

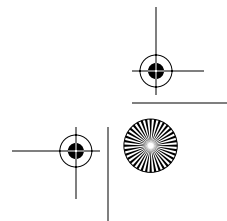
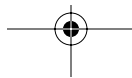
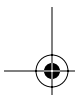
□ **Prepare Others to Endure Inevitable Hardship and the End-Time Test (3:1-13)**

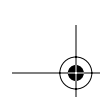
Strengthen the Faith of the Flock (3:1-5) American Christian culture is sometimes obsessed with a “health and wealth gospel” that teaches that, if people are faithful, God will favor them with material blessings and they will not suffer trials. Others have disagreed with such a perspective. These five verses speak definitively to this issue in a quite surprising way.

Godly Anxiety for Others Results in Helping Them Grow in Faith (3:1-2) In 2:17-20 Paul has expressed an intense passion to be reunited with the Thessalonians because his confidence about their faith is part of his assurance in his own victorious faith on the last day. The main point of this preceding section is that “out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you” (2:17). Paul’s efforts, however, have been thwarted in some manner by Satan. The continued absence caused Paul’s desire for reunion to increase even more, so that *when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left in Athens and sent Timothy . . . to strengthen and encourage you in your faith* (3:1-2; Marshall 1983:89). The resolve to send Timothy lay also in the recognition that if Satan were hindering Paul from coming, he might well also be trying to put stumbling blocks into the way of the Thessalonians’ faith (Gaventa 1998:42). In light of this, Paul’s determination is redoubled to discover how they are doing in their new faith, especially because of the inextricable link between the genuineness of their belief and confidence in his own Christian commitment.

A possible discrepancy could be detected in Timothy’s commission to *strengthen and encourage* the Thessalonians’ faith and 3:13, which states that God will “strengthen your hearts” (see also 5:23-24; 2 Thess 2:17; Marshall [1983:91] compares Rom 16:25; 1 Pet 5:10). How can both be true? The most natural solution is that given by Paul elsewhere. In a similar context, Paul speaks of himself as planting the seed of the gospel and of Apollos as watering that seed, but only God, not Paul or

3:1 While commentators are divided, the plural *we* in 3:1 and following may not be literal but an epistolary *we*, since Paul lapses into the first-person singular in 3:5, using the very same terminology (see similarly 2:18; so Stott 1991:71-74; Wanamaker 1990:127).





1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5 □

Apollos, can make the seed grow (1 Cor 3:5-8). Paul and Apollos are not equal partners with God, but they are “fellow workers” under God (3:9), who “has assigned to each his task” (3:5). God’s human servants, whether Paul, Apollos or Timothy, can make efforts to confirm people in their faith, but such efforts become effective only when God makes them effective.

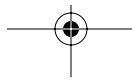
Paul did not minister alone but in “teams” (see Phil 2:19-24; 2 Tim 2:1-2). Part of the way God has designed that ministry be effective is that there be ministry teams or “fellow workers” with people who complement one another’s gifts. Too often churches assume that only one person should be the minister, but they should be open to a plurality of ministers. Sometimes this is due to the fact that some churches are so small that they do not have the financial resources to support more than one person to do the work of the ministry. Even in such cases, however, the “minister,” with the encouragement of the church, should be committed to discipling others in order to prepare them to share in part of the work of ministry.

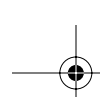
Strengthening the Faith of Others Is a Godly Goal (3:3-4) The goal of Timothy’s strengthening and encouraging is that *no one would be unsettled* (or deceived) *by these trials* (3:3). The Greek *sainō* can mean “deceived” (e.g., Lenski 1937:284; Milligan 1908:38; Frame



3:2 The NIV adds the marginal note that some manuscripts have “servant” (*diakonon*) instead of *fellow worker* (*synergon*). The former has somewhat better manuscript support, but most agree that “fellow worker of God” is what Paul originally wrote. It is the harder reading and best explains the origin of the other variants as easily understood scribal corrections. The reading “fellow worker of God” could easily be understood to indicate that Timothy was being viewed as an equal partner with God, so that an early pious scribe either changed the phrase to “servant of God” or to “servant of God and our fellow worker” or added “servant” and retained “fellow worker of God” as the following phrase. The NIV’s identification of Timothy as *God’s fellow worker* could similarly mislead today’s readers, since it might imply that Timothy is on the same level of God as a colleague. It is better rendered “our co-worker for [or under] God” (see NRSV). The genitival phrase *synergon tou theou* is better taken as a genitive of subordination or of association. The *our* before *brother* likely does double duty and is to be repeated before “co-worker,” indicating that Timothy is an equal colleague of Paul and not of God.

See Neil 1957:59-61, for a discussion of how 3:1-6 accords with Acts 17–18, since Acts does not mention that either Timothy or Silas were at Athens with him after departing from Thessalonica and Berea but that they rejoined him only after he





□ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

1912:128; Hendriksen 1979:84-85), though the NIV translates it *unsettled*, which many commentators and other translations also prefer (some using the synonym “shaken” or “moved”; so KJV, NEB, NKJV, NRSV, Douay, NET). Perhaps better than both is the compromise rendering “that no one turn back from his beliefs because of these persecutions” (Louw and Nida 1988-89:1.374; Richard [1995:141-42] plausibly prefers “dissuaded”). The problem with the translation “unsettled” or “shaken” is that it can too easily refer to trials in general and does not adequately reflect the opposing forces of Satan and of the unbelieving community at Thessalonica at work to wreck the faith of the readers. Satan was responsible for detaining Paul from returning to them and for producing tribulations (3:3) that were designed to tempt the new converts to throw over their faith (3:5).

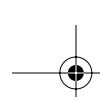
The notion of a “shaking designed to move one from faith” is enhanced further from the second epistle, which uses a virtual synonym for *sainō* in 2:2, “not to become easily *unsettled* [*saleuō*] . . . by some prophecy” arising from false teachers. Paul summarizes in 2:3: “Don’t let anyone *deceive* you in any way.” That 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3 has a bearing on this text is indicated by other substantial parallels between the two contexts, which point to the likelihood that the two passages address similar situations and interpret one another. Thus the clearer understand-

went on to Corinth from Athens. A possible solution is to view the *we* of 3:1-2 as an epistolary *we* referring only to Paul (see above); then neither Timothy nor Silas have to be placed in Athens before joining Paul subsequently in Corinth (so Williams 1992:56-57).

3:3 The parallels between 3:3-5 and 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3 include: (1) a similar verbal construction in Greek (a definite article *to* + a negative word [“no one” or “not”] + a passive infinitive, which appears synonymous in meaning); (2) the reality of their “tribulations” (1 Thess 3:3-4; 2 Thess 1:4-7); (3) Satan’s activity (1 Thess 3:5; 2 Thess 2:2-3, 7-9); and (4) their need for strengthening and encouraging (cf. 1 Thess 3:2, 13; 2 Thess 2:17). Such parallels indicate that the two texts mutually inform each other and reflect a similar situation.

Ellingworth and Nida (1975:55) render the phrase *You know quite well that we were destined for them* as “You yourselves know that such persecutions are part of God’s will for us.” However, they suggest as an alternative rendering either “God has permitted these persecutions to come to us” or “God has allowed these people to cause us to suffer,” explaining that they do not believe readers should “think that God himself had purposely planned or even organized the persecutions against the Christians.” But this is just what Paul wants his readers to think, since it, ultimately,



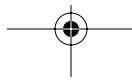


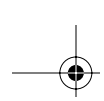
1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5 □

ing of the tribulations in 2 Thessalonians 2 as “persecutions” (see 1:4-7) and of the unsettling (2:2) as deception (2:3) casts similar light on the tribulations and unsettling of 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4: Paul wants Timothy to strengthen the readers in order that they not be moved from their faith by persecutions and false views of the truth, whether instigated by pagans or Jews, or even, though less probably, by false teachers within. The satanic assaults of oppression and false accusations, like the false teaching in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, were likely intended to deceive the readers in order that they would turn back from their beliefs. Uppermost in mind in the *trials* of 3:3 is the kind of persecutions mentioned in the directly preceding paragraph of 2:14-16, as well as possibly 1:6, including the probable slander against Paul’s integrity.

