

1Thessalonians

Preached on 2020-09-27 by Phillip Kayser

Background

Well, just as a bit of background: Paul planted the church of Thessalonica in Acts 17. He did so near the beginning of the year AD 51 during his second missionary journey. And I want to read the first 10 verses of Acts 17 just so that you can see the tough neighbors that this church had. They were under terrible persecution. Their neighborhood was not a fun neighborhood. Acts 17, beginning to read at verse 1:

Acts 17:1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." 4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

So there were some Jews who believed and subsequently there was a huge crowd of Gentiles who came to Christ. Verse 5:

5 But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar [Oh, Oh. The whole city is being turned against them. "set all the city in an uproar"] and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. 7 Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." [Isn't it weird that the mobs that turn the world upside down and tear it apart tend to accuse us peaceful ones of turning the world upside down. Anyway, verse 8] 8 And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. 9 So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. 10 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

Then down to verse 13:

But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. 14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed...

So the Jews used unfair Antifa-type tactics to turn the Gentiles against the Christians. And based on Acts 17, some commentators believe that Paul was only able to stay in Thessalonica for three weeks. And that is possible. But I believe he was actually there somewhere between 2-4 months before the riots occurred.¹ He ministered for three weeks

¹ But there are way too many facts against that short of a stay in Thessalonica. So most commentators believe there was a bit longer of a stay - perhaps 2-4 months. It couldn't be

to the Jews, then ministered to the Gentiles for long enough that verse 4 says that a “great multitude” of Gentiles came to Christ. And I won’t get into a lot of proofs, but the Philippians sent support to him in Thessalonica twice (Philippians 4:15-16) and yet that wasn’t enough, so he had to engage in tentmaking to support himself. That doesn’t make any sense if he was only there three weeks - especially since Philippi was 100 miles away. Likewise, his comments in 1 and 2 Thessalonians about how he, Silvanus, and Timothy diligently shepherded them over a period of time seem to indicate that he was there for a minimum of 2 months, but possibly upwards of 4. He was there long enough to have developed a deep relationship with them.

And even though this book is not one of the pastoral epistles, it sure has a lot to teach pastors about shepherding and loving the flock. In chapter 2:7 Paul says, “But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.” Then he switches images in verse 11, saying, “as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children...” While elders aren’t surrogate parents,

much longer than that because there are several events that had to happen in AD 51 between the planting of the church and the writing of the letter at the end of the same year. But I believe it had to be longer than three weeks and was probably shorter than four months. I won’t give you all the reasons why Paul’s stay was probably longer than three weeks, but let me share three:

First, it is true that Acts 17:2-3 says that Paul was in the synagogue for only three weeks, but the next verse shows that Paul subsequently won “a great multitude” of pagans to the faith. When did he do that. It’s fairly natural to read it as after the three weeks. Could a great multitude get converted in one day? Yes. But there is no evidence that it happened.

Second, Philippians 4:15-16 says that the Philippians sent aid to Paul on two different occasions while he was ministering in Thessalonica. Philippi was 100 miles away, and these two separate offerings were collected specifically for Paul’s Thessalonica ministry. Logistically this indicates a much longer stay than simply three weeks.

Third, both 1 and 2 Thessalonians indicate that Paul worked as a tentmaker so that he would not have to be a burden to them. This indicates that the gifts from the Philippians were not enough to live on. He had to supplement those gifts with tentmaking. Indeed, he says twice that he worked night and day so as not to be a burden to them. Again, though not a slam dunk argument, it definitely seems to favor a period longer than the first three weeks.

But Paul’s stay could not have been much more than four months, and probably much shorter because several factors had to happen before Paul wrote this book at the end of the year. Chapter 4:13-18 indicates that several people in the church had already died as a result of the persecution. Chapter 3 indicates that Paul had to be in Athens in suspense of what had happened to the church, to then send Timothy to comfort them, and to then receive a message back of the state of the church. So putting all of these facts together it appears that Paul stayed there somewhere between 2-4 months.

there are a lot of similarities between “dad the family shepherd” and elders who are shepherds of the flock. There are a lot of similarities between the sacrifices that a mother makes and the sacrifices that elders *should* make. And Paul teaches on the reciprocal love that members and elders should have to each other. It’s beautiful imagery.

