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LIGUORI CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY



Paul's Early and Prison Letters

**1 & 2 THESSALONIANS, PHILIPPIANS,
COLOSSIANS, EPHESIANS, PHILEMON**

WILLIAM A. ANDERSON, DMIN, PHD



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Introduction to *Liguori Catholic Bible Study*

READING THE BIBLE can be daunting. It's a complex book, and many a person of goodwill has tried to read the Bible and ended up putting it down in utter confusion. It helps to have a companion, and *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is a solid one. Over the course of this series, you'll learn about biblical messages, themes, personalities, and events and understand how the books of the Bible rose out of the need to address new situations.

Across the centuries, people of faith have asked, "Where is God in this moment?" Millions of Catholics look to the Bible for encouragement in their journey of faith. Wisdom teaches us not to undertake Bible study alone, disconnected from the Church that was given Scripture to share and treasure. When used as a source of prayer and thoughtful reflection, the Bible comes alive.

Your choice of a Bible–study program should be dictated by what you want to get out of it. One goal of *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is to give readers greater familiarity with the Bible's structure, themes, personalities, and message. But that's not enough. This program will also teach you to use Scripture in your prayer. God's message is as compelling and urgent today as ever, but we get only part of the message when it's memorized and stuck in our heads. It's meant for the entire person—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

We're baptized into life with Christ, and we're called to live more fully with Christ today as we practice the values of justice, peace, forgiveness, and community. God's new covenant was written on the hearts of the people of Israel; we, their spiritual descendants, are loved that intimately by God today. *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* will draw you closer to God, in whose image and likeness we are fashioned.

Group and Individual Study

The *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* series is intended for group and individual study and prayer. This series gives you the tools to start a study group. Gathering two or three people in a home or announcing the meeting of a Bible-study group in a parish or community can bring surprising results. Each lesson in this series contains a section to help groups study, reflect, pray, and share biblical reflections. Each lesson also has a second section for individual study.

Many people who want to learn more about the Bible don't know where to begin. This series gives them a place to start and helps them continue until they're familiar with all the books of the Bible.

Bible study can be a lifelong project, always enriching those who wish to be faithful to God's Word. When people complete a study of the whole Bible, they can begin again, making new discoveries with each new adventure into the Word of God.



Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

BIBLE STUDY isn't just a matter of gaining intellectual knowledge of the Bible; it's also about gaining a greater understanding of God's love and concern for creation. The purpose of reading and knowing the Bible is to enrich our relationship with God. God loves us and gave us the Bible to illustrate that love. In a speech before the Pontifical Biblical Commission shortly after his election, Pope Francis stressed that the Church's life and mission are founded on the Word of God, which is the soul of theology as well as the inspiration of all of Christian existence. A study of the Bible is not only an intellectual pursuit but also a spiritual adventure that should influence our dealings with God and neighbor.

The Meaning of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina is a Latin expression that means "divine or sacred reading." The process for *lectio divina* consists of Scripture readings, reflection, and prayer. Many clergy, religious, and laity use *lectio divina* in their daily spiritual reading to develop a closer and more loving relationship with God. Learning about Scripture has as its purpose the living of its message, which demands a period of reflection on the Scripture passages.

Prayer and *Lectio Divina*

Prayer is a necessary element for the practice of *lectio divina*. The entire process of reading and reflecting is a prayer. It's not merely an intellectual pursuit; it's also a spiritual one. Page 19 includes an Opening Prayer for gathering one's thoughts before moving on to the passages in each section.

This prayer may be used privately or in a group. For those who use the book for daily spiritual reading, the prayer for each section may be repeated each day. Some may wish to keep a journal of each day's meditation.

Pondering the Word of God

Lectio divina is the ancient Christian spiritual practice of reading the holy Scriptures with intentionality and devotion. This practice helps Christians center themselves and descend to the level of the heart to enter an inner quiet space, finding God.

This sacred reading is distinct from reading for knowledge or information, and it's more than the pious practice of spiritual reading. It is the practice of opening ourselves to the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we intentionally focus on and become present to the inner meaning of the Scripture passage, the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds and hearts. We come to the text willing to be influenced by a deeper meaning that lies within the words and thoughts we ponder.

In this space, we open ourselves to be challenged and changed by the inner meaning we experience. We approach the text in a spirit of faith and obedience as a disciple ready to be taught by the Holy Spirit. As we savor the sacred text, we let go of our usual control of how we expect God to act in our lives and surrender our hearts and consciences to the flow of the divine (*divina*) through the reading (*lectio*).

The fundamental principle of *lectio divina* leads us to understand the profound mystery of the Incarnation, "The Word became flesh," not only in history but also within us.

Praying *Lectio* Today

Before you begin, relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). Then practice these four simple actions:

1. Read a passage from Scripture or the daily Mass readings. This is known as *lectio*. (If the Word of God is read aloud, the hearers listen attentively.)
2. Pray the selected passage with attention as you listen for a specific meaning that comes to mind. Once again, the reading is listened to or silently read and reflected or meditated on. This is known as *meditatio*.
3. The exercise becomes active. Pick a word, sentence, or idea that surfaces from your consideration of the chosen text. Does the reading remind you of a person, place, or experience? If so, pray about it. Compose your thoughts and reflection into a simple word or phrase. This prayer-thought will help you remove distractions during the *lectio*. This exercise is called *oratio*.
4. In silence, with your eyes closed, quiet yourself and become conscious of your breathing. Let your thoughts, feelings, and concerns fade as you consider the selected passage in the previous step (*oratio*). If you're distracted, use your prayer word to help you return to silence. This is *contemplatio*.

This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

Many teachers of prayer call contemplation the prayer of resting in God, a prelude to losing oneself in the presence of God. Scripture is transformed in our hearing as we pray and allow our hearts to unite intimately with the Lord. The Word truly takes on flesh, and this time it is manifested in our flesh.



How to Use This Bible-Study Companion

THE BIBLE, along with the commentaries and reflections found in this study, will help participants become familiar with the Scripture texts and lead them to reflect more deeply on the texts' message. At the end of this study, participants will have a firm grasp of Paul's early and prison letters and realize how these letters offer spiritual nourishment. This study is not only an intellectual adventure, it's also a spiritual one. The reflections lead participants into their own journey with the Scripture readings.

Context

When Paul wrote the early and prison letters, he was writing to communities he once visited and who now needed further instruction and corrections concerning the message he preached to them. Paul's letters are always written in response to situations developing within each particular community. To help readers learn about each passage in relation to those around it, each lesson begins with an overview that puts the Scripture passages into context.

