

***Acts 1: Lesson Five,***  
***Paul's Second Missionary Journey***  
***Acts 15:36 – 18:22, 1 & 2 Thessalonians***

**Subject:** Paul took a second missionary journey and wrote to the Thessalonians.

**Main Idea:** Believers should have a reputation of faithfulness and stability.

**Principles:**

1. *We can be faithful in any and every circumstance if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.*
2. *We prepare for Christ's return by faithfully studying what the Bible teaches and working at our earthly callings.*

### Introduction

When you think about the kind of person you want to be many things may come to mind. Is steadfastness on your list? Is that a quality you value? A reputation you wish to have?

The definition of the word “steady” is “unfaltering; sure; not easily excited or upset; reliable, dependable, sober.” We use some of the same words and ideas to describe God: He is unchanging, unfaltering, sure, reliable, and dependable. Our world is full of instability and uncertainty. Even those who appear confident outwardly have insecurities within. A believer’s steadiness is therefore a testimony of God’s own unchanging and faithful nature.

In the last lesson, we saw the ever-steady Paul complete his first missionary journey. In this lesson, we read about his second missionary journey and learn of the founding of the first European churches, churches to which Paul eventually wrote epistles (Philippians, Thessalonians, and Corinthians). Paul spent the greater part of this journey in Corinth. From Corinth, he wrote his letters to the Thessalonians.

Paul endured great hardships, but he was steady. Perhaps we sometimes associate the ideas of steadiness and boring. As we can easily see from the book of Acts, Paul’s life was not boring! And in terms of his personality, he wasn’t devoid of emotion. He got excited, angry, and discouraged, but he was nevertheless faithful, trustworthy, and reliable. He didn’t give up. He persevered. He doggedly taught and lived out the Gospel. He was steady and he encouraged the Thessalonians specifically to settle down and live steady lives.

## I. Paul's Second Missionary Journey – Acts 15:36-18:22

### A. Division over John Mark – 15:36-39

- i. Background of Division: When Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey, they took John Mark with them. We primarily know John Mark today by his Roman name “Mark” (John was his Jewish name). We also know of two of his relatives: his mother, who was apparently wealthy and perhaps widowed (Acts 12:12), and Barnabas, his cousin (Colossians 4:10). However, early in that journey, Mark abandoned Paul and Barnabas (13:13, 15:38). While Luke did not record an explanation, some have suggested it was due to Mark's youth and inexperience. Others wonder if he disagreed with Paul's methods. Whatever the reason, when Paul and Barnabas decided to revisit the churches of Galatia, Barnabas (ever the encourager) wanted to take Mark, but Paul refused.
- ii. Positive Outcomes: Paul and Barnabas went separate ways, but as a result, two sets of missionaries went out, rather than just one. Barnabas took Mark and headed to Cyprus while Paul took Silas and traveled inland through Syria and Cilicia into Galatia. Paul's later letters indicate that within about ten years, he and Mark fully reconciled (Colossians 4:10, 2 Timothy 4:11, Philemon 24). According to early tradition, Mark served as Peter's interpreter and recorded Peter's recollections of Jesus' earthly ministry in what we know as the Gospel of Mark. Peter wrote in his first epistle that John Mark was like a son to him (1 Peter 5:13).

### B. Paul's Travel Companions – 15:40-16:10

- i. Silas: Silas (also called Silvanus) was introduced in Acts 15 as one of the two representatives sent by the apostles to Antioch to confirm the outcome of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:22). Like Mark, he later traveled with Peter and served as his amanuensis (1 Peter 5:12).
- ii. Timothy: During Paul's second journey, he was introduced to a young, uncircumcised, Jewish believer named Timothy (Acts 16:1). Although Timothy's father was Greek, his mother was Jewish, and Jews reckoned Jewishness on the basis of the maternal ancestry. Paul had argued against the necessity of circumcision for salvation but nevertheless had Timothy circumcised for the sake of expediency. The Jewish believers were already suspicious about Paul's attitude toward the Mosaic Law. For Paul to take an uncircumcised, Jewish ministry partner would only have hindered his witness in Jewish communities. Timothy became like a son to Paul.
- iii. Luke: Luke (the author) apparently joined Paul, Silas, and Timothy in Troas, modestly indicating his presence only by changing the pronoun from “they” to “we” (Acts 16:10).