The word *trials* or tribulation (*thlipsis*) refers to a recent past, present and characteristic reality for believers (see the noun and verb forms in Jn 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom 5:3; 8:35; 12:12; 2 Cor 1:4; 4:17; 6:4; 7:4; Col 1:24; 2 Thess 1:2-7; Rev 1:9; 2:9-10). Paul understands that Christ launched the beginning of the end times, which includes both the initial phase of the long-awaited kingdom and the inception of great tribulation. Paul and other New Testament writers repeatedly refer to their own days as the “latter days” of final trial (1 Tim 4:1-5; 2 Tim 3:1-5; 2 Pet 3:3-7; 1 Jn 2:18; Jude 18-19). These ordeals are not random trials but are part of a redemptive-historical design by which history will conclude with the Messiah’s establishment of a kingdom and resistance to it. According to Old Testament expectation, Israel would undergo tribulation in the latter days: persecutions from without and deceptive teachings from within. God would eventually defeat Israel’s persecutors, judge her compromisers and bequeath an eternal kingdom to Israel. Since Jesus summed up true Israel in himself, the trials he endured began to fulfill the prophecy that Israel would suffer eschatolog-

brings comfort to think that God has ordained suffering and that all afflictions are in the hands of a loving and infinitely all-wise God. Richard (1995:148-49) a bit more strongly contends that it is “ludicrous” to affirm that trials are normal for Christians, and he doubts the eschatological notion of tribulation, as well as the implication that the trials of 3:3-4 are due to being “in the Messiah,” who himself suffered. However, the immediate context of the epistle bears out the presence of these ideas, as do other biblical passages. For a general parallel to a decreed, coming trial in 3:3, see Colossians 1:24, which refers to a decreed amount of end-time afflictions that Chris-





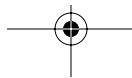
□ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

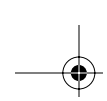
ical trial. Those who follow Jesus in the present age are “in Messiah Jesus” (1 Thess 2:14) and are identified with him as true Israel. This means they must also tread the same prophesied path of end-time tribulation before their own final resurrection.

Against this background of tribulation, the second part of 3:3 gives the reason (*gar*) that the Thessalonians should not be shaken by circumstances and turn back from their beliefs: because *you know quite well that we were destined for them*. Paul and his readers live in a period of the unveiling fulfillment of Scripture, and their trials are part of what God has *destined* to take place at the consummation of the ages. The time of tribulation will continue until the final advent of the Messiah, so that the lives of Christians during the interim will be characterized by trial. This has come about by God’s sovereign hand and has been planned from long ago. Such suffering tests the metal of the true believer. The only pathway leading to the eternal kingdom is one lined with trials through which believers must steadfastly pass in order finally to enter in. As Best notes, “Paul is not thinking of a period of persecution which will pass and the church return to normality; normality is persecution” (Best 1972:135; see further Acts 14:22; Phil 1:29; 2 Thess 1:4-5; 1 Pet 4:12-13).

Paul underscores in 3:4 the reason (*gar*) the readers should have known that they were truly destined for these troubles: he *kept telling* them that they would suffer tribulation. The imperfect tense of the verb *kept telling* (*prolegomen*) indicates a continuing action in the past of repeatedly reminding the readers of the certainty of coming ordeals. Moreover, what Paul repeatedly predicted about imminent hardship has, in fact, *turned out that way, as you well know*. Many Christians do not think that the church is yet experiencing the end-time tribulation, but Scripture, and especially the present text, testifies otherwise. The difference between the present tribulation and its future phase lies not

tians who are in the body of Christ are to endure (cf. Rev 6:11). Other biblical passages expressing the same kind of causal chain are Matthew 4:1 and Luke 4:1 (the Spirit leads Jesus to be tempted by the devil); Acts 2:23 and 4:27-28 (where wicked humans put Jesus to death, yet their actions were in accordance with God’s sovereign plan); 1 Peter 5:10; Revelation 6:1-8 (where trials brought by evil heavenly forces are ultimately unleashed by the Lamb, Jesus). In the Old Testament, see likewise Exodus 4:21; 7:3, 13; Job 1:10-12, 16, 20-22; 2:5-10.



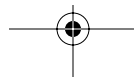


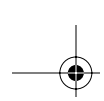
1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5 □

in its nature but in its extent. The beginning phase is marked by selective persecution and false teaching, whereas the culminating stage will witness universal persecution and worldwide heresy (see, e.g., 2 Thess 2:3; Rev 11:7-10; 20:7-10; Beale 1999a:587-96, 1021-31).

Too often Christians who suffer do not view their suffering within a redemptive-historical context. They may rightly see their suffering as a test of their individual faith and as something through which they need to endure in order to grow in their faith. When, however, we are able to view our afflictions through a wide-angle lens as part of the great trial that was prophesied to come upon God's people at the end, our endurance takes on more significance, since it identifies us with Jesus' (i.e., true Israel's) own victorious forbearance in suffering, climaxed by his death and resurrection. We become identified with the redemptive-historical story line of Scripture and, in particular, with the great messianic victory over evil, which will be concluded at the second coming.

Oppressive circumstances give us opportunity to reflect on our part in the divine plan of the ages and to participate in it. How should Christians respond to the prognosis of a terminal illness, to a job loss because of refusal to compromise faith, to the death of a loved one or even to imprisonment for refusing to deny Christ? Whenever we maintain our faith in Christ throughout these situations, we demonstrate our identification with the Messiah who began ironically to reign in the midst of the great tribulation through which he went by enduring in his faith (see Rev 1:9). We become like John, who regarded his exile on Patmos as an opportunity to reign spiritually in the kingdom by enduring through tribulation. The question is not whether or not we will face trials but whether or not we will be faithful in confronting trials. In the end, 3:1-5 turns the "health and wealth gospel" on its head and contends that the church will not be spiritually healthy unless it goes through trial and persecution, which may entail loss of health, wealth and material possessions. Sadly, some churches may not go through the persecutions they should because they do not raise their doctrinal and ethical profile high enough in standing for the gospel. Yet one thing remains clear from this text: the devil and the world try to knock God's people down when they stand high for him.





□ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

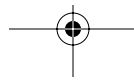
A Godly Vigilance to Discern the Spiritual Condition of Others

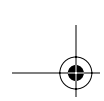
(3:5) Because of (*dia touto*) Paul's concern that the readers not be moved from their belief due to trials (3:3-4) and because he could not *stand* knowing how they were doing any *longer*, he sent Timothy to find out about the viability of the Thessalonians' faith. Specifically, he was *afraid* that their faith was faltering, so he sent Timothy to discover whether or not *in some way the tempter might have tempted you* with the result that *our efforts might have been useless* (*eis kenon*, "in vain"). Paul has already expressed confidence that his work among them has not been "in vain" (2:1). On the basis of this, he has assurance that on the last day he will be able to lay down the Thessalonians' successful outcome of faith as a fruit (2:19-20). Thus 3:1-5 continue the purpose of 2:17-20 in revealing Paul's zealous concern for the readers as an apologetic against charges that he was an insincere charlatan.

These verses pose a theological problem, however: 3:5 portrays Satan potentially causing tribulation by tempting the readers to go against God's will, yet 3:3-4 state that God causes such tribulation. The tension could be viewed as a contradiction in Paul's thinking, but it is unlikely Paul would contradict himself within the space of three verses. Or the tension can be resolved as an antinomy, an apparent contradiction from the human perspective but not from God's. Still better, a causal chain may be perceived: (1) God as the ultimate cause, (2) Satan as the intermediate cause, and (3) human persecutors (and false teachers?) as the most immediate cause. This option parallels Paul's later depiction of the human antichrist's work of deception as under the power of Satan, whose power of deception is effective only if God himself makes it effective (2 Thess 2:8-12). The more immediate context of 1 Thessalonians 2:16 is consistent with this analysis, since there Paul speaks of a divinely decreed amount of sin, including persecution of the righteous, that Israel has committed throughout her generations.

These verses also pose another theological difficulty, though one of a more practical nature. How can Paul express such great anxiety for others and yet tell others not to "be anxious about anything" (Phil 4:6)? The best answer is found in understanding the infinite complexity of the divine mind. God's mind has the capacity to look at the world through two lenses, a narrow and a wide-angle lens. John Piper explains:

101





1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5 □

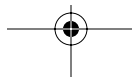
When God looks at a painful or wicked event through his narrow lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin for what it is in itself and he is angered or grieved . . . (Ezek. 18:32).

