



## Paul Teaches on Sanctification and Christ's Coming 1 Thessalonians 4

### Introduction

After sending Timothy to check on the Thessalonians and Silvanus to minister to other Macedonian churches, Paul had been left alone in Athens. But by the time his missionary helpers rejoined him, Paul had already moved on to Corinth. It was in Corinth that Paul received Timothy's good news of the Thessalonians' faith and love (Acts 18:1-5) and penned his letter with the support of Timothy and Silvanus.

In the first three chapters of this letter, Paul shared his great joy over the Thessalonians' passionate reception of the gospel. Yet he also expressed his concern for the strength of their faith. In Chapter 3, verses 12-13, Paul prayed that his Thessalonian flock would grow in love and holiness. To facilitate an answer to this prayer, Paul teaches fervently on both subjects. In Chapter 4, his subject is living a life that is both worthy of God and pleasing to Him. Paul emphasizes moral righteousness, practicing faith in everyday living, and living for God in the expectation (hope) of Christ's return.

In his short time with them, Paul had taught the new Thessalonian believers the basic doctrine of God's good news, the gospel. In addition to the vital necessity of maintaining a strong faith in Jesus Christ, he had taught them the principles of living in Christ, stressing that good works testify to saving faith. See 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and Ephesians 2:10. In Chapter 4, Paul expounds upon the practical details of Christian living while awaiting Christ's return.

All believers are in dire need of the plain, practical, moral teaching that Paul delivered in his letter to the Thessalonians. Christians need to be taught that "the new life in Christ is a holy life, a life bent on pleasing God by obeying His commandments" (John Stott, The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians). How can new believers live the Christian life without instruction from God's word? How can those who are established in the faith continue to live the Christian life without reminders (2 Peter 1:15 and 3:1)? Will you gratefully open your mind and heart to Paul's needful teaching?

### Outline of 1 Thessalonians 4

- I. Christian Behavior - 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12
- II. Christian Hope - 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

#### I. Christian Behavior - 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Paul "urges" and "exhorts" his readers, not by his own

authority, but *in the Lord Jesus*, to *abound more and more* in the teaching they had received from him. The good news Timothy had delivered to Paul was that the Thessalonians' faith and Christian love was alive and well. Paul cheers them on to keep running the race and finish strong (Hebrews 12:1 and 2 Timothy 4:7).

The main points of Paul's teaching in this section are: pleasing God, self-control, loving one another, and living a quiet and productive life.

##### A. Please God - 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

Paul had taught the Thessalonians the necessity of living *to please God*. They were doing that but needed encouragement to do so even more, especially since he was no longer with them. Paul instructs them (and us) how to do it. The purpose is our *sanctification*. The Greek word "hagiasmos" means "separation to God". It refers to separation from all evil things and evil ways. It means to be set apart for service to God. Hebrews 10:10 tells us that believers are sanctified *through the offering of the body of Christ Jesus once for all*. But sanctification also refers to the practical objective to *abound more and more* (4:1) in obedience to God's Word, following the example of Jesus. Sanctification is God's will for every believer.

When Paul refers to the *commandments we gave you*, he is not so much giving a legalistic order to obey the law of God as he is giving a call to please the Law-giver. When you love someone, it is natural to desire to do all you can to please that person. When you come to the throne of God through the cross of Jesus Christ, and the love of God is poured out in your heart through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), there is a natural desire to convey that love to God. The Scripture says that those who love God show it through obedience. The apostle John wrote, *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments* (1 John 5:3).

##### B. Control Sexual Desires - 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

An important part of sanctification is personal purity. Paul says, *abstain from sexual immorality*. He uses the Greek word "porneia" that refers to "every kind of illicit sexual intercourse" (W.E. Vine, Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words). The word "*abstain*" means "to make a clean cut". "Where things are evil, the Christian attitude is necessarily one of abstinence and not moderation" (I. Howard Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians).

1. Contrast between believers and unbelievers  
- 4:3-5

The Christian's life is to stand in marked contrast to that of the unbeliever because the believer has the precious knowledge of God. Those who do not know God act the way they do, *in passion and lust*, simply because they don't know God. Christians act in a completely different way, in *sanctification and honor*, because they do know God. Christian morality is God-centered.

Sex is a gift from God that is to be used honorably by applying the holy principles set forth in His Word, the Bible. Human beings are not to misuse their bodies, take advantage of one another sexually, or defraud one another by twisting or watering down what Scripture says about sexual relations. There is a warning given here. *The Lord is the avenger of all such* (4:6). He will see that justice is done.