### C. Philippi – 16:6-40

- i. Call to Macedonia: After Paul revisited and strengthened the churches established in his first journey (with the exception of those in Cyprus, which were visited by Barnabas and Mark), Paul and his companions drew close to Asia (a term which Luke seemed to have used in the more limited sense of Ephesus and the central and southwestern coastal region of Asia Minor<sup>1</sup>). However, the Holy Spirit prevented them from entering Asia, as well as Bithynia, the gateway to the east. The group was left with little choice but to head toward the northwest coast of Asia Minor, where they eventually came to the port of Troas. They might have stayed in Troas but the Holy Spirit again intervened, this time by means of a vision in which Paul saw a man in Macedonia begging him for help. The end result was that Paul was led into Europe rather than carrying the Gospel to the east.
- ii. A New Church: Although there was no synagogue in Philippi, Paul was able to locate a group of God-fearing women who met for prayer outside the city. “God-fearers” were those who worshipped the living God but had no knowledge of Jesus Christ (like Cornelius’ household [Acts 10:1-2] and this group of Philippian women). One such woman in Philippi was Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman (the fact that she dealt in purple cloth indicates wealth). Upon her conversion, she invited Paul and his companions to stay in her home. It probably became the meeting place of the church at Philippi. As we will later discover, of all the churches Paul founded, the Philippian church became especially dear to him.
- iii. Trouble in Philippi
  1. Paul ran into legal trouble in several cities on this journey; Philippi was one of them. Anti-Semitism had heightened under Emperor Claudius’ reign. In fact, Claudius had ordered all Jews out of Rome (18:2). Since Luke was a Gentile and Timothy a half-Gentile, they weren’t nearly so offensive as their comrades. When Paul healed a demon-possessed slave, she lost the ability predict the future and thus, to make money. Her infuriated owners brought Paul and Silas before the authorities, accusing them of un-Roman activities. The authorities severely flogged and imprisoned Paul and Silas, evidently without giving them an opportunity to present a defense. As Roman citizens, Paul and Silas shouldn’t have been legally punished without a trial. Although flogging was brutal enough to sometimes result in a victim’s death, Paul and Silas amazingly sung hymns late into the night.

2. About midnight, a violent earthquake suddenly freed all the prisoners. The jailer prepared to kill himself rather than face execution for allowing their escape. Paul intervened and assured the jailer that all the prisoners were present. Out of gratitude, the man gave Paul and Silas an audience in his home. His family was converted and tended to Paul and Silas' physical needs.
  3. In the morning, when the magistrate ordered Paul and Silas' release, Paul announced that they were Roman citizens and demanded public exoneration. This was a wise move on Paul's part, since it would have caused the citizens of Philippi to think twice before harassing the new believers. Not only was Paul protecting the young church at Philippi, he was also doing what he could to ensure that Christians, in general, maintained a good standing with the Roman government. As the record in Acts shows, believers were often falsely accused of illegal activities.
- iv. Departure: The Philippian authorities escorted Paul and Silas from the prison, publicly exonerating them while simultaneously asking them to leave the city. Luke says "they" left (apparently, he did not [16:40]). The terms "we" and "us," (indicating Luke's presence) do not appear again until Acts 20, at which time Paul was again in Philippi on his third missionary journey.

#### **D. Thessalonica and Berea – 17:1-15**

##### i. Thessalonica

1. Unlike Philippi, Thessalonica had a synagogue where Paul preached for three consecutive weeks. A large and influential group was converted, but some of the Jews became jealous and rounded up some bad characters who started a riot. When the mob searched but failed to find Paul and Silas, they dragged Paul's host Jason, along with some other believers, before the city officials. The men were forced to post bond (and likely to guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave the city) before being released.
2. At nightfall, Paul, Timothy, and Silas moved on to nearby Berea. Some scholars believe Paul had only been in Thessalonica for three weeks. However, Paul later indicated that he practiced his trade in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:9, 2 Thessalonians 3:8-10). This and other evidence leads many to conclude Paul had spent more than three weeks there. Regardless, Paul left sooner than he had wanted (1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:1).

