

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 78: The Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Part I

INTRODUCTION TO 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS

Introduction:

On his second missionary trip, Paul, along with Silas and Timothy, left Philippi and traveled south and west to the city of Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia. The response to their ministry was so volatile that they were forced to flee, but Paul remained their spiritual father and took an active interest in their growth and maturity.

The Author: Refer to Introduction of Pauline Epistles, Lesson 67

Paul's authorship was seldom questioned until very recently and only the most radical of critics. Their attempts fail in light of evidence such as:

1. Direct statements of Paul (1:1; 2:18)
2. Vocabulary, style, and doctrinal content confirm his authorship
3. It correlates with the recorded facts of Paul's travels (Acts 16-18)
4. Many intimate details regarding Paul are shared
5. Confirmation of many reliable, historical church sources

Paul's first letter was written from Corinth and can be dated at AD. 51 based on an archeological inscription in the temple of Apollo at Delphi that names Gallio as proconsul in Achaia from AD. 51-52 (Acts 18).

Paul's second letter was also written from Corinth, indicating he wrote it within several months of the first, in late AD. 51 or early 52.

The City: Refer to maps of Paul's journeys in back of your Bible.

In Paul's day, Thessalonica was an important naval center, located on a deep water Thermaic Gulf in the north of the Aegean Sea. It also served as the hub of political and commercial activity for all of Macedonia since it was located on the Egnation Way, the main east-west highway in the region and the road to Rome.

The city was founded in the fourth century BC. by Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's four generals, He named it after his wife, Thessalonica, who just happened to be Alexander's half-sister.

It became the capital of the Roman Empire's Macedonian Province in 168 BC., was declared a free city (governed by its citizens) and grew to a population of over 200,000 people when Paul first traveled there. Unlike many Biblical cities, it still exists as the modern city of Salonica, second most important city in Greece, with a population of approximately 300,000.

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The Church:

Acts chapters 16-18 describe this portion of Paul's second trip as he traveled the 100 miles from Philippi to Thessalonica in AD. 50.

As was his usual approach, he went immediately to the local synagogue to present the gospel "to the Jews first" (17:1-2). He used the facts of the death and resurrection of Jesus to prove that He was, in truth, the Messiah (17:2-3).

Some Jews believed, along with Hellenistic proselytes, and a number of wealthy women, but the church was primarily made up of Gentiles, mostly slaves and members of the working poor (4:11-12).

Their ministry was short but sweet, some think as little as three weeks because of the three Sabbaths mentioned in Acts 17:2. It is more likely that they left the hostile Jews and continued to minister to the Gentiles.

They were there long enough to:

1. Choose and train leaders (I Thes. 5:12);
2. Reach surrounding areas with the gospel (I Thes. 1:7)
3. Pass on the "traditions" or systematic teachings (II Thes. 2:15)

Because Paul's preaching drew people away from the synagogue, the Jews charged his host, Jason, with harboring traitors. They accused Paul of claiming that Jesus was a king in opposition to Caesar. A mob attacked Jason's home and the city rulers held him as security, to force the missionaries to leave (Acts 17:5-9).

Paul and his group continued south to Berea where they experienced dejavu, conversions followed by hostility. This time the believers sent Paul on to Athens but Timothy and Silvanus remained in Berea (Act 17:11-14).

They rejoined Paul in Athens but Paul, concerned about having to leave the church without experienced leadership, sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (3:1-5), to encourage the believers and collect data for a report on the condition of the newborn church.

The Letters:

Paul moved on the Corinth, and when Timothy joined him (3:6) he wrote his first letter based on Timothy's good report. Timothy presented a church full of faith and love that stood fast under persecution. On the other hand, he reported criticism of Paul, problems with sexual immorality and idleness, confusion about the return of Jesus, and tensions in the fellowship.

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His **first letter** is one of relief and gratefulness to God for the healthy state of the church but also one of concern and correction for their weaknesses.