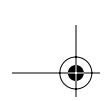
But when God looks at a painful or wicked event through his wide-angle lens, he sees the tragedy of the sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing out from it. He sees it in all the connections and effects that form a pattern or mosaic stretching into eternity. This mosaic in all its parts—good and evil—brings him delight. (Piper 1986:29)

An everyday example can illustrate this. My wife, Dorinda, designs needlework patterns. Her office is next to my study. She often comes in with excitement about what she is working on and asks my opinion about her designs while she is in the midst of creating them. Often I have to be honest and tell her that the unfinished design does not look very good. She always disagrees and says she sees great promise in her unfinished work. She even delights in it before it is done. What is the difference between my assessment and hers? She knows how the design will be finished and how all the color combinations will come together; though she sees the unfinished and imperfect design, she takes pleasure in it because she knows how it will be completed.

It is the same with life's unpleasant circumstances. When we look only through the narrow lens, there is some basis for anxiety. We need, however to consider the wide-angle perspective at the same time. Although we may not understand all of the broader panorama of God's plan, we can still have peace and delight that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom 8:28). Indeed, "he works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will . . . for the praise of His glory" (Eph 1:11-12). Reminding ourselves of this in the midst of trial will enable us to experience the joy and confidence in God that Paul desires for all who read his words (1 Thess 5:16, 23-24).

3:8 The end-time notion of resurrection "life" is manifestly apparent from recalling that the Old Testament prophesied that God would resurrect the saints at the end and they would live on eternally (e.g., Is 25:8; 26:19; Dan 12:2; Hos 13:14). The final resurrection of God's people will be the way they participate in the new creation;





□ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:6-10

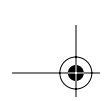
Faith Is Encouraged When Others Endure Trials (3:6-10) The contemporary saying “Get a life!” is often spoken to someone who finds pleasure in something that others regard as insignificant. In 3:6-10, Paul explains the right perspective on “getting a life” and what is one of the greatest things in life in which true believers should take pleasure. In fact, Paul tells us here what it means to him truly to “get a life.” His perspective on living is the opposite of ancient and modern unbelieving hedonists who say “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor 15:32). His understanding of a fulfilling life differs not only from modern conceptions but also from those within some sectors of the contemporary church that focus on styles of management or marketing to pump new life into the church.

These verses report that Paul’s anxious concern about the viability of the readers’ faith (3:1-5) was joyously alleviated by Timothy’s report. Consequently, Paul’s thought moves on to focus on his response to that good report. Paul uses the word *euangelizō* (*has brought good news*) to characterize Timothy’s account, a word commonly rendered “announce the gospel” elsewhere in the New Testament. The word has the same meaning in the other twenty-one times Paul uses it.

It may sound strange to describe the continuing faith of Christians by a term that normally refers to the announcement of the gospel (so Wanamaker 1990:133; see also Morris 1959:105), but the Christian “gospel” sense of the verb is appropriate here because the gospel has an effect throughout Christians’ lives, not merely when they initially accept it. This effect includes, at least, an increasingly deeper faith and robust Christian lifestyle that has the potential to influence unbelievers favorably on behalf of the gospel (see Marshall 1983:94). This interpretation is also consistent with Paul’s earlier statement that the word of God, which the readers initially received when they first believed, continued to be at work in them (1:6; 2:13; see also Col 2:6; Wilson 1975:48). This conclusion is borne out by noticing that the content of the *good news* in 3:6 is faith, love and hope, the well-known Pauline triad that sum-

that is, they will be given new creational bodies. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was one of the reasons that his early followers believed that the latter days had been set in motion. To be identified with Jesus is also to be identified with Jesus’ own resurrection life, which appears to be the kind of “life” Paul refers to here.





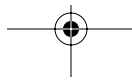
1 THESSALONIANS 3:6-10 □

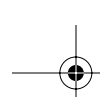
marizes the Christian belief (the phrase that *you long to see us* likely implies some aspect of the readers' hope for the future; see comments on 1:3). Paul's understanding of what it means to have life in 3:8 also points to 3:6 referring to *good news* in the "gospel" sense.

Paul and his colleagues *were encouraged* in the midst of *distress (anankē) and persecution (thlipsis)* because (*dia touto*) they heard this good news about the Thessalonians. What trials could be in mind? It is unlikely that the past persecutions in Philippi or elsewhere are in view (e.g., 2:2, 15-16; 3:4; Acts 17:5-9). Satan, however, repeatedly thwarted Paul from returning to pastor his young flock (2:18), and he would certainly have considered this a "thorn from Satan," which he closely links with "hardships [*anankē*]. . . persecutions . . . [and] difficulties" (2 Cor 12:7, 10). Furthermore, the hardship of being kept away would have been enhanced by Paul's fear "that in some way the tempter might have tempted" them (3:5). Paul's knowledge that unbelieving Gentiles and Jews in Thessalonica were continuing to slander him was also likely a contributing factor to his sense of undergoing trial. Finally, the reference to *all our distress and persecution* may include other tribulations Paul experienced after leaving Thessalonica (cf. Acts 17:10-15; 18:12-17; 1 Cor 4:11-13; 9:12), some of which we have no further information about.

Paul may refer to his suffering with the language of *distress and persecution* to identify further the trials of the present with the end-time tribulation, which he just elaborated on in 3:3-4. In doing so, he appears to be echoing the identical expression in Zephaniah 1:15, which refers to the latter-day distress accompanying the "day of the LORD" (1:14), another phrase that Paul uses to describe the eschatological woes in this letter (5:2). Interestingly, Paul uses the words *distress* and *persecution* elsewhere to describe how "this world in its present form is passing away," which gives further eschatological tone to the phrase (1 Cor 7:26, 28, 31; see Wanamaker 1990:135).

Against this background, 3:8 states the effect of Paul's encouragement due to their faith: *now we really live*. The Greek word *nyn (now)* could refer to the present in contrast to a preceding time, or it could function logically ("this being so" [Best 1972:142]). If there is a logical sense, one can translate the thought: "For, because of the encourage-





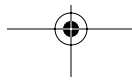
□ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:6-10

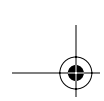
ment arising from your faith [3:7], we really live.” Wanamaker (1990:136) similarly views *we really live* as a response to the preceding news, but perhaps both a temporal and logical sense are included: “For, under these circumstances, we really live” (see Morris 1959:107; Richard 1995:161). In any event, the last part of 3:8 supports the first part, so that “really living” is the main point thus far of 3:6-8.

What this means is difficult to say at first glance. The word *zōmen* (literally “we live”) is parallel with the preceding mention of *we were encouraged* in 3:7, though it is not synonymous with it. *We really live* may be an interpretation of what it means to be encouraged: Paul’s anxiety has now been removed because of the report of his readers’ enduring belief. This could imply, however, that “living” is a mere figure of speech for not being anxious (e.g., JB: “now we can breathe again”; NEB: “It is the breath of life to us”). Elsewhere Paul is invigorated by his readers’ spiritual growth (Rom 15:32; 1 Cor 16:18; 2 Cor 7:2-3, 13; Philem 7, 20; so Marshall 1983:96), but it is not clear how these general parallels shed further light on 3:8.

The mention of living, however, is probably not figurative but refers to actual salvific life in relationship with God. But how can Paul say that now he really lives, if he had spiritual life before? Continuing the thought of 2:17-20, the readers’ unflagging persuasion of the truth is a crucial ingredient in Paul’s own steadfast fidelity to Christ in carrying on his new life’s task of taking the good news of Israel’s Messiah beyond the boundaries of Israel. Paul’s salvific life “in Christ” (1:1; 2:14) is not merely a past reality experienced at the Damascus Road but an ongoing condition about which he receives confidence through the knowledge that his converts are continuing in the reality of *their* new life. As in 2:17-20, the successful outcome of their life in Christ is a fruit demonstrating the genuineness of Paul’s own life in Christ. The phrase *now we really live* expresses this confidence because they are *standing firm in the Lord* and have not been moved from their commitment to Christ.

That he is speaking about assurance concerning his own salvific life is supported by Paul’s use of the same verb elsewhere to indicate true life in the Messiah. This life is none other than life in the resurrected Christ, an in-breaking eschatological resurrection existence (see, e.g., Gal 2:20).





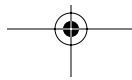
1 THESSALONIANS 3:6-10 □

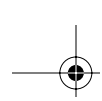
The nature of Paul's life as resurrection life is suggested also by his use of *zaō* later in this epistle: "[Christ] died for us [and came to life] so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may *live* together with him" (1 Thess 5:10). The parallel in 4:14 also shows that the *present* resurrection life of the believer will be consummated on a greater scale in the future. The reference to the good news in 3:6, which describes the report about the ongoing vitality of the Thessalonians' faith, suggests further that Paul has a heightened awareness of his own true existence: to hear of their endurance is a life-imparting gospel experience for him that is crucial to his growth in and assurance of his true resurrection existence in Christ (Best 1972:143; see also 2 Cor 4:11-12; 7:3).