2. Called in holiness- 4:6-8

God calls His people to holy living, and those who choose to ignore this call reject Him. There is no excuse, for God has given His Holy Spirit to indwell all who believe in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16). "*Has also given*" (4:8) is in the present tense in the Greek and is literally "who is ever giving". If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells inside you and is continually giving you power to live a holy life. To ignore or reject this is to grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30).

C. Love One Another - 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10

Surely Paul had taught the Thessalonians the two great commandments: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself* (Luke 10:27). They knew the importance of love by what they had been taught, but they also knew it instinctively through personal experience.

Sadly, many of the early Christians were estranged from their families. When they received the gospel and turned to Christ, they turned from their pagan beliefs and lifestyle. This often led to rejection by friends and family who had not embraced Christianity. However, as believers they became part of a new family. As born-again children of God, all believers are brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul writes that he has no need to tell them about *brotherly love*. Having been spurned by parents and siblings, God had shown them the necessity of loving the members of their new spiritual family.

Paul praises the Thessalonians for letting the light of their love shine as a testimony, not only among

Christians in their city but throughout the land, *in all Macedonia*. Nevertheless, he urges them to *increase more and more* their public testimony to honor God and win new souls to Christ. How is your love of others evident in practical ways? Is your love increasing more and more? In what ways?

D. Live a Quiet and Industrious Life -  
1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

While he was with the Thessalonians, Paul had given instruction to *aspire to lead a quiet life,....mind your own business, and....work with your own hands*. Apparently some of the new believers had a problem in this area because Paul brings it up again in 5:14 where he exhorts and warns *those who are unruly*. "*Unruly*" is the Greek "ataktos", a word historically used to describe an insubordinate army or soldiers who are undisciplined in their behavior. Later, the verb "atakteo" came to refer to someone who "played truant" from school or work. This is why some versions translate "ataktos" as "*idle*" (RSV and NIV) rather than "*unruly*". Perhaps both of the above definitions applied to the *unruly* Thessalonians, for a person with no occupation usually has time on his (or her) hands which may easily be filled with disorderly behavior and meddling in the affairs of others.

1. The problem - 4:11

Part of the problem for the Thessalonians may have been that Greek society despised manual labor (working with one's hands). In the culture of the day, those who did manual labor were looked upon with contempt. To be seen working with one's hands was a humbling experience. But Paul had set the Christian example while among them by working at his trade as a tentmaker, *laboring night and day* (2:9). Surely, he had also taught them that Jesus, the prime example, had worked with His hands as a carpenter. The Scriptures tell us, *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might* (Ecclesiastes 9:10, NASB).

2. The purpose - 4:12

The purpose for working, as Paul explains, is to be an example of honesty and integrity, especially in the presence of unbelievers. Working also enables a person to have *honorable independence* (J.B. Phillips New Testament). The Wycliff Bible Commentary notes, "God made everything good; therefore, man can perform the most menial tasks knowing that he is in touch with the Creator's handiwork; further, he can do it to God's glory." The lesson is to be grateful and work hard at the work God has given you to do. Whether you are a business executive, a doctor, a wife and mother, a carpenter like Jesus, a teacher, a plumber, a janitor, a lawyer, a computer programmer, or whatever honest work you do, God has given you that work to do. *And*

*whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men* (Colossians 3:23).

## II. Christian Hope - 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The last six verses of Chapter 4 are words of comfort that deal with the hope of Christ's return. Paul wrote about this because he did not want the Thessalonians *to be ignorant*. He had undoubtedly preached on the subject of Christ's return while he was with them. They knew that Christ had been crucified and that He had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. They knew He was alive and that He would return. From 5:2, we also know they had been taught that the day of His return would come suddenly, *as a thief in the night*. They were concerned about faithful brothers and sisters in Christ who had recently died and thus would be absent when Christ returned. What would happen to their deceased loved ones on that day? The Thessalonians were sorrowful (4:13) over the loss of their friends and family members and they needed words of comfort and hope. Paul wrote to assure them that those believers who had died would share fully in the glories of Christ's coming.

### A. Those Who Have Fallen Asleep - 1 Thessalonians 4:13

Paul uses the term *fallen asleep* because, for the Christian, death is temporary. Christ died in order to triumph over death. *Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through the fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage* (Hebrews 2:14-15).

It is interesting to note that the word "cemetery" comes from the Greek "koimeterion" which means "a sleeping place". The dead body "sleeps" in the tomb until God raises it up. This was anticipated even in the Old Testament, *And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt* (Daniel 12:2).