- ii. Berea: The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonian Jews. Rather than becoming jealous of Paul, they earnestly searched the scriptures to see if what he said was true. As a result, another group of Jews and prominent Greeks were converted. However, the Jewish troublemakers from Thessalonica came and agitated the Berean crowds. The new believers arranged for Paul to be safely escorted to Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea.

### **E. Athens – 17:16-34**

- i. Paul’s Frame of Mind: Having been driven out of his three previous locations, Paul arrived in Athens alone and discouraged. His concern for the Macedonian churches was so great, that once Timothy and Silas rejoined him, he made the difficult decision to send them back, even though it meant he would remain in Athens alone (1 Thessalonians 3:1). Timothy went to Thessalonica. We are not told where Silas went (perhaps to Berea, or he may have rejoined Luke in Philippi).
- ii. Paul’s “Mars Hill” Address: Even after the Romans conquered the Greeks Athens remained the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman world. In New Testament times, what we know as Greece today was divided into the Roman provinces of Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south. Athens was in Achaia. The idolatry in Athens so greatly troubled Paul that he not only went to the synagogue but also to the marketplace. As it happened, a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Neither of these schools was bound up with the many Greek and Roman gods and idols. Thus, while they would have rejected full-blown Judaism, they would not have found monotheism itself offensive.<sup>ii</sup> As a result, Paul was taken to Mars Hill (the Roman name for the Areopagus, the Ancient Grecian Supreme Court and meeting place). For the first time in any of his recorded speeches, Paul made no mention of the Old Testament scriptures. Rather, he found a culturally relevant way to present the Gospel by talking with them about the one they knew as “the unknown god.” Paul’s example of beginning with familiar cultural references is a model for evangelism at home and abroad.
- iii. Results in Athens: Although there is no scriptural record of a church being founded in Athens, Luke did say that a member of the Areopagus was converted, as well as a woman named Damaris and a number of others.

### **F. Corinth – 18:1-17**

- i. Ministry in Corinth: The Jews in Corinth abused Paul, just as in previous locations, but the Lord also sent him encouragement. First, Paul met a Jew named Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who happened to be tentmakers, as Paul was. They became Paul’s long-time friends and trusted co-workers.

Second, Silas and Timothy finally rejoined Paul, freeing him to devote himself entirely to preaching, rather than working at his trade for support. Then, the ruler of the synagogue and his household were converted, and also many Corinthians. Most encouraging of all, the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him to remain in Corinth because He had many people in the city (18:10). Paul's opponents found a way to drag him into court but the case was dismissed almost immediately, leaving Paul free to continue ministering. He remained in Corinth for a year and a half and wrote both epistles to the Thessalonians during this period. Those who assign Galatians a post-Jerusalem Convention (Acts 15) date suggest he may also have sent that letter from Corinth.

- ii. Departure: When Paul finally left Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila left with him. Paul had made a vow and was eager to reach Jerusalem to fulfill it, but he made a brief stop in Ephesus along the way. The Ephesians begged him to stay longer and he promised to return if the Lord allowed it (as it turned out, Paul did later return to minister in Ephesus for nearly three years on his third journey). Priscilla and Aquila remained in Ephesus and Paul journeyed to Jerusalem via Caesarea. He then returned to his home church in Antioch.