During his eighteen-month stay in Corinth, Paul obviously stayed on top of the situation in the Thessalonian church. He wrote a **second letter** to deal with a misunderstanding that seems to have occurred in regard to the meaning of his first letter.

The church had matured and expanded (1:3) but there were three things that concerned Paul:

First, the pressure and persecution was becoming so severe that he felt he needed to explain why God allows his people to suffer for the kingdom and how He will bring justice when Jesus comes again (2 Thes. 1:5-10).

Secondly, false teaching had reached them which claimed to come from Paul, but was a forgery. They were being told that the Day of the Lord had already come. Paul reminded them of the proper order of historical events tied to the Second Coming of Christ. (2 Thes. 2:1-12)

Thirdly, a group of members had previously stopped working and refused to follow Paul's correction to get back to work (2 Thes. 3:4-12).

It is likely that Paul returned to the Thessalonian church on his third trip (Acts 20), and he expressed a desire to revisit them when he was first imprisoned in Rome (Phil. 1:25-26; 2:24). He may have visited the city again during his release (1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 4:13) before his death.

The Purpose:

Paul had a number of reasons for writing his **first letter**:

1. To express his thankfulness for and encouragement to the church.
2. To answer false allegations that he was in ministry for money.
3. To comfort the baby church in the midst of serious persecution.
4. To remind them not to revert to a former pagan life of impurity.
5. To condemn a non-productive lifestyle.
6. To correct a misunderstanding of prophecy.
7. To discuss problem areas in their personal and church lives.

The thrust of the **second letter** was somewhat different:

1. To encourage a persecuted church to persevere.
2. To correct any misunderstanding of his teaching on the coming Day of the Lord (1 Thes. 5:1-11) which caused fear or idleness.
3. To explain the ramifications of this teaching spiritually and physically.

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The Problem:

Eschatology is, of course, the study of final things. One of the problems of studying the Thessalonian letters is the tendency to get caught up in its eschatology.

We certainly can learn much from Paul's teachings as they impart important information about: the "catching up" of the believers, dead and alive; "the Day of the Lord," that period of time between the coming of Jesus in the air for the church and the "Second Coming," and when Jesus comes to earth to set up the Millennial Kingdom and rules in Jerusalem.

Conclusion:

This is all fun stuff. But, we need to look at Paul's purpose in clarifying these prophetic truths. After all, what is the purpose of prophecy?

In Old Testament times God spoke to the Prophet Ezekiel and explained to him just what his job as prophet entailed. In Ezekiel 33:1-10 God explained that a prophet is a watchman standing on a high place to warn the people of impending attack. If that watchman does not do his job and warn the people, he has their blood on his hands (v 6).

God goes on to explain to Ezekiel that He has appointed him watchman over Israel, to warn them of God's judgment which is coming because of their wickedness. His instructions are explicit,

" . . . say to the house of Israel, Thus you have spoken, saying, 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we are rotting away in them; how shall we then survive?'" or in the King James, *"how shall we then live?"*

God goes on to explain to the prophet how to answer that question. The bottom line is in verses 18 and 19.

"When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, then he shall die in it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and practices justice and righteousness, he will live by them."

So, the purpose of prophecy in the Old Testament, i.e. predicting future events and warning of coming events, is to change Israel's lifestyle.

The purpose of prophecy is to lead men to righteous living.

In the New Testament the purpose of prophecy has not changed.

First, we have the New Testament approach to Old Testament prophecy:

Peter wrote an ode to salvation by grace in I Peter 1. In verse 10 he says, *"As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry."*

Verse 12, *"It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven . . ."*

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What does Peter see as the purpose of the ministry of those prophets?

What effect should their work have on us? Verse 13, *"Therefore . . ."* Since the prophets were serving you with their message, how should you respond? Holiness, fear, love, maturity . . . change of lifestyle (1:3-3:12).

