

I THESSALONIANS

**The First Letter of Paul
to the Church in
Thessalonica**

Paul's mission to Greece

In the Introduction we pieced together what we know about Paul's life up to the writing of Galatians and the Jerusalem Assembly. Shortly after the Jerusalem Assembly, Paul set off to visit the churches which he and Barnabas had founded on their previous journey (47-48). He headed off overland, working his way through Syria and Cilicia, accompanied this time not by Barnabas but by Silvanus (Luke calls him by his Jewish name 'Silas', Acts 15:36-41). After visiting the churches in southern Galatia, he headed north and west, joined now by Timothy. Guided by the Spirit of Jesus, they came to Troas. The journey from Antioch to Troas covered some fifteen hundred kilometres and could have taken the best part of eight months. It is at this stage that Luke begins to use the first person in his narrative (Acts 16:10). It is possible, as some suggest, that Luke is using an unnamed person's travel diary as one of his sources. It is also possible, however, that the earliest tradition is correct and that Luke is drawing here on his own memoirs.

From Troas Paul crossed by ship to Macedonia, disembarked at Neapolis (Acts 16:11), and journeyed the fifteen or so kilometres along the Via Egnatia to Philippi (Acts 16:12). We will have more to say about his experiences there when we introduce his letter written to the Philippians. Luke (or the anonymous author of the travel diary) seems to have stayed on in Philippi, for the narrative moves back to the third person: '*they* departed' (Acts 16:40). Forced to leave Philippi, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy continued along the Via Egnatia, heading west. One hundred fifty kilometres along the road they came to the port of Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia (Acts 17:1-9).

Thessalonica was a thriving city, the seat of the Roman proconsul of Macedonia, proud of its ties with Rome and enjoying a good deal of self-governance. It was an important centre for the cult of the Roman deities and of the Emperor and, as we shall note shortly, there is evidence of the presence in Thessalonica of sectaries of imported mystery cults. Luke's account of Paul's stay in Thessalonica is quite brief. He begins with a summary account of Paul's proclamation of the gospel in the synagogue:

Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.'

– Acts 17:2-3

He goes on to speak of three groups of people who 'were persuaded' by Paul's proclamation and who joined (Greek: *prosklēroō*) the missionaries. Luke's choice of verb indicates that the initiative is not theirs: it is God who has chosen them to enjoy the promised inheritance. There were 'some' Jews. Aristarchus, one of Paul's close companions, was a Jew from Thessalonica (see Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:2; Colossians 4:10). Secundus, also from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4), may also have been a Jew. There were also 'a great many of the devout Greeks'. Luke is referring to those Gentiles who attended the synagogue, though they did not have themselves circumcised. They were attracted to Judaism for its monotheistic faith, and also because, in a world of confusing and conflicting religious and philosophical ideas, they found attractive the clarity of Judaism's moral code.

Map 2. Cities bordering the Aegean



Luke singles out for special mention ‘not a few of the leading women’. Christians met in a home to break bread. It was especially these rich women who were able to provide hospitality to the community, the bulk of whom were poor (2Corinthians 8:2), manual workers (1Thessalonians 4:11). The letter we are about to read implies a stay of at least a few weeks, if not months. This is also implied by a remark which Paul makes in a letter which he wrote to the community at Philippi: ‘When I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once’ (Philippians 4:16).

Apart from his brief mention of the three groups of converts, Luke records only one scene at the end of Paul’s time there. The mob, stirred on by Jews who opposed Paul, attempted to seize Paul and Silvanus in order to haul them before the assembly of citizens (Greek: *dēmos*), the appropriate body to pass judgment in a free city such as Thessalonica. It seems that the missionaries were lodging with Jason (Acts 17:5). The mob went looking for Paul there and when they were unable to find him, they ‘dragged Jason and some of the believers before the city authorities’ (Greek: *politarchēs*), accusing the missionaries of proclaiming a king in opposition to Caesar (Acts 17:7). Perhaps the city authorities had received news from Philippi which cautioned them to be careful. In any case the only action they took was to require Jason to go guarantor not to harbour the troublesome missionaries. ‘That very night’, says Luke, ‘the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea’ (Acts 17:10). This meant leaving the Via Egnatia and heading south west into the hills.

They received a better welcome in Beroea. However, ‘when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind’ (Acts 17:13-14). Paul headed south and arrived in Athens (Acts 17:15).

Athens saw itself as the cultural centre of the Greek-speaking world. It had lost any semblance of its former military and economic power, but at about the time of Paul’s visit it was given a special status in Roman law as an independent city allied to Rome, and so not under the jurisdiction of the proconsul of Achaia who resided in Corinth. Paul’s escort returned to Beroea with instructions that Silvanus and Timothy were to join him ‘as soon as possible’ (Acts 17:15). Either Timothy came to Athens straightaway and was sent by Paul to Thessalonica, or Paul also sent instructions that Timothy was to go there before joining him (1Thessalonians 3:2). In Macedonia, Luke focuses on Paul’s mission of liberation from the limitations and the abuse of Roman power, and from intransigent Jewish ideology. In Athens we find Paul in the market place (the agora) and in the arena of public debate and philosophical dispute (the Areopagus). We witness the meeting of the word proclaimed by Paul and Greek wisdom, represented by the Epicureans and the Stoics (Acts 17:18). Paul was no stranger to this world. One of the leading Stoic schools in the east was at Tarsus, and Paul’s letters reveal a man who is familiar with its thought. Dionysius, one of the members of the council (an *Areopagitēs*), became a believer. There were some others, including ‘a woman named Damaris’ (Acts 17:34).

From Athens Paul went to Corinth, capital of the Roman province of Achaia. There he met a Jewish-Christian couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who, like Paul, worked with a needle, making canvas shades for the market-place, as well as tents and coverings for the caravans and other cloth and leather goods. They had recently been expelled from Rome (Acts 18:2-3). The Roman historian Suetonius, writing c.120, mentions an expulsion of Jews from Rome because of trouble stirred up because of someone he calls 'Chrestos' ('Christ?'). The Christian historian, Orosius, writing in the early fifth century, dates this edict in 49. The date is disputed, and it is unlikely that the edict would have been a general one. It was probably directed at a particular synagogue where debates over Christ were causing public disorder, and Claudius was hoping to restore order by expelling those who were not Roman citizens, which included Aquila and Priscilla. Luke records that Paul stayed in Corinth for eighteen months (Acts 18:11). He also mentions that at one stage he was brought before the proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12). The most likely year of Gallio's appointment as proconsul is 51. We know from a letter written by his brother, Seneca, that he retired before the completion of his term, so it is reasonable to assume that he left Corinth as soon as the sailing season opened in the spring of 52.

It would seem, therefore, that Paul arrived in Corinth before the onset of winter in the year 50 and left at the same time as Gallio in the spring of 52. This gives us a firm point of reference in our attempt to date Paul's life. By taking into account all the other indications given in Paul's letters and in the Acts, as well as the impossibility of travelling by boat during the winter months and the difficulty of travelling by land in some places during the winter, we are able to move back from 50 and forward from 52 to establish a reasonably accurate picture of the timing of Paul's movements (see the time chart, page 9).

Silvanus and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth, and it is their news from Thessalonica that is the occasion for the letter we are about to study, a letter written probably from Corinth towards the end of 50, that is to say only twenty years at the most after the death of Jesus. Many consider this to be the earliest of Paul's letters. We are following the opinion of those who say that Galatians was earlier, composed in Antioch in 48. In Galatians, as we have seen, Paul was stirred to give expression to the essence of his gospel. His letter to the Thessalonians has none of that kind of urgency. Nor is it a document in which Paul carefully expresses the essential convictions of his life. He is responding quite briefly (the Greek has only forty-eight sentences) to the concerns which the community in Thessalonica has expressed through Timothy and to the situation in Thessalonica as observed by him.

The two obvious concerns are persecution and the fate of the members of the community who have died. Otherwise, a superficial reading could lead one to think that everything was fine in Thessalonica. There are many expressions of affection, and the whole first half of the letter is given over to thanksgiving. This is all, of course, genuine, but there is evidence that Timothy's report reinforced a concern which Paul already had about the faith of the young community (3:5). The worry about the dead was but one symptom of the problem.

Situation in Thessalonica

To get an idea of what was happening in Thessalonica we have to read between the lines of Paul's letter, with the risk which this entails of our reading into the text what is not there. The best we can do is to offer some suggestions, based on what we know about Thessalonica and on our interpretation of the text of the letter. These suggestions must be checked when we come to the text itself. If they have merit, they open up further depths in Paul's presentation of the gospel.

Apart from the civic cult of the main Roman gods (appropriately inculturated) and of the emperor himself, there is evidence of the presence in Thessalonica of various cults from Egypt as well as a host of cults and movements from the east. The cult of Dionysos, with its celebration of wine and sex, was popular in this port town, but perhaps the most distinctive of the mystery cults that flourished in Thessalonica was the cult of Cabiros. We do not have precise information about the practices attached to this cult in first century Thessalonica, but it was widely popular among the poor and the dispossessed. Cabiros was murdered by his brothers and worshipped as a hero. Communion with him was achieved in an ecstatic state brought on by the frenzied cult. It is reasonable to assume that among the poor who were won over to Christianity, some had been involved in one or other of the mystery cults and it may be this that points to the problems that were experienced in the community when Paul and his companions were prematurely forced to leave them.

They had become Christians with a good deal of enthusiasm, as Paul's letter will indicate. However, the young community had to face what seems to have been constant and quite energetic persecution. They had been promised a salvation that went beyond anything they had formerly heard of or experienced. They seem to have expected that the full establishment of the kingdom of God as inaugurated by Jesus would come in their lifetime, but when some of their members died without this happening, not surprisingly they began to question the kind of salvation given by Jesus who was slow in coming and who was unable to prevent death. Were they tempted to go back to the more exciting and more socially acceptable cults that they had left? Did they miss the sexual indulgence and release associated with some of these movements? They were accustomed to wandering philosophers peddling new ideas, attracting a following, achieving fame, making money and then moving on. When it was suggested that Paul and his companions were no better, did some in the community begin to wonder?

The way that Paul chooses to deal with their questions gives us an insight into his character. He must have been a particularly attractive person to have been able to do what he did, and he must have had a profound capacity for friendship and for reflecting the love of Christ about which he preached. It is interesting to find such clear evidence of this in the way he writes this letter, in the images he uses and in the sentiments he expresses. Note also Paul's constant appeal to experience. One would expect genuine religion to be about our real lives, for it is in our actual life experiences that the questions arise and that we experience the longing to know and to love that are looking for a focus and a direction. Far from getting lost in speculation and empty theorizing, Paul is concerned to remind his readers of what actually happened when he was with them, and of what they came to perceive. Notice how often he uses expressions like 'you know', or 'as you know'.