**Summary Statement:** Paul was indeed a steadfast minister of the Gospel. In Philippi, Paul was illegally flogged, imprisoned, and asked to leave. He was forced out of Thessalonica and Berea by jealous Jews and left alone in Athens. The Lord graciously gave him eighteen months in Corinth, but even there, the Jews brought him before the court. Later, during his third missionary journey, he summarized what he had had to endure:

*I have worked harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, ...from bandits, ... from my own countrymen, ... from Gentiles, in danger in the city... in the country...at sea...and from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)*

Paul could only have persevered by keeping his eyes on Jesus, instead of looking at the path before and around him. He surely looked to Him:

- for a new ministry partner when he and Barnabas decided to travel separately
- for ongoing direction throughout his journey
- for help finding people who were open to the Gospel in places like Philippi and Athens
- for peace and joy to maintain his testimony, even while imprisoned
- and for wisdom to know how to protect new believers and wisdom to know when he had spent enough time and experienced enough rejection in the synagogue to move on to Gentile circles with his message
- to bring the Father glory through his many legal entanglements and to prompt hearts to respond in spiritually dead places

**Principle:** *We can be faithful in any and every circumstance if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.*

**Application:** In practical terms, keeping our eyes on Jesus is using our imagination to visualize His beauty, based on a Scriptural understanding of Him. Meditate on various aspects of His person and compare His fullness with your need. Do you lack guidance? What do you know from the Scriptures about His leading? Can you use your spiritual vision to see your Shepherd leading you? Do you need comfort? What does the Bible tell us about His compassion? Can you see Him touching you as He touched the needy, outcast leper? Do you need love for others? See Him hanging on the cross out of love for you. Do you need wisdom? Think of His brilliant response to those who tried to trick Him with their question about the coin and paying taxes. Go beyond a recollection of His adequacy; *see* your faithful, strong, ever-loving older brother, and the burden of your troubles will fall away. In Him, you will find everything you need. How well trained is your vision? What do you think about as you are falling asleep, when you awake, and when anxious thoughts come? Usually, these are telling thoughts about our focus.

**Transition:** As mentioned, Paul wrote both of his letters to the Thessalonians from Corinth during his second missionary journey, probably within a 12-month period. Both letters are addressed as having come from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Luke's reference to Gallio as proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12) has allowed scholars to date Paul's time in Corinth (and thus his letters to the Thessalonians) quite conclusively in the early 50s AD.

## II. Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians

### A. 1 Thessalonians

#### i. Background

1. Out of concern for the new Thessalonian converts, Paul sent Timothy to check on them. He had been forced to leave Thessalonica more quickly than he had wanted. 1 Thessalonians indicates that the believers were suffering persecution at the hands of the same local Jews who had also opposed Paul (1 Thessalonians 2:14). When Timothy finally rejoined Paul in Corinth, he reported that the Thessalonians were standing firm, despite opposition and despite rumors that Paul had been self-centered in his ministry to them. Apparently, Timothy also informed Paul of a particular concern the Thessalonians had about the state of believers who had died while awaiting Christ's return (1 Thessalonians 4:13).
2. Paul was so relieved to hear of the Thessalonians' steadfastness that he immediately wrote his first letter to them, repeatedly expressing his gratitude to God. All five chapters allude to Christ's return, and in chapter 4, Paul addressed their specific concern. The letter ends with an exhortation to live in light of Christ's return.

ii. Paul's Gratitude, Exhortation Concerning Sanctification, and Assurance Regarding His Motives – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4:12: Paul thanked God for the reputation the Thessalonians had earned among the churches (1:2-3), rejoiced that they continued to stand firm (3:8), and urged ongoing compliance with the Lord as He sanctified them (3:10-4:12). He also assured them that his motives in serving them had been pure (simply to teach the Gospel and please the Lord). He had even worked at his trade to ensure they weren't burdened with his support (2:3-12).

iii. Awaiting Christ's Return – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:28

1. *Comfort About the Lord's Coming* – 4:13-18: Many students of the Bible and church history have concluded that the early church expected Christ to return to earth very shortly after he ascended. This may explain why the Thessalonians became concerned about what would happen to those who had died in the meantime.
  - a. *Those Who Have Fallen Asleep*: In chapters 4 and 5, Paul repeatedly speaks of the dead as those who have fallen asleep. Nothing in the text supports the idea that the state of the believer between death and resurrection actually resembles sleep. The Greek word Paul used for "sleep" appears in many Greek, Jewish, and Christian writings as a euphemism for death.<sup>iii</sup> In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that when a believer dies, their spirit (the full personality) is immediately "at home with the Lord" (5:6-9). We don't

know whether our spirits will be clothed with temporary bodies while awaiting the Resurrection or not. But we can be certain that if we die before the Lord returns, we will immediately be in His presence and feel “at home.” Furthermore, Jesus’ parable about Lazarus and the rich man indicates that those who have died (believers and nonbelievers alike) are fully aware of their condition and able to remember all about their lives on earth (Luke 16:19-31). We will learn more about the bodily resurrection of believers in our study of 1 Corinthians.