Next we have the New Testament approach to New Testament prophecy: Just one of many examples of N. T. prophecy is in I John 3. John says, *"Behold, now we are the children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that , when He appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see Him as He is."* (v 2)

And what is the result of this knowledge of prophecy? Verse 3: *"And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."*

Lesson:

The purpose of prophecy is to lead men to righteous living.

The purpose of prophesy is to change our lifestyle:

1. Seeing that Jesus is coming and we don't know when, how shall we then live?
2. Seeing as in the end times things get worse and worse (persecution), how shall we then live?
3. Seeing that sinners face an eternity of wrath and judgment, how shall we then live?
4. Seeing that God has saved us from wrath and punishment, how shall we then live?
5. Seeing as death is not the end of existence, how shall we then live?
6. Seeing that we will give an account of our service, how shall we than live?

According to Paul's letters we should respond to prophesy with:

1. Perseverance and Joy
2. Readiness and Hope
3. Comfort and Encouragement

Homework:

Read: The Book of I1 Thessalonians

Think: How does thinking about prophecy affect how I relate to non-believers? Believers?

Apply: Live as though you knew Jesus was coming this week.

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Bible Survey Lesson 79: The Books of I & II Thessalonians, Part II

OUTLINES OF 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS

Introduction:

The first century Christian was a marked man. Not only did a new believer often lose his job, home, even his family, but persecution came from all directions.

Zealous Jews attacked them as apostates from the true religion, followers of a false Messiah, and blasphemers of God. Greeks confronted them for being illiterate, illogical, and irrational. Romans considered them as enemies of Caesar, revolutionaries, and even cannibals.

Persecutions included expulsion, beating, stoning, torture, and death by more methods that you can imagine. Believers were killed by beheading, torture, burning, stoning, wild beast, skinning, and crucifixion. (Refer to Foxes Book of Martyrs.)

To be a follower of Christ in Paul's time could mean being willing to give up everything, including your life and the city of Thessalonica was not a tolerant city.

The Jews drove Paul out of their Synagogue and eventually from the city itself. He knew what zealous Pharisees could do since he had been the deadliest of them all.

The city, although Roman, was granted the status of "free city" in 42 BC. and chose to govern itself following a Greek pattern. It was run with an iron hand by magistrates and an elected assembly (politarchs or city authorities, and "the Areopagus" as Luke correctly names them in Acts 17).

Since the city was the capital of the province of Macedonia, it had a Roman garrison and the Roman soldier were known to consider Christians as, at least strange and, at worst, dangerous psychopaths.

Paul empathizes with them. He had suffered persecution of many kinds and, in fact, he would eventually be executed for his faith. His first letter was written to give them encouragement, comfort, and hope.

The Outline of the Book of 1 Thessalonians

Paul hands us an outline for His first letter in verses 2 through 4: *"We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers: constantly bearing in mind your **work of faith**, and **labor of love**, and **steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved of God, His choice of you."*

I. THE PAST -- "work of love" (Chapters 1:1-3:13)

Much of this letter is very personal and relates primarily to Paul's ministry and the Thessalonian church's response. Paul offers thanksgiving for the faith of these who are *"in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:"* (v 1) then reviews their history together.

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A. Condition (1:1-10)

Paul has nothing but good to say about the Thessalonian believers.

1. **They were mature**, growing in the Christian graces of faith, hope and love. The early church always associated faith with the work (Gal 5:6; Jas. 2:18), love with labor (Rev. 4:2,-4), and hope with endurance (Rom. 5:2-4); 8:24) (v 3).
2. **They were fruitful**, their lives were an adequate proof of the reality of their being in Jesus. (v 3)
3. **They were chosen**, and since God loved them and chose them they received the Word *"in the power of the Holy Spirit"* not just a message from reliable men. (vv. 4-5)
4. **They were disciples**, following the example of Jesus, and Paul and his team, then becoming examples to other believers throughout their region. (v 6)
5. **They were witnesses**, who sounded forth the Word of God spreading their testimony that they had, *"turned from idols to serve a living and true God"* (vv. 7-10).