### B. Others Who Have No Hope - 1 Thessalonians 4:14

Paul did not want the Thessalonian believers to grieve like those who followed pagan gods and therefore had no hope. F.F Bruce comments, "There is ample evidence that among pagans generally there was a sad sense of hopelessness in the face of death" (Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians). Although a Christian surely grieves when a loved one dies in the Lord, it is different from the grief of an unbeliever who has no eternal hope. Those who have faith in Jesus Christ know they will see their loved ones again

and be forever with them and with the Lord. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10). *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again*. Jesus is the *firstfruits* of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20-23), the promise that those who *sleep in Jesus* will be raised.

### C. The Unbreakable Bond - 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

Several years after writing this letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:35-39). There is an unbreakable bond between Christ and His people which even death cannot destroy.

We who believe will never be separated from Christ, meaning we will never be separated from one another. Paul describes the joyful reunion in verses 15-17.

### D. The Coming of the Lord - 1 Thessalonians 4:15

The gathering of Christ's people will occur at His "coming". The Greek word is "parousia" which can mean either "coming" or "presence". "When used of the return of Christ, it signifies not merely His momentary coming for His saints, but His presence with them from that moment on" Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, W.E. Vine). When Paul writes, *we who are alive and remain*, he stresses that the coming of the Lord could occur at any time. He hoped to live to see it and he welcomed the possibility.

"The Christian hope, however, is more than the expectation that the King is coming; it is also the belief that when He comes, the Christian dead will come with Him and the Christian living will join them" (The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, John R.W. Stott).

To sum up, this is what Paul believes (4:14), on the authority of Christ Himself (4:15), about the coming of the Lord: 1) Jesus died and rose again, 2) He will come again, 3) God will bring the Christian dead with Jesus when He comes, 4) those Christians who are alive at His coming *will not precede* those who have died.

### 1. Paul's description of the parousia - 4:16

Paul pictures Christ's coming as awe-inspiring and irresistible. Luke 17:24 reveals, *For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day*.



a. *The Lord Himself will descend -*  
verse 16

Christ Jesus Himself will descend from heaven. This is a fulfillment of the promise in Acts 1:11, spoken to Jesus' apostles at His ascension. "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.*" It is also a fulfillment of Jesus' promise in John 14:3, "*And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.*"

b. *With a shout -* verse 16

While some take the shout to be the voice of the archangel, it is more likely that it is the irresistible voice of the Lord Himself, initiating the resurrection of the dead. See John 5:25.

c. *With the voice of an archangel -*  
verse 16

The sound of the archangel's voice, will also be a sign for the dead to rise. The only archangel named in Scripture is Michael (Jude 9), but Jewish tradition held that there were seven altogether.

d. *With the trumpet of God -* verse 16

In the Old Testament, trumpets were used to gather the congregation. The trumpet gave a summons, an alert, or a call to be ready. In Exodus 19:16-19, the trumpet was used to call the people out of the camp to meet God, a beautiful picture of the future trumpet call Paul mentions.

e. *The dead in Christ will rise first -*  
verse 16

The Lord's command, the archangel's voice, and the trumpet sound will be a summons to meet the Lord. The dead will be the first to respond to the call. *The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live* (John 5:25).

f. *We who are alive and remain shall be*  
*caught up together with them -*  
verse 17

After the dead have been raised, all living believers will be "*caught up*" together with them. The Greek word "harpazo" is the same word used to describe Paul's rescue from the rioters in Jerusalem (Acts 23:10) and the male child in Revelation 12:5 being caught up to God to preserve him from the fiery red dragon.

g. *In the clouds -* verse 17

Clouds are associated with God and the Lord Jesus Christ throughout Scripture. See Exodus 19:16; 24:15-18; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Daniel 7:13; Nahum 1:3; Mark 9:7; Acts 1:9; Revelation 1:7. At His ascension, Jesus was taken up into a cloud. He will return in the same way (Daniel 7:13; Mark 13:26, 14:62; Luke 21:27; Acts 1:9-11; Revelation 1:7).

h. *To meet the Lord in the air -* verse 17

The meeting *in the air* may show Christ's superiority and power over Satan. The New Testament describes Satan as *the prince of the power of the air* (Ephesians 2:2; 6:12). But on that day, the supremacy of Christ will be evident to all.