Paul's confidence that he truly lives leads to thanksgiving in 3:9. He cannot *thank God enough* for the Thessalonians' life of faith. He thankfully acknowledges that the readers' standing in the Lord is due to the Lord's all-powerful and gracious work in their hearts (an implication supported by the same sense of the parallel thanksgivings in 1:2; 2:13; 2 Thess 2:13). As we saw in 1:2-4, to thank God for something means that one is thanking him for something he has wholly given himself.

God's work among the readers, therefore, is the ultimate contributing cause to Paul's sense of the continuing viability of his own authentic life in the Lord. Even *all the joy* Paul has *in the presence of . . . God because of* the readers he attributes to God's work by thanking him. The double reference to Paul's own *joy* (literally "the joy with which we rejoice") picks up the double reference from 2:19-20, where it referred to his joyous confidence in the strength of the readers' enduring faith as part of the victorious outcome of his own Christian life. If God is the cause of the apostle's tribulations (3:3, 7), he is also the creator of his joy (see 3:12-13; 5:23-24). Indeed, the phrase "rejoice . . . before the Lord" supports God's gracious hand as the cause of the readers' condition because it is a typical phrase in the Greek Old Testament to indicate "a joy which is conscious of the divine origin of the good things of life and expresses itself in thanks to God instead of becoming selfish" (Marshall 1983:97; see Deut 12:12, 18; Lev 23:40; Is 9:3).

Thus the multiple expression of *joy* in 3:9 is another way of speaking, not merely about Paul's certainty of the readers' genuine relation to Christ, but also about the assurance of his own true life in the





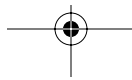
□ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13

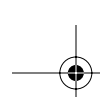
Lord. On the basis of both the ongoing faith of the readers and of himself, Paul gives thanks to God. The logical emphasis of thought for all of 3:1-9 now rests on this thanksgiving, grounded in the faith of believers, as was the case also in 1:2-5 and 2:13-16. In fact, the thanksgiving of 3:9 continues the thought of the earlier two thanksgivings, and thanksgiving to God is the main point of the entire letter up to this point.

Paul thankfully acknowledges God's hand behind the readers' faith and his own joy in the context of prayer, as he and his colleagues *pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith*. As in 1:2, Paul understands that it is out of the fertile ground of continual prayer that thanksgiving originates. The purpose of the prayer is that he be able to return in order to complete their faith. It is unclear whether the lack is the fault of the readers in not following the apostle's prior instructions or whether it is due merely to the fact that they have only received initial instruction and need more. Both are probably in mind, though the former may be the focus (see 1 Cor 16:17; Phil 2:30; cf. Best 1972:145). Still, because of the brevity of Paul's stay, the readers need more teaching to establish them and enable them to persevere in all facets of their faith. Within context, 3:11-12 form the primary focus of what is lacking in their faith, and these points are elaborated further in the discussions on holiness (4:1-8), love (4:9-12) and Christ's final coming (4:13—5:11). Paul intends that the remainder of the letter from 4:1 on meet these deficiencies until he himself can come in person (so Best 1972:145).

Pray That Others Be Strengthened to Endure the Last Judgment

(3:11-13) One of the greatest responsibilities of the servant of God is to pray to be used in the life of God's flock. Whether 3:11 begins a new prayer or continues the prayer of 3:10, the initial petition that Paul could see his readers again (3:10) is amplified by his request that *God . . . and our Lord Jesus clear the way* for him to return to the readers (likely answered in Acts 20:1-4). Timothy's good report about the young Christians does not make Paul complacent but fuels his desire all the more to return in order, no doubt, to help them to grow further in their faith.





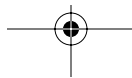
1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13 □

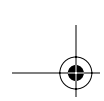
Paul's prayer is directed not only to *our God and Father himself* but also to *our Lord Jesus*. This conjunctive relationship between the Father and Christ and the fact that Paul's prayer is directed to both suggests strongly that Jesus shares the same divine status as the Father. Further, that both the Father and Jesus are the subject of the singular verb *clear* (or "make straight") highlights the unity of their position (Wanamaker 1990:141-42). Jesus' name of *Lord (kyrios)* underscores his divinity, since the name derives from the Greek Old Testament designation of Yahweh. Elsewhere Christ's deity is also implied because a function or position of God is likewise a function or position of Jesus (1:1, 3; 2 Thess 1:1-2; 2:16; 3:5). The application of Zechariah 14:5 ("the LORD my God") to "our Lord Jesus" strikingly confirms this conclusion (see below).

Paul requests that, until he returns, God grant grace to the believers so that they continue to develop in their faith (3:12-13). But this is only partly what is in mind. While 3:11 is part of the content of the prayer in 3:10, 3:12-13 also expand on Paul's petition in 3:10 that he be enabled to "supply what is lacking in [their] faith." Therefore, Paul believes that his prayer in 3:12-13 will be answered in part by God enabling him to return and to strengthen them further. Paul is an agent under the hand of God who will strengthen the people by means of God's power (see 5:23-24). Just as Paul "planted the seed" of the gospel and Apollos "watered it" but "God made it grow" (1 Cor 3:5-9), so similarly here Paul prays that he can return in order to be an instrument of God in grounding the saints in their new faith. Human agents such as Paul and Timothy make efforts to strengthen people (*eis to stērixai* ["to strengthen"] in 3:2), but only God can cause such efforts to be effective (*eis to stērixai* in 3:13).

The primary way the young converts will become rooted in faith is by God making their *love increase and overflow for each other and for*

3:11 J. A. Hewett [1975-1976] cautions that the use of the singular verb *clear* with two subjects *Father* and *Jesus* does not demonstrate that the Father and Jesus have essential equality. In other instances of a singular verb with two subjects there is not absolute identity between the two subjects (e.g., Mt 5:18 [heaven and earth]; 6:19 [moth and rust]; Mk 4:41 [wind and waves]; Jn 12:22 [Andrew and Philip]; 1 Cor 15:50 [flesh and blood]; Jas 5:3 [gold and silver]). Nevertheless, he goes on to say that, because it is clear that Paul did affirm Jesus' deity elsewhere (e.g., Rom 9:5; Col 1:15-





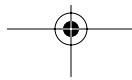
□ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13

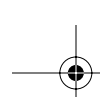
everyone else (3:12). This may be a reference to loving believers within the church and unbelievers outside the church (see Gal 6:10). When Christians love even their enemies, they are like their heavenly Father, who is merciful even to evil people (Mt 5:43-48; Lk 6:32-36; see Marshall 1983:101). One loves one's family more intensely than others, and it is likely the same for the family of faith (see Calvin 1984:180-81). This does not mean that Christians should love one another and not the world but that they must show love for each other first, which suggests practically that more energy will be expended in loving Christian family members than in loving the world. Indeed, God intends that the love Christians have for one another be a witness to the world (Jn 17:23). In this respect,

the Christian community is the school in which we learn to love. Like great musicians who practice tedious drills for long hours, Christians practice their scales at home in order to sing in public. In the community love is commanded and modeled, and here is where it must be lived out and practiced. This does not mean that love is limited to the boundaries of the community. But if the community does not live by the model and teaching of its founder, Jesus, how can it expect others to do so or to hear its call to join with them? (Thompson 1992:59)

Indeed, the concluding phrase of 3:12 not only shows that the readers will learn how to love from Paul's own example (as unbelievers should learn in the same way from the Thessalonians' example) but places the tone of the whole verse on Christians loving one another. *Everyone else* may even refer to Christians outside the church of Thessalonica in other cities and areas (see also 2 Thess 1:3). For example, 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 appears to define the *everyone else* (*pantas*) of 3:12 as all Christians in Macedonia outside Thessalonica. Likewise, the

20; 2:9) and because the syntax in 3:11 is unusual, the uncommon construction maintains "the intimacy of the two elements, in order to avoid either a complete separation or a complete merging of the two to whom he prayed: his God and his Lord." The other uses cited confirm a close relationship between the two subjects of singular verbs but not exact identity. The construction, therefore, is certainly suited to trinitarian theology and walks the razor's edge of maintaining a distinction of divine persons while affirming a unity of status.