B. Conduct (2:1-12)

Having validated the ministry of the Thessalonian Believers, Paul now defends the ministry of himself and his team. There had obviously been questions raised about his methods and his motives. His defense included three arguments discussing his character:

1. **His integrity**. Even though Paul, Timothy and Silas had suffered great persecution in Phillipi, they did not hold back in proclaiming *"the gospel of God amid much opposition"* in Thessalonica. The people received their message and their approval as from God, not from men so they knew their coming was not in vain (1-4).
2. **His industry**. *"For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God"* (v 9) In verses 6-8 Paul defends their motives, methods and message.
3. **His interaction**. Paul and his team were devout, upright, and blameless in their behavior, exhorting, encouraging, and imploring the believers to walk worthy of God (vv. 10-12).

C. Conversation (2:13-16)

The bottom line of vindication for Paul's ministry and the genuine condition of the believers at Thessalonica is the fact of their true conversion. Just skimming through verses 13 through 15 we see that they *"received the Word of God, . . . accepted it for what it really is, the Word of God, which also performs its work . . . became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus . . . and endured suffering."*

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D. Concern (2:17-20)

Paul expresses his concern for the church in sharp contrast to the persecutors he has mentioned in verses 14-16. He declares his desire to see them and fellowship with them for they will be his hope, and glory, and crown *"in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming."* After all, they are Paul's glory and joy.

E. Confirmation (3:1-10)

What is Paul's final proof that all the things he has stated above are true? He sent Timothy to check out how they were doing in light of the hostile circumstances. And what did he find? The church was still faithfully persevering in their faith and love for Jesus and for Paul. Of course, we know that testing under persecution is one of the tests of true faith.

F. Continued Prayer (3:11-13)

The encouraging report from Timothy rejuvenated Paul and led him to continue to pray that God would supply anything that might be lacking in their already great faith. *"That He may establish your hearts unblamable before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."* (v 13)

II. THE PRESENT -- "labor of love" (Chapter 4:1-13)

After rehearsing their past relationship verifying their salvation and His service, spiritual father Paul turns to several ethical and doctrinal issues:

A. Love for God (1-8)

When we truly love God we want to please him. Paul reminds them that they know how to walk and please God and actually do walk in that manner, but wants them to *"excel still more."* (v. 1)

What was their problem area? Pagan culture looked on sexual immorality with indifference or tolerance. Since many church members came out of that culture they may have slipped back into that area of sin. They are to abstain from any sexual immorality.

Paul tells them to *"know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor."* (v. 4) That could mean to know how to control their own body, or to honorably acquire a wife so they don't use a vessel that isn't their's. I lean toward the second, but either has impact.

If the second case is true it fits the context very well. If we fail to do this, we fail to please God (v 1), we harm ourselves by living like those who do not know God (v 5), and we defraud the woman, and wrong the man to whom she is married or whom she will marry in the future (v 6).

The bottom line is, to please God means to do His will and His will is the sanctification of the believer (vv. 7-8).

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B. Love for Brothers (9-10)

Loving the brothers at home and throughout Macedonia was no problem. They practiced this very well, but Paul says, *"we urge you, brethren to excel still more."*

C. Love for the Lost (11-12)

How can believers show their love for "outsiders?" Paul tells them, *"make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hand."* This is not very flashy, or pious, or religious sounding, but it works and is part of this process of pleasing God.

III. THE FUTURE -- "patience of hope" (Chapters 4:13-5:28)

What is the great hope of the church? Find a hymnbook and read the words from the classic hymn, *"The Solid Rock"* by Edward Mote and William Bradley.

