from ever curdling into cruelty: do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

There is the entire spirit of Christian correction in a single line. The goal of the discipline is never destruction; it is restoration. The distance is meant to provoke not exile but shame — the healthy shame that wakes a person up and turns him around. And through all of it, even at his most stubborn, he is to be treated not as an enemy to be defeated but as a brother to be won back. This is law in the service of the gospel: firm enough to be felt, gentle enough to heal, and aimed always at the day the wanderer comes home. The church that forgets the firmness becomes spineless; the church that forgets the brotherhood becomes brutal. Paul will allow it to be neither.

The Lord of Peace

And so we come to the end of the letters, and Paul ends them the way he began — with a blessing of peace and grace, the very things he had wished upon this church in his opening lines. Now may the Lord of peace himself, he prays, give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with you all.

Stop and feel the weight of that, given everything these two letters have held. This is a church that had been grieving its dead, frightened by rumors of the end, persecuted by its neighbors, rattled by deceivers, and troubled by disorder in its own ranks. And the last thing Paul asks for them is peace — not a temporary calm that lasts till the next bad news, but peace at all times and in every way, from the Lord of peace himself. The letter that opened by addressing a frightened people closes by commending them to the God whose own nature is peace. And then, the presence: the Lord be with you all — the same promise that has run like a golden thread through this whole study, the deepest thing the last day holds, here pronounced over them as a present blessing. Always with the Lord on that day; and, even now, the Lord with you.

Do not let that word peace slide past as a pleasantry; in the Scriptures it is one of the great words. It is not simply the absence of conflict, the quiet of a moment with no trouble in it. It is the deep biblical wholeness the Hebrews called *shalom* — the settled, flourishing rightness of a life and a world made well. It is what the risen Christ breathed over his

terrified disciples behind their locked doors. It is the peace that, Paul tells another church, surpasses all understanding and stands like a sentry over the heart. That is what he asks for this anxious congregation — the wholeness only the Lord of peace himself can give, and that no rumor of the end can take away.

Paul adds one final, personal touch: he takes the pen from his secretary and signs the letter in his own hand, noting that this is how his genuine letters may be known. It is a small thing, but it points straight back to the trouble that had started this second letter — the forged message that had falsely claimed the Day had come. Paul authenticates his own word, so that no counterfeit can frighten them again. And then the last line, the line both letters finally rest in, the line the whole gospel finally rests in: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Grace, first and last. The letters began with grace and peace; they end now with peace and grace. Everything in between — every doctrine, every comfort, every command, every hard word and tender one — is held safe inside that bracket of grace.

With These Words

And here our study comes home. We have walked through two short letters, written to one small, frightened, altogether ordinary church a very long time ago — and found in them something that speaks to nearly every fear a Christian can carry. To the grieving, Paul gave the resurrection and the great reunion: your dead will rise, and you will all be with the Lord. To the anxious, straining to know the day, he gave an identity in place of a date: you are sons of the day, and the dawn holds no terror for those who already belong to the light. To the persecuted, he gave the sure promise of justice: God sees, God will set it right, and the glory of Christ will one day shine out of your despised and faithful lives. To the deceived and the shaken, he gave election: you were chosen before the foundation of the world, and nothing in heaven or earth can unfasten that grip. And to the idle and the weary alike, here at the end, he gives the gift of ordinary faithful work, and the gentle charge not to grow tired of doing good.

Through every bit of it runs one single thread, and it is the thread this whole study has been named for. Again and again Paul takes the great doctrine of the last things — the very subject that, in so many other hands, has been turned into a calendar to be decoded or a terror to be survived — and he hands it to a trembling church for one purpose, and one purpose only: to comfort one another. Not to calculate. Not to speculate. Not to frighten. To comfort. The dead in Christ will rise; therefore, he says, encourage one another with these words. The day will not surprise you, for you are sons of it; therefore build one another up. God chose you before the world began; therefore stand firm, and be at peace. The whole towering architecture of Christian hope was raised, in the end, to be spoken

gently from one believer to another — at a graveside, at a bedside, in a sleepless and frightened midnight — with these words.

And the church has done exactly this for two thousand years. Stand at any Christian funeral and listen: you will hear these very words read over the casket — the dead in Christ will rise, we will always be with the Lord — spoken not as speculation but as comfort, exactly as Paul commanded. Sit beside any Christian deathbed and you will hear them again, pressed quietly into the hand of the dying. They are woven into the hymns we sing and the creed we confess. The whole church, in every century and every tongue, has been doing in its grief and its waiting what this little church was first told to do. When you carry these words to someone who is afraid, you are not improvising. You are joining a long and unbroken company of the faithful who have handed the same comfort, mouth to ear, down the centuries to you.