So I have divided the whole book up into two parts. Chapters 1-3 show a pastor’s heart for his church and chapters 4-5 show a pastor’s burden for the continuing problems that his sheep are facing. In those chapters he watches out for the sheep so that they don’t get savaged. There doesn’t seem to be a lot of controversy on that two-fold structure. And true to Paul’s heart as a shepherd he inserts prayers at the beginning, the middle, and the end. And it makes for a very neat structure.

I won’t get into all the reasons for why Paul decided to plant a church in Thessalonica - though it fits his strategy of planting churches in the most influential cities of Rome - yes, even during times when the world was about to go up in flames. He went into every lion’s den of every province to flush out the demons. And sometimes they chased him out. Anyway, let’s dive into the book.

Overview of the book

The pastor’s heart for people (1 Thess. 1-3)

Let’s look at the first half of a pastor’s heart for his people. Chapter 1 focuses upon the church that he loved, while chapter 2 looks at the apostle’s ministry, and then chapter 3 looks at Timothy’s report on the church, which will introduce the second half of the book. There is always a logical flow to Paul’s writings.

Chapter 1 - A beautiful description of the church

Chapter 1 is a beautiful description of the church of Thessalonica. Because the book as a whole will be giving pastoral concerns, Paul includes two other pastors who had ministered to them in his greetings - Silvanus and Timothy. And he comforts the saints in verse 1 that they are in God and in Christ. And he pronounces further grace and peace upon them.

And I want you to notice something common to Paul’s epistles that we ought to imitate. Rarely does Paul lead with problems; nor should we. He usually leads with the things that they share in common. He gives a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving on their behalf in verses 2-4. Or it might be more accurate to say that Paul tells them the content of his prayers for them. It’s good to remind each other that we are praying in very tangible ways for each other. And what Paul shares about his prayers shows his pastoral heart. He really knows his sheep, and values them, and looks at the sheep as God does, and has faith that God will keep working in them. So he starts with thanksgiving.

He moves on to remembering what God had done in their past. It’s always good for us to remember all the good that God has done in people’s lives before we point out the errors. And what a beautiful remembrance it is. Look at verses 5-6

5 For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. 6 And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit...

I love those verses. In those two verses he recognizes the power of God's grace that had been at work in them. He affirms that he sees this grace because it is easy for people to begin to doubt whether God is at work in them when they are facing all kinds of troubles on every side. Where is God? And Paul assures them that he has seen the power of God at work in their lives.

And he goes on to assure them that *others* have recognized these graces in them too. Verses 7-9:

7 so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. 8 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. 9 For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...

He's encouraging them, building them up, and is joyful on their behalf. He is positive before he brings up anything negative. Brothers and sisters, we need to do this more with each other. When others are discouraged, share a Scriptural perspective and share your own testimony of what that brother or sister has meant to you. Let them know if others have spoken words of appreciation about them. It's not just elders who should be encouraging. All of us should be like the Macedonians and encourage the saints when they are down.

The last verse of chapter 1 introduces a theme that will be repeated throughout the book - that these saints were eagerly waiting for Jesus to come and to do something soon. He isn't talking about people 2000 years later. He is talking about these newly converted Thessalonians whom he has taught "to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." Which wrath to come? Well, let's jump ahead to 2:16. Speaking of the Jews who killed Jesus and persecuted Paul, it says, "forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost." It was about to fall. Though Paul had instructed these Christians that they would have to endure the Great Tribulation, none of them would have to endure God's great wrath that was about to be poured out upon both Israel and Rome. But more on that when we get to chapter 4. He is not talking here (in chapter 1:10) about Christ's coming at the end of history. He is talking about the imminent coming Jesus had promised in Matthew 24 that would happen within that generation. It was something to wait expectantly for during the first century. Mounce says that that word "wait" means to expect it. It is a waiting with an expectation that it is about to happen. It's imminent. They will experience it.

Chapter 2 - A detailed description of the ministry

But in chapter 2 Paul transitions to remembering *his* ministry in that church. And this is a chapter that every young pastor should meditate deeply upon. We won't have time to apply everything in these verses, but as I read some sections, let me make just a few highlights.