A. Day of the Christ (4:13-18) ("Rapture")

Paul had taught the imminent return of Jesus as the great hope to sustain them through times of persecution. They were excited about that concept. This caused two problems:

1. Some of the Christians in Thessalonica had died and their living friends or family were worried that they were going to miss the great event.
2. Some members just quit their jobs and waited living off others. In this portion he deals with the first group. Not only will the dead believers not miss the event, they will rise from the dead and be raised first so as to meet with the living believers in the air and then *"always be with the Lord."*

These words became a vehicle of comfort for the entire church (v 18). It provided great comfort to those with loved ones who had already died, but also provided the most exciting scenario of the "catching up" of the church to those living under persecution.

B. Day of the Lord (5:1-11)

In this section Paul changes his emphasis (*"Now as to"* indicates a new topic) from the "catching up" and moves on to the meaning of the term "the Day of the Lord."

Since the Day of the Lord will come suddenly, unexpectedly, and not happily (*"just like a thief in the night"* --v 2), bringing destruction on those who are spiritually unaware, believers should be alert.

The great news for the Thessalonian believers is that their destiny is not wrath, but deliverance through Jesus (see above). Again Paul says, *"encourage one another, and build up one another."*

The simultaneous truths concerning the return of Christ for His believers, and the Day of the Lord bringing wrath to sinners, should make it clear that people can only be saved from wrath by placing their faith and hope in Jesus and His salvation.

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C. Day of the Church (5:12-28)

Meanwhile, the church functions in the real world while awaiting its great hope. Paul closes his letter with some instructions:

1. Verse 12 -- *"appreciate those who work among you."*
2. Verse 13 -- *"Live in peace with one another"*
3. Verse 14 -- *"admonish the unruly, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all men"*
4. Verse 15 -- *"seek that which is good for one another and all men"*
5. Verse 16 -- *"Rejoice always"*
6. Verse 17 -- *"pray without ceasing"*
7. Verse 18 -- *"in everything give thanks"*
8. Verse 19 -- *"do not quench the Spirit"*
9. Verse 20 -- *"do not despise prophetic utterances"*
10. Verse 21 -- *"Examine everything carefully; hold fast to the good"*
11. Verse 22 -- *"abstain from every kind of evil"*

But that's an impossible list. How can that ever occur?

READ 1 THESS. 5:23 AND 24

Lessons:

1. God chooses us unto salvation. (1:4)
2. God's will is what brought this whole plan into existence. (4:3)
3. God's people are called to holy living and God supernaturally sets us apart giving us the Holy Spirit so we can obey. (4:7-8)
4. God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise all believers to live with Him forever. (4:14-17)

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The Outline of the Book of 2 Thessalonians

Introduction:

Have you ever sent a letter to someone thinking it to be clear and concise and have word get back to you that the recipient is thoroughly confused.

That seems to have happened in regard to Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. Paul had written to help them to grow in an already strong faith, and to comfort and encourage them by clarifying the reality of, and facts surrounding the return of Christ. There were two basic problems:

1. His announcement that the return of Jesus was imminent caused some church members to stop working and just wait for His coming. They rationalized their laziness by pointing to Paul's teaching and lived off the generosity of members of the body (3:11)
2. Increased persecution of the church caused some to fear that the "Day of the Lord" had arrived, and thus they had missed the "catching up" to be with Jesus.

This was fueled by agitators who confused them by spreading false information taken from utterances of inspired prophets in the church, misinterpretation of Paul's letter, or perhaps by a forged epistle or people claiming to have been sent by Paul himself (2:2).

Responding quickly, Paul dealt with both of these problems.

I. COMFORT (Chapter 1)

In typical fashion, Paul commends and encourages his audience before he teaches or corrects.

A. Encouragement (1-4)

Paul offered praise and thanksgiving to God for their growing faith and their maturing love and patience. He also talks to other churches about them and their perseverance under persecution.

B. Exhortation (5-12)

It is obvious that the church had suffered much at the hands of the unrighteous. Paul's answer to this is to remind them of a coming reversal of roles. While the believers at Thessalonica are suffering now, the persecutors are going to face judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

That retribution will be dealt out to two groups of people:

1. Those who do not know God.
2. Those who do not obey the gospel.

The penalty will be *"eternal destruction, away from the Lord and from the glory of His power"* (vv. 8-9).