Although there will be great joy in reuniting with loved ones, the greatest joy will be *to meet the Lord* and to know that *thus we shall always be with the Lord*. The dead in Christ will be *with Him* (4:14), those who are alive and remain will be *with them* (4:17), and we will all be *with the Lord* (4:17). It will be the ultimate reunion!

2. Paul's exhortation to *comfort one another -*  
4:18

What words of comfort these are! Paul's purpose has not been to preach doctrine, but to comfort. He has supplied all the information needed for comfort and there is no need to add to it or strive to fill in missing details. When Job's friends went to comfort him, they started out fine. They sat silently with him for seven days in his grief. But then they started talking and did not stop. Nothing they said was comforting and much of what they said was untrue.

Paul stated the facts of Christ's coming without embellishing them with his opinion, bias, or unnecessary information that would detract from the comfort he intended. Paul did not argue, he consoled. He has given us words to share with those grieving the loss of a loved one. They are true words of compassion and encouragement. *Therefore comfort each other and edify one another* as Paul has done.

### Applications

1. Who do you know who needs to be comforted by Paul's words about Christ's glorious return? Will you share what you have learned with them? When?
2. How is your life an example to unbelievers? How do your words and actions convey to others that you know God?
3. How is your life an example of Christian purity? Is there something in your life that may be grieving the Holy Spirit? What changes will you begin to make today?

## QUESTIONS

Questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

### **DAY ONE: Read all lesson notes and references.**

1. What did you learn about sanctification that you can apply to your life?
2. What stirs you most about Christ's coming?

### **DAY TWO: Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3.**

3. a. What did Paul not need to write about?
  - b. What do you think Paul meant by these two terms?
4. What will be Paul's subject in Chapter 5?
5. a. What do you learn about "*the day of the Lord*" from this passage?
  - b. What more do you learn from the following Old Testament passages?  
Isaiah 2:12-17  
  
Joel 3:14-16  
  
Amos 5:18
  - c. What additional information do you find in the following New Testament passages?  
1 Corinthians 1:7-8  
  
2 Thessalonians 2:2-3  
  
Hebrews 10:24-25  
  
2 Peter 3:10-12.
6. a. What did Jesus teach about "*that Day*" in Luke 21:34-36?
  - b. How do Jesus' words in Luke relate to Paul's teaching in 1 Thessalonians 5:3?

**DAY THREE: Read 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11.**

7. a. How does Paul describe the Thessalonians in verses 4 and 5?
- b. Using the following Scripture passages, explain the meaning of Paul's words, "*you, brethren, are not in darkness*".  
Colossians 1:13  
  
Romans 13:12-14  
  
Ephesians 5:8  
  
1 John 2:8-11
- c. ♥(Heart Question) From the above Scriptures, is 1 Thessalonians 5:4 true of you?  
Please explain why or why not.
8. a. Try to put Paul's admonition in verse 6 into your own words in a way you could share with a friend.
- b. ? (Thought Question) Why is this admonition important?
9. a. How does Paul refer to himself and the Thessalonians in verse 8?
- b. To what does he compare those who are "*of the day*"?
- c. What type of armor are they to wear?
10. a. Contrast the way "*sleep*" is used in verses 6-7 with its use in verse 10.
- b. In verse 10, to what does "*wake*" refer?
- c. What is true of both those who "*wake*" and those who "*sleep*" (verse 10)?
- d. For what purpose did Paul give this information?

**DAY FOUR: Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22.**

11. Who are the "*brethren*" Paul speaks to in verses 12 and 14? Could you include yourself among them?
12. How are the "*brethren*" to relate to:  
a. Their pastors and teachers?

- b. Each other?
  - c. ♥(Heart Question) Are your answers to a. and b. above true of you? How could you encourage these types of relationships in your church or Bible study group?
13. a. List 9 exhortations Paul gives the “*brethren*” in verses 14-22.
- b. Why does Paul exhort believers to behave in this way?
14. a. Which of the 9 exhortations spoke to your heart with conviction?
- b. How will you act upon it?

**DAY FIVE: Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28.**

15. a. What does Paul ask God to do for the readers of this letter?
- b. How can he be sure God will do this?
  - c. Who will you pray this prayer for this week?
16. With what three requests does Paul close his letter?
17. a. What is Paul’s closing blessing upon his readers?
- b. What is grace? Why is it important?

**DAY SIX: Review 1 Thessalonians Chapters 1-5.**

18. What is the most important thing you learned in your study of 1 Thessalonians?
19. Which verse from the book of 1 Thessalonians will you memorize for the glory of God and for eternal credit? Please be prepared to recite this verse for your group.