And notice, finally, that the thing Paul hands them is words. Not a technique, not a ritual we perform, not a secret knowledge reserved for the initiated — words, to be spoken from one mouth to one ear. This is no small thing, and it is deeply Lutheran. We have said all through this study that God works through means, that his Spirit rides his Word, that the gospel comes in power and is at work in those who believe. Here that conviction reaches its plainest and humblest form: the comfort of the last things travels by the Word, carried in the ordinary speech of ordinary Christians. You do not need to be eloquent. You do not need to be a theologian. You need only to know what is true — the Lord is coming, the dead will rise, we will all be with him — and to say it, in love, to someone who needs to hear it. The Word in your mouth is the same Word that once came in power to Thessalonica. It has lost none of that power. Speak it.

So that is how we will use them. Not as a chart hung on the wall, but as words held ready in the mouth — the truest words there are, to be carried to whoever needs them next. The Lord is coming. The dead will rise. We will all be together. And we will always be with the Lord. And until that day comes, we wait the way Paul taught this little church to wait: not frightened, not idle, not forever calculating, but loving our neighbors, doing our quiet work, holding fast the Word, resting in the God who chose us — and comforting one another, all the while, with these words.

May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Soli Deo Gloria

Back Matter

Notes

Sources, references, and a few things worth looking up

These notes are keyed to the sessions rather than numbered in the text. Nothing in the sessions is marked with a superscript, because a study meant to be read aloud to a class should not be interrupted by an apparatus. If you want to know where a claim comes from, find the session below and look for the phrase in bold; it is quoted from the point in the session where the claim is made.

The confessional citations follow *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), and use the standard abbreviations: AC for the Augsburg Confession, Ap for the Apology, SA for the Smalcald Articles, Tr for the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and FC Ep and FC SD for the Epitome and Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord. Article and paragraph numbers are given so that the passage can be found in any edition.

Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible (New English Translation), second edition. Where the NET's wording differs noticeably from the translations most readers grew up with, the difference is noted below rather than smoothed over. The full copyright acknowledgment appears under A Note on Translations and Permissions at the end of these notes.

Greek words are transliterated. Where a lexical claim is made, the reference is to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition, revised by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), cited as BDAG.

Introduction

one return, one resurrection, one judgment The single visible return of Christ, the resurrection of all the dead, and the judgment are confessed in AC XVII. The same article rejects the expectation that the godly will possess an earthly kingdom before the resurrection: AC XVII.5. See also the Nicene Creed's "he will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead."

the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope SA II.IV.10–14 and Tr 39–41. Both were produced at the assembly at Schmalkalden in Febru-

ary 1537, in anticipation of the council that eventually met at Trent. On the historical setting, see the editors' introductions in Kolb-Wengert.

the apparatus built on top of it is far younger The developed pretribulation system is usually traced to John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) and the Brethren movement, and reached a wide American readership through the notes of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909; revised 1917). For the history, see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), and Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1982*, revised edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Darby had antecedents, and honest historians disagree about how much weight to give them; what is not in dispute is that the system in its developed form is a nineteenth-century arrival.

the novels Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, the *Left Behind* series (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1995–2007).

Session One: Chosen and Called

the city authorities Acts 17:6, 8. Luke calls them politarchs, a title that is not used of officials elsewhere in the New Testament and that has turned up in a substantial number of inscriptions from Macedonia, several of them from Thessalonica itself. See BDAG s.v. *politarchēs*, and G. H. R. Horsley, “The Politarchs,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, edited by David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

endurance of hope 1 Thessalonians 1:3. Older translations read “steadfastness” or “patience of hope.” The noun is *hupomonē*, the quality of holding up under weight rather than of waiting quietly.

God chose you 1 Thessalonians 1:4. On election as comfort rather than speculation, see FC Ep XI and FC SD XI, and especially FC SD XI.45–49 on the doctrine's pastoral use.

our deliverer from the coming wrath 1 Thessalonians 1:10. Where older translations read “who delivers us from the wrath to come,” the NET makes it a title, deliverer. The point the session draws from it — that the first mention of Christ's return in this letter is rescue rather than terror — holds under either rendering.

the sealed will The analogy is the author's, not the text's.