Throughout the letter Paul appeals to their religious experience, their personal and communal experience of the Spirit of the risen Jesus. The gospel is about being more sensitive to one's experience, more able to stay in touch with its richest dimensions, more able to penetrate to its deepest significance, and more able to give expression to it in a creative and loving way. We find Paul appealing to the Christians of Thessalonica not to forget this, to stay in touch with what has been happening to them, and to keep modelling their lives on that of Jesus and on the example which Paul and the other two missionaries gave them while they were living among them.

Note, too, the obvious centrality of Jesus in Paul's life and in the lives of the community to whom he is writing. It is clear that the transcendent yearning for the divine experienced by Paul and by those to whom he is writing are intimately bound up with their relationship with Jesus. Furthermore, their hopes for the future are also centred on Jesus. Paul gently reassures them of this and at the same time, focuses their attention on the way they conduct their lives in the present. If they live now with Jesus they can be confident that they will always live with him.

The earliest complete Greek text of 1 Thessalonians that has come down to us is preserved in two fourth century books, the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus. Parts of the text have been preserved on papyrus sheets, from c.200AD (P⁴⁶), and from late in the third century (P³⁰).

Structure of 1 Thessalonians

Address	1:1
Part One: Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the experiences he shared with them and expresses his gratitude to God for:	
a: their faith, their hope and their love	1:2-3
b: the experiences they had at the time of their conversion	1:4-5
c: their fidelity in living as Christians	1:6-10
d: his own missionary activity in their midst	2:1-12
e: their endurance under persecution	2:13-16
f: Timothy's return visit to Thessalonica	2:17 - 3:10
Conclusion to Part One	3:11-13
Part Two: Paul deals with certain issues central to Christian living	
a: human sexuality	4:3-8
b: love	4:9-12
c: the communion with Christ of Christians who have died	4:13-18
d: the timing of the coming of Christ cannot be predicted	5:1-11
e: a few final matters	5:12-22
Conclusion to Part Two	5:23-24
Conclusion to the Letter	5:25-28

The liturgical readings

1:1-5	29th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
1:5-10	30th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
1:1-5, 8-10	21st Monday of Ordinary Time Year I
2:7-9,13	31st Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
2:1-8	21st Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year I
2:9-13	21st Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year I
2:14 - 3:6	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
3:7-13	21st Thursday of Ordinary Time Year I
3:12 - 4:2	1st Sunday of Advent Year C
4:1-8	21st Friday of Ordinary Time Year I
4:9-11	21st Saturday of Ordinary Time Year I
4:12	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
4:13-18	32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A and 22nd Monday Year I
5:1-6	33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
5:1-6,9-11	22nd Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year I
5:7-8,12-15	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
5:16-24	3rd Sunday of Advent Year B
5:25-28	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary

**¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
to the church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
grace to you and peace.**

The letter opens, as was customary in formal letters of the day, by naming the author. As in all his letters, Paul uses his Roman family name (see Introduction page 11). He sends greetings from Silvanus and Timothy, for, though he is the author, he is writing as a member of a community who share his faith and his convictions. Silvanus (Luke uses his Jewish name, Silas) conveyed the decisions of the Jerusalem Assembly to Antioch (Acts 15:22), and was chosen by Paul as his missionary companion (Acts 15:40). Timothy joined them at Lystra (Acts 16:1), and the three of them came together to Thessalonica.

There follows the naming of those for whom the letter is intended. It is addressed not to individuals but to the ‘church’(Greek: *ekklēsia*), denoting those who have been chosen by God, called into community, and who are assembled for worship. It is an apostolic and pastoral letter to be read ‘to all the brothers and sisters’(5:27).

The Christians of Thessalonica are bound together as a community by being ‘in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’ We refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 1:1-3, for a reflection on God as Father, and on Jesus as Lord and Christ. Paul speaks of the church of the Thessalonians as being *in* God and Jesus. When we speak of people being ‘in love’, we are saying that their attitude to things and to people, the way they look at life, and the decisions they make, are very much influenced by a special love relationship in their lives. This captures something of what Paul is saying here. The community has been embraced by God and drawn into the communion of love that Jesus has with his Father. It is this communion that binds them to God, to each other and to Paul, ‘in love’.

As noted in our commentary on Galatians 1:3, behind the title ‘Lord’ as applied to Jesus lie a number of convictions. The first concerns the identification of Jesus and his mission with God’s self-revelation in the Exodus as ‘Yahweh’(‘THE LORD’), the one who hears the cry of the poor and is determined to redeem them. The second is that Jesus who was crucified is now exalted, and as king (‘lord’) is powerfully bringing about the reign of God’s will on earth. The beginnings of this are already being experienced by the Christians of Thessalonica. The third involves the relationship, common in Paul’s day between a domestic slave and a master. Paul could speak of himself as a slave of Christ his lord (see Galatians 1:10) for he was willingly bound to him, body and soul, heart and mind, in loving obedience. Paul is reminding his readers that they, too, are called to enjoy a similar relationship. Paul wishes them all the blessings of their gracious God (see Galatians 1:3), and one of his main aims in writing is to bring them to ‘peace’(see 5:3,13,23). This was also a theme in Paul’s Letter to the churches of Galatia (see Galatians 1:3; 5:22; 6:16).

It was customary in formal letters to follow the greeting with an expression of thanks. Paul follows this custom, though in this case thanksgiving takes up the whole first half of his letter (1:2 - 3:13). Thanksgiving flows from a sense of wonder and appreciation. The more we are able to see things and especially people with a pure heart, the more we are aware of their goodness. The measure of our ability to see like this is the measure of our humility, for the more childlike we are in our relationship with God and the more we are free from being caught up in self-focus, the more we are open to the surprise and the wonder of other people. It is humility that enables us to see clearly; seeing leads to wonder, and wonder finds expression in gratitude.

Paul begins by telling the community in Thessalonica how closely he holds them to his heart when he enters into intimate communion with God in prayer. He is moved to thank God for their faith, their hope and their love. In his letter to the Galatians, after speaking of the hope that sustains their eager longing to enjoy full communion with God, Paul goes on to say: ‘The only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:5-6). We refer the reader to that text where we delayed to meditate on the biblical meaning of these three fundamental characteristics of the Christian life. We will find Paul linking them closely again in future letters. Our primary response to God is that of faith, for grace can transform our lives only if we are open to receive it. Knowing God’s faithfulness enables us to hope – that is to say, to leave the future in God’s hands, trusting that God will fulfil his promises to us. Faith and hope enable us to immerse ourselves in the present moment in God’s love and so enable God’s love, coming to us from the heart of the risen Christ, to transform us and to radiate out from us in love for others.

The good news proclaimed to the Christians in Thessalonica by Paul is that Jesus is alive, in communion with God, and that he offers the gift of his Spirit to all who welcome him. With the Spirit comes a share in Jesus’ own faith. It is this faith that enables us to be steadfast in our hope by trusting the future to God and focusing all our energies into loving one another. Paul underlines this by speaking of ‘your *work* of faith’. Faith is producing its fruit in their lives and Paul is grateful for the way in which they are living the gospel.

He recognises, too, that love involves ‘labour’. Being in communion with God for the Thessalonians means being instruments of God’s merciful and forgiving love in their world. This, as we shall see, brought them up against a lot of resistance. They are sharing in the labour of the cross and have been steadfast in their hope in spite of persecution. Paul is concerned in this letter to support them in this.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly

³remembering before our God and Father

your work of faith

and labour of love

and steadfastness of hope

in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[repeated from the previous page]

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in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pause to examine two expressions in verse three: 'before God our Father' and 'in our Lord Jesus Christ'. They highlight the difficulty of translating from one language to another. They are also much richer than appears at first sight in the New Revised Standard Version translation which we are following.

The phrase 'before God our Father' appears to be connected with 'remembering'. This is only one aspect. The phrase can also apply to Paul being in God's presence ('before God our Father') as he remembers the Thessalonians in prayer. It can also refer to the Thessalonians, for they are in God's presence, too. God is gazing upon them in love as they live out their faith, as they labour in witnessing to God's love, and as they sustain their hope amid persecution. Paul is expressing his gratitude that they have learned to live in God's presence and to delight in the one who is gazing upon them in love.

The phrase 'in our Lord Jesus Christ' appears to be connected with 'hope'. The Greek, however, lacks the preposition 'in'. 'Our Lord Jesus Christ' is in the genitive case. Literally translated it reads: '*of our Lord Jesus Christ*'. The connection with Jesus indicated by the genitive could extend to 'faith' and 'love' as well as 'hope'. Since the genitive construction does not specify the precise nature of the connection, one should assume that Paul intends to include the many different ways in which these three central characteristics of the Christian life relate to Jesus.

Jesus is the one in whom we believe, for it is he who reveals the true God to us. He is also the one who shares with us his own faith in God. Jesus is the one whom we love. He is also the one whose love makes it possible for us to live in loving communion with his Father. Jesus is the one we hope to be with in the future. It is also because of what Jesus did and because of what happened to Jesus that we trust that God will give us the eternal life which we have been promised. Peaceful in this trust we can leave the future in God's hands, listening for the inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus and discovering how to give ourselves to others in love as we journey with Jesus to the Father.

Paul does not wish to limit himself to any one of these ideas. He is pointing out that our whole lives are related to Jesus and are lived in the presence of God. And for this his heart is lifted up in a prayer of thanksgiving.

Paul addresses them affectionately and in faith as his ‘brothers and sisters’. Together they have been loved by God with the love which God has for his Son, Jesus, and they have inherited Jesus’ communion with his Father (see Galatians 3:26; 4:6-7).

When Paul writes: ‘God has chosen you’, he is giving expression to a central aspect of his own experience. As a Jew he was very conscious, and rightly so, of belonging to a people who had been especially chosen by God. He was determined to be faithful to that choice and to defend Judaism from being infected through its contact with the Greek world. This was also behind his vehement opposition to the Christian church. When God revealed his Son to Paul (Galatians 1:16), Paul came to see that God had chosen every people and every person for communion with Himself through being united to his Son. The Gentile Thessalonians, no less than their Jewish brothers and sisters, are chosen by God.

As proof of God’s choice of them and as a sign that they have welcomed God’s grace into their lives, Paul appeals to their experience of what actually happened when he, Silvanus and Timothy came among them. Many memories are contained in Paul’s simple words: memories of physical, psychological and spiritual healing, and especially memories of a powerful release of liberating and creative energy, of dramatic changes in people’s lives, as well as memories of selfless love as they experienced the Spirit of God in their midst.