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Part 1: Group Study

To give participants a comprehensive study of Paul's early and prison letters, the book is divided into six lessons. Lesson 1 is group study only; Lessons 2 through 6 are divided into Part 1, group study, and Part 2, individual study. For example, Lesson 2 covers passages from the latter part of 1 Thessalonians as well as the Second Letter to the Thessalonians. The study group reads and discusses only 1 Thessalonians 4—5 (Part 1). Participants privately read and reflect on 2 Thessalonians 1—3 (Part 2).

Group study may or may not include *lectio divina*. With *lectio divina*, the group meets for ninety minutes using the first format on page 17. Without *lectio divina*, the group meets for one hour using the second format on page 17, and participants are urged to privately read the *lectio divina* section at the end of Part 1. It contains additional reflections on the Scripture passages studied during the group session that will take participants even further into the passages.

Part 2: Individual Study

The passages not covered in Part 1 are divided into three to four shorter components, one to be studied each day. Participants who don't belong to a study group can use the lessons for private sacred reading. They may choose to reflect on one Scripture passage per day, making it possible for a clearer understanding of the Scripture passages used in their *lectio divina* (sacred reading).

A PROCESS FOR SACRED READING

Liguori Publications has designed this study to be user friendly and manageable. However, group dynamics and leaders vary. We're not trying to keep the Holy Spirit from working in your midst, thus we suggest you decide beforehand which format works best for your group. If you have limited time, you could study the Bible as a group and save prayer and reflection for personal time.

However, if your group wishes to digest and feast on sacred Scripture through both prayer and study, we recommend you spend closer to ninety

minutes each week by gathering to study and pray with Scripture. *Lectio divina* (see page 11) is an ancient contemplative prayer form that moves readers from the head to the heart in meeting the Lord. We strongly suggest using this prayer form whether in individual or group study.

GROUP-STUDY FORMATS

1. Bible Study With *Lectio Divina*

About ninety minutes of group study

- ② Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ② Scripture passage read aloud (5 minutes)
- ② Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ② Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (30 minutes)
- ② Scripture passage read aloud a second time, followed by quiet time for meditation and contemplation (5 minutes)
- ② Spend some time in prayer with the selected passage. Group participants will slowly read the Scripture passage a third time in silence, listening for the voice of God as they read (10–20 minutes)
- ② Shared reflection (10–15 minutes)
- ② Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

To become acquainted with lectio divina, see page 11.

2. Bible Study

About one hour of group study

- ② Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ② Scripture passage read aloud (5 minutes)
- ② Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ② Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (40 minutes)
- ② Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

Notes to the Leader

- ② Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ② Plan which sections will be covered each week of your Bible study.
- ② Read the material in advance of each session.
- ② Establish written ground rules. (Example: We won't keep you longer than ninety minutes; don't dominate the sharing by arguing or debating.)
- ② Meet in an appropriate and welcoming gathering space (church building, meeting room, house).
- ② Provide name tags and perhaps use a brief icebreaker for the first meeting; ask participants to introduce themselves.
- ② Mark the Scripture passage(s) that will be read during the session.
- ② Decide how you would like the Scripture to be read aloud (whether by one or multiple readers).
- ② Use a clock or watch.
- ② Provide extra Bibles (or copies of the Scripture passages) for participants who don't bring their Bible.
- ② Ask participants to read "Introduction: Paul's Early and Prison Letters" (page 21) before the first session.
- ② Tell participants which passages to study and urge them to read the passages and commentaries before the meeting.
- ② If you opt to use the *lectio divina* format, familiarize yourself with this prayer form ahead of time.

Notes to Participants

- ② Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ② Read "Introduction: Paul's Early and Prison Letters" (page 21) before the first session.
- ② Read the Scripture passages and commentaries before each session.
- ② Be prepared to share and listen respectfully. (This is not a time to debate beliefs or argue.)

Opening Prayer

Leader: O God, come to my assistance.

Response: O Lord, make haste to help me.

Leader: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit...

Response: ...as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Leader: Christ is the vine and we are the branches. As branches linked to Jesus, the vine, we are called to recognize that the Scriptures are always being fulfilled in our lives. It is the living Word of God living on in us. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your divine wisdom, knowledge, and love.

Response: Open our minds and hearts as we study your great love for us as shown in the Bible.

Reader: (Open your Bible to the assigned Scripture(s) and read in a paced, deliberate manner. Pause for one minute, listening for a word, phrase, or image that you may use in your *lectio divina* practice.)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Response: Our Father...

Leader: Lord, inspire us with your Spirit as we study your Word in the Bible. Be with us this day and every day as we strive to know you and serve you and to love as you love. We believe that through your goodness and love, the Spirit of the Lord is truly upon us. Allow the words of the Bible, your Word, to capture us and inspire us to live as you live and to love as you love.

Response: Amen.

Leader: May the divine assistance remain with us always.

Response: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Introduction

Paul's Early and Prison Letters

Read this overview before the first session.

Having a strong belief in the message of the gospel, an activist in Central America rallied the people to form peaceful marches against an unjust dictatorship. This activist sent an e-mail to a village near the capital, a village that many believed faced imminent invasion and slaughter by government troops. In his e-mail, the activist encouraged the people to remain faithful to the Lord's message of peace and to stand firm on the day the invasion would take place.

As a result of his first e-mail that many passed on to others, he became so well known among the people that the government sought to capture and imprison him. A short time after the e-mail appeared, the activist was captured by government soldiers and placed under house arrest. Since he was allowed to have visitors during his captivity, he asked his visitors to send out untraceable e-mails to the leaders of the peasants, urging them not to bear arms but to mount peaceful demonstrations throughout the country.

The e-mails became the glue that held the peasants together in their resolve to mount peaceful demonstrations. In one community, however, some individuals in the town were inciting others to arm themselves for battle. The activist responded to the situation, thanking the people for their support in the past and encouraging them not to join forces with the warring faction. He kept reminding them about the need for peaceful

demonstrations. By way of his letters, he included sentiments of his love and affection for them.

Later, another village received a letter that claimed to be from the activist, but no one was sure that he actually wrote it. It sounded like him, offered similar advice, but it included some ideas about peace that they had not heard him preach about in the past. Although the people suspected that a friend of the activist wrote the letter, they still followed its advice, for it included admonitions similar to previous letters written by the activist.

Because of the activist's letters and his call for peaceful demonstrations that spread throughout the country, the demonstrations eventually led to the fall of the dictatorship. Later, when peace finally settled over the country, the people gathered the activist's letters together and used them as a foundation upon which the new, peaceful government should be established.