- b. *Basis of Our Hope*: Paul eased the Thessalonians’ minds by reminding them of the basis of the Christian hope: the God who raised Jesus will also raise His followers (4:13-14).
- c. *Summary of Events*: Paul also assured the Thessalonians that dead and living believers will be reunited with one another and with Jesus at His coming, summarizing Christ’s return with an order of events:
  - i. *The Lord Will Descend*: When Jesus ascended to Heaven in the clouds, angels told those who were watching that He would return again in the same way (Acts 1:9-11). In Thessalonians 4, Paul adds that the Lord’s descent will be with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God (whether these are three descriptions of one occurrence or three distinct actions is not explained).
  - ii. *The Dead Will Rise*: Upon the Lord’s return, the dead in Christ will rise (4:16). Although Paul says nothing about the non-Christian dead in this passage, the possibility that they will also be raised at that time is not excluded.
  - iii. *The Dead and the Living Will Be Caught Up Together*: Following the resurrection of dead believers, living believers will be “caught up” with them in the clouds and together, they will meet the Lord in the air. The Greek term translated “caught up” indicates that resurrected believers and believers who are living at the time will together be “snatched away” or “taken away.” The comparable Latin word *raptus* is the source of the English term “rapture” and the reason why many Christians refer to this event as “the rapture.”

1. *Dispensational (or Pretribulational) Premillennialists* distinguish the events described in 1 Thessalonians 4 (the rapture) from the Second Coming of Christ. They believe the rapture will precede and initiate a seven-year period of tribulation on the earth. After the seven years, Jesus will return to the earth again (His Second Coming) with all believers to set up an earthly, millennial (1000 - year) kingdom.
  2. *Classic (or Historic) Premillennialists* believe that the event Paul described in 1 Thessalonians is not separate from Christ's Second Coming but one part of it. They hold that believers will meet Christ in the air but then immediately return to earth with Him to reign in His millennial kingdom.
  3. *Amillennialists and Postmillennialists*: Although these views have very different ideas from one another about what constitutes the Millennium, they both teach that the rapture is *not* followed by an earthly, millennial reign of Christ at all but will immediately usher believers into the eternal state (that is, the final state of every person following judgment, either eternal condemnation or eternal blessedness).
  - iv. *All Believers Will Be with the Lord Forever*: Finally, Paul says that we will be with the Lord forever. It appears that he is referring to the eternal state, but since he is summarizing, it is impossible to know from this statement alone whether other events will occur between the rapture and the eternal state (as many believe they will).
2. *Living in Consideration of Christ's Return – 5:1-28*: Having comforted those whose believing loved ones had died, Paul ended his letter by exhorting the Thessalonians to live in light of Christ's return. Thus, he moved from the subject of resurrection to the subject of judgment.
    - a. *Judgment*: Paul said we should not be so unprepared for the Day of the Lord and coming judgment that the day surprises us like a thief (5:4). Rather, we ought to be alert.

The New Testament teaches that the *general populace* will be completely surprised by Christ's return (1 Thessalonians 5, Luke 12:39, 2 Peter 3:10). For them, it will be like it was in Noah's day when the floodwaters came and like the time when God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. People were going about their normal lives, as if nothing was going to happen, and judgment took them by surprise (Luke 17:26-29).

- b. *Blameless Living*: Paul ended his letter by exhorting the Thessalonians to live in light of Christ's return. This calls for self-control, alertness, and blameless living, especially among church members (respect for leaders, kindness, peace and patience with one another, willingness to speak into one another's lives, joyfulness, prayerfulness, thanksgiving, and testing of all teaching).