Faith is something learned through imitation, ultimately through imitation of Christ, ‘the Lord’. This is not an imitation ‘from the outside’, as it were, but the imitation which happens when we are drawn into communion with Jesus through the gift of his Spirit. Jesus’ life-giving Spirit is active, transforming our lives, so that it is Jesus’ own faith that we are experiencing, and his love and his hope. As Paul writes to the Galatians: ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20).

It is this communion with Christ that makes it possible for them to find joy ‘in spite of persecution’. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul mentioned in passing his own past as a persecutor (Galatians 1:23). He spoke also, but again in passing, of his being himself persecuted (Galatians 5:11; 6:12), and of the persecution which the Galatians were suffering (Galatians 4:29) at the hands of those who, by insisting on them submitting to the law, were themselves avoiding being ‘persecuted for the cross of Christ’ (Galatians 6:12). Paul’s words here to the Thessalonians, especially the link between persecution, joy and the Holy Spirit, invite us to pause to reflect on the place of suffering in the life of a disciple.

**⁴For we know,
brothers and
sisters beloved
by God,**

that he has chosen you,

**⁵because our
message of the
gospel came to
you not in word
only, but also in
power and in the
Holy Spirit and
with abundant
effect [NRSV
‘full conviction’];**

**just as you
know what kind
of persons we
proved to be
among you for
your sake.**

**⁶And you became imitators
of us and of the
Lord,**

**for in spite of
persecution you
received the
word with joy
inspired by the
Holy Spirit,**

Suffering

The only way to discover the key to unlocking some of the mysteries of suffering in the Christian life is through contemplation of Jesus in his sufferings. To do this we need a special grace, for, as Paul says:

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

– 1Corinthians 1:22-24

What revealed God to Paul as a God of love was not the crucifixion. It was not Jesus' sufferings in themselves or his atrocious death. Rather, it was the way in which Jesus responded to the injustice, the envy, the hatred, the fear and the political manoeuvring that brought about his death. We reflected on this at some length when commenting on Paul's statement that it was Jesus' gift of himself in love that has the power to liberate us from all that is enslaving us, for in giving himself Jesus draws us into communion with himself in his communion with God: 'He *gave himself* for our sins to set us free' (Galatians 1:4). 'I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and *giving himself* for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Jesus continued to do his Father's will, even on the cross, as he continued to pray, to believe, to hope and to love, The sin of others was able to bring about his death, but it was unable to take away his life. It comes as no surprise that Christ crucified was a scandal to Jews and utter foolishness to Greeks. Only one who is sustained by grace and who dares to look beyond the suffering and to enter into the heart of Jesus as he offers forgiveness and hope and love from the cross can begin to find meaning there.

Without such contemplation what sense would it make to look for meaning in our lives, and for freedom from the burden of suffering, to be told that the one offering us salvation is a person who was crucified? To break through the scandal and apparent folly of such a suggestion, Paul had to make some sense of it himself. His message was not that God causes suffering and so we must submit to it. Besides the fact that such an idea lacks attraction, it is clearly wrong. A large part of suffering is the result of people's sinful refusal or inability to obey God. Salvation means salvation from such sin, not acceptance of it. Nor was it Paul's message that if we believe we will be freed from suffering. The facts speak for themselves. If anything, the suffering experienced by the Thessalonians increased as a result of their decision to believe. When they turned their backs on the false gods honoured by their fellow citizens, they found themselves cut off from a good deal of ordinary social interaction. This made them objects of suspicion, and when things were not going well, the superstitious populace blamed this on the Christians' neglect of the gods.

There is no suggestion that the persecution which the Thessalonians were suffering was itself God's will. As in the case of Jesus, the suffering was largely the result of prejudice and unwillingness or inability to be open to the liberating message of the gospel. As Paul says, it was in spite of persecution (not because of it) that the Christians in Thessalonica welcomed the gospel with joy.

The question upon which we are reflecting here is: How can we learn to give ourselves in love when we are suffering? Or, in Paul's words: How can we, 'in spite of persecution', continue to welcome God's grace 'in joy inspired by the Holy Spirit'?

Let us begin our reflection by recalling that as we mature as persons we have to grow beyond the complete dependence on others that was appropriate for us as a child, and we have to discover our unique personality. This is not the place to examine the various stages through which we need to grow in the long journey of self-discovery. It is sufficient for our purposes to note that growth is not always easy or straightforward. Depending on circumstances that are largely outside our control, we can often experience considerable difficulty and pain in letting go the security which we experience at one stage in order to face the risks of growth. Central to this growth is the fact that discovering our unique 'ego' is not a self-focused journey. Rather, it is a matter of growing in our capacity to receive and to give love. Jesus expresses this well when he says: 'If you try to make your life secure you will lose it. It is when you lose your life that you keep it' (Luke 17:33). In other words, we discover ourselves as we learn to give ourselves to others in love, not as we insist on using things and people to bolster our individual sense of security.

Suffering has an irreplaceable role to play in bringing us to the realisation that we discover ourselves only in God's love, and that to enjoy God's love and to be instruments of bringing others to enjoy it we must transcend our own ego. We must let go of our natural tendency to focus on ourselves. We must learn to give ourselves as Jesus gave himself on the cross. It is suffering that forces us to recognise the basic flaw in our thinking that we are meant to be self-reliant. It forces us to face our dependence and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment, let alone do God's will, except in dependence upon and communion with God. Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in situations that work, that feel comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed. Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us.

To manage suffering we have to learn to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as in our body. We may choose simply to hold on, to stay put, to defend our position. However, when we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go, and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered to us in and through the suffering. We are free to choose to avoid the pain of letting go our self-centredness, or we can cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God's grace, courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to undergo what feels like a kind of dying, believing that God will raise us up. Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are 'dyings' as we have to leave someone or something we value; as we come up against our own or other people's limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes, dreams and expectations. The pain of 'dying' can sometimes be in proportion to the success and duration of the adaptation we have made to whatever it is that is being threatened.

Suffering

To be human means to be finite, to be dependent, to receive all we are and have as a gift. As human beings, we are not immortal. Once life has been given to us as a gift, the only life we ever know comes through dying. The whole process of maturing is one of accepting the 'dyings' that the human condition and our own and other people's sinful decisions inflict upon us. This does not mean submitting inactively to injustice. But it does mean that even when a 'dying' is laid on us unjustly, as they laid the cross on Jesus, we must come to an acceptance of the reality of the dying if we are to find a deeper life through it.

Each time we accept to 'die', we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy. Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life, beyond our experienced horizons. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God's love have been purified away by God's Holy Spirit, the living flame of love. We learn this difficult lesson by contemplating Jesus in his suffering. He gives us an example, and by sharing his Spirit with us, he encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of suffering. By keeping our eyes on Jesus, especially on his way of responding to suffering, it is possible for us to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us. In our weakness and suffering, we experience a special strength that is not our own. Like Jesus in the agony, Paul prayed for the burden of suffering to be lifted from him. He shares with us Jesus' response:

The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

– 2Corinthians 12:9-10

Much pain in our world results from our reaction to unjust suffering inflicted on us by others. We tend to hurt back. Or, when we do not do that, we store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on. Let us listen to Jesus:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven.

Matthew 5:10-12

It is true that our reward will be experienced in full 'in heaven', in the sense that beyond death we will be taken into the fullness of communion with God. Jesus, however, is not restricting his words to that. 'In heaven' means 'in God'. We will experience the reign of God now: 'the kingdom of heaven *is* theirs'. If, like Jesus, we learn to give ourselves now in love, even in the midst of suffering, we will experience now a special grace of communion. What is more, such loving exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause us the suffering. It can also give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we love outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed. This was Paul's experience. He wanted to live with Jesus and so he wanted to suffer with him:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Jesus' followers to find joy in their sufferings:

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and I am completing what is lacking in my flesh in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

– Colossians 1:24

It seems true that to experience Christ as exalted we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies. Did not Jesus say to Paul on the road to Damascus: 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting' (Acts 9:5)?

The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering borne in love, is immeasurable. Paul considers such suffering a privilege:

God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.

– Philippians 1:29

It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

– 2Corinthians 4:6-10

There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Suffering

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives. At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by suffering, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer. Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick.

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.

– Philippians 3:10

While we strive, in response to God's grace and call, to be God's faithful servants in bringing about the reign of God here on earth, we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in the love-communion with God which we call 'heaven':

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

– Philippians 3:20-21

In this life we will experience being transformed into Christ, but it is only in the eternal life that is beyond death that we are assured of being finally and totally drawn into God's own love-communion, the communion enjoyed by the risen Christ:

We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence ... So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. 'For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling ... so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

– 2Corinthians 4:14 – 5:4

If we think that whatever suffering exists in this world is willed by God (either directly intended by God or permitted by God), we will see our task as one of accepting suffering in all its forms. We will see such submission as doing God's will, while trusting in God's wisdom and love. If, on the other hand, we recognise that, whatever the circumstances, God's will is that we love and be faithful to love; if we recognise that suffering is part of life and that its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will, we will see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent, without letting it deter us from loving faithfully. When we experience suffering ourselves or experience others suffering, we will not automatically assume that it is God's will. Rather, we will trust that God is present to all who are suffering and loving us to draw closer to God through our suffering, whatever its cause. We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

Jesus was willing to lay down his life, not to die but to continue in the intimate life of love which he had with his Father. He laid down his life willingly 'in order to take it up again' (John 10:17), and he is encouraging his disciples to do the same, for he has come not that we might die but that we may 'have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). Sharing his life we 'will not die' (John 6:50). 'Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes' (John 5:21). The power that makes possible the victory of life over death is the power of love which, like everything else, he has from the Father (see John 5:26).

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering. Ultimately this will happen when we share glory with God's Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here on earth when love heals, and when to be healed leads to greater love.

If we continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our purification and redemption. Suffering is part of every life. Let suffering be a cross for us who are disciples of Jesus, for then we can embrace him who died there, knowing that he is embracing us.

⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you,

and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God,

¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead –

Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Verse nine reminds us of the opening lines of the Ten Commandments:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol ... You shall not bow down to them or *be enslaved by them.*

– Exodus 20:1-5

The ‘living and true God’ is Yahweh, the God of the Exodus, the redeeming God, the God and Father of Jesus. Just as the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt, so the Thessalonians were enslaved by state religion, a religion which partly responded to genuine religious experience, but was also partly the product of human pride and human fear. They were also slaves of their own misguided passions and of ignorance. Liberated through their acceptance of the gospel, they now live in hope, ‘waiting for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus who rescues us from the wrath that is coming’.