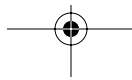
1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13 □

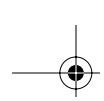
phrase “be kind to each other and to everyone else” in 5:15 should be understood in the same way as 3:12. At the least, these two parallel passages underscore that the focus of 3:12 is on Christians loving one another. It is intriguing that, though Paul is concerned about the truth of the gospel throughout the Thessalonian epistles, here toward the climax of 1 Thessalonians 1—3 he focuses on love. One need not go far to seek the reason: “Truth is hard if it is not softened by love, and love is soft if it is not strengthened by the truth” (Stott 1991:70).

Paul asks God to increase love among the Thessalonians with a specific goal in mind: to *strengthen* their *hearts so that they will be blameless and holy* at Jesus’ return. This is the central point of 3:11-13, but it also continues the explanation of Timothy’s mission to “strengthen” the readers (3:2-3; Morris 1959:113). Paul prays that, after Timothy’s departure, God will continue to establish the Thessalonians in Christian love in order to strengthen their hearts so that they successfully pass through the end-time gauntlet of judgment. The point is that unless love grows, selfish desires increase and will turn our love toward ourselves and not toward God, which results in an ungodly character and lifestyle (Thomas 1978:268). The phrase *when our Lord Jesus comes* has already occurred in 2:19, where it referred to the time of judgment at Christ’s final coming. Christians can sustain the judicial testing only if they have demonstrated evidence of true faith in their lives, in this case *blameless and holy* characters.

Paul may be speaking of perfect holiness in 3:13, especially in the light of 5:23, which uses many of the same words and phrases. If so, Paul has in mind God’s perfection of his saints at the resurrection. God’s people will pass through the judgment because they have been perfected ethically on the basis of Christ’s forgiving and cleansing death as well as on the basis of his own flawless righteousness. However, 3:13 may be not a requirement of perfect blamelessness but a

3:13 The word *holy* (*hagiosynē*) refers only to a divine attribute in the Greek Old Testament (Ps 30:4; 96:6; 97:12; 145:5; 2 Macc 3:12), and it is used once in this manner in Romans 1:4, while the only other use is in 2 Corinthians 7:1, where it refers to the process of the believer’s growth in godliness. Such usage *could* point to the idea that *holiness* in this letter refers to the final, perfected state of Christians in God’s eternal, holy presence (so Milligan 1908:44). Nevertheless, Pauline usage is split, and





□ 1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13

statement that such attributes must characterize one's life. This godly mark becomes a badge allowing exemption from the end-time sentence of condemnation and allowing safe entrance into the kingdom. The badge is an outward emblem demonstrating that one has truly believed in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus, which makes one blameless in God's eyes (see also 2 Thess 2:16-17).

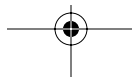
The focus here is not on what God does to his people at the end of history but on God's work in the lives of his people *until* they share Christ's glory at his final coming. The further development of holiness in 4:1-8 also places the emphasis on the believers' growth in godliness in the present life, and living in such a holy manner ensures that one will not be caught off guard when Christ unexpectedly returns (5:1-11). If this is a correct analysis, then saints pass through the final test by means of the badge of their holy lifestyle, and the ethical perfection of believers will take place immediately after the judgment (for support, see 2 Cor 5:10).

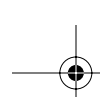
As in 3:11, so in 3:13 there is a conjunctive relationship between the Father and the Lord Jesus. This time both share the same position of end-time judge, implying that Jesus has the same divine position as the Father (so also Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; see Bruce 1982:72). Similarly the end of 3:13 alludes to Zechariah 14:5 to underscore Jesus' deity: "the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him." Significantly, in place of Zechariah's "LORD my God" Paul substitutes *our Lord Jesus* (so Whiteley 1969:57-58). The fact that Zechariah 14:5 is part of a larger prophetic description of the final judgment enhances the earlier conclusion that mention of Christ's coming here and at 2:19 is a reference to judgment. Also in line with the earlier analysis, the Zechariah context shows that both the enemy *and* God's own people must pass through this judgment (see Zech 13:9; 14:16-19).

Passing successfully through the test of the last judgment forms the

there is not enough occurrence of the word in Paul to establish a pattern of usage.

Some think *holy ones (hagioi)* refers to angels, others that it refers only to human believers (Lenski 1937:300-301). Either is equally possible. For arguments on both sides, see Marshall 1983:102-3; Best 1972:152-53; Milligan 1908:45; Morris 1959:114-15; and Bruce 1982:73-74.





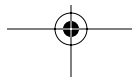
1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13 □

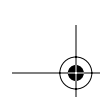
main point of 3:11-13 and is, in fact, the climax of the chapter as a whole and of the entire letter to this point. The penultimate point of the chapter is the thanksgiving of 3:9, which moves on to the great concern for the Thessalonians' welfare, expressed in the prayer for the victorious outcome of their faith in 3:13. Thus G. P. Wiles correctly concludes that the prayer in 3:11-13, together with that of 5:23-24, summarizes and "place[s] the spotlight on the central message of the letter" (Wiles 1974:68). The prayer of 3:10-13 reflects one of the main purposes of the letter: to serve as a temporary communication until Paul is able to return. Then the apostle will be able to fill in any remaining gaps in their foundational Christian instruction. In the meantime, chapters 4—5 will address more urgent concerns that need to be attended to immediately (Bruce 1982:66). Finally, 3:1-13 also continue to highlight Paul's purpose of defending his integrity and authenticity as a representative of the true God by showing his overwhelming concern for the readers' welfare.

□ **Do Not Reject God and Incur His Judgment but Desire to Please Him (4:1-8)**

With 4:1 Paul begins the second major section of his letter. The word *finally* (*loipon*) typically introduces a new, sometimes concluding section in Paul's letters (2 Cor 13:11; Phil 3:1; 4:8; 2 Thess 3:1). Moreover, the word "therefore" (*oun*, omitted by NIV and some Greek MSS) at the beginning of 4:1 indicates that what Paul is now about to elaborate as a new and concluding section is based on the preceding. As noted earlier, chapters 4—5 expand on 3:10-13, especially 3:10, by providing what will complete what is lacking in their faith so that they "abound" more in love and faith (3:12; 4:1). Paul now issues imperatives to the readers on the basis of his confidence that God will so strengthen their faith. As elsewhere, Paul does not give commands such as these to unbelievers but to those who have believed and in whose lives it is clear that God is working. The Thessalonians could be confident that God had been at work in them, and the prospect that he would continue

4:2 The introductory *touto* ("this") may well refer to the preceding commands or to the godly lifestyle mentioned in 4:1, resulting in the following translation: "this [the commands just mentioned] is the will of God, which is your sanctification." This also





□ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-2

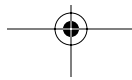
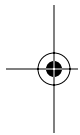
that work in their lives to the end (5:23-24) would motivate them to obey Paul's command and *please God . . . more and more* (4:1). As noted before, the relationship between the indicative reality of God's work in his people (3:11-12) and the imperatives that he imposes upon them (4:1-8) has been well summarized in Augustine's dictum, "Grant what Thou dost command and command what Thou wilt" (*Confessions* 10.29; see Phil 2:12-13). On the other hand, 4:1-8 will also lay accountability for breaking God's commands at the feet of the readers (4:6).

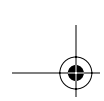
The Goal of Pleasing God by Obeying His Commands (4:1-2)

American culture is caught up with the grand goal of enjoying life and pleasing oneself. For example, a recent magazine article discussing vacation homes as investments led with the caption: "The No. 1 reason to build a vacation home is to enjoy yourself." Today more than ever society is caught up in concern for health and personal well-being. Churches sometimes try to attract people to their services by advertising that what goes on at church will be enjoyable to them. Some churches advertise that contemporary music and coffee will be served throughout the service. One can even enjoy breakfast beforehand at a church cafeteria or be entertained by "sitcom-like" plays. Some of these things may not be bad in themselves, but the impression is that of the church attempting to attract people by dangling before them the kinds of pleasures that they can find outside the church. If a church does this too consistently, then what it may have to offer may be no different, ultimately, than what the world offers.

We must not fool ourselves and think that things were radically different in the first century. A few years ago I went to Turkey (old Asia Minor) to see the ancient sites of the towns where the seven churches of Revelation were located. At Pergamum I visited the ruins of an ancient Roman health spa, where, among other things, people would go to be rejuvenated emotionally because of depression. There were even rooms where a patient could rest; in the ceiling were little holes through which the priestly attendants of the spa would whisper en-

closely associates *sanctification* with the commands and God-pleasing lifestyle of 4:1 (see similarly Richard 1995:187, 195).





1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-2 □

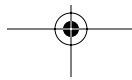
encouraging things to help the victims recuperate psychologically.