Paul's Early and Prison Letters

In many ways, Paul was an activist with the message to live as peaceful followers of Christ. Unfortunately, Paul had to confront others who believed he was rejecting his Jewish roots. His message of peace caused him a great deal of suffering. This volume will study Paul's earliest letters, along with those he penned shortly before his death.

The letters of Paul in this text include Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, written early in Paul's ministry at a time when he believed the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. Later, when Paul was imprisoned, he wrote letters from his cell. Commentators identify Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon as letters written by Paul during his time in prison. They receive their name from Paul's own admission that he was writing during imprisonment.

We will learn in this volume that Paul may not have written the Letter to the Ephesians, but it captures his spirit and thoughts so well that it took several centuries before anyone challenged Paul's authorship.

The Early Letters

1 Thessalonians

Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest Christian manuscript in existence, written about the year 50. The letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament are ordered according to their length, with the longest being first and the shortest (Philemon) placed last. If the letters were placed in chronological order, Paul's letters to the Thessalonians would be the first. As it is, Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, because of their brevity, hold the eighth and ninth position among the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament.

Paul, with his companions Timothy and Silvanus (Silas), who are mentioned at the beginning of his letter, founded the church in Thessalonica. The Acts of the Apostles tells of the dangers Paul and Silas encountered as a result of their mission in Thessalonica. Paul preached in the synagogue there and converted many, but some leading Jews became jealous of Paul and stirred up the crowd against him and his companions. Acts records Paul preaching for three Sabbaths, but commentators believe Paul and his companions must have remained in Thessalonica for a longer period while founding the church there.

Because of the dangers from the Jews who rejected faith in Christ, Paul and Silas had to leave the city and travel to Beroea, but the Jews from Thessalonica followed them to that place and stirred up the crowds against them. When the danger in Beroea threatened Paul's life, the Christians in the city dispatched Paul to Athens. When Paul and his companions departed Thessalonica, they left behind converts that included Jews as well as Gentiles.

After Paul left the city, he sent word to Silas and Timothy, who remained behind at Beroea, to join him as soon as possible. In Athens, Paul preached about Christ and resurrection (see Acts 17). We do not know what happened to Silvanus (Silas) who fled to Beroea with Paul and Timothy, but Timothy and Silas were with Paul when he wrote his letter to the Thessalonians.

Due to Paul's hasty departure from Thessalonica, he apparently felt a need to continue instructing the new converts of the area. After his usual

greeting and thanksgiving, he speaks of his ministry among them, adding his desire to be among them and encouraging them to continue to develop the faith and love he witnessed when he was with them.

Since the Thessalonians live in the midst of a pagan culture and are familiar with pagan practices, Paul directs them to live faithfully and morally as followers of Christ. He addresses sexual practices that were dominant among pagan cultures, encouraging the converts to faith in Christ to remain strong and chaste.

A prominent feature of the letter is its treatment of the Second Coming of Christ. While preaching in Thessalonica, Paul believed the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. After presenting this message, he addresses the concerns resulting from this belief.

Many of the Thessalonian converts questioned what would happen to those who were already dead when the Second Coming took place. Would they share in the resurrection? Paul assures them that the dead will be the first to be raised and that the living will then share in the gifts of the Second Coming.

Some of the Thessalonians were apparently looking for signs predicting the coming of Christ. Paul points to the futility of attempting to predict the Second Coming, urging them to be vigilant, awake, and ready for when the time comes.

2 Thessalonians

Many commentators challenge the authorship of 2 Thessalonians. Most once believed 2 Thessalonians followed 1 Thessalonians after some new questions arose among the Thessalonian converts. But some evidence indicates this letter may not have been written by Paul but by one of his companions who believed he was responding to questions in Paul's manner. This letter is much more formal than 1 Thessalonians.

The Second Letter to the Thessalonians addresses two major issues. The first was concerned with questions about the Second Coming, and the second addressed the issue of work. Some preachers were convincing a small number of converts that the Second Coming had already taken place. Paul addresses this issue by presenting some signs of the Second Coming that had not yet occurred. The problem with Paul's presentation of these signs

is that he declared in the First Letter to the Thessalonians that signs did not exist. Some commentators see this as an indication that Paul did not write 2 Thessalonians.

One of the dangers found among some of the Thessalonian converts in response to Paul's message about the nearness of the Second Coming was that some of them apparently refused to work. Paul warns them against idleness, which leads to gossip, and states that they who do not work should not eat. Paul points to himself as an example of one who worked while he was among them, yet who still believed the Second Coming was imminent.

The Prison Letters

Paul in Prison—A History

In Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians (11:23), he boasts of the suffering he endured for the sake of Christ. Among his labors for Christ and his imprisonments, he writes that he is a minister of Christ with "far greater labors, far more imprisonments." Paul's most notable periods of time spent in prison occurred in Caesarea and in Rome. His long-term imprisonment began when more than forty people of Judea wanted to kill him, taking an oath not to eat or drink until they were able to slay him. They requested that the commander allow Paul to appear before the Sanhedrin, but the real plan was to kill him before he arrived. The commander, having received word about the plot, gathered two hundred men to protect Paul while he was sent to be imprisoned at Caesarea. (See Acts 23:22–27.)

Two years after Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea, the leadership in Rome changed. When it looked as though some were again plotting to kill Paul, he appealed, as a Roman citizen, to Caesar to judge his case. As a result, the rulers had no choice but to send Paul to Rome. His journey was long and perilous, fraught with rough seas and shipwreck.

Paul finally arrived in Rome, where he was held captive under house arrest, which allowed him many freedoms. Although he could choose his own private accommodations, Roman soldiers kept constant watch over him. For two years, Paul was able to continue preaching the gospel message, freely receiving all who visited him. The Book of Acts (28:31) closes with the words, "He received all who came to him, and with complete

assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Thus Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years and another two years in Rome, from 61 to 63. The Book of Acts records that soldiers guarded Paul (28:16), that he was allowed to receive visitors (28:30), and that he had opportunities to share the gospel (28:31).

Many commentators believe it was during Paul’s time as a prisoner in Rome that he wrote his epistles to the Colossians, the Philippians, and Philemon, though others believe some of the letters were written while Paul was in Caesarea or in prison in another area not mentioned in Acts. Paul does speak of “far more imprisonments” (Acts 11:23). Although the Letter to the Ephesians claims to be written from prison, many commentators do not believe Paul was the author.