Verse 1:

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain.

Ministers of the Gospel don't want their ministry to be in vain. They want fruit. It grieves us when we preach our hearts out and our words are bounced off of hard hearts. And we are energized and encouraged when we see people eagerly embracing the changes that God's word calls for. It is exciting to counsel people who eagerly adopt it. Verse 2:

But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict.

Churches today are facing conflict. It is certainly not as bad in America as in many parts of the world, but it is heating up. And as Virgil Walker and Darrel Harrison have been pointing out lately, the church needs to develop a theology of suffering. Verse 3:

For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy always sought to maintain these three things: Accuracy in their preaching, purity in life, and integrity in motives. And all three of those things must once again become hallmarks of preachers today:

Accuracy in preaching: We don't just tell people what they want to hear. We must preach exactly what the Word calls us to preach, even if that gets us in trouble, as it certainly got Paul in trouble with the Jews. The persecutors that have made pastor after pastor intimidated into softening his message today are the LGBTQ mafia, the BLM intimidators, and other political correctness police.

Leon Morris says that the second word may seem shocking that Paul even needed to mention it because it deals with sexual immorality. But those words are just as needed by pastors today. Just as Thessalonica was filled with sexual allurements, pornography has made many a pastor fall in modern America. We must be able to say that our message is not mixed with lives of uncleanness. Pray these words into the lives of the pastors of America. I really appreciate the fact that there were prayer movements in Washington DC yesterday. A lot of neat stuff was happening in the Franklin Graham prayer time. We need such solemn assemblies of prayer.

The Greek of the last word refers to catching fish with bait. Leon Morris states,

The wandering sophists and jugglers resorted to all sorts of devices to attract people and so get their money. Not so the preachers. They had not tried to ensnare their hearers.²

Paul was not part of the seeker-sensitive movement that only preached what people wanted to hear. He did not try to lure them in with gimmicks.

² Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, *The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 62.

And I need to move much more quickly if I am going to get through the book. But I think you can catch the drift of what Paul is saying if I just read these. All of these verses form a fantastic paradigm for pastors to aspire to. Starting at verse 4:

1Th. 2:4 But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. 5 For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness. 6 Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. 7 But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. 8 So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. 9 For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.

1Th. 2:10 You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; 11 as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, 12 that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Those three ministers of the Gospel served for God's glory and wanted each member made mature in Christ Jesus. And though the kingdom had started in AD 30, this is one of many verses that indicate that there is an aspect of the kingdom's presence that was still being anticipated in AD 70.³ And I have talked about that enough in the past that I won't describe what that means. But AD 70 was a critical time.

Anyway, when each of the characteristics listed in those verses characterize our ministry, it may receive backlash, but those who are elect will rejoice in it.

Verse 13 shows that we need to treat the Bible as a powerful tool that works effectively in the hearers. We don't need to go to psychology and other humanistic wisdom to get people to change. No. The weapons of our warfare are mighty in God for tearing down strongholds and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. We don't need to trust in oratory, or stories, or illustrations. It's not that those things can't be used, but it is the Word of God itself that effectively works in those who believe.

But now comes another description of the coming of Christ in AD 70. It is definitely a coming designed to deal with first century Jewish persecutors such as we read about in Acts 17.

14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, 15 who killed

³ To use the paradigm of Israel. Just as Israel exited Egypt on Passover, Christ established a people on Passover and Firstfruits in AD 30. Just as Israel was given the law and established as a nation 50 days later on Pentecost at Mount Sinai, the church was established 50 days later in some sense at Pentecost. But it was another 40 years before Israel crossed the Jordan and started possessing their possessions, and it would be 40 years before Jesus, the greater Joshua, would start in earnest possessing his possessions after AD 70. Daniel 7 says that the kingdom was confirmed in His hands as that point. Revelation 20 says much the same thing.

both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, 16 forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

Paul is indicating that the Jews bucket of iniquity was almost full and God's wrath was soon to be poured out upon them. The Day of the Lord's wrath that this book will be speaking about was an imminent day of wrath that would destroy the Jews and scatter them to the four winds. God hasn't failed in His promises.