To understand the meaning of the expression ‘the wrath that is coming’ we should recall the heightened expectation among the various strands of Judaism of the first century of our era that God was about to intervene in history to bring about the reign of God on earth. The fulfilment of God’s promises and the vindication of Israel also meant the final destruction of the forces of evil that oppose God’s will. It is this aspect of destruction of evil that is conveyed by the word ‘wrath’. Because they recognised Jesus as God’s Messiah, and in light of the resurrection of Jesus, this heightened expectation was even more acute among Christian Jews. As we shall see in the following chapters, they spoke in terms of the imminent ‘coming of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (see 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:23), or of the ‘coming of the Son of Man’ (Matthew 24:27).

The language of divine ‘wrath’ is traditional. To deepen our understanding it is necessary to examine the tradition. To do so we must first realise that the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures looked at the events of history at two related but distinct levels. There is the human level of cause and effect. Good actions have good effects, bad actions have bad effects, and we are responsible for the good or the evil that we do; hence for the effects that follow, for ourselves and for others.

The prophets, however, saw history also from a higher viewpoint. Without denying human freedom, they saw that the ultimate cause of everything that happens in this world is God. Furthermore, they thought of God as *controlling* the world such that nothing happens without God's will. It is God who determines the outcome of a battle. It is God who determines the seasons. It is God who causes famine and plague. When good things happen, it is God who is blessing us; when bad things happen it is God who is punishing us.

A key conviction that we find in the Hebrew Scriptures is that God is just. This means that God can be trusted to act always according to God's nature. The Scriptures show that the people were still struggling to free themselves from the many conflicting images of God that prevailed in the surrounding polytheistic cultures. We find many images of God in the Bible that are not easily reconciled in a harmonious way. However, among all the different images, the dominant one is of God as a liberator and a saviour. God, for the Israelites, is the God of Moses, the God of the Exodus, the God who redeems from slavery, the God who cares for the widows and the orphans, the God of mercy, the God of faithful love

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.

– Exodus 3:7-8

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin'

– Exodus 34:6-7

Of course, since God is just, God must act not only according to who God is, but also according to who we are. God must punish sin. The above text continues:

yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

– Exodus 34:7

But though God must punish, God never stops being a God of love:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

– Hosea 11:8-9

Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?

– Psalm 77:7-9

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

– Lamentations 3:22-23

Rescued from the wrath that is coming

God is a saving and redeeming God. When we sin, we cut ourselves off from God, but we cannot stop God loving. This means that the aim of God's punishment is that we change and renew our communion with God: that we repent and live.

For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.

– Isaiah 54:5-8

When the Bible speaks of God being angry (the 'wrath of God') it is stressing that God's relationship to us is not that of a cold, uninterested observer. Ours is a passionate God. We must distinguish clearly between two quite distinct forms of 'anger'. One form of 'anger' is the anger of losing one's temper. Sadly, this is common among us and arises from a failure in patience. It is self-centred. It is a vice. This kind of anger is never predicated of God. There is, however, another kind of anger which rises up and overwhelms us when we see someone we love hurting themselves or hurting others. It is an intense, passionate and unselfish concern, and a powerful means of bringing about change. We see this kind of anger in Jesus as he attempts to break through people's pride and prejudice. This is the kind of anger that is predicated of God. Both kinds of anger are passionate. The key distinction between the two is that the latter arises from a passionate love.

The God of the Exodus cannot stand by and watch people whom God loves destroying others and destroying themselves. God cares enough to be angry. The divine anger blazes out, flamed by holiness and justice and a passionate love that seeks to break through our resistance to the truth: a love that tries to free our minds and hearts from what is closing them to the light, as nature bursts the kernel to let in light and warmth and to release the seeds of new life. If we are humble, if we are contrite, if we repent, we will respond and open ourselves to God's redeeming action in our lives. Then we will experience this divine 'anger' as a burning and purifying love. If we stubbornly remain in our sin, we will experience it simply as anger.

We began this reflection by noting that the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures looked at history on two levels: that of the divine, overarching providence, and that of human cause and effect. In relation to sin and punishment, and so in relation to the theme of the 'anger of God' we find this exemplified in many texts. Take, for example, psalm seven. Verses twelve and thirteen portray God as the one punishing us for our sins; verses fourteen to sixteen identify the punishment as being the result of our sinful behaviour:

If one does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and strung his bow; he has prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts. See how they conceive evil, and are pregnant with mischief, and bring forth lies. They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made. Their mischief returns upon their own heads, and on their own heads their violence descends.

– Psalm 7:12-16

To this point we have been reflecting on the justice of God, the punishment of God and the anger of God as we find these expressions in the Old Testament. If we read some passages of the New Testament from within the same perspective, we might understand these expressions in the same way. However, the revelation of God that we receive by listening to and contemplating Jesus involves a radical shift in the way in which we look upon God, and so a radical shift in the way in which we understand terms like ‘punishment’ and ‘anger’ in relation to God.

Jesus reveals God as a God of love. We find this, as we have already noted, also in the Old Testament. The difference is that now God’s love has the effect upon other images of God like the effect that the rising of the sun has upon the light emanating from the stars. God’s love is such that every other image of God has to be re-thought. We no longer think of God as *controlling* the world. God *loves* the world, and love does not control. God has made us free and respects our freedom. If we choose to reject God’s love, God will not stop loving us; but neither will God force this love upon us. Our rejection of God’s love, our choosing to live without this love, affects our lives and the lives of those around us. On a perfectly sunny day. I might choose to pull down the blind and so plunge myself in darkness, shutting out the rays of light which would otherwise stream into the room. My pulling down the blind does not stop the sun shining. If I change my mind and lift the blind, I will be immediately bathed in light. So it is with us and God. God’s love is unconditional. We can choose to reject it and God respects this choice. We can plunge ourselves into darkness, but we cannot alter God’s love.

It remains true that God is just. God, therefore, cannot pretend that things are other than they in fact are. We are meant for light, not for darkness. We are created to live in God’s love. The darkness into which we plunge ourselves through sin is unnatural. We are ill at ease. The darkness itself can be a reminder that we are meant for the light. In this sense the effect of our sin can be spoken of as ‘punishment’, so long as we recognize that it is self-inflicted. It is not something which God inflicts upon us from the outside. The prodigal son in the parable of Jesus ended up in a pig yard as a consequence of his dissipation. This was a ‘punishment’, but not something inflicted on him by anyone other than himself. Certainly not by his father. If we speak of it as punishment ‘of God’, we are not saying that God is the cause; rather that it is a self-inflicted punishment that affects our relationship with God. The Catholic catechism has this to say about the ultimate punishment, hell.

To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell’.

– Catholic Catechism n.1033

The mystery is that we are able to resist love and so can die an eternal death. Paul knows that to do so we must break through the loving arms of Jesus extended on the cross, for Jesus gave his life to save us from our sins (see Galatians 1:4), whether it be through the last-minute promise to a dying thief (Luke 23:39-43), or the last-minute appeal to a desperate Judas (Luke 22:48).

Rescued from the wrath that is coming

If, in the light of the revelation of God given us by Jesus, we continue to speak of the 'wrath of God', we have to re-think what it is we are saying. If we are thinking of God, then we are speaking of God's passionate love which opposes evil in all its manifestations. God uses even the effects of human sin to attract the perpetrators of sin and their victims to a life of divine communion.

If, on the other hand, we are referring to our human experience when we reject grace, then we are speaking of the pain and anguish which we experience when, resisting God's purifying love, we stubbornly remain within the bounds set up by our disobedience. We project this feeling on to God as 'anger', because of the analogy with how we feel when another person is angry with us. In this sense the anger is 'of God' in the same sense in which we spoke earlier of punishment being 'of God'. It is our relationship with God that is affected. We are speaking of the impenetrable darkness which we experience when we shut out God's light; of the hopeless despair which we experience when we refuse the freedom offered us by God; of the incapacity to receive or to give love which we experience when we deliberately and persistently reject God's offer of love.

The key problem here is the problem of human hardness of heart and obstinacy of will in refusing God's gracious love. This is the most baffling of mysteries: the mystery of evil, the mystery of our capacity to refuse love, the mystery of human pride that refuses liberation, the mystery of a self-centredness that becomes so opaque as to shut out the light of divine love. Jesus often spoke of it and begged his contemporaries to repent, that is to say, to open their minds and hearts to God's grace and to allow love to change their ways. Otherwise we face an eternal darkness. His words, coming from one so gentle and compassionate, force us to face the fact of sin and its consequences in our lives.

It is from these consequences that Jesus would save us, not by any suggestion that God turns a blind eye to our transgressions, but by the amazing truth that God offers us a love which will transform us, attracting us away from sin and towards the communion which alone can satisfy our hearts. Jesus loves us in such a convincing way that we will dare to say Yes to love in our lives. When Paul speaks of Jesus delivering us from the wrath, he is referring to God's decisive revelation of his love in Jesus, through whom God offers us a love which will transform us, attracting us away from sin and towards the communion which alone can satisfy our hearts.

Let us now return to Paul's text. He speaks of 'the wrath *that is coming*'. During the period of the writing of the Hebrew Bible, death was thought of as the end of life. We notice an alteration of this perspective beginning in the Book of Daniel (12:1-3) and in the Second Book of the Maccabees (6:18ff), both of which works were influenced by the heroic martyrdom suffered by faithful Jews during the religious persecution of 168-165BC. The obvious injustice of their death, and the equally clear truth that it could not be interpreted as the consequence of their sin, forced into consciousness, as it were, the idea of a life-beyond-death in which those who suffered unjustly in this life would enjoy the reward of their fidelity, while their persecutors, who often seem to prosper here, would have to suffer the results of their sin.

Furthermore, in Jewish writings of the second and first centuries BC, we find the idea emerging that God was soon to bring about the decisive age of history, when there would be a renewed heaven and a renewed earth, because God's kingdom would be realised and God's will would be done. In this new age God's justice would reign, the good would be rewarded and the evil punished. Since these ideas express attempts to explore beyond the horizon of the authors' present experience, we are not surprised to find that the language which they use to speak of this definitive age is highly imaginative and symbolic.

Speculation concerning the nature of reward ('heaven') and punishment ('hell') varies from one writing to another. The common element in all this speculation was that divine justice would one day be manifest. It is to this judgment that Paul is referring. He believed that Christ was risen from the dead, and that the resurrected Jesus reveals God's design for the human race. Because of the close link in the minds of Paul's contemporaries between resurrection and judgment, it is understandable that Paul would see Jesus' resurrection as the beginning of the promised new age.

The fulfilment was expected to be imminent. God's ultimate design for the world was about to be realised. It is obvious now, and it gradually became obvious even during Paul's life, that there is no close time-link between the resurrection of Jesus and the full realisation of history's goal in which God's will would be done 'on earth as in heaven'. We should not be surprised, however, to find such an expectation in the early years of the Church's life.