Colossians

Many commentators believe Paul is the author of Colossians, while others do not believe Paul wrote this letter. The letter does include some theological explanations that do not sound like Paul. Likewise, there are some stylistic changes and words not common to him, but this is not enough evidence to convince most commentators that the letter was not written by Paul. Colossians closely resembles Paul’s Letter to Philemon, which is certainly written by Paul. The Letter to Philemon concerns a slave named Onesimus, who is mentioned in the Letter to the Colossians.

A companion of Paul named Epaphras, who is mentioned in the letter, is the apparent founder of the Church at Colossae. Paul writes to correct certain errors found among the converts in Colossae. In Colossae, elements of paganism and Judaism led to philosophical theories about “elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ” (2:8). Some converts in Colossae mixed the worship of these “elemental powers” with their worship of God through Christ.

Paul sought to eradicate these false forms of worship by stressing the preeminence of Christ, who is the visible image of the invisible God and who existed before all created beings on earth and in the heavens. Everything was created through him and for him. Paul points to Christ as the only mediator between God and human beings.

Furthermore, Paul asserts that Christ has put to death all practices such as mortifying the flesh or avoiding certain foods. Christ brought about unity among all people, erasing distinctions between Jew and Greek, circumcised and uncircumcised, and other distinctions. Paul teaches that all Christians receive the call to live holy lives, showing respect for family members, slaves, and others.

Philippians

Philippi, a Roman colony and an important city in northeastern Greece, was situated along a main route linking Byzantium with the Adriatic coast, a major shipping port. The city consisted of a large number of Gentiles and a small number of Jews. Paul founded the community at Philippi and expresses his love and concern for the converts in that city.

Just as commentators believe 1 Thessalonians is the first letter Paul wrote, they speculate that his Letter to the Philippians may be the last one he penned. This letter was apparently written from Rome in 62, and the belief is that Paul was martyred sometime after he wrote it. Paul and the Philippians developed a warm and loving relationship with one another, much like a father's relationship with his children. Paul, the founder of the Church at Philippi, speaks to them with deep affection, encouraging them to continue growing in their love for Jesus Christ.

The mutual love between Paul and the Philippians prompted the Philippians to send financial aid to Paul in prison through their envoy named Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus, a companion to Paul, became ill. Hearing that the Philippians were deeply grieved over his illness, he wanted to return to Philippi as soon as he recovered to assure the Philippians that he was well again.

Although Paul sent Epaphroditus to Philippi to alleviate the grief of the Philippians, he used the occasion to send this letter to the Philippians to express his great love for them and to deal with conflicts within the community. Through the use of a liturgical hymn, he urges them to have the attitude of Christ, who humbled himself by accepting our human condition and remaining obedient to his mission to the point of dying on the cross. The hymn ends on a note of triumph, exhorting that every knee shall bend and proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Within the letter we find abrupt changes in tone that lead some commentators to believe that Philippians is not just one letter, but many. He addresses the Judaizers harshly as “dogs” and recalls his own Jewish origins and practices to prove he is indeed a dedicated Jew who believes Jesus calls us to a new life, free of the Mosaic Law. The Judaizers were attempting to influence those who accepted faith in Christ and freedom from the Law of Moses. Paul also addressed personal squabbles within the community. The letter concludes with a blessing for the community.

Ephesians

Due to differences in style from the letters known to be written by Paul, the references to doctrines in the Church which show a development later than the era in which Paul lived, and the image of the Church as dominantly composed of Gentiles, most later commentators do not believe the text was written by Paul. They believe a later writer composed it sometime between 80 and 100. During Paul’s era, although there were many converts from among the Gentiles, the Church had a large number of converts from Judaism as well.

The letter found in our current New Testament is addressed to the Ephesians, but this address is missing in the earliest manuscripts. The letter seems to be a circular letter to be read at various churches. Scholars believe the expression “in Ephesus” was added to the letter more than a century after it was first written. In the current Catholic New Testament, the term *in Ephesus* is placed in brackets to show that it is a later addition. Missing in the letter is the tone of informality found in Paul’s other letters. If Paul were writing a circular letter, as most believe, it would obviously possess a more formal tone.

The theme of the letter encompasses an image of the Church as the body of Christ and the universal oneness of all creation through the ministry of the Church, which is the visible manifestation of the unity found in Christ’s body. The author views the act of bringing all into union with Christ as God’s hidden purpose from the beginning of time. Jews and Gentiles are now one in union with Christ. Flowing from this theme of unity in Christ is the need to keep the body of Christ pure and holy. As a means to attain this holiness, the author provides practical advice for living such a life in the Church.

Philemon

Paul's Letter to Philemon is a genuine Pauline letter. It is short and personal. Paul writes to Philemon concerning his slave Onesimus, who escaped and became a convert to Christ and an associate of Paul and is now sent back to him by the apostle. Paul begs for leniency for Onesimus, whom he has come to love as a brother. If Philemon wants to inflict any punishment on Onesimus, Paul asks that Philemon inflict it upon him (Paul) instead. It is a warm letter that shows Paul to be an extremely caring friend of Onesimus and Philemon.



LESSON 2

1 and 2 Thessalonians

1 THESSALONIANS 4—2 THESSALONIANS 3

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep (4:14).

Opening Prayer (SEE PAGE 19)

Context

Part 1: 1 Thessalonians 4—5 Paul admonishes his readers concerning their manner of life as followers of Christ. He exhorts them not to practice the sexual immorality common to their Gentile neighbors and to treat one another with mutual charity. Calming their fears concerning those who died, he tells them the dead will be the first to rise at the coming of the Lord. Since no one knows when the end will come, he urges the Thessalonians to remain vigilant, offering encouragement to one another and building up the spirit of the community. Furthermore, he prays they will experience peace and live holy lives, and ends with a blessing for the community.

Part 2: 2 Thessalonians 1—3 The author of Second Thessalonians greets the Thessalonians in the same manner as the greeting found in First Thessalonians, noting that the letter comes from Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. He praises the members of the community for their endurance in times of persecution. For those who are the perpetrators of the persecution, the author offers a warning that they will find themselves outcasts at the coming of the Lord, and exhorts them not to allow themselves to be deceived by the claim

that Christ has already come. He reminds the Thessalonians to give thanks to God for choosing them for salvation. Hoping to spread the message of Jesus to other areas of the world, he requests prayers from them that the word of the Lord may touch other hearts as it touched the hearts of the Christians in Thessalonica. Although the end may be near, he admonishes the people to work and avoid becoming busybodies. Finally, he urges them not to associate with those who do not obey the message the author left with them.