But notice what gives Paul joy in the face of this Jewish persecution. It was really these believers. It's kind of a test of a pastor's heart. The joke some pastors give is that the ministry would be great if it wasn't for the people. That wasn't Paul's attitude. He gloried in each of the saints in Thessalonica. Verse 17 says that he longed to see them face to face on earth, but verse 18 says that Satan had hindered his coming to them time and again. But he knows that even if he doesn't see them again on earth, he will see them all in heaven:

19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

He will deal with that subject of His coming in chapter 4, but he is introducing the idea that all of us will be able to be in the presence of the Lord - an incredibly encouraging doctrine. Some must have thought that only those in the first resurrection would make it to heaven, and those who survived AD 70 would have to wait in Hades for 1000s of years until the final resurrection. And while that confusion was understandable, Paul will correct that view later and show that all of them (even those who might die after the Parousia in AD 70), all of them will be joined in his presence in heaven after death. Words of comfort.

Chapter 3 - An overview of Timothy's report on the church, followed by prayer

But in chapter 3 Paul shows his pastor's heart by beginning to interact with some of Timothy's report. Some of his report was positive and some of it was negative. These Christians had been suffering, and Paul begins by expressing his concerns, and giving comfort, and showing them hope. And in this he is also a good model for pastors. This is why I say that even though Thessalonians is not technically one of the pastoral epistles, it teaches a great deal about what it takes to be a good minister of the Gospel.

Look at the anxious concern Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy had for what these saints were going through, and notice his reminders of how to face it faithfully. Beginning to read at chapter 3:1.

1Th. 3:1 Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, 2 and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, 3 that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. 4 For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. 5 For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.

Paul doesn't want a single sheep to be lost. Because they were going through the beginnings of the tribulation, Paul is so anxious about their spiritual state that he twice

says that he could hardly endure the suspense. Pastors should have this kind of care and concern for the sheep. It should drive them in their shepherding.

And by the way, the word μέλλω is used in verse 4. That means “about to.” Paul had previously warned them that the tribulation was about to happen (that’s the word μέλλω in verse 4), and now a few months later he says that it *had* begun. So we really need to take that word for “about to” seriously. It’s not even translated in the NKJV, but it should be.

In verses 6-8 Paul says that he was so relieved to hear that they were continuing in faith and love. He reminds himself and them that they can only stand in the Lord and he wants them to be committed to standing fast in the Lord. Again, pastors must be Christocentric and Gospel oriented in their calls to ethical living. It’s only *in the Lord* that any of it is possible.

But in verses 9-10 he assures them that he rejoices in them before the Lord and prays for them all before the Lord. And he actually offers up a prayer in verses 11-13 that is a fine model of prayer and blessing:

1Th. 3:11 Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, 13 so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

The pastor’s burden concerning problems (1 Thes. 4-5)

Well, that brings us to the second half of the book where Paul shows a burden over their sins and problems. This is the slightly negative half.

Chapter 4 - A plea for purity during troubled times

But let’s dive into chapter 4 where many of the controversies seem to arise. The first controversy isn’t a big one. Some people deny that verses 1-8 has anything to do with how to get married or how to get to the altar pure. Their interpretation of verse 4 is that it just means how to gain self-control over your body and not cave into sexual desires. And that’s the way some versions translate it. And that’s fine - they still have fantastic applications. But I think there is more. When it says, “that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,” I agree with those interpreters who say that it is talking about how to gain a *wife* in sanctification and honor.

The key to understanding this whole section is the meaning of two words in verse 4. The word “to possess” is κτάομαι, and it is defined this way in the dictionary: “to gain possession of, procure for oneself, acquire, get” (BDAG) something you don’t currently have. That definition nullifies the other interpretation. The word does not mean being in control of something you already have. You already have your body. Rather, it means to get something you don’t currently have. You are wanting to get a vessel. You don’t yet have that vessel. That’s the point.

The second word that needs to be understood is the meaning of that word “vessel.” The Greek word for vessel (σκεῦος) was frequently used as a Jewish idiom for a wife. For

example, 1 Peter 3:7 calls the wife “the weaker vessel” - same word. So William Hendriksen translates this verse as, “how to take a wife for himself.” If this is true (and I am 100% convinced that it is), then all of the instructions in verses 1-8 are designed to teach us how to avoid sin while courting and later romancing a woman. Let me read from seven more translations that interpret it exactly in this way.