Session Two: The Word You Received

entrusted with the gospel 1 Thessalonians 2:4. The treasure-in-clay-jars image is borrowed from 2 Corinthians 4:7.

we became little children among you 1 Thessalonians 2:7. This is a textual variant of a single letter: *nēpioi* (infants, little children) or *ēpioi* (gentle). The NET prints “little children”; the ESV, NIV, and KJV read “gentle.” The manuscript evidence favors *nēpioi*, though it makes for an abrupt image next to the nursing mother in the same sentence, which is why many translations take the other road. Worth naming in class, since half the room will be reading “gentle.”

God’s message, which is at work among those who believe 1 Thessalonians 2:13, NET; older translations read “the word of men” and “the word of God.” Compare Romans 10:17 and AC V on the means through which God gives faith.

this passage has been put to terrible use On 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16. Martin Luther’s late writings against the Jews, above all *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), are the hardest case for readers of this study and should be named rather than left vague. Several Lutheran church bodies have formally repudiated them, including the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (1983) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, whose 1994 “Declaration to the Jewish Community” rejects Luther’s anti-Jewish writings and the use made of them. If the phrase “people who called themselves Lutheran” stands in the text, consider naming Luther directly here; the vaguer phrase reads as evasion to anyone who knows the history.

Session Three: Longing to See You

Satan thwarted us 1 Thessalonians 2:18; compare 3:11, where it is God who directs the way. The two are held together without explanation in the space of a few verses.

destined for this 1 Thessalonians 3:3. The statement is made about persecution for the gospel and should not be extended into a claim that every hardship is a specific divine sentence on the sufferer.

we were separated from you 1 Thessalonians 2:17. The NET reads “separated,” but the Greek verb *aporphanizō* is the language of bereavement — to be orphaned. The session makes that point about the Greek, not about the printed English. See BDAG s.v. *aporphanizō*.

a creature on a leash The phrase is proverbial rather than confessional; if it stays, it is worth noting that Luther’s own formulations of the same idea are scattered through the Genesis lectures and the Bondage of the Will rather than fixed in one memorable line.

your hearts strengthened in holiness, to be blameless 1 Thessalonians 3:13, NET; older translations read “establish your hearts blameless in holiness.” Paul returns to this petition at 5:23; see the note on Session Seven.

Session Four: A Life Pleasing to God

a striking wordplay in the Greek 1 Thessalonians 4:11. The verb *philotimeomai* carries the sense of striving for honor or making something one’s ambition; Paul attaches it to living quietly, which produces the effect of an ambition to be unambitious. The NET catches it with “aspire to lead a quiet life.” See BDAG s.v. *philotimeomai*.

two kinds of righteousness Ap IV, especially Ap IV.86–122, on faith and the works that follow it. On the use of the law by the regenerate, see FC Ep VI and FC SD VI.

sanctification 1 Thessalonians 4:3. For leaders: the material on sexual holiness in this session will be heard personally by someone in the room. It is worth deciding in advance that the session will be taught with the law spoken plainly and the absolution spoken just as plainly, and that no one will be asked to disclose anything.

Session Five: The Dead in Christ

caught up 1 Thessalonians 4:17. The Greek is *harpazō*, to seize or snatch away; the Latin Vulgate renders it *rapiemur*, which is where the English word “rapture” comes from. The word is Paul’s and the event is real; what this study sets aside is the later system, not the verse.

to meet the Lord The noun is *apantēsis*. It is often used of a delegation going out from a city to receive an arriving dignitary and escort him back in, a sense visible at Acts 28:15 and Matthew 25:6. See BDAG s.v. *apantēsis*. The civic sense fits the passage well; it is not the only possible sense, and the argument here does not depend on it.

a secret pretribulation rapture was not part of the church’s mainstream reading Stated as a historical judgment about the mainstream of interpretation, not as a claim that no reader anywhere ever anticipated any element of the later system. See the histories cited under the Introduction.