PART 1: GROUP STUDY (1 THESSALONIANS 4—5)

Read aloud 1 Thessalonians 4—5.

4:1–12 Call to Holiness

Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to live their faith in such a way that they continue to grow in holiness. The exhortation is not given because the Thessalonians are living in sin, but to encourage them to continue their spiritual growth. Paul approaches them in the Lord Jesus, that is, with the authority of Jesus, who sent him. Because of this authority, Paul can urge the Thessalonians to continue to act as he taught them.

The sanctification of the Thessalonians is the will of God, according to the letter, and Paul gives this as a basic motive for their avoidance of all immoral acts. The Gentile world was noted for its sexual depravity, so Paul warns them against illicit sexual activity. Since he is speaking in a society in which men control decisions concerning marriage, he urges the Thessalonians to choose a wife in holiness and honor, which means they should not follow the example of the Gentiles who may choose wives from among their own close relatives for the sake of keeping family possessions. He encourages them to control their own body and avoid lust, warning them against acting like the Gentiles, who have no regard for God in their life and thus commit sins of passion.

Furthermore, Paul warns his readers against the exploitation of one's neighbor. Those who wrong others in this way must face the Lord, who avenges such action. Although they have received this admonition from

Paul, he reminds them that the call to holiness comes from God, and whoever rejects these instructions not only shows a disregard for Paul but also for God, who gives the Holy Spirit to them. To reject holiness is a rejection of God's gifts to them, as the Spirit is given for their continual growth in holiness.

Paul commends the Thessalonians for their manner of acting with love toward one another. They have received this gift of love from God, and are expressing it to all Christians throughout Macedonia. As he does in the beginning of this section, Paul urges them to make more progress in the virtues they are already practicing. In this case, he is urging them to manifest love by living in peace, minding their own affairs, and working with their hands. This last exhortation may have been intended for those who had ceased working because they believed the Second Coming was about to take place. Paul tells them they should conduct themselves properly toward outsiders and continue to work to meet their own material needs.

4:13–18 Resurrection for the Deceased

In this passage, Paul instructs the Thessalonians concerning the Second Coming of Christ, which is referred to as “the coming,” as though the first presence of Jesus on earth was yet to be fulfilled and the true coming was one of glory. Only later did the Church begin to refer to the “coming” of the Lord in glory as the “second” coming.

Paul expresses a desire to clarify his teaching about those who have already died before the coming of the Lord in glory. It is unclear whether he is expanding on a lesson he had already taught them or whether he is addressing a problem discovered by Timothy during his visit to Thessalonica. This passage, however, seems to hold a central place in the letter.

Some Christians of Thessalonica worried about those who had fallen asleep (died) believing in Jesus. They apparently believed that only those who were alive at the Second Coming would share in the glory of the Lord. A common pagan belief was that everything ended with death and that there was no hope for glory after death. Paul addresses this concern so that Christians, unlike their unbelieving neighbors, will have hope.

When Paul tells his readers they should not grieve as others do who

have no hope, he refers to grieving with despair rather than normal human grieving at the loss of a loved one. However, he makes no specific comment here on this type of healthy human grieving.

Paul believes those who have already died will rise at the coming of the Lord. He points to faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the foundation for this belief, and makes clear that the living, among whom he includes himself, will be no better off than those who have died. We can deduce from this passage that Paul expects the coming of the Lord to occur soon, or at least before his own death.

Using apocalyptic imagery, Paul states that on the last day, the Lord will come from heaven at the sound of the archangel's call and the trumpet of God. At this time, the dead will rise from their graves first, and then the living will be caught up together with them to join the Lord. This is the time of fulfillment when all will live in glory with the Lord Jesus for all eternity. In this apocalyptic description of the coming of the Lord, Paul is not particularly concerned with the exactness or sequence of events. When he states that the dead will rise first, he is less concerned about the timing of their resurrection than he is about the fact of their resurrection. Still, he encourages the Thessalonians to use his message as a source of encouragement for one another.

5:1–11 Stay Alert and Sober

Paul refuses to offer guesses concerning the exact moment of the coming of the Lord, since he and the Thessalonians know the time will be like a “thief at night.” This idea is also found in the Gospels of Matthew (24:43–44) and Luke (12:39–40), who state that the end will come like a thief at an hour they least expect. Although these two gospels were written later, the message of the end times being preached at the time Paul wrote his letter could have included these words as the words of Jesus. Whatever the source of the message, it was apparently a common teaching shared by Paul with others.

At the end of this letter, Paul warns that those who are unprepared will just begin to think all is going well when the end comes, bringing destruction as suddenly as pain comes to a woman in labor. No one will be able to escape the coming of the Lord. By contrasting darkness (evil)

with light (those enlightened by Christ), he teaches those who read the letter that they are to abandon the darkness and live in the light of Christ. They are to live as people live during the day—alert and sober—and not asleep like those who live in darkness. These ideas should be viewed in a spiritual sense. Paul is not telling his readers to avoid sleep. Those who live in darkness are living in spiritual darkness, asleep to the presence of God in their life and drunk with the pleasures of the world.

Using the symbol of a soldier preparing for battle, Paul teaches those who live in the light to put on faith and love as a breastplate and hope of salvation as a helmet. Thus he offers Christians the joyful and encouraging news that God has destined them for salvation through Christ, and not for the wrath of God. Because of Christ's death, Christians will join Jesus Christ in glory whether they are awake (living) or asleep (dead). Whenever Paul speaks of Christ's death, he does so with the fuller meaning that Christ has also been raised—aware that Jesus is the Christ who suffered, died, and was raised. Concluding this passage, Paul urges the Thessalonians to continue to encourage and build up one another with his hopeful message.

5:12–28 Mutual Respect

Structure in the early Church was far different than the structure of the Church today. Paul has apparently placed some members of the Thessalonian community in authority, and he now urges the people to show respect for this authority. Authority is performed in the name of the Lord and, therefore, with the authority of the Lord. Those in authority have the duty of admonishing the community and of sharing the word of the Lord with the members therein. Paul encourages the community to treat these leaders with love because of the work they perform in their midst.

As he continues to urge the Thessalonians to live in peace, Paul indicates that they should also admonish those who are idle, encourage the faint-hearted in the faith, help those who are weak, and show patience toward all. Since he is writing to a young and newly established community, Paul recognizes that some weaknesses must be treated with patience, for it is difficult for people to make dramatic changes to their life overnight. He teaches that evil should not be given as repayment for evil, and they should seek the good of one another and the good of all. They are to have

a continual spirit of joy, praying always, and ceaselessly thanking God. In this way, they are fulfilling God's will for them.