1. The NAB translation says, “that each of you know how to acquire a wife for him self.”
2. God’s Word Translation has “finding a husband or wife for yourself is to be done in a holy and honorable way.”
3. The TCNT has “taking one woman for his wife.”
4. Weymouth has “each of you shall know how to procure himself a wife.”
5. EBC has “his own wife.”
6. RSV has, “how to take a wife for himself.”
7. In Jamiesson, Faucet, and Brown’s commentary, it says,

how to possess his vessel — rather as *Greek*, “how to *acquire* (get for himself) *his own vessel*,” that is, that each should have *his own wife* so as to avoid fornication (1 Thessalonians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 7:2). The emphatical position of “his own” in the *Greek*, and the use of “vessel” for *wife*, in 1 Peter 3:7, and in common Jewish phraseology, and the correct translation “acquire,” all justify this rendering.⁴

Well, that’s a pretty good goal - how to get to the marriage ceremony pure. How do we do it? Let me outline eight of Paul’s guidelines.

First, Paul is quite adamant “that you abstain from sexual immorality” (v. 3). The word for “sexual immorality” is *πορνείας*, and refers to any sexually stimulating contact outside of marriage. As the Song of Solomon makes clear, sexual contact must be defined much more broadly than simply intercourse. To be blunt, The Bible indicates that sexual immorality includes petting, foreplay, or other contact that arouses sexual desires outside of marriage.

Second, Paul uses the word “in sanctification” to mean totally separated from the world or totally different from the world. That’s the root meaning of sanctification. Christians should not enter into romantic relationships the way the world does. He makes this even more clear in verse 5 when he says, “not in the passion of lust, *like the Gentiles* who do not know God.” We are not to be like the Gentiles in the way they acquire a wife. They don’t have problems pushing the envelope on touch, but we should.

⁴ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, 1871, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 1996), paragraph 22442.

Third, verse 4 says that every man must “acquire his own wife in... honor.” Anything that would dishonor this woman must be avoided. A good question to ask is, “Would I be embarrassed by what I did to her if she later married someone else?”

Fourth, during this stage when you are seeking “to acquire a wife,” do not arouse the “passion of lust” (v. 5). Note that this verse doesn’t just forbid intercourse; it forbids the preliminary *passions* of lust from arising in the first place. Anything that arouses these passions must be scrupulously avoided.⁵ Paul gives brass-tacks-very-practical-advice. Some people don’t like it, but it’s pretty hard not to understand what his advice is.

Fifth, in verse 6 Paul commanded every believer to not “take advantage of” the person whom he is considering for marriage. Just because you *yourself* are not aroused by physical touch does not mean that the other partner will not be. Sensitivity to the holiness of the *other* person must be heightened.

Sixth, verse 6 says that the man who is seeking to acquire this woman must make sure that he does not “defraud his brother in this matter” of passions. That’s an interesting instruction. There is some male person other than himself whom he must not defraud in this area of passions. And there are differences of view as to whether the person defrauded is the woman’s father or the woman’s future husband, but since the defrauding has to do with this matter - with sexual passions (which only a future husband has a right to), I believe that it is the future husband who is defrauded. The point is that the suitor must not take what is not yet his to take. That would be defrauding. Nor may he offer what he is not yet able to give. John Thompson states: “But who is this brother that is being defrauded? It can only be the woman’s future spouse!” Leon Morris agrees. He says, “The future partner of such a one has been defrauded.... It reminds us that all sexual looseness represents an act of injustice to someone other than the two parties concerned.”⁶ So he is basically saying, don’t do anything with this woman that you would regret if you didn’t end up marrying her.⁷

⁵ The way Paul worded it in 1 Corinthians 7:1 was to say that it is good for man not to touch a woman. He was *not* forbidding handshakes or hugs unless those kinds of touch “ignite the fire” of sexual desire (and fire is the root meaning of the word).

⁶ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, *The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 124.

⁷ This defrauding is not limited to sexual intercourse. We know this for two reasons: first, Verse 6 says that even though others may not find out, God will know and avenge. And second, The phrase “this matter” indicates that Paul doesn’t want the “passion of lust” robbed from the future husband because sexual desire (“passion”) is the right of the husband and wife alone. This means that any use of each other that arouses sexual desire is taking something that belongs to the future spouse alone.