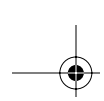
Whether in the ancient world or today, the chief end of humanity has often been to take pleasure in this life. In contrast, our passage begins by affirming the opposite: humanity's chief goal ought to be to take pleasure in pleasing God. Such passages in Scripture as this fueled the great confession, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and *to enjoy Him forever.*" Granted, Christians enjoy the material pleasures of this life, but only as a gift from the gracious God whom they serve (1 Tim 4:4). This world is not an end in itself to be enjoyed.

On the basis that God has begun to work in the readers and that they are beginning *to live in order to please God*, Paul appeals to them to excel in this: *we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.* The main point of 4:1 is that the ultimate purpose of living as a Christian is not to please oneself but increasingly to please God (Rom 8:8; 15:1-6). This develops further the earlier reference to pleasing God (2:4) and walking worthily for the goal of achieving God's glory for which they have been called (2:12).

The Greek text of 4:1 reads "just as you received from us how *it is necessary for you* to walk so as to please God." Although the NIV leaves out "it is necessary" (*dei*; so also Moffatt 1970 and NLT), most other translations attempt to express it, typically by "you must" or "you ought." Some readers may understand this to mean that Christians *should* live in the way Paul had instructed, but if they do not they will not experience the full blessing they could otherwise. Paul's urging of them to excel, however, suggests that there is a *necessity* that his readers live this lifestyle and that such living is not optional for less seriously minded Christians. Indeed, this necessity is heightened by the fact that such a lifestyle is a divine commandment (4:2), that God has called believers to this conduct (4:7), that God has given true believers the power to fulfill this commandment (3:12-13) and that to reject living in this manner is tantamount to rejecting God (4:8). Consequently, *it is necessary that* God's true people live this way if they want to avoid the inevitable last judgment (4:6).

Paul says the basis for his appeal that they please God is grounded in *the authority of the Lord Jesus* himself (literally, "through the Lord Jesus"). This reiterates and emphasizes the statement in 4:1 that his ap-



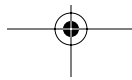
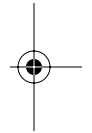


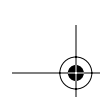
□ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8

peal was *in the Lord Jesus*. This appeal is none other than a renewed encouragement for them to obey the commandments given earlier by Paul. The main point of 4:1-2 thus lies with Paul's exhortation to please God, which should be heeded because the entreaty really comes with the authority of Christ himself.

Avoid Immorality and Pursue Holiness (4:3-8) In 4:3 Paul gives a second reason (*gar*, omitted by NIV) for pleasing God: the command to please God is grounded not only in Christ's authority (4:2) but also in *God's will*, which is immediately defined by the phrase *that you should be holy*. Paul uses the word *will* (*thelēma*) elsewhere predominately to refer to God's decretive will. This may be the idea here, since Paul has just prayed that God would strengthen their hearts so that they would be holy (3:13). Likewise, he prays later that God "sanctify you [make you holy] through and through" (5:23). If this is the case, then 4:3 is speaking of God's unthwartable plan that the readers be made holy. Sometimes, however, Paul employs the same word for God's commanding will, which is certainly how he uses it in 5:18. Both notions of God's *will* likely include the notion of divine pleasure that underlies his decree or his commands. Here the "commanding" will is clearly in focus, since 4:3-6 consist of commands, and 4:8 says these commands can be "rejected." But when people obey God's commands, it pleases him (4:1).

God's will is that they become holy (*hagiasmos*), a word repeated two more times in the following verses (4:4, 7). The notion of holiness or sanctification summarizes the various commands given in 4:3-7, and these verses define what holiness is in this context. The word in the Greek Old Testament is a translation of the Hebrew *qādōš*, which has the sense of holy or holiness with overtones sometimes of being set apart from the unclean. The idea of separateness from the unclean or from sin corresponds to many of Paul's uses of the word, which involve being separated from sin and set apart to righteousness (Rom 6:19-22; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Thess 2:13-16). This notion of separation from sin is confirmed from 5:22-23, where after commanding the readers to "avoid every kind of evil," Paul immediately says, "May God . . . *sanctify* you through and through."





1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8 □

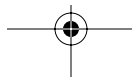
Paul directly defines holiness in 4:3 by commanding the Thessalonians to *avoid sexual immorality (porneia)*. He further defines it positively by saying that holiness is a state of being *honorable* and negatively by explaining that keeping away from immoral intercourse is not being in a condition of *passionate lust* (4:5) or impurity (4:7) and not sinning by taking advantage of a fellow believer (4:6). The word *porneia* can refer specifically to any illicit form of sexual intercourse or generally to any immoral sexual relationship (which is the implication of the NIV's translation; see Jensen 1978). However, both in the Greek Old Testament and the New Testament, especially Paul, the word refers to immoral sexual intercourse, and that is likely the use here.

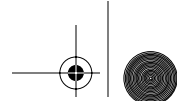
On the face of it, 4:4 defines the precise kind of immoral activity Paul has in mind: "that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor" (lit. trans.) This verse, together with 4:5-7, is one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament. At least four interpretations have been offered (see further Marshall 1982:107-12).

1. The apostle commands Christians, single or married, to "keep control" over their own "bodies" so that they do not enter into immoral sexual relationships. This is consistent with Paul's use of the Greek word *skeuos* with the meaning "person" or "a person's body" in every other occurrence (six times). As we have seen, in mind are not all kinds of sexual immorality but specifically illicit sexual intercourse, since that is how Paul uses *porneia* elsewhere. This verse then could be a parallel to 1 Corinthians 6:18 and would also be in line with Paul's instructions that husbands and wives jointly possess each other's bodies (1 Cor 7:2-5).

2. A second view is virtually identical to the first except that the

4:5 Cult prostitution at the temples, especially of fertility gods and goddesses, was known in the ancient world, not only among the Canaanites in the form of the Baal cult, but also in the Greco-Roman world, such as at Corinth in the cult of Aphrodite. Given the backdrop of the Aphrodite cult in Corinth, this is likely what Paul, at least in part, is warning the Corinthians about, since he exhorts them to keep the "temple of the Holy Spirit" pure by not committing *porneia* (1 Cor 6:13-19) and because the verbal form of *porneia* is directly linked with idolatry in 1 Corinthians 10:7-8. Likewise, some plausibly believe that "to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit immoral intercourse [*porneuō*]" (Rev 2:14; 2:20) reflects, at least partially, a setting of





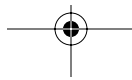
□ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8

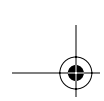
word *skeuos* is not understood as a “person” or “body” but specifically as the male sexual organ itself (Bruce 1982:83; Ellingworth and Nida 1975:79). The Hebrew word in the apparent parallel of 1 Samuel 21:5 carries this connotation (“Surely women have been kept from us . . . and the vessels [*skeuē* in the Greek translation] of the young men were holy,” NASB). Like the first interpretation, this view also accords well with Paul’s warnings against immoral relationships with prostitutes (1 Cor 6:12-20).

Some contend that the usual ingressive meaning of *ktaomai* (“to acquire, gain, take”) does not fit the first two interpretations, which demand the sense of an ongoing keeping or possessing (see, e.g., Stott 1991:83). However, the verb can sometimes be translated “keep,” and even the nuance of “gain mastery” or “possess” is suitable to the first two interpretations (so Moulton and Milligan 1930:362; Milligan 1908:49). Thus, those not presently living holy lives must begin to do so, that is, take possession of their bodies and begin to control them and then continue to do so. Paul’s emphasis may well be on the beginning of the process of sexual holiness for those who do not have it, with the continuance of that process implied.

3. A third interpretation is that 4:3 refers to a Christian man who marries a wife (Frame 1912:147-50; Best 1972:160-65). The “vessel” is identified as a wife, which corresponds well to the six other times Paul uses the word with the meaning “body” or “person.” Indeed, 1 Peter 3:7 uses *skeuos* to refer to a wife. Furthermore, this view understands *ktaomai* as “acquire” or “win over” or even “marry” with an ingressive sense (i.e., focusing on an action that commences the marital state). Accordingly, this would mean that a man’s decision to marry someone should not be controlled by sexual desire but honor for his

either cultic prostitution or sexual immorality associated with idolatrous temple festivities in Pergamum and Thyatira (see Beale 1999a:248-50, 260-61). Such a cult background has been documented for Thessalonica. The cult of Cabirus was present before the first century A.D. and was in all probability the chief cult in Thessalonica during the time of Paul (see Jewett 1986:127-26). The figure of a male sexual organ was a fertility symbol commonly associated with the Cabiri cult (Donfried 1985:338-40), and phallic rites were practiced as a part of the cult to promote fertility (see further Weima 1996:105).