We imagine it differently today, but we share with Paul the hope that history will issue in the vindication of Jesus and of all that he stands for. We share with Paul the conviction that what we do matters and that our future is determined by whether we accept God's love or obstinately reject it. We share with him the belief that Christ has redeemed us from sin and from its consequences, and we, too, look forward in hope to the renewal of the world and to living with the exalted Jesus in the glory of God our Father.

The opening chapter of First Thessalonians encourages us to seek to spend our life in the presence of God (see 1:3). It encourages us also to reflect upon the actual effects which acceptance of the Gospel is having in our personal lives and in the life of our family and parish community (see 1:5). We might call to mind some of the significant people who have modelled Christ for us (see 1:6-8). We might ask how we handle suffering? Do I pray for the joy of the Holy Spirit to sustain me in continuing to love through it (see 1:6)? Finally, Paul challenges us to examine our faith. Do I believe that God's love is truly unconditional and that it Jesus who continues to grace us so that we may be freed from the evil effects of our own and other people's sinful behaviour (see 1:9-10)?

**¹You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain,
²but though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know,
we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.**

The establishment of the Roman Empire in the East allowed for an ease and security in travel that had never been known before. This helped the exchange of ideas. 'Philosophers' were on the move peddling their theories and seeking converts. Not all did so for pure motives. It seems that when Timothy went back to Thessalonica from Berea, he discovered that Paul's opponents were accusing him of peddling his fancy ideas for notoriety and personal gain (see verse three).

To this point Paul has been asking them to reflect on what happened to them. Now he asks them to remember what he and the other missionaries were like. As he wrote earlier: 'our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with abundant effect'(1:5). What did he gain out of it? They know how he was treated in Philippi. Luke writes:

The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

– Acts 16:22-24

They had witnessed for themselves his courage in proclaiming the gospel 'in spite of great opposition'. Luke, who was with Paul in Philippi (Acts 16:12), was among those who were deeply impressed by Paul's courageous preaching (Greek: *parrēsiazomai*). He describes Paul's preaching in this way from the beginning at Damascus (Acts 9:27) to the end in Rome (Acts 28:31), and many times in between (Acts 9:28, 13:6, 14:3, 18:26, 19:8, 26:26). Luke is telling us that Paul spoke from the fullness of the Spirit that is upon him. He spoke about Jesus without fear or compromise. As Paul himself states, his courage was 'in our God'. It did not come from his own strength:

By the grace of God I am what I am.

– 1Corinthians 15:9

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

– Philippians 4:13

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

– Ephesians 6:10

The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.

– 2Timothy 4:17

Like his master, Jesus, the suffering servant of the Lord, ‘there was no deceit in his mouth’ (Isaiah 53:9). They know that he did not make money out of gullible converts. He did not use religion as a cover for indulging in immoral behaviour. He did not spend his time flattering those in power. In verse four ‘approved’ and ‘tests’ both translate the Greek *dokimazō*. God does more than simply check as a method of quality control. God purifies in the crucible of suffering (see 1 Peter 1:6-7). Like Jeremiah, Paul could pray: ‘You, O Lord, know me; You see me and *test* me — my heart is with you’ (Jeremiah 12:3).

He was not looking for human approval or praise. As he wrote to the Galatians:

Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

– Galatians 1:10

The missionaries could have wielded authority as ‘apostles of Christ’ (compare Acts 14:4,6); but they were ‘gentle’ with them, like Jesus who declared: ‘Come to me ... for I am gentle and humble in heart’ (Matthew 11:28-29). It is, of course, possible that there were people outside the community who were trying to undermine trust in Paul. It seems much more likely that the criticism (suspicion?) is coming from within and that Paul is hoping to win over those whose confidence in him has been shaken.

Paul likens himself to ‘a mother feeding and cherishing her own children’. We recall his plea to the Galatians who were abandoning Jesus for the security of Jewish observance:

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you’.

– Galatians 4:19

Both these highly evocative images give us an insight into Paul’s character, and especially into his capacity for deep and gentle affection (compare Acts 20:31). In giving them the gospel, Paul, like his master, gave them himself.

³For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery,

⁴but just as we have been approved by God

to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak,

not to please *people*, but to please God who tests our hearts.

⁵As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery, or with a pretext for greed;

⁶nor did we seek praise from *people*, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

⁷But we were gentle among you

like a *mother feeding and cherishing her own children*.

⁸So deeply do we care for you that we are (*‘were’*) determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

⁹For you remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters;

we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how reverent [NRSV 'pure'], upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers.

¹¹As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children,

¹²urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Having likened himself to a mother, Paul goes on to speak of himself as their father, working hard to support them and teaching them all they need to live the life of a disciple of Jesus. The gospel which he proclaimed to them is 'the gospel of God' (see also 2:2). It is 'of God' because it is *from* God, 'who was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' (Galatians 1:16). It is 'of God' because it is *about* God and what God has revealed of himself in revealing his Son. Paul sees himself as a sacrament for them of God's compassionate love:

As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

– Psalm 103:13

The Thessalonians know that Paul did not come among them for personal gain. He did accept the generous support of the community in Philippi 'more than once' (Philippians 4:16), but he did not burden the Thessalonians. Later, in writing to the Corinthians, he praises the churches in Macedonia for their generosity in contributing to the support of the poor in Judea in spite of what he describes as their 'extreme poverty' (2 Corinthians 8:1). Paul was determined to support himself by his own work. Later, when leaving the Aegean for Jerusalem and Rome, he could say to the presbyters from Ephesus:

I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

– Acts 20:33-35

Not only did he not preach for personal gain, he was always reverent (Greek: *hosios*, 'respecting the sacred'), upright and blameless. This passage gives us an interesting insight also into Paul's teaching. The word translated 'urging' (Greek: *parakaleō*) is not the usual word used by Greek moralists. It is derived from the verb 'call', for Paul saw his exhortations as invitations, instruments of God's call (see 5:24), inviting people to respond to love, while always respecting their freedom. To the call Paul added encouragement, and because their response was really important, he was not content simply to call and encourage. He also 'pleaded' with them, pointing out forcefully the consequences of their acceptance or refusal of the gospel.

Paul reminds them that God is calling them into his 'kingdom' (see Galatians 5:21). This is a term frequently found on the lips of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (see also John 3:3,5 and 18:36). It has its origins in the Hebrew scriptures which acknowledge God as the one to whom all obedience is ultimately owed. Included in the concept are the promises made to the Davidic dynasty and, with the collapse of the kingdom of Judah, the longing for God's Messiah to liberate Judah and to bring about the reign of God over all the earth. The New Testament sees Jesus as this Messiah and Jesus' disciples, including Paul, see the Christian community as God's instrument for achieving God's will 'on earth as in heaven' (Matthew 6:10).

We may get some insight into Paul's understanding of the term 'kingdom' by looking at the Gospel of Paul's disciple, Luke. The angel Gabriel is sent by God to announce to Mary that she is to conceive the Messiah, whose kingdom will never end (Luke 1:33). Jesus announces that his mission is to proclaim 'the good news of the kingdom of God' (Luke 4:43; see 8:1; 9:11). His disciples share this same mission (Luke 9:2,60; 10:9,11). This kingdom is enjoyed by the poor, who know their total dependence on God and cry to him in their distress (Luke 6:20). Wonderful as John the Baptist is, it is an even greater privilege to be a disciple of Jesus and to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God (Luke 7:28; 8:10), a kingdom that Jesus' contemporaries would see revealed in their lifetime (Luke 9:27). Being part of God's kingdom requires of us a wholehearted commitment to doing the will of God (Luke 9:62).

It follows that the more people respond in delight to the glory of God revealed (the more God's 'name' is hallowed), the more God's kingdom will be present in this world. It is for this that Jesus is giving his life, and he invites his disciples to share this mission and this prayer. God is present in Jesus. God is to be radiantly and obviously present in the community of Jesus' disciples. The longing expressed in 'your kingdom come' will be fully satisfied only when all live as Jesus lives. No wonder Paul urges, encourages and pleads with the Thessalonians that they 'lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory'.

¹³We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

What does it mean to accept the word of Paul as the word of God? An attempt to respond to this takes into the whole question of what we mean by 'religious experience'.

If we consider any experience at all, we find that there are what may be called two poles in the experience: there is the object which is experienced, and there is the subject who is experiencing. The object may be something external to ourselves like the rising of the moon, or it may be something internal like a feeling of anxiety. We are aware simultaneously of the experienced object and of ourselves as the subject having the experience.

If we focus attention on the subjective pole, that is to say on ourselves as the experiencing subject, we notice arising in us a desire to understand what is happening. We want to know because we want to belong, we want to be in communion with reality. This desire is, of itself, limitless. Nothing completely satisfies it. Every answer we get through inquiry is only a part-answer, giving rise to further questioning. Whatever communion we have with others, our hearts hunger for more.

It is here that the question of God arises. Our experience is always of something finite, but our longing has no bounds. Every time we affirm something as true, we affirm at the same time that our longing to understand is not senseless: things have meaning. Every time we experience communion, we know that our longing for love, which we experience as without limit, is not an illusion. 'God' is the word we use to name that which is the ultimate explanation of all that is, and that which alone can satisfy our limitless yearning for communion.

Every experience, therefore, in so far as it engages our longing to know and to love, can be said to be religious, since the transcendent God whom we do not directly experience is immanent in everything that is.

What Paul is saying, then, is that when the Thessalonians heard him speak, they found that his words engaged their deepest longings for the divine. His words remained human words, of course, with all the limitations that words necessarily have, but they gave his listeners a taste of the divine. His proclamation of the gospel was perceived as coming from God and drawing them to God, involving them in a consciously religious journey.

‘Religious experience’ is another name for experience of ‘revelation’. God is communicating himself all the time to everyone in every experience. Sometimes we are insensitive. Sometimes we are distracted. But sometimes we are listening in the depths of our being. Sometimes the veil hiding us from God partly falls away and we penetrate a little further into the mystery of the divine. This insight, this experience, is the experience of revelation. Paul was inspired by the risen Jesus whose Spirit filled him and who had commissioned him to preach the Good News. When he did preach it, others were inspired by his words, and part of the veil covering their hearts and minds fell away as they recognised that the one about whom Paul spoke was the One for whom they were longing. God was speaking to them through the words of Paul.

In this passage Paul is referring to his spoken words. We have come to speak of his written words, including those in this letter, as ‘the word of God’, and for the same reasons. They too remain human words, for God deals with us through the human. They carry with them all the limitations of time, place and circumstance which human words cannot avoid. They must, therefore, be interpreted carefully with these limitations in mind. They do not cease to be human because they are vehicles of the divine, any more that Jesus ceased to be human because he was divine. To treat the words of scripture apart from their historical limitation is like ignoring the historical particularity of Jesus.