**B. 2 Thessalonians:** Soon after sending his first letter, Paul learned that the persecution the Thessalonians suffered had intensified (perhaps he had heard this from the courier who delivered his first letter). He also learned that the church had received an alarming letter or report, supposedly from him, indicating that the Day of the Lord had arrived. The news unsettled them to the point that some were neglecting their vocational responsibilities. Thus, Paul wrote them a second letter.

- i. The Thessalonians' Oppressors Will Be Punished – 2 Thessalonians 1: Paul began this letter by commending the Thessalonians for their continued spiritual growth. It was proof of their salvation and their vindication at Christ's Second Coming. They suffered greatly, but God would one day punish their oppressors. Paul described the judgment of the wicked as "punishment with everlasting destruction" (1:9). The book of Revelation describes hell as a "lake of fire" (Revelation 20:10, 15). In hell, God will give unbelievers exactly what they wanted. Throughout their lives on earth, they rejected the knowledge of Him that was apparent in creation and in their consciences (Romans 1). They pushed God away, preferring to live without Him. Therefore, God will shut them out of His presence and the majesty of His power. The clear implication of complete separation from God is separation from all of the common graces that flow from His attributes: separation from goodness, mercy, love, power, creativity, light, truth, peace, beauty, kindness, fellowship, and so on. With God completely absent, there will be left nothing at all to enjoy in hell. While we may prefer to think that those who reject Christ will merely be annihilated, the Bible does not teach this. It says they will endure eternal, conscious suffering.

ii. The Man of Lawlessness – 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12: The “Day of the Lord” is a technical term used in the Bible to describe the time of the Lord’s judgment and the events surrounding it. Understandably, the report indicating that the “Day of the Lord” had already come alarmed the Thessalonians. They assumed Christ had already returned or at least, was coming very soon. Paul assured them that the day would not come until a large-scale rebellion against God took place. He called the individual who will lead this rebellion “the man of lawlessness.”

1. *Identifying the Man of Lawlessness*: Paul stated that the coming of the man of lawlessness will be in accordance with the work of Satan. He will be an evil man who will perform counterfeit miracles that deceive the unsaved. He will oppose and exalt himself over God and even proclaim that he *is* God! Daniel 11 describes such a man. In 168 BC, Antiochus Epiphanes fulfilled Daniel’s prophesy, at least in part, by opposing and killing the Jews and desecrating their Temple. But in the first century AD, the Roman emperors, particularly Nero, also seemed to fulfill this prophecy about the man of lawlessness. Since that time, people have thought Adolf Hitler or certain other especially evil rulers were the man of lawlessness. Although all these men lived in the spirit of antichrist, it seems unlikely that any of them were the man Paul wrote about since Christ has not yet returned. The Apostle John called such individuals “antichrists” in his epistles, yet he also foretold *an* antichrist, who seems to be the same individual Paul spoke of in 2 Thessalonians (1 John 2:18-22, 2 John 7). Likewise, Paul’s words in 2 Thessalonians “express the belief that demonic opposition to God, already present in the world, though in a restrained way, will ultimately reach a peak and become incarnated in a historical person who will lead a massive anti-Christ movement.”<sup>iv</sup> Many believe the person Paul and John described is the “Beast” of the book of Revelation (Revelation 13). It is difficult to imagine how completely evil this man will be, since his evil will exceed that of Antiochus, Nero, and Hitler (and others). He may be an incarnation of Satan himself.
2. *The One Holding Him Back*: Paul says the man of lawlessness won’t be revealed until the “one” holding him back is removed (2:7). Who or what is this “one” holding him back? The Thessalonians apparently already knew, since Paul says he had previously told them (2:5-6). However, present day readers are unable to identify him with any certainty.