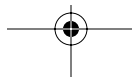
1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8 □

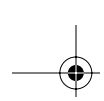
wife as a Christian sister. If *ktaomai* means “keep” or “possess” in a durative sense, then the idea in 4:3-6 is of a husband living with his wife in a holy and honorable manner by not being passionately lustful or involving himself in immoral relations with other women and by respecting the marriage bonds of others (Maurer 1967:360-67; Collins 1984:313, 331-32). Such a rendering of *ktaomai*, however, is the same as that of the first two views, which could weaken the uniqueness of this perspective. Nevertheless, this third perspective would also be consistent with Paul’s comments about husbands and wives in 1 Corinthians 7:2-5.

There are several objections to the third interpretation. First, some believe that it implies a low view of the wife as a human, since she is understood primarily as a sexual instrument of gratification. In fact, however, the third interpretation has Paul stressing sanctified and honorable relationships in marriage. Second, the rabbinic parallels supporting the view are not clear or come from a time after the New Testament period (see Marshall 1982:108-9). Third, if such a view were in Paul’s mind, he would plausibly have had a dative construction (*heautō*) directly linked to the verb *ktaomai* (“acquire *for oneself*”). Fourth, this explanation assumes that the males addressed were independently considering marriage, much the way this occurs in the modern world today. The vast majority of marriages in the Greco-Roman world, however, were arranged by parents often for social or economic reasons. In this light, it is unlikely that Paul had unarranged marriages in view (McGehee 1989:84). Finally, the purview of 4:3 and 4:5-6 seems broader than the marriage context. In particular, to *wrong* and *take advantage of* at first glance are more suitable for a wider application to different kinds of immoral relationships than merely to only one kind of relationship. These objections are not fatal, but they have cumulative force.

4. A final interpretation believes that 4:4-5 refer to a Greek law on the inheritance of a daughter that Christians should not observe. The

law . . . required the marriage of a daughter to somebody of near kin who would be regarded as a “son” for purposes of inheritance. Such a marriage might not only be contrary to Jewish law





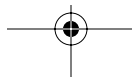
□ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8

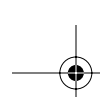
with its forbidden degrees of union, but the possibility of it could lead to legal squabbles between different relatives who wished to marry the heiress. Paul counsels that Christians must avoid incest (vv. 4ff.) and legal disputes. This view requires that *in this matter* be taken to mean “in the lawsuit” (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1). (Marshall 1982:111, summarizing H. Baltensweiler’s position)

Similarly, some contend that the phrase *in this matter* (*en tō pragmati*, 4:6) refers generally to business affairs in which Christians are in danger of sinning (see Douay, RSV margin). However, the context supports a more general idea of immorality and does not provide any substantial hints of either of these narrower legal or economic meanings (Best 1972:164). In particular, (1) there is no clear transitional wording to indicate the beginning of a new theme in 4:6; (2) the presence of the word *impure* in 4:7 shows that the topic of sexual uncleanness is still in mind; and (3) 4:3-6 is a single sentence with three infinitival clauses, the first two pertaining to sexuality, which makes it unlikely that the last infinitival clause deals with a different subject (Weima 1996:109). The words *in this matter* and *wrong his brother or take advantage of him* could fit a context concerning business lawsuits or legal disputes in connection with marriage, but they also make good sense as a continuation of the topic of 4:4-5 (Wanamaker 1990:154).

On balance, either the first or second interpretation is preferable, though ultimately they are not too different from one another. Either interpretation is more parallel than the other views to Paul’s exhortation in 4:3 to avoid sexual immorality (Whitton 1982). Still, I favor the idea that Paul has in mind the more general idea of not participating in immoral sexual intercourse with our *bodies* rather than precisely the male sexual organ. Since 4:3 and 5 are general references to immorality, the burden of proof is on one arguing for a more specific kind of immorality (i.e., immorality in relation to marriage or in connection with Greek laws concerning marriage). Nevertheless, the third view affirming that marriage is the focus is viable.

There is, however, another generally unnoticed context within which the first and second interpretations are best seen. The thrust of this passage is that the readers are to abstain from those things characteristic of





1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8 □

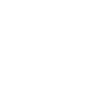
the heathen, who do not know God, a lifestyle generally characterized by *porneia* and deserving God's wrath (see the Old Testament parallels in Ps 79:6; Jer 10:25). In particular, 4:1-8 may well refer to that immoral lifestyle associated with contexts of Gentile idolatry, which would be a development of 1:9. Thus Paul is commanding that, just as they "turned to God from idols" (1:9), they also must break off all associations with their idolatrous past, including all immoral customs such as cult prostitution and the sexual immorality associated with idolatrous temple festivities (see also Donfried 1985:337-42). That this is what Paul is thinking is indicated by New Testament parallels where idolatry is present along with the unique wording and ideas pertaining to immorality found here.

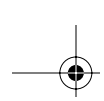
In Acts 15:19-20, 29 and 21:25 *porneia* and other key phrases are associated with idolatry. The former passage says that Jewish Christians should not trouble "the Gentiles who are turning to God" (see 1 Thess 1:9) but should tell them "to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality [*porneia*], from the meat of strangled animals and from blood." All these descriptions relate to idolatry, including even the last phrase, which is another way of referring to sacrifices made to idols.

Romans 1:24-31, which links idolatry inextricably to immorality (1:21-23), says that "God gave them over in the sinful desires [*epithymia*; "lusts"] of their hearts to sexual impurity [*akatharsia*] for the degrading of their bodies with one another" (1:24). This resembles Paul's statement about keeping one's body in a state of honor and not in lust (*epithymia*) and impurity (*akatharsia*; 1 Thess 4:4-5, 7). Likewise, *the heathen, who do not know God* (4:5), are equivalent to the heathen who "did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God" (Rom 1:28). Finally, the antithesis of controlling one's *own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust* (1 Thess 4:4-5) is God's giving of people over to dishonorable lusts (Rom 1:26).

Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 also contain striking parallels, including the mention of illicit sexual intercourse, impurity, and lust. Paul specifically notes in both texts that such behavior "is idolatry" (Col 3:5) and is practiced by one who "is an idolater" and who has no "inherit-

4:6 See Collins 1984:317 for a list of various scholars who see the sexual theme of





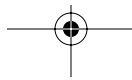
□ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8

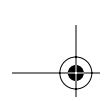
ance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph 5:5). Finally, both passages list impurity (*akatharsia*; so also 1 Thess 4), which in the Greek Old Testament predominantly refers to cultic uncleanness and sometimes refers to cultic impurity caused by idolatry. The cognate adjective “is particularly used for things connected with idolatrous cults” (Hauck 1965:3.427). Furthermore, in all three texts, there follows in the next verse mention of God judging these sins through his wrath, a theme also part of the Romans 1 parallel.

To participate in such immorality is to *wrong or take advantage* of one’s *brother* (1 Thess 4:6). The mention of a *brother* or sister (*adelphos* can refer to both) fits well with the two interpretations that identify marriage as the key issue. On the other hand, how could the identification of illicit sexual intercourse in a context of idolatry be related to a Christian brother or sister? The immorality associated with idolatry certainly also occurred in pagan culture outside that context, but the two were associated because of actual cultic practice and because immorality was an inevitable by-product of idol worship (so Rom 1:21-31), all of which resulted from not knowing God (1 Thess 4:5; cf. Gal 4:8). Such a link was held by others in early Judaism: “For the devising of idols was the beginning of illicit sexual intercourse (*porneia*; Wis 14:12). So Paul probably has a context of idolatry as the focus but also, secondarily, any context where immorality is practiced. Indeed, the fact that he does not explicitly mention idol worship in 4:1-8 suggests that he may be generalizing from the cultic context of immorality to all places where immorality occurs.

Then, as now, there would have been many opportunities for Christian brothers and sisters to be conformed to pagan practices and commit immorality with one another, whether in idolatrous contexts or elsewhere (see, e.g., 1 Cor 5:1; 6:15-19). To do so, Paul says, is to *wrong or take advantage* of the other person. The precise idea of the Greek word *pleonekteō* is to take advantage of people by wrongly taking something from them through deceptive means (see 2 Cor 12:17). The idea is that of defrauding, taking something that is not

4:3-5 continuing into 4:6 as well as those who affirm that 4:6 addresses a different topic than 4:3-5, namely, economic greed.





1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8 □

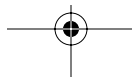
one's own through deceptive motives.