Raymond Brown in an article entitled ‘And the Lord said: Biblical reflections on Scripture as the word of God’ (Theological Studies 42[1981] page 9) writes: ‘The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation’. Raymond F. Collins in the article on inspiration in the New Jerome Biblical Commentary (page 1033 #69) writes: ‘Though canonized by long usage, ‘word of God’ should not be used of the Scriptures without further hermeneutical reflection ... A distance is to be maintained conceptually between the scriptural expression and the self-communication of God in itself, even in the case of the prophets. Theologically it is less confusing to state that the Scriptures witness to the word of God’.

The fact is that Paul’s written words and the written words of the other works of the New Testament inspired the Christian communities in their response to God. They were copied, reflected on and cherished, as vehicles of divine communion. They revealed God, however imperfectly. The acceptance of these works by those who knew Jesus and by their disciples, provides a powerful guarantee to us, many centuries later, that these same words can be for us, too, ‘the word of God’, revealing God to us and inviting us into communion with him. This is true only to the extent that we understand them correctly, and that in reading them we are in touch with our own religious longings.

¹⁴For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from you own compatriots as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone ¹⁶by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved.

**Thus they have been constantly filling up the measure of their sins;
but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.**

Paul speaks of the suffering inflicted on the Christians in Thessalonica by the people of their own city (see the Introduction to this letter for the troubles mentioned in Acts). He compares their suffering to that experienced by their brothers and sisters in 'the churches of God in Christ Jesus (compare 1:1) that are in Judea' – suffering inflicted on them by 'the Jews'. It should be obvious that his criticism is directed only against those Jews who were responsible for the actions which he lists.

He creates the setting for his first accusation ('they drove us out') by recalling that it was 'the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets'. Stephen made the same accusation:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.

– Acts 7:51-52

For Jews like Stephen and Paul to speak in this way about other Jews is not without precedent:

They kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

– 2Chronicles 36:16

We hear a similar cry coming from the heart of Jesus:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors.

– Matthew 23:29-32

There is an echo of Jesus' cry in Paul's words when he speaks of them 'filling up the measure of their sins'. When Paul speaks of the Jews who 'drove us out', he can hardly be speaking of the persecution that occurred in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen (see Acts 8:1). He was one of those responsible on that occasion (Acts 8:3). He could be referring to the plot against his life when he first came to Jerusalem after his conversion. The event is recorded by Luke.

Saul went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

– Acts 9:28-30

He could also be recalling the many times since when he and his missionary companions had to flee because of opposition from the synagogue. In the light of Paul's remarks earlier about the Thessalonians experiencing 'joy inspired by the Holy Spirit in spite of persecution'(1:6), it is interesting to note Luke's account of Paul's experience at Antioch in southern Galatia:

The Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

– Acts 13:50-52

It was Jews who were behind Paul having to escape by night from Thessalonica (Acts 17:5). They hunted him down in Berea as well (Acts 17:13). Some years later in a letter to the Corinthians, he states: 'Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one'(2Corinthians 11:2). He had plenty of experience to draw on.

Far worse is the opposition from Jews who try to 'hinder us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved'. Paul's letter to the Galatians reveals the existence of a certain faction of Jewish Christians who opposed Paul's mission to the Gentiles because he failed to insist on their following the law. There are also Jews who were not Christians who did not take kindly to this ex-Pharisee proclaiming a crucified criminal as the Jewish Messiah. Paul understood their reasons, for he once persecuted the Christians himself. But having come to see the gracious gift that God is offering to all the nations in the gospel of Christ, and having answered the call to go out to the nations to preach this gospel, he sees what a terrible disservice these Jews are doing in opposing God's will and attempting to keep from the Gentiles the message of salvation.

In conclusion he refers again to 'God's wrath'(see 1:10). Something must have happened in Judea that Paul interprets as 'punishment' for their rejection of God's offer of grace. One hypothesis is that Paul is referring to the violent repression of the Jews in Judea under the Roman Procurator, Ventidius Cumanus (48-52AD). Or he may be referring to the coming parousia. Since it is imminent and inevitable, it is as though they already stand judged. Paul sees this judgment as something which they have brought upon themselves by rejecting the peace offered them by Jesus. He sees it as a sign of what will happen to them in the final judgment if they do not repent.

Paul cannot be blamed for those over the centuries who have taken his words out of context and used them to support their own anti-Jewish prejudices. Can the Psalmist be blamed for the devil's use of his words to tempt Jesus (Luke 4:10-11)? It is even worse to use Paul's words here, as some have done, to accuse Paul himself of being anti-Jewish. In the light of evidence from Paul's own writings, as well as from the portrait of Paul given us by Luke in Acts, such a claim is patently absurd.

¹⁷As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you – in person not in heart – we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.

¹⁸For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again – but Satan blocked our way.

¹⁹For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?

²⁰Yes, you are our glory and joy!

Once again expressing the depth of his affection for the Christians in Thessalonica (see 2:7-12), Paul explains that his longing to return to them has been blocked by Satan. He may be referring to the opposition that required his hasty departure from Thessalonica and the guarantee demanded of one of the Christian converts, Jason, to see that Paul did not again disturb the peace there (see Acts 17:9). Whatever the circumstance, Paul sees it as inspired by evil.

He speaks of the Thessalonians as his ‘hope’ (see commentary on Galatians 5:5), and his ‘joy’ (always, for Paul, a sharing in the joy of the Risen Christ, and experienced ‘in the Holy Spirit’, see 1:6). When he comes to the end of the race, they will be the wreath of victory placed on his head, and his ‘glory’.

Paul introduces a word which will recur again in this letter: the word ‘*parousia*’, the ‘coming of our Lord Jesus’ (for ‘Lord Jesus’, see 1:1). This is the word that would have been used in Thessalonica to announce the appearance of the proconsul, or of some other important personage from Rome. It had religious overtones, too, because of the practice of honouring the emperor as a god and because the procession led to the various temples where the local gods were honoured.

Paul is referring to the appearance in their midst of the one who reigns in heaven as king and whose kingdom is being established on earth through the proclamation of the gospel. When he appears, all will be revealed, and it will be shown that the Christians of Thessalonica are Paul’s prize for the struggles that he has suffered in gaining them for Christ.

Luke describes Paul's arrival in Athens. Hunted down in Berea by Jews from Thessalonica, Paul was forced to depart hurriedly and take a ship south to Athens, leaving Silvanus and Timothy behind in Berea. Paul sent his escort back to Berea with instructions that the other two missionaries were to join him as soon as possible. Paul stayed on in Athens awaiting their arrival (Acts 17:1-16). Either Paul also sent a message for Timothy to go to Thessalonica first, or perhaps when Timothy arrived in Athens, Paul sent him straight off.

The determined opposition was such that he feared for the Thessalonians' faith and wanted Timothy to 'encourage' them (Greek: *parakaleō*). As we saw when commenting on 2:12, this is one of Paul's favourite words. He saw himself and his 'co-workers' as instruments of God's 'call' (Greek: *kaleō*), which carries with it all the grace which the Thessalonians need to persevere in faith through the persecutions that they are suffering (see 1:6; 2:14), as well as the temptations and doubts that are assailing them.

Why does Paul speak of persecutions as something 'we are destined for'? On his return journey, after the many sufferings which he endured in the cities of southern Galatia, we are told by Luke that Paul:

strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.'

– Acts 14:22

We refer the reader to the reflection on the role of suffering in the life of a disciple (see commentary on 1:6). Whenever we model our lives on Jesus, and take seriously his 'labour of love' (see 1:3), we will find ourselves taking the side of the oppressed, and opposition will inevitably come from those who gain from the oppression, whatever form it might take. To follow Jesus is to come up against the same forces of evil which brought about his crucifixion. As with Jesus, so with the Christian, only love sustained by faith can give meaning to the suffering endured. For a reflection on what Paul means by 'faith', see the commentary on Galatians 2:16.

Paul sees 'Satan' behind whatever it is that is preventing his return to Thessalonica (2:18). He sees the same evil power as tempting the Thessalonians to abandon their new-found faith in Jesus.

¹Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens;

²and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith,

³so that no one be shaken by these persecutions.

Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for.

⁴In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know.

⁵For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain.

⁶But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love.

He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us – just as we long to see you.

⁷For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution, we have been encouraged about you through your faith.

⁸For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.

⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?

¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Timothy has arrived in Corinth (see Acts 18:5) with news about the situation in Thessalonica. Paul is delighted to be reassured about their ‘faith and love’ (see 1:3). He is encouraged (Greek: *parakaleō*, see 3:2) to learn that their faith has been strong enough to withstand the persecution that they are undergoing. Paul, too, has had much to suffer, and is delighted by the news that his affectionate regard for them is reciprocated.

The joy he experiences on hearing from them causes Paul, once again, to give thanks (Greek: *eucharistia*) for the action of God in their lives (for the verb *eucharisteō*, see 1:2; 2:13).

Paul addresses his prayer to ‘our God and Father’ and to ‘our Lord Jesus’ (compare 1:1). The communion in love between God and the risen Jesus is so intimate that the verb ‘direct’ in Greek is in the singular. It is possible that the subject of the verb ‘direct’ is ‘God’. In which case we should perhaps translate: ‘May God himself - both our Father and our Lord Jesus - direct our way to you’. Usually in the New Testament the word ‘God’ refers to God the Father. It is possible that here we have an example of it being used to include the risen Jesus.

God is love and it is the communion in love of Father, Son and Spirit, which is the bond of love uniting the members of the community. Jesus shares his love-communion with Paul, Timothy and Silvanus. They in turn have drawn the Thessalonians into this same love and Paul’s prayer is that the community will continue to love one another and to reach out with this love to all. For a fuller reflection on ‘love’ see the commentary on Galatians 5:6.

It is the Holy Spirit of God who strengthens their hearts, and they are strengthened in ‘holiness’, for they have received the fullness of the Holy Spirit and, through this consecration, they are living in intimate communion with the all-Holy God (see Isaiah 6:3; Psalm 99:3,5). Paul speaks again of the ‘coming’ (Greek: *parousia*) of Christ (see 2:19), with an allusion to the final judgment when ‘the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him’ (Zechariah 1:5).

With this prayerful expression of his hopes for the Thessalonian community, Paul concludes the first major part of his letter. It has been a sustained and affectionate expression of his gratitude to God for their Christian lives. Paul has also been reminding them of their own experiences with him, in the hope that this memory will support their faith. We are not surprised to find him ending on the theme of love, reminding them in so doing of his own deep affection for them, and his desire that they will be able to stand before the judgment seat of God innocent of sin.