- a. One of many suggestions is that “one” holding back the power of lawlessness is God Himself, through some heavenly agency or the Christian gospel or the Church.<sup>v</sup> Those who expect the Church to be raptured before this man of lawlessness is often revealed suggest that the Holy Spirit, through His presence in the Church, is the one currently restraining evil. Once God’s people are raptured, the antichrist and rebellion will prevail.
  - b. A second popular view is that government agencies (represented in Paul’s day by the emperor himself) are holding back the power of lawlessness.<sup>vi</sup> After all, God’s purpose for civil authorities is to restraint anarchy (Romans 13:1-5) and on several occasions, when angry and jealous Jews attacked Paul, Roman officials had protected him.
  - c. Since Paul is not at all clear about who or what will be removed before the man of lawlessness comes, we are best not to insist on any particular answer. What is clear is that the antichrist is ultimately doomed to destruction (2:3) and will be overthrown by Christ at His coming (2:8).
- iii. Stand Firm – 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17: With these words, Paul consoled the Thessalonians that they could not have missed Christ’s return. He then urged them to stand firm in what he had taught. As individuals whom God had chosen and called, they did not need to worry about the Day of the Lord. They would “share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2:14).
- iv. Prayer for Paul and Warning Against Idleness – 2 Thessalonians 3:
1. *Prayer for Paul*: Like the Thessalonians, Paul was often persecuted. He requested prayer for his ministry and deliverance from evil men.
  2. *Settle Down*: As the end of his letter, Paul instructed the Thessalonians to work hard and earn a living, just as he had done while among them. Apparently, they had worked themselves into such an eschatological frenzy that some had stopped working. The persecution they were suffering naturally increased their anticipation of Christ’s return, but Paul told them to settle down and return to their work.

**C. A Debated Question: Could Christ Come at Any Time?** 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8 and other New Testament passages encourage believers to be alert, ready, and watchful for Christ’s return (Matthew 24:42-44, 50, 25:13, Mark 13:32-33, Luke 12:40, etc.). From these passages, we might conclude that Lord could come at *any* time. On the other hand, in 2 Thessalonians, Paul seems to indicate that Christ could *not* come at any time, since certain signs must precede His coming. This may leave us wondering: Could Christ return at *any* time?

(The following discussion closely follows that in Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.<sup>vii</sup>)

Obviously, one answer is that He could not. However, this countermands the force of the warning for us to be ready. The other answer is that Jesus *could* return at any time. If that is the case, it must be reconciled with the Bible's teachings that certain signs must precede His coming. Bible students have traditionally done this in one of three ways:

- i. Some reconcile it by separating Christ's return into two distinct events. The first coming is a secret event in which the Church is raptured. After that, those who remain experience seven years of tribulation on the earth in which all the signs are fulfilled. At the end of the seven years, the Lord returns again in a very public way, with the Church, to establish His earthly kingdom. This view allows all the signs that must precede Christ's coming to be fulfilled while still allowing for the fact that Christ could come for believers at any moment.
- ii. Some scholars have concluded that Christ *could* return at any time because the signs have already been fulfilled. To understand this view, we must consider what the signs are and in what sense some believe they have been fulfilled.
  1. *The Preaching of the Gospel to All Nations* (Mark 13:10): The preaching of the Gospel to all nations may not mean that every individual will have heard the Gospel. Some believe that the Gospel was preached to all nations in the first century in a representative sense (Colossians 1:5-6, 23).
  2. *The Great Tribulation* (Mark 13:7-8, 19-20): Many people in the first century understood the period of great tribulation to have referred to the Roman siege of Jerusalem (AD 66-70). Some point out that since that time, great violence against believers has continued to take place in various locations. Those who endure it are especially likely to believe that this sign has been fulfilled.
  3. *False Prophets Working Signs and Wonders* (Mark 13:22): Missionaries have attested to the fact that signs and wonders have been worked through witchcraft and demonic activity for centuries.
  4. *Signs in the Heavens* (Mark 13:24-25): Some scholars explain the darkening of the sun and moon and the falling of stars from heaven as symbolic references to the first century fall of Jerusalem.
  5. *The Coming of the Man of Lawlessness and the Rebellion* (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, 1 John 2:18): Many terribly wicked individuals were believed to be the antichrist in the past. Some Protestants have even believed that one or another of the popes was the antichrist.