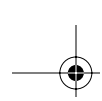
Thus here Paul warns Christians not to participate in immorality, since it involves deceptively taking something from others for selfish purposes. Paul undoubtedly believes that sexual relationships are reserved only for marriage, so that such relationships outside of marriage entail taking sexual possessions reserved for another. The deception is that selfish sexual motives are often masked by sincere professions of love.

Paul gives a good reason for heeding his instruction in 4:3-6: "because *the* Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned *you*" (4:6 NASB). Those taken advantage of have a divine defender who will avenge the wrong done to them. It is generally acknowledged that, following his pattern elsewhere, Paul uses "Lord" to refer to Jesus (see 1:1, 3; 2:15, 19; 3:11; 4:1-2). If Marshall's proposal (1983:112) that Paul is alluding to Psalm 94:1 ("The Lord [*kyrios*] is a God of vengeance [*ekdikēseōn*]"; 93:1 in the LXX) is correct, then Paul has omitted "God" from the reference and left *Lord* (*kyrios*) in order to highlight Jesus' divine position of end-time judge together with his Father. The psalm speaks of God's vengeance in judging the earth and Gentiles (94:2, 10). Thus Paul is saying that those who disobey his instructions deserve judgment because they live like Gentiles, *who do not know God* (see also 2 Thess 1:8).

The judgment Paul considers here is not some mere disciplining procedure of genuine believers. Rather, those who do not break off from their former pagan ways of living should not be considered truly Christian and should certainly not be given assurance that their faith is genuine. Such people who confess to be Christians but live like Gentiles will be judged like unbelieving Gentiles (see also Eph 5:3-6; Col 3:5-6). Paul underscores his warning by reminding them that he has already cautioned them repeatedly about this kind of sin and its consequences (the indefinite aspect of the aorist verbs probably are best taken with the continuous aspect of the imperfects used similarly in 3:4).

We have seen that Paul grounds the command to please God (4:1) not only in the authority of Christ (4:2) but also in the authority of God's will, namely, their sanctification (4:3). This sanctification consists of avoiding sexual immorality, a telltale emblem of the idolatrous lifestyle of unbelieving Gentiles that deserves divine judgment (4:3-6).





□ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-10

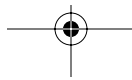
Given the repetition of wording between 4:3 and 7 (e.g., “holy”), it is most likely that they form an *inclusio* or “bookend” encasing the warning about immorality, all of which undergirds the reason Christians should please God (Bruce 1982:81): it is God’s authoritative will that his people should live a life pleasing to him.

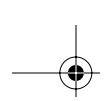
Finally, 4:8 gives a conclusion based on 4:2-7: those who reject God’s authoritative will that people live in a holy manner are not merely rejecting Paul’s human instructions but are rejecting God himself. This again highlights Paul as an apostle who has been appointed to mediate God’s word (see Lk 10:16, which Paul’s wording may reflect; cf. Mt 10:40; Jn 13:20; so Best 1972:168-69). Paul appends the phrase *who gives you his Holy [hagios] Spirit* because the Spirit is the agent God gives to his people to inspire them inwardly toward holiness [*hagiasmos*] and to accomplish in them the great aim of desiring to please him (e.g., Eph. 1:16-18; 3:16-19; 5:17-21; 1 Thess 5:18-19). The reference to the giving of the Holy Spirit has its roots in Ezekiel 36:27 and 37:14, where God promises to put his Spirit in his people in order to cleanse Israel from all their uncleannesses (*akatharsion*; see 1 Thess 4:7) and idols (36:25). In addition, God’s Spirit is to “move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws,” which is also Paul’s point (36:27; see Weima 1996:110-11).

People need to submit themselves to God’s authority by trusting in Christ, and the Spirit will enable them to walk in a manner pleasing to God. While the Thessalonians are commanded to live holy lives (4:3-4), God is the one who will enable them to be holy (4:7; see 5:23-24; 2 Thess 2:13-14). Therefore, those who do not heed Paul’s instructions about immorality show that they have not experienced the inward work of the Spirit and reject the God who gives that Spirit. At the very least, they should have no assurance that they are truly to be counted among God’s called. Conversely, Paul encourages his readers to persevere by demonstrating the fruits of sanctification, which results in satisfying God (4:1). In this light, the main point of all of 4:1-8 is still on pleasing God.

□ **Witness to Outsiders by Loving One Another (4:9-12)**

It is often said that churches would be great places if it were not for the people in them. Of course, when people become Christians, they do





1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-10 □

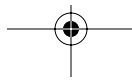
not become “perfected” saints, and all too often factions arise over insignificant issues or fellow Christians interrelate no differently than the rest of the world, holding grudges against one another and gossiping about each other.

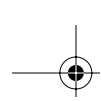
We should not think that the first-century church was a paradise of ecclesiological bliss. Indeed, most, if not all, of Paul’s letters were written to address problems within the churches themselves. Paul does not primarily address difficulties due to persecutions of the church from without but crises arising from internal sources. Similarly, Paul writes in 4:9-12 that believers should comport themselves harmoniously within the church in order to be motivated to act properly outside the church and to be an effective witness in a dark world.

Strive to Love One Another (4:9-10) Just as 4:1-8 expands on the concept of holiness from the prayer of 3:13 as that which pleases God, 4:9-12 develops another aspect of Paul’s prayer in 3:12 that “the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.” As in 1 Corinthians, the introductory phrase “now about” (*peri de*) introduces new topics that were likely raised in some form by the Thessalonians and communicated through Timothy back to Paul (see, e.g., 1 Cor 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12; 1 Thess 4:13; 5:1). Nevertheless, this section is not unrelated to 4:1-8 and 3:12-13. Paul hopes that his instructions here will be one of the instruments used by God to begin to answer his earlier prayer at the end of chapter 3.

Why put instructions about love at this point? Love was the primary thing in 3:12-13 that Paul prayed would “strengthen” their hearts in holiness. Paul does not want the Thessalonians to reject his instructions about holiness (4:2-8) but knows that if they increase in love, they will be strengthened in holiness. Indeed, all the interpretations of 4:4-6 involve the underlying notion that to maintain a condition of holiness there must be love and respect for others, all of which will fulfill the grand goal of pleasing God (4:1). This notion of love now becomes explicit in 4:9-10.

From one perspective, they needed no more instruction from Paul about loving one another, since they themselves had *been taught by God to love each other*. Presumably this teaching came from Paul himself





□ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-10

when he was among them. The statement that they had *been taught by God* underscores Paul's earlier statement that the instructions he gives do not ultimately derive from his own authority but from Christ's authority (4:2, 8). This instruction *to love each other* derives not only from Jesus' present authority but also from Jesus' Upper Room discourse, where he told his disciples three times to "love one another" (Jn 13:34; 15:12, 17; see also 1 Jn 3:11; 2 Jn 5; Bruce 1982:90). Paul, as often elsewhere, is passing on and developing Jesus' teachings for his readers. In this light, the phrase *taught by God* refers to Jesus as the divine teacher.

The Holy Spirit's influence inducing Christians to love one another may also be implied in the expression, since the phrase "God, who gives you his Holy Spirit," has directly preceded (4:8; see also Rom 5:5; Gal 5:22). The use of *theodidaktos* (*taught by God*) and similar expressions elsewhere further suggests the internal teaching by the Spirit (see Frame 1912:158, who cites *Barnabas* 21:6; Is 54:13; Jer 31:33-34; Jn 6:45; *Psalms of Solomon* 17:35). These other uses speak of God directly teaching a person in some apparently internal manner. That both Jesus and the Spirit may be included as the subject of the teaching is apparent from the observation that the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. In short, Jesus taught the love command during his earthly ministry and then sent the Spirit to continue to teach it to his people and to empower them to fulfill it.

In addition to the fact that Paul's readers have already been taught by God to love each other, a second reason (note the causal *gar*; *in fact* in NIV) they need no further instruction is that they are actually applying the earlier instruction to their lives (4:10). Not only have the Thessalonian Christians genuinely begun to practice love toward each other but their love flows over even to *all the brothers throughout Macedonia*.

One might think that Paul would be content with this and stop to thank God for it. He is, however, so desirous that they keep on loving that he urges them not to be satisfied with their past performance but even *to do so more and more* in the future (4:10). The sense is that although they do not need to be written to about love because they are practicing it so well, nevertheless they need to excel even more, which is the main point of 4:9-10. Paul knows that perfect sanctification in any area of life is impossible this side of heaven, so he encourages them to keep advancing in their growing love.