In early communities like the one in Thessalonica, it was common for many new experiences to arise. Paul invites them to be open to the Spirit, warning against rejecting those who share the message of the gospel. Furthermore, he challenges them to test every new experience against the message of the gospel, and instructs them to avoid every form of evil.

At the beginning of the second part of this letter (4:3), Paul told the Thessalonians that it was God's will that they be sanctified. Now, as he ends his letter, he prays that God will sanctify them entirely. In this way, the theme of holiness becomes central to the second part of the letter, just as the theme of thanksgiving dominated the first part.

Paul prays that God bless the Thessalonians fully, and he refers to each one's spirit, soul, and body—the only place in the New Testament where such a separation appears. Still, Paul is not making a threefold distinction within the human person in this passage. He is simply praying that God will bring them all the blessings possible and that they will be blameless when the Lord comes. Because the Lord who calls them is faithful, they have the assurance that he will make them worthy of him at this coming. After praying for them, Paul asks them to pray for him.

The apostle asks them to greet one another with the ritual holy kiss and adds a command that his letter be read to all the brothers and sisters. This may indicate that some type of faction divided the community, or simply that the early church community consisted of many small assemblies within the same area. Although Paul does not make this command in any of his other letters, this call to read the letter leads to the conclusion that all of his letters were written with the intention that they would be read to the assembly.

Paul ends with a simple liturgical blessing in which he asks that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with them. His final blessing will not be as brief in his future letters.

Review Questions

1. List some ways in which we might apply Paul's letter instructing the Thessalonians to live a Christian lifestyle.
2. Why were the people so concerned about resurrection of the dead at the time of the Second Coming?
3. What do you think about the Second Coming today? Does it energize you to be rooted in your faith? Explain.
4. Why does the author consider idleness sinful (recall the Thessalonians as they "waited" for the Lord to come)? Are there times when you are idle instead of working for the reign of God?
5. How does Paul motivate Christians to "rejoice always"?

Closing Prayer (SEE PAGE 19)

Pray the closing prayer now or after *lectio divina*.

Lectio Divina (SEE PAGE 11)

Relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

The meditations that follow are provided only to help group participants use this prayer form, but note that *lectio* is intended to bring one to a place of prayerful contemplation where the Word of God speaks to the hearer from his or her heart. (See page 11 for further instruction.)

Call to Holiness (4:1–12)

Paul tells the Thessalonians their path to holiness comes by conducting themselves in a manner pleasing to God. This is God's will for them.

A woman asked a monk what God's will is for her. The monk asked her a series of questions: "Do you pray every day? Are you dedicated to your family? Do you give alms, visit the sick and homebound, and treat people with respect? Do you complete your work well?" She answered that she did all this, but she insisted on knowing God's will for her. The monk told her that she was already doing God's will and that she was on the path to holiness. He explained that God's will is that we do what we are called to do in life as well as we can and that we do it with and for God. This is the way to holiness.

Paul knew the temptations the Thessalonians encountered in their pagan environment, and he told them to avoid the impurity of those who do not believe in God, to shun exploiting others, and to live charitably. He does not tell them they will not be tempted, since he was wise enough to know we all must endure temptations. His teaching is that God calls all people to holiness and that God's will for them is that they should strive to live a holy life.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Resurrection for the Deceased (4:13–18)

People often ask whether we will recognize our friends and relatives in heaven. Jesus never answered the question; instead, he spoke of the importance of love during his life on earth. He told us that God is a loving God who understands the importance of love in life more than we do.

The answer to the question of whether we will recognize our friends and relatives in heaven would seem to be “yes” in view of God's great love for all people. We love our relatives and friends here on earth, and we can believe that somehow we will recognize them in heaven. An elderly woman told her children when she was dying that she was anxious to go and be with her husband, who had died a year earlier. She was expressing what many people express, namely, a desire to be reunited with a loved one.

When the Thessalonians asked Paul if those who were already dead would share in the coming of Christ, the question could have the same source as the question concerning the recognition of our relatives and friends in heaven. Both questions come from a desire to be reunited with a loved one. Paul can happily assure them that those who have already died will be sharing in the coming of Christ. It is still a mystery what the coming of Christ entails, but at the root of Paul's answer is the encouraging idea that we will be united with loved ones for all eternity.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Stay Alert and Sober (5:1–11)

Jesus compares the end of time to a man who travels abroad. He places his servants in charge, giving each a particular task. The man orders the

gatekeeper to be on watch, most likely to open the gate for him when he arrives, be it during the day or in the middle of the night. Jesus hopes the master will not come suddenly and find the servants asleep (Mark 13:34–37). Those who are asleep are those who are not living as the master desires. The master in this story is God, and the return of the master is the day of reckoning. Jesus sums up his message succinctly when he says, “What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

Paul’s message is the same as that of Jesus. He is telling the Thessalonians that the Lord will come like a thief in the night, that is, when least expected. Just when all seems secure, the Lord will come and the end has arrived. The reality for all of us is that we should always be ready, since we may not be alive when the Lord comes. But whether we are alive when the Lord comes or not, we will still meet the Lord at a time we may never expect. Living God’s message as well as we can is our way of being awake and sober when the day comes.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Mutual Respect (5:12–28)

Paul calls the community of the Thessalonians to a life of holiness and links this holiness with order and joy in the community. They are to trust the authority established by God, avoid idleness, encourage one another, show patience to all, and rejoice in the Lord.

Paul’s message is not only for the Thessalonians but for all Christians. We belong to the body of Christ, a community of peace and love. As Christians, we are called not only to have concern for ourselves but also for the community. Trusting legitimate authority, working for the good of others, taking time to offer encouragement, and being patient with those who are weak in faith are all practiced for the good of the community.

Paul’s message teaches that a truly holy person is one who is called to “Rejoice always” and “Pray without ceasing.” True joy comes from believing that the Lord is our constant companion.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

PART 2: INDIVIDUAL STUDY (2 THESSALONIANS 1—3)

Day 1: Greeting and Thanksgiving (1:1–12)

The author begins the Second Letter to the Thessalonians with the same format used in First Thessalonians. Although the letter obviously comes from a single author, the author names Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy as its senders. In line with Paul's customary writing style and language, the Second Letter to the Thessalonians was widely accepted from the earliest centuries by many commentators as authored by Paul shortly after his first letter.