6. *The Salvation of Israel* (Romans 11:12, 25-26): Although Paul seems to indicate a future large-scale turning of Jewish people to Christ in Romans 11, some argue that his words do not need to be understood that way and that Jewish people will continue to be saved in the same way they are currently: one person at a time.

The trouble with believing that all of these signs have been fulfilled is that no one can prove it and that the Bible seems to indicate that all of them will find some greater fulfillment just before Christ returns.

- iii. The third option is to conclude that it is *unlikely* the signs have been fulfilled but *possible*. Dr. Wayne Grudem explains: “It is spiritually unhealthy for us to say that we know that these signs *have not* occurred, and it seems to stretch the bounds of credible interpretation to say that we know these signs have occurred. But it seems to fit exactly in the middle of the New Testament approach toward Christ’s return to say that we *do not know* with certainty if these events have occurred. Responsible exegesis, an expectation of Christ’s sudden return, and a measure of humility in our understanding, are all three preserved in this position.”<sup>viii</sup>

**Summary Statement:** Paul told the Thessalonians not to set aside normal work while they awaited Christ’s return. Neither were they to become so captivated by their daily affairs that the idea of Christ’s return was ever far from their consciousness. They were to remain alert and expectant of Christ’s return while continuing to live steady, hard-working lives.

The Jews had a saying: “Excellent is the study of the law along with a worldly trade; for the practice of them both makes a man forget iniquity...”<sup>ix</sup> Similarly, studying what the Bible teaches and working at our earthly callings together prepare us for Christ’s return.

**Principle:** *We prepare for Christ’s return by faithfully studying what the Bible teaches and working at our earthly callings.*

**Application:** What a timely admonition! At the moment, the political climate of the United States is unsettling, the need for law enforcement is in question, and we’re coping with a worldwide pandemic. How exactly does the Lord want us to respond? In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul tells us we should pursue the work we have been given (our vocational callings as well as our “church work”), believing the Lord will reward us upon His return as doing it unto Him. Hard labor keeps us balanced and healthy and is a good testimony. The Athenians did nothing but stand around discussing and listening to the latest happenings and ideas. God forbid that this describes us! When the Lord returns, we want to hear His “well done.” Is your attitude toward your daily work and church responsibilities dependent, in any part, on national or world events? Do you need to put more effort into them so that, when Christ returns, you will be found a faithful steward of the responsibilities He has given you?

Although we should be hard workers, we must guard against becoming so captivated by our daily affairs that the thought of Christ's return is ever far from our consciousness. A good dose of Bible doctrine is an antidote to forgetting that Christ may soon return, and also the antidote to fallacy and fear. Have you concluded that the Bible's teachings on future events are so difficult that you have not bothered to study them seriously? Believers are not to be surprised by Christ's return.

### Conclusion

The world desperately needs answers. News and other reports are alarming and difficult. If we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, our minds filled with God's truth, and our hands and feet engaged in hard work, our faithfulness and steadiness in the home, the workplace, the church, and the community will draw the troubled world to us and to the Christ we represent. There has never been a better time to be faithful and steady.

---

<sup>i</sup> Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 344). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>ii</sup> Gempf, C. (1994). *Acts in New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed., p. 1093). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>iii</sup> Martin, D. M. (1995). *1, 2 Thessalonians* (Vol. 33, p. 143). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>iv</sup> Brauch, M. T. and Peter Davids (1997). *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (pp. 662–663). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

<sup>v</sup> Marshall, I. Howard (1994). *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed.) (2 Th 2:1–17). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (p. 664). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

<sup>vii</sup> Grudem, Wayne (2000). *Systematic Theology* (pp. 1095-1105). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>viii</sup> Grudem, Wayne (2000). *Systematic Theology* (p. 1105). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>ix</sup> The Acts based on Chuck Missler / William Barclay / Ray Stedman notes and commentary. [http://tlindman.us/Files/Acts/18\\_ACTS.pdf](http://tlindman.us/Files/Acts/18_ACTS.pdf)