Session Six: Sons of the Day

like a thief in the night 1 Thessalonians 5:2. Paul is taking up a saying of Jesus: Matthew 24:43–44 and Luke 12:39–40. Compare 2 Peter 3:10 and Revelation 3:3 and 16:15.

the day of the Lord The phrase runs through the prophets. Amos 5:18–20 is the sharpest warning to those who longed for it: in the NET, the Lord’s day of judgment brings darkness, not light. Compare Joel 2:1–11, Zephaniah 1:14–18, and Isaiah 13:6–13.

confident prophets of the date If representative cases are wanted, William Miller’s predictions culminating in the disappointment of 1844, the datings that followed Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), and Harold Camping’s announcements for 2011 are the best documented and the most instructive, since each did measurable damage to real believers.

peace and security 1 Thessalonians 5:3. That Paul is echoing Roman imperial slogans is a widely held and attractive suggestion; it is an inference from the setting rather than something the text states.

you cannot know the day The unknowability of the timing is not the same claim as the doctrine of imminence — that Christ may return at any moment. This study affirms the first on the strength of Matthew 24:36 and asks the reader to notice that the second is a separate question, on which the Confessions do not bind the conscience.

alert or asleep 1 Thessalonians 5:10. The NET reads “alert or asleep,” and its own note sets out the two ways the phrase can be taken: of moral wakefulness, matching verses 6 and 8, or of physical life and death, returning to the point of 4:13–18. This session follows the second, which is why the promise gathers up both of the last two sessions. The first reading is defensible and is worth mentioning to a class.

sons of the light and sons of the day 1 Thessalonians 5:5. The study prints the NET’s wording and keeps it as its own phrase, including in the session title. “Sons” translates *huiioi* and is a Hebrew idiom of belonging rather than a statement about gender — compare “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17) and John 12:36, where the NET has Jesus call his hearers to become “sons of light.” The ESV, NIV, and NRSV render the phrase inclusively as “children of light” and “children of the day,” which is the wording most readers will know. The session explains the idiom where the verse is quoted, and a teacher should not skip that explanation: half a class will otherwise hear the phrase as excluding them.

Session Seven: Kept Blameless

acknowledge those who labor among you and preside over you in the Lord 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, NET. On the office and its limits, see AC XIV and AC XXVIII, especially AC XXVIII.21–22 on the reach of ecclesiastical authority over consciences.

the undisciplined 1 Thessalonians 5:14, NET; older translations read “the idle” or “the unruly.” The word is *ataktos*, which BDAG glosses in terms of disorderliness and insubor-

dination; a military sense of being out of rank is commonly suggested and is not certain. The same root returns at 2 Thessalonians 3:6 and 3:11. See BDAG s.v. *ataktos*, *atakteō*.

the discouraged *Oligopsychos*, literally small-souled; the word occurs only here in the New Testament. Older translations read “the fainthearted.” See BDAG s.v. *oligopsychos*.

examined the Scriptures carefully every day Acts 17:11, of the Bereans — the next town Paul reached after leaving Thessalonica, which is worth mentioning to a class. The NET says Luke calls them more open-minded than the Thessalonians; older translations read “more noble.”

make you completely holy 1 Thessalonians 5:23, NET; older translations read “sanctify you completely.” The petition answers 3:13. On sanctification as God’s work rather than the believer’s achievement, see FC SD II and FC SD IV.

your spirit and soul and body The verse has been used to argue for a threefold anatomy of the human person. That reading is possible but disputed, and nothing in this session depends on it; Paul is piling up terms for completeness.

I call on you solemnly in the Lord 1 Thessalonians 5:27, NET. The NET note gives the more literal sense: “I adjure you by the Lord,” “I put you under oath before the Lord.” The verb is unusually strong for a closing instruction. On the public reading and hearing of the Word as the means by which faith comes, see Romans 10:17, AC V, and SA III.VIII.3–13 against those who expect the Spirit apart from the outward Word.

Session Eight: Worthy of the Kingdom

probably only a short time has passed Paul does not say how long, and neither letter dates itself. Commentators generally place the second letter within months of the first on the strength of the shared circumstances and the continuing persecution; the interval is an inference.

does God see this The cry of the martyrs at Revelation 6:9–11 is the closest parallel, and the answer given there — rest a little longer — is worth reading aloud alongside this chapter.

evidence of God’s righteous judgment 2 Thessalonians 1:5. Interpreters differ over what exactly is the evidence: the endurance of the Thessalonians, or the whole situation of a suffering church under a God who will set things right. The comfort of the passage does not turn on the choice.

glorified among his saints 2 Thessalonians 1:10, NET; older translations read “glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at.” The section heading in this study follows the NET.

Either way the glory is displayed in the persecuted congregation, which is the session's point.

vengeance is mine Romans 12:19, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35. The point Paul makes to the Thessalonians is the same one he makes to the Romans: justice is promised, and it is not assigned to us.