Some commentators claim Paul is not the author of Second Thessalonians but that another writer used Paul's name. In ancient writings, an author, believing he was faithful to the teachings of the writer whose name he selected, would use the name of that well-known person to give more authority to his writing. One reason some commentators believe another author penned Second Thessalonians is its impersonal form. In the First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul speaks as someone familiar with the members of this church at Thessalonica, expressing love and concern for them. The Second Letter to the Thessalonians shows no signs of such familiarity.

Another reason for the suspicion that another author wrote Second Thessalonians are the different approaches used in speaking about the coming of the Lord. In the First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul tells them he does not know when the end will come, while the second letter speaks of certain signs that will occur before the end. However, if this second letter was written by another author, he was a person well versed in Paul's style and language and one who was thoroughly familiar with First Thessalonians.

The author makes a significant change when he addresses the Thessalonians as those who belong to "God *our* Father." Paul ordinarily uses the expression "God *the* Father." This may be a further indication that the letter was written by an author other than Paul. Unlike the First Letter to the Thessalonians, the author of 2 Thessalonians greets them with the entire liturgical blessing, "grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." In the first letter, Paul simply wishes them grace and peace.

The author thanks God for the way in which the faith and love of the Thessalonians is continuing to develop. Noticeably missing is any mention of the virtue of hope, usually added to “faith and love” by Paul. In thanking God, the author speaks more formally than in the First Letter to the Thessalonians. He begins with a more formal phrase, saying he gives thanks to the Lord for all the Thessalonians have done. In the midst of some persecution (not identified in this letter), the Thessalonians have remained faithful. The author tells them he is able to boast to other Christian communities about the faithfulness they have exhibited throughout their trials.

After commending the Thessalonians for their constancy and faith during persecutions and afflictions, the author shares some theological insights into God’s judgment concerning these afflictions. By enduring these sufferings now, the Thessalonians realize they will be found worthy of the kingdom of God. The reward does not come now, but it will come at the end of time when the kingdom reaches its fulfillment. At that time, God’s judgment will also bring punishment upon those who afflicted the Christians of Thessalonica.

The author states that when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven, the suffering Christians will find rest. This revelation refers to Jesus as the Lord’s coming in glory with his angels in blazing fire to punish the unbelievers. Paul alludes to Psalm 79:6, where the Lord is pictured as coming like a warrior with a flaming sword to inflict punishment on the enemy. The author of the letter names the enemy in a twofold manner. He calls them “those who do not acknowledge God,” which ordinarily refers to the Gentiles who did not have the gospel preached to them, and “those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus,” which ordinarily refers to those who have heard but refuse to believe. In this context, the author seems to include, under these two headings, all unbelievers.

These unbelievers will not face annihilation, but they will face eternal destruction that consists of being “separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.” The Lord Jesus is glorified by his saints (believers) and adored by them. This glory is the glory the Lord shares with the faithful. The author, speaking as Paul, declares this is what he has taught.

The author prays that God will make the people worthy of God’s call.

This summons of God refers to the people's call to a living faith and not their call to endure suffering. With the power of God, they will put this faith into action by their strong resolutions and their works. When they act in faith, the Lord Jesus will be glorified in them. This glory is not merited but is a pure gift (grace) of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Paul prays that God will make the Thessalonians worthy of their calling to live with faith in God, no matter what happens to them. God does not call them to a life of suffering, but when suffering comes, God's gift of faith helps them endure it without losing trust in God's presence and grace.

A man, who had a debilitating heart attack that limited his ability to perform many functions, told of waking each day and thanking the Lord for blessing him with life. When he told a friend about his morning greeting to the Lord, his friend asked how he could be so cheerful when God had treated him so badly. The man replied that God did not cause the heart attack. His own habit of smoking too much and not watching his diet caused his attack. The man, however, explained that the heart attack had made him realize how wonderful life is. Each morning he is grateful he is alive, and he believed that God would be his companion for another day.

Those who believe in God do not seek suffering, but faith in God offers strength and courage when suffering comes. Paul grieves when the Thessalonians are suffering, but he can rejoice when he sees them accepting suffering with a strong faith in God.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 2: Christ and the Lawless One (2:1–17)

The author now addresses two topics: the coming of the Lord and the gathering of the community to meet him. These could be seen as two separate concerns or as two aspects of the same concern, namely, the time of the coming of the Lord. The author asks his listeners not to become excited

or terrified from what they have heard. News had apparently spread throughout the community that the Lord had already come, and now the Thessalonians were simply awaiting the final outcome.

The author of this letter tells the Thessalonians not to pay heed to false utterances or to any false sayings attributed to Jesus or the apostles, or even to a letter that allegedly comes from Paul. Speaking in Paul's name, the author implicitly denies such a letter. He wishes to teach that the day of the Lord has not yet come, no matter what testimony is falsely claimed to be a witness to his coming.

Once the people began to believe the coming of the Lord had already taken place, they were open to every type of rumor and false prophecy. The acceptance of this false message was a motive for writing the Second Letter to the Thessalonians, for there was a need to instruct the people about the Second Coming.

The author lists those things that must take place before the coming of the Lord. This stands in contrast to Paul's words in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, when he tells them that no one knows when the end will take place. One of the first signs of the coming of the Lord will be the occurrence of mass apostasy. In apocalyptic literature, God's creatures rebel and lead many astray.

Another sign of the end is that "the lawless one," who is also called "the one destined for destruction," has not yet been revealed. This enemy of God will set himself over all the false gods and will take the true God's seat of honor and power in the temple, even declaring himself to be God. The temple here most likely is not in reference to the Temple of Jerusalem, but is used in a symbolic manner to mean the center of worship. People will worship "the lawless one" as though they are worshiping the true God.

Contrary to any evidence in the First Letter to the Thessalonians, the author of this letter states he already taught these truths about the signs of the coming of the Lord to the Thessalonians. If Paul were the author of Second Thessalonians, he could, of course, have taught them this in his preaching after he wrote his first letter to them, since he claims to have been with them when he taught this message.

The author of 2 Thessalonians reminds the Christians of Thessalonica that they know why the "lawless one" is restrained. The time to reveal him

has not yet come, although his secret power is already at work. The restraint will be taken away, and the “lawless one” will then be revealed. The idea that there is a designated time for everything is part of apocalyptic literature. At the time when the “lawless one” is known and revealed, the Lord Jesus will not abandon his people. The Lord will destroy him with “the breath of his mouth” and “the manifestation of his coming.”