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God's people can be encouraged, knowing their faithfulness will be vindicated when Jesus comes, and realizing they have not believed or suffered in vain.

Why is this important? So they will get even? So they will feel better? So they will be admired forever? NO! The purpose of their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope is "*in order that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ*"(v. 12).

II. CORRECTION Chapter 2:1-12)

Paul next spent most of a chapter dealing with the main problem among the Thessalonian believers.

A. Crisis (1-2)

Some were teaching that the Day of the Lord had already occurred. This was a problem because, if true, it would mean the "catching up" mentioned in his first letter had happened and they were left behind. It also meant the persecution that was getting worse would become an unbearable "wrath" before the Lord put an end it and brought in His Millennial Kingdom.

Paul wants to set the record straight.

B. Correction (3-12)

The prophetic utterances are wrong. The forged letters are wrong. The men who have chosen to speak for Paul are wrong.

In his first letter Paul taught that the "Second Coming" would come suddenly, unexpectedly, and unhappily (1 Thess. 1:5). Now, he teaches that, even though that is true, several things must precede that event in history:

1. A mighty apostasy (v 3).
2. A man of lawlessness revealed (vv. 3-4; 8-9)

(Note: He occupies the throne in the Temple so it must be rebuilt.)

3. The Restrained removed (vv 6-7)

(The debate rages, but I believe it is the Holy Spirit.)

4. Retribution on the sinful (vv. 10-12)

(They fail to love the truth [10], God sends a great delusion [11], they are judged for not believing the truth [12]).

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III. CONCERN (Chapters 2:13-3:18)

Its nice for the Thessalonians to know this is not in the present but in the future, but how can they be sure of their salvation? Where does their eternal security rest? It rests in knowledge that *"God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the spirit and faith in truth (v 13).*

A. Word (2:13-17)

God chose them, then called them to Himself *"through the gospel"*(v. 14). Their ongoing maturity also relies on the Word of God. Paul tells them to *"stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us."* Traditions, in this case are the Apostles teaching which later became the Scriptures.

B. Walk (3:1-7)

Paul asks them to pray *"that the Word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified"* (v 1). Just how will that happen? Because they *"are doing and will continue to do what we command."*

And while noting their walking in obedience to their call, respect for the Word, and willingness to do what they are instructed, Paul deals with a particular problem that seems to have come out of his teaching on the "catching up" of the believers.

His instructions here are in line with all teaching on church discipline. The church members are to withdraw support and social contact from anyone who lives an unruly life, not obeying the Word.

C. Work (3:8-18)

Some in the Thessalonian church had stopped working because they figured "why bother since Jesus is coming to get us out of here, so we'll just kick back and wait."

While Paul maintained his confidence in the Lord's imminent return, he rebuked them for their idleness. He pointed to his team's example of working as well as ministering so that they would not be a burden to anyone. He reminded them of what he had instructed when he was in their church, *"if anyone will not work, neither let him eat."*

Paul urged them, instead, to be examples in the fellowship, to earn their own living, and not grow weary in well doing. But, not only were they loafers and freeloaders, they were busybodies (v11), interfering in other peoples lives.

If they do not obey this counsel (Paul is confronting the sinner), the body is instructed, *"do not associate with him"* (v 14). They should not, however, be treated as enemies but admonished as brothers. Restoration is the goal.

Paul concludes this letter with words of grace and peace in his own handwriting. This will make it personal, also proving it is, in fact, from him. The letter includes encouragement, instruction, rebuke, and admonishment. But it is a book of grace and peace from beginning (1:2) to end (3:18).

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Lessons:

Almost 2000 years later, we stand much closer to the "catching up" of believers by Christ. We still need to:

1. Live each day in eager expectation, as if Jesus was coming today.
2. Enjoy the knowledge that we will meet believing loved ones again.
3. Continue working to meet our needs, for the good of the body, and for the spread of the gospel.