Session Nine: The Man of Lawlessness

the Lutheran Confessions identify the man of lawlessness SA II.IV.10–14, where Luther applies 2 Thessalonians 2:4 to the papal office directly, and Tr 39–41, where Melanchthon sets out the marks. Both were written in 1537 in the shadow of an expected council, and both are aimed at an office and its claims over conscience, not at the people who belong to that communion. Readers coming to this for the first time should be told the date and the circumstances before being told the conclusion.

voices within the medieval church itself Representative figures rather than a general appeal: the Waldensians from the twelfth century onward, the Franciscan Spirituals in the conflicts over poverty and papal authority, John Wyclif (d. 1384), and Jan Hus (d. 1415), each of whom applied the language of Antichrist to the papal office. Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) is often mentioned in this connection; his own position is more complicated than the shorthand suggests, and his later followers went considerably further than he did.

Antiochus Epiphanes Antiochus IV desecrated the temple in 167 BC: 1 Maccabees 1:54–59, and Daniel 11:31 with 12:11. Jesus takes up the language of the abomination of desolation at Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14.

the Roman emperor Caligula The order to place his statue in the temple was given around AD 40 and was not carried out before his death. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.261–309; compare Jewish War 2.184–203.

the hidden power of lawlessness 2 Thessalonians 2:7, NET; the Greek is literally “the mystery of lawlessness.” The verb for its working is *energeō*, of something actively operating now. Compare 1 John 2:18 and 22 and 4:3, where the spirit of antichrist is already present in the apostolic age.

the restrainer 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7, where Paul shifts from a neuter “what holds him back” to a masculine “the one who holds him back” (NET; the Greek is literally “the thing that restrains” and “the one who restrains,” which is where this study’s term “restrainer” comes from). The identification with ordered government goes back at least to Tertullian, who read the restraining power as the Roman state (Apology 32; *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 24). The identification with the preaching of the gospel is also old. The identification with the Holy Spirit is itself an old suggestion and can be held without embarrassment;

what is recent is the further claim that the Spirit is withdrawn from the earth at a pre-tribulation rapture, which belongs to the developed system described in the notes to the Introduction. The two claims should not be treated as one.

the Confessions say nothing authoritative about the restrainer Correct as stated: neither SA II.IV nor Tr addresses the question, and the Formula does not take it up. This is open ground.

Session Ten: Chosen from the Beginning

God chose you from the beginning 2 Thessalonians 2:13. This is the NET's main text, and the session follows it. The underlying Greek is a single string that can be divided either as *ap' archēs* (from the beginning) or as *aparchēn* (as a first fruit); ancient manuscripts were written without word division, and the evidence is genuinely divided. The NET prints "from the beginning" and notes the alternative, observing that Paul uses first-fruit language often elsewhere while "from the beginning" appears nowhere else in his letters, and judging the decision a close one. Readers using the ESV, NIV, or NRSV will find "as the firstfruits" in the text instead; the KJV, NASB, CSB, and NET read "from the beginning." As the session says, the doctrine is unaffected either way.

election FC Ep XI and FC SD XI throughout. On the asymmetry — that God's grace is the cause of salvation while unbelief is the cause of condemnation — see FC SD XI.40–42 and XI.78–82. On the universal offer, FC SD XI.28–32.

chosen in him before the foundation of the world Ephesians 1:4.

stand firm and hold to the traditions 2 Thessalonians 2:15. "Traditions" here is the apostolic teaching delivered by word and letter, which is worth saying to a class before anyone reaches for a later meaning of the word.

Session Eleven: Not Weary in Doing Good

idleness arose from end-times excitement The connection is the most plausible reading of the situation and is widely held, but Paul does not state it. He describes people who are not working and are meddling; the link to the rumors about the day of the Lord is an inference from the letter as a whole. It is worth presenting it that way to a class.

if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat 2 Thessalonians 3:10, quoted as Scripture. Note the verb: not willing. The verse says nothing about those who cannot find work, cannot work, or are caring for someone who cannot. That distinction should be made out loud every time this passage is taught.

not busy but busybodies 2 Thessalonians 3:11. The wordplay is between *ergazomenous* and *periergazomenous* — working and working around. English cannot quite reproduce it; the common renderings are approximations.

in due time we will reap Galatians 6:9, NET; compare 2 Thessalonians 3:13, “do not grow weary in doing what is right.”

the Lord of peace himself give you peace 2 Thessalonians 3:16. On peace as wholeness rather than the absence of trouble, compare John 20:19 and Philippians 4:7.

brotherly discipline 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15: note the last clause, do not regard him as an enemy but warn him as a brother. Compare Matthew 18:15–17 and Galatians 6:1.

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