The “lawless one” will not be Satan, but a human being and an agent of Satan. He will have the power and the ability to perform signs and wonders. These powers will be those given over to evil and falsehood, and they will lure those whose hearts are closed to the truth and who are destined for ruin. The author states that God will drive those directed toward evil to even greater evil so that those who refuse to believe and who live in evil will be clearly condemned.

The author feels bound to give thanks to God for the Thessalonians because they are the ones who have proven themselves and are chosen for salvation. They remain faithful and holy, and they are faithful to the truth. This faithfulness to the truth stands in contrast to those in the previous passage who refused to open their hearts to the truth. The Thessalonians were called to faith through the preaching of the gospel, and they brought glory to the Lord Jesus Christ by their manner of responding to the truth of the good news.

The author ends this passage by exhorting his listeners to remain firm in their faith and to hold fast to the message he taught them by his preaching and writing.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

The author warns that a day will come when the “lawless one” will deceive many people. But he also applauds the strong faith of people like the Thessalonians who are able to remain faithful in the midst of evil. As strong as evil is, the author does not believe it will be strong enough to overcome the faith of the Thessalonians.

Like the Thessalonians, we are living in an era when evil seems to dominate. Belief in God is being challenged to the point that the

name of God cannot be mentioned in schools and many public gatherings. When we watch the news on television, we encounter people of great evil who are responsible for having thousands of people killed in their own country. The age is also making illicit pleasures seem commonplace and even expected, and a time when those who were allowed to be born are passing judgment on the unborn. It seems to be an age of extreme selfishness, when one's life and luxuries become more important than the lives of others.

When all seems so hopelessly evil in the world, we can look—as the author of 2 Thessalonians does—to the good people who are remaining faithful. These are the ones who are actively helping the poor, the sick, the lonely, the homeless, and the outcasts of society. There are millions of people, like Christ, who are laying down their life for others, as well as people who are speaking for those who have no voice.

The author of 2 Thessalonians is grateful that God has blessed the Thessalonian community with trust strong enough for them to remain faithful to Christ's message of love, justice, and peace. In the midst of evil in the world, God has blessed millions of people with a faith strong enough to overcome the power of darkness.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 3: Request for Prayers (3:1–5)

The author begs the Thessalonians to pray that his preaching of the word of the Lord may be received as well by others as it has been by them. He also asks that they pray for his deliverance from those who do not understand and who are evil, but this request is too general for us to know exactly what he meant. If the letter were written by Paul, then the reference may be to those who are hindering his spread of the message. If it were written later, then we have no idea about its reference to those who are evil.

In contrast to these evil people, the author declares that the Lord is always faithful. The Thessalonians can depend on God to strengthen and guard them against evil. The author expresses his confidence in the Lord that the Thessalonians are doing and will continue to do what they have

been commanded. He prays that the Lord will fill their hearts with the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Paul not only realizes the need for others to pray for him in his ministry, but he also realizes his need to pray for all people. He himself prays for the Thessalonians. Paul teaches, as Jesus does, about the necessity for prayer in one's ministry, and he emphasizes the need for Christians to pray for one another that they may faithfully share Christ's message with others and live it in their own life.

In the Gospel of Mark (1:38), the author tells of Jesus' early rising to go to a deserted place to pray. When his disciples found him, they urged him to return to the people who were anxiously looking for him. Jesus responded, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come."

It was time for Jesus to move on. Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray for him so that the Lord's word may speed forward as it did among them.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 4: Neglecting Work (3:6–18)

The author commands the Thessalonians in the name of the Lord to avoid any Christian who lives in idleness. As the author will later point out, this type of avoidance is not intended to lead others into sin or to hurt them deeply, but to shame them and lead them to repentance.

The author, who more vividly speaks as though he is Paul, offers himself as an example to be followed. He reminds the Thessalonians that he and his companions did not live a life of leisure while among them. They avoided depending on them for food. Paul and his companions chose to work themselves to the point of exhaustion rather than impose on the Thessalonians for anything. They did this, not for the sake of making the Thessalonians indebted to them, but rather that the Thessalonians might imitate them.

The author states that while he was among them, he established the rule that anyone who did not work should not eat. The need for such a rule arose from the idleness of those who believed the Lord had already come and they were simply waiting for the day when the coming of the Lord would be clearly revealed.

In their idleness, the Thessalonians had become busybodies. The author commands them with the authority given by the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly, without gossiping, and to earn their own living. They should never grow tired of doing what is right. The command becomes even stronger when the author writes that those who do not follow these directives should be cut off from the community. The hope, as already mentioned, is not that they be treated like enemies, but as “believers” who are called to repentance.

Because he is writing to people who are suffering anxiety, fear, and persecution, the author prays that they might experience peace from “the Lord of peace.” Again speaking as Paul, the author states that he signs this letter in his own hand, as he does to every letter he writes. In reality, Paul does not sign every letter with his own hand. There is no indication that he signed the First Letter to the Thessalonians in his own handwriting. An unknown author using Paul’s name could be adding this ending to give Paul’s authority to the letter.

The letter ends with the usual liturgical ending, the same as that found in First Thessalonians. The only difference is that the word *all* is added to the ending of Second Thessalonians.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

The author knows the importance of work for human beings. He knows that those who are able to work are important to the community. At the same time, he is aware that some are unable to work, and he does not deny the need to make provisions for them.

In the second story of creation found in the Book of Genesis, we read that God set the first human beings in a garden of paradise “to cultivate and care for it” (2:15). The story teaches that from the

very beginning, God created human beings as workers, but sin made work burdensome. After their sin, God tells the first human beings, “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread” (3:19). The author of Genesis is attempting to explain why work, which is basic to being human, is difficult.

The message of the Scriptures reminds us that God put us on earth to perform some type of physical work. God made us co-creators, which means we are to work to fulfill this role in creation. We may perform difficult physical labor, work within an office, schoolroom, or hospital, or do creative work such as write, perform music, plan events, or the like. This is God’s will.

Some are unable to work due to various physical or mental conditions, and their presence becomes a gift to those around them. Many senior citizens who can no longer work are able to look back over a lifetime filled with many hours of work.

When the author of Second Thessalonians wrote his letter, he spoke of his own work, and he said that those who do not work should not eat. Paul the Apostle was a tentmaker who knew the necessity of work in God’s creation.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Review Questions

1. Is the author’s warning that God will repay with affliction those who are afflicting the Thessalonians a form of revenge on the author’s part? Explain.
2. What does Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians reveal about Paul?
3. What does the author (penned as Paul) mean when he says the lawless one will seat himself in the temple of God?
4. Why is work so important to Paul? To us?