In concluding thus with a prayer, Paul is reminding his readers that prayer disposes us to become aware of what it is in us that is preventing us from listening to God and from receiving God’s grace. As God’s children we are invited to go to him in trust, praying to grow to be able to know and face the fears that cause us to shy away from love. Prayer is a matter of taking time and creating space to get in touch with our deepest longings and with our religious experience. In our prayer we are to trust that the truth will set us free (John 8:23), and that God would not give us this longing for him if God did not want to fulfil it. To want to love is already to love; to want to be in communion with God is to be already in communion with God; to pray for love is already to receive it.

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.

¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

¹³And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness

that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

¹Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you do so more and more.

²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Earlier in the letter, Paul reminded the Thessalonians how, as a father, he had urged, encouraged and pleaded with them to lead a life worthy of God (see 2:12). The second part of his letter, beginning here, consists in just such an exhortation. Before examining the details in the following verses, it is important to highlight the specifically Christian dimension of the moral teaching of Paul.

The Stoics of Paul's day had worked out a system of ethics based on their understanding of human nature. Christians of a later period were fond of expressing their moral teaching in the terms of the current ethical philosophy, both in order to appeal to their non-Christian contemporaries in language that was understandable, and to support the reasonableness of the Christian position. This procedure has an obvious validity, but it must not be allowed to obscure the truth that Paul invariably argues not from an understanding of human nature and its requirements but from the example of Jesus who shares with the believer his Spirit.

Christian living is modelled on that of Jesus and is possible because of the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in us. A person cannot live Christian morality without faith. It obviously cannot be imposed on non-believers, for it is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Paul's urging, as we noted earlier (see the commentary on 2:12), is an appeal from the risen Christ, and is made 'in the Lord Jesus' and 'through the Lord Jesus', that is to say, in communion with him and with his authority.

Paul is not simply offering suggestions. He is speaking of 'how you *ought* to live'. The obligations are not because they are human but because they are disciples of Jesus. Being human and being a disciple of Jesus are not in opposition. In fact Jesus, being sinless, is perfectly human. The call to live as humanly as Jesus, however, is not made because of the moral strength that the Thessalonians should have as human beings, but because they share in Jesus' Spirit. For further reflection on this, see the commentary on Galatians 5:22.

Paul begins by reminding his readers that it is God's will that their lives be transformed by the Holy Spirit, and purified of all that inhibits their sharing in Jesus' communion with God. This is the goal of their consecration as Christians (see 3:13). The social environment calls for a special stress on sexual behaviour (compare Galatians 5:19). They must learn to control their own body (literally, 'instrument' – probably a euphemism for the male sexual organ). As we noted when commenting upon 'self-control' as a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:23), Paul is not calling for stronger will-power, as though we have in ourselves the capacity to achieve virtue in this matter. Rather, he is calling for them to open themselves to the power of grace. Control over sexual urges that are insensitive to the dignity of others and to their real needs, and that 'wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter' is one of the fruits of submitting one's life to the inspiration and the power of the Spirit of Jesus. It is one of the fruits of love.

God alone is the source of 'holiness', and the only 'honour' (Greek: *doxa*, 'glory') that is real is the radiance of an inner beauty that is itself the result of the sanctification that is brought about by the Spirit of God. To follow their natural urging without opening themselves to grace and to love is to behave 'like the Gentiles who do not know God' (compare Galatians 4:8). Paul is speaking as a Jew, brought up on prayers like the following:

Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.

– Psalm 79:6 (see Jeremiah 10:25)

Paul reinforces his message by recalling solemnly the warning he gave them when he was with them: 'the Lord is an avenger in all these things'. The language is traditional: 'O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth!' (Psalm 9:1), and belongs to the theme of the 'anger of God', which we examined in relation to 1:10. It matters how we behave. Our actions have results that we cannot pretend away, nor can God pretend that things are other than they really are. At the same time Paul reminds them that God 'gives his Holy Spirit to you'. Sexuality is about love. It is God's gift of the Spirit of Jesus that makes sexual purity possible. The Spirit of communion that binds disciples to their Lord sanctifies the deepest recesses of our being, and purifies sexual desire to be a sacrament of God's own creative love, creating communion between people committed to journey together in love.

³For this is the will of God, your sanctification:

that you abstain from fornication;

⁴that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honour,

⁵not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

⁶that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

⁷For God did not call us to impurity, but in holiness.

⁸Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁹Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;

¹⁰and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we exhort you, beloved, to do so more and more,

¹¹to aspire to live quietly, to put into practice the kind of life that is proper for you [NRSV 'mind your own affairs'], and to work with your hands, as we directed you,

¹²so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and not be lacking in anything' [NRSV 'be dependent on no one'].

Saint Augustine writes: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you' (*Confessions*, I.1.1). Do I realise the connection between this most profound longing and my sexuality? A linking of sexual desire to our ultimate goal could help us avoid the distractions that come from our insecurity, and so help us to love others in a clearer way. It is the pure of heart who see God (Matthew 5:8). It is the pure of heart who see themselves and others truly. They can truly celebrate love.

Having spoken of sexuality, Paul moves naturally to speak in more general terms of the love they should have within the Christian family. He has already referred to their love (1:3 and 3:6), and has already expressed the wish that they continue to grow in love 'to one another and to *everybody*' (3:12). Here it is love within the Christian community that attracts his comment. He is pleased with what he has heard in this regard, but exhorts them to keep on growing in love. There are no limits to God's grace, and we are never to put limits on the love to which we aspire, for it is God's love that is poured into our hearts by the Spirit of Jesus, and it is this love which flows between us. It is by this love that we recognize disciples of Jesus (see John 13:35).

In the opening address Paul spoke of them as 'beloved by God' (1:4). He now speaks of them as 'taught by God'. It is God who teaches them this love, through the teaching of the missionaries (see 3:4; 4:2), but especially through the intimate action of the Spirit of Jesus within the community. It sounds as though Timothy has heard about their reputation for love and hospitality from members of the communities in Philippi and Beroea.

Paul appeals to them to 'live quietly'. They are to live trusting, loving, faithful and patient lives, confident in the coming of Christ (see 2:19, 3:13). He insisted on supporting himself through his work. The bulk of the community seem to have come from people who, like himself, worked with their hands, people whom he met in the course of working at his trade. Paul encourages them to go peacefully about their daily lives. He also exhorts them to put into practice all that they should be as disciples of Jesus so as to attract those outside the community to the way of salvation (see 2:16).

In his report to Paul, Timothy must have informed him that the Thessalonians were worried about those members of their community who had put their hope in Jesus and had been looking forward to Jesus' coming to take them with him into glory, but who have died. What might they have expected to have been so disappointed?

Though the Christian community in Thessalonica seems to have been composed mainly of Gentiles, we need to remember that Paul, 'as was his custom' (Acts 17:2), began his preaching in the synagogue. The first Gentile converts came largely from people who had some connection with the synagogue. It is important, therefore, to have some idea of Jewish notions of resurrection, for they provided the language which Paul would have used in proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus, and in holding out to Jew and Gentile alike the hope that nothing would separate from Jesus those who were united now with him.

Traditionally, the Jews, like their Gentile neighbours, assumed that at death a person went to the underworld (*Sheol*: the Greek *Hades*). Here the dead person had an existence that was shadowy and lifeless. There are indications of this idea in the sacred Scriptures:

My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

– Psalm 88:3-5

The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor do any that go down into silence.

– Psalm 115:17

Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you;
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.
The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day;
fathers make known to children your faithfulness.

– Isaiah 38:18-19

Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades
in place of the living who give thanks?
From the dead, as from one who does not exist,
thanksgiving has ceased; those who are alive and well
sing the Lord's praises.

– Sirach 17:27-28

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those sleeping [NRSV 'who have died'], so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Life beyond death

At the same time, they longed for an enduring relationship with God, who would somehow, and against all the evidence, preserve them from death and the underworld:

My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

The notion of resurrection from the dead, at least as an image, is found in two texts from the exile (Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Isaiah 53:8-12), and in a post-exilic, apocalyptic text included in the scroll of Isaiah, the author writes:

The dead do not live; shades do not rise — because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them’.

– Isaiah 26:14

However, he goes on to say:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

– Isaiah 26:19

It was faith in the fidelity of God that grew into an explicit belief that God would raise to life after death those who put their trust in God and were faithful to the covenant. The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the Syrian persecutions (168-165BC). It seemed impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

– Daniel 12:1-2

Our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God’s covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance.

– 2Maccabees 7:36

In the middle of the first century AD, the Pharisees were among those who espoused the notion that God would in some way raise the just to fullness of life. Some seem to have expected this to happen when history attained its final goal and God's reign would be fully realised. Others were perhaps thinking in terms of the end of the space-time universe which we know, though this seems less likely. In either case the dead would experience a delay. It was as difficult for them as it is for us to think of after death without thinking in temporal terms. The whole idea of life beyond death was rejected by the Sadducees as a notion not found in the Torah (see Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8).

Besides the notion of the resurrection of the dead, there were the extraordinary stories of Enoch who 'walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him' (Genesis 5:2), 'He did not experience death' (Hebrews 11:5). There was also Elijah who 'ascended in a whirlwind into heaven' (2Kings 2:11). Popular legend led to other famous people being thought of as having been taken up into heaven without dying. The Book of Wisdom picks up the idea:

There were some who pleased God and were loved by him, and while living among sinners were taken up. They were caught up so that evil might not change their understanding or guile deceive their souls.

– Wisdom 4:10-11

It was into this world that Paul, the Pharisee who had become a follower of Jesus, came, proclaiming that God had already raised Jesus to life and taken him up into glory as the first fruits of those who would believe in him. Jesus had destroyed death. Furthermore he would come and gather up his disciples to share his glory. The dominant image seems to have been that of Enoch and Elijah, and Christians hoped that God would come and sweep them up into life with Jesus without their having to die. Obviously this would not happen to those in the community who died, so this gave rise to the question: what would happen to them? When Jesus came - and they expected it to be soon - and gathered the living up into glory, would the dead remain dead and be separated from the rest of the community while they awaited the general resurrection? Or would God do to them what he did to Jesus: bring them back to life and then take them up into glory?

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those sleeping [NRSV 'who have died'], so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep [NRSV 'died'].

¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have fallen asleep [NRSV 'died'].

¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul uses a common euphemism for death when he speaks of 'those sleeping'. However, in the context of Christian faith, it is more than a euphemism. It is, rather, an expression of faith in the fact that death does not end the life of communion with God. He goes straight to the heart of the gospel, reminding them of something that would have been also at the heart of his preaching: 'Jesus died and rose again'. He does not go on to draw the conclusion that the faithful will consequently also rise again. This he takes for granted, and it is not the subject of the question which is concerning the Thessalonians. He speaks, rather, of the 'coming of the Lord' (*parousia*, see 2:19; 3:13). He assures them that when Jesus comes, and they are assumed into heaven to *meet* the Lord (Greek: *apantēsis*, see Matthew 25:6; Acts 28:15), 'God will bring with him those who have died'. The Thessalonians need not be troubled by the thought that their dead will miss out and have to await a general resurrection imagined as being in an indefinite future.

The words 'through Jesus' may, as in this translation, be saying that it is because of what Jesus has done that God will bring the dead with him. It may, however, go with 'those who have died', referring to those who have died in faith because of Jesus. Either way, reference is being made to the redemptive power of Jesus' self-giving love on the cross. Both the question and the response are concerned with *Christians* who have died.

Paul reassures them, claiming that what he is about to say is something he has received as a word from the Lord – an understanding, in other words, that has come to him in prayer. The dead will not be forgotten. Indeed, they will be the first to accompany Jesus in glory. Paul's language picks up the experience of the festive welcoming (Greek: *apantēsis*) of a dignitary into the city. He may also be drawing on the account of God's coming on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:10-18). This text is sometimes interpreted as though Paul was expecting to be still alive when Jesus comes (see, however, 5:1-11). Whether or not this is so, the essence of his message is that the Thessalonians have nothing to fear because 'we will be with the Lord forever'. This is all that matters to Paul. It is in this communion with Jesus that real life consists.

Paul takes the occasion to point out that whatever their expectations they do not know and cannot know the timing of ‘the day of the Lord’. This is a traditional expression for the day of God’s triumph (see Amos 5:18 and Isaiah 13:6). Paul uses another traditional phrase, ‘the times and seasons’, referring to the mysterious timing of God’s providential will (see Daniel 2:21, Acts 1:7). Concern about the timing of God’s final judgment or of the coming of Jesus is only an idle curiosity. Paul directs them to living *now* in faith, hope and love (compare 1:3).

Using an image which comes from Jesus himself, he reminds them that the day of the Lord, the day of judgment when the world and every human being will have to face the consequences of our behaviour, will come unexpectedly, ‘like a thief in the night’ (see Matthew 24:43). *They* will be caught off guard (see Luke 17:26-30), but not so ‘*you*, beloved’. It is the will of God that the Thessalonians remain vigilant (see Luke 12:35-40) and so avoid sin and its consequences (which is what Paul means by ‘wrath’, see 1:10). Their union with Jesus is proof that ‘God has destined us for salvation’ (see 1:10; 2:12,16), ‘so that whether we are awake or asleep (whether we are alive or dead) we may live with him’. Death does not break communion. He also draws from traditional sayings of Jesus to urge them to be ‘children of the light’ (Luke 16:8), and to arm themselves (see Isaiah 59:17) with faith, hope and love.

Finally, we should not miss the simple but profound statement that Jesus ‘died for us’. Jesus’ death was not simply something from which God raised him (see 1:10; 4:14). It was not only a murder perpetrated by people who sinfully resisted God’s will. When his mission of love from the Father brought him up against the threat of death, he refused to stop loving to avoid it. He chose to cling to his Father’s will, to continue to give his life in love, making even his death a ‘giving of himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age’ (Galatians 1:4).

¹Now concerning the times and seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you.

²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape.

⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of the light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night.

⁸But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but to obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

¹²But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you;

¹³esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves.

¹⁴And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the insubordinate [NRSV 'idlers'] encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.

¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

Paul's advice is rich and profound. Firstly, he speaks of the leaders of the community. At this early stage, the community would still have looked for leadership to Paul himself. But they needed some organisation on the local level. On his earlier mission to southern Galatia, Paul set up an organisational structure modelled on the synagogue by appointing elders (Acts 14:23). In his letter to the neighbouring community at Philippi, he mentions those responsible for overseeing the life of the community ('bishops', Philippians 1:1). Here, he asks the Thessalonians to respect those who 'have charge of you in the Lord'. The only specific function he mentions is that of admonishing (by correcting wrong ways of understanding; Greek: *noutheteō*). Paul appeals to his readers to esteem them 'in love'.

Peace (see 1:1) is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), a fruit which Paul urges them to welcome and to cultivate. In the community they need each other's help, which includes mutual correction. When Jesus tells us not to judge (see Matthew 7:1), he is telling us that we have no right to sit in judgment on other people as though we were in a position to decide motivation and guilt. He was not telling us to be unobservant or undiscerning. Based perhaps on Timothy's report, Paul focuses on four areas of special concern.

Those who are failing to live up to the standards of Christian discipleship (the 'insubordinate'; Greek: *ataktos*) are to be admonished. True love is not fragile; it does not need to hide from the truth or to pretend things are other than they really are. Since it matters how we behave, one who truly loves will care enough to correct us when we are wrong. We should not correct with anger or ill-will, and if we do not love someone, we would best leave the correcting to someone who does. If we correct humbly and out of love, only good can come from it.

Those who are especially fearful – partly, no doubt, as a consequence of the persecution that the community is suffering – are to be encouraged. The weak are to be helped, and, finally, they are to 'be patient (Greek: *makrothumeō*) with all'. This is another of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 5:22), a sharing in the large-hearted and faithful love of the heart of Jesus that persists in love through whatever difficulties love may encounter. In his final plea (compare Galatians 6:9-10), the accent is on 'always' and 'to all', for Paul never tires of stressing the universal love of God. To some outsiders the young Christian community must have resembled the communities established by the Epicureans. These tended to separate themselves off from public life. Paul wants the Christians to reach out to their neighbours, seeking to do good not only to one another but to all.

The joy which Paul wishes for them is the joy that filled the heart of Jesus, whose desire it was ‘that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete’ (John 15:11). It is the happiness of those who live by the beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3-12): those who recognise their dependence upon God and who look to their Father for everything; the gentle who sense the sacred at the heart of every situation; those whose hearts have been broken, but who, through the pain, have learned compassion; those who hunger and thirst for justice; those who show mercy to others; the pure in heart who see God; those who work for peace; those who share in the sufferings of Jesus and who continue to give themselves in love. It is a ‘joy inspired by the Holy Spirit’ (1:6; see Galatians 5:22).

They are to ‘pray without ceasing’. Prayer can be constant, because it flows from the discovery of the divine at the heart of activity as well as in solitude. As we dare to penetrate to the depths of our experience, we become more and more conscious of the mystery at the heart of it. Jesus experienced the need to go apart at times to taste in silence what he had touched in love. We have the same need, not just to live prayerfully, but to make space in which God can speak his Word to us and give us a share of his Spirit.

Paul exhorts them to be grateful. He witnesses himself to this quality, for the first half of this letter is filled with thanksgiving. However dark our situation may be, our faith tells us that God is present gracing us. It is essential to living a Christian life that we search our situation for signs of grace and that we allow our hearts, however burdened with sorrow, to turn to God full of gratitude.

¹⁶**Rejoice always,**

¹⁷**pray without ceasing,**

¹⁸**give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit.

²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets,

²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good;

²²abstain from every form of evil.

Paul does not need to remind them that at the heart of Christian experience is the experience of Jesus' Spirit. They were, it seems, especially conscious of this. The stress in his letter has been on living one's ordinary daily life in communion with Jesus. Our whole life is to be lived in Christ and so in his Spirit. Paul encourages them to be sensitive to the movement of the Spirit in the community, especially when Jesus speaks to them through the prophets among them, those who are especially sensitive and open to divine inspiration and who proclaim God's word in the assembly.

However, while exhorting the Thessalonians to respect such utterances, Paul knows our human capacity for self-deception, and so he stresses the need for spiritual discernment (Greek: *dokimazō*, see 2:4). Problems in community are largely due to failure in this regard. They must do all they can to ensure that it is the Spirit of their risen Lord who is the principle of their life in community.

Some of the criteria for discernment have already been mentioned in the letter. Movements are to be tested by their fruit: the fruits of faith, hope and love (see 1:3 and 5:8). If when we follow what we take to be the inspiration of God's Spirit our lives become more and more modelled on that of Jesus (see 1:6), more and more patient in suffering persecution (see 2:14), more and more (an expression found also in 3:12 and 4:1) in accordance with the values Paul is mentioning in this passage, then we can be confident in our discernment.

Another important criterion is our docility in being ready to learn from those who have a special gift for revealing to us the word of God (see 2:13, 3:2, 4:2) and for leadership (5:12).

In the present passage Paul is concerned to point out that one's own personal conviction that one is indeed following the Spirit of God is no substitute for the ordinary, humble process of 'testing everything', so that we may 'hold fast to what is good' and 'abstain from every form of evil'.

God's grace is meant to affect our life in the Spirit (our 'spirit'). It is meant to affect the way we think and feel as human beings (our 'soul'), and all the ways that our life finds physical expression (our 'body'). Every dimension of our being is meant to be transformed by God's sanctifying Spirit. Could one of the problems in the Thessalonian community have been that some members were stressing the sanctification of the 'spirit', but were overlooking or ignoring the need for sanctification of the 'soul' and the 'body'?

Paul's hope that they will be found blameless at the judgment is founded on his conviction concerning God's fidelity. Paul knows that we are always free to reject God's love; hence his exhortations. But he knows too that it is God's will that we all be saved. He knows that Jesus gave his life in order that we would be convinced of God's love and attracted to respond. He knows that God never goes back on his word. The Thessalonians can be assured, from God's side, of every grace needed to attain their goal. Paul's prayer and hope is that, knowing this, they will repent of what is sinful in their lives and cling steadfastly to the hope that the gospel has inspired in them.

The innocence of which Paul speaks often appears elusive. How often do we turn our attention away from our own efforts, with their partial successes and frequent failures, in order to recall that the One who is calling us 'is faithful and *he* will do it'. Let us see ourselves in the leper (Luke 5:12-16), in the sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50), in the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32); and in the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43). Let us allow the forgiveness of God to flow over us. Only when we are truly convinced of God's love will we dare to listen to God and to follow Jesus in humble trust. Only when we contemplate Jesus on the cross, and, with the beloved disciple, watch the life pouring from his pierced heart, will we 'with unveiled faces reflect the brightness of the Lord' and 'be turned into the image that we reflect' (2 Corinthians 3:18). Only then can we become 'imitators of the Lord' (1:6).

After asking for their prayers and instructing that the letter be made public, Paul prays that they open their hearts to the grace offered them by their risen Lord.

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely;

and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

²⁵Beloved, pray for us.

²⁶Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

²⁷I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them.

²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.