Paul anticipates the flippancy of some who think that stolen kisses are no big deal by warning us that this is indeed a serious matter. Don't be blinded by your culture. He says, "because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified... Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit." (v. 6). He doesn't mince any words; this is serious stuff, and he has the authority to command it.

Seventh, we are to avoid all "uncleanness" in our relationship (v. 7).

Eighth, we are to actively pursue holiness in the relationship (v. 7). This gives the whole time of courtship and romance a God-centered focus.

I've spent more time on this section simply because this tends to be an area that people fudge on in every age. But moving on...

In verses 9-12 Paul brings up a different area of love - and specifically, that loving one another does not involve mooching off each other. Apparently he was too subtle for some people, so he really gets on their case about that issue in 2 Thessalonians. Some people were too spiritual to work. They were living off of others. Paul said that it doesn't work that way.

But now comes a topic of huge controversy, and I have no illusions that I will say the last word on these verses. 1 Thessalonians 4-5 is a difficult passage on any view of eschatology. I still think there are three legitimate interpretations of chapter 4:15-17. And when I say legitimate, they don't seriously violate any rules of interpretation.

The least likely one is the one I held to until a few years ago, yet it is the one that most people hold to. It is that those three verses describe what happens to believers on the last day of history. There are four facts that have made me move away from that, including that chapters 4-5 (when taken together) sure look like those who remain after the resurrection of verse 16 will die and then live again. That doesn't fit any view of resurrection future to us - Premil, Amil, or Postmil. I won't 100% rule that out, but I will explain why it doesn't seem to fit all the evidence.

The second interpretation is that verse 16 refers to the first resurrection in AD 70 and verse 17 refers to the second resurrection on the last day of history. That fits Paul's assertion that those who don't get raised in verse 16 will subsequently die and then live again. But there are other facts that it doesn't seem to fit. But it is a fairly strong option.

The third interpretation that is becoming popular (and this is the one I tentatively hold to) is that verse 16 tells us what happens to the *bodies* of those who died prior to AD 70 - that body and soul they go to heaven, while verse 17 tells us what happens to the *souls* of those who die after AD 70, and that he doesn't deal with their bodies till a brief statement in chapter 5.

The two interpretations that I reject are the Full Preterist view of Ed Stevens - that there was both a resurrection and a rapture in AD 70 and that 100% of believers left the earth. He says after AD 70 there were zero Christians upon earth, and that those who came to

Christ after that had no good guidance and that is why the early church was so weak. That is absolutely impossible on many counts.

The second interpretation that I reject is the Dispensational one that says that verse 16 is a *secret* resurrection that no one will notice 1007 years before the last day of history and that verse 17 is a secret rapture of living believers on the same day - again, something that no one will notice because it will be so fast. There will just be the mysterious disappearance of a bunch of people. There are way too many facts against that. As I said before, it is a tough passage for every view of eschatology.

But let me explain where I landed. I do not deny a future coming of Christ at the end of history, but let me give you my reasons why I believe *this* particular passage speaks of the very visible appearing of Christ with His angelic armies and chariots that came against Jerusalem. This is the coming referred to in the first half of Matthew 24, where Jesus said that He would come before that generation passed away. This is the perfect answer to liberals. Theological liberals love to mock these kinds of passages and say that Jesus and the apostles clearly anticipated a coming of Christ in their own generation, but they were wrong. They claim that the Bible is in error. But we say, No. Jesus *did* come in the first century exactly as He said that He would. And again, this is not a denial of a coming at the end of history. But here are the reasons why this coming is most likely the first century coming.

First, the “you,” “we,” “us” in this passage seems refers to the Thessalonian Christians who aren’t around today. If you read both chapters with those words in view, it sure seems hard to take it as a general “you,” “we,” “us.” It’s possible, but seems like a stretch.

Second, verse 15 says that some of those living at that time would live to see this coming and would continue to live after that coming. This is one I had a very hard time getting around. Verse 15 says,

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.

Very briefly, the word “we” implies that some of them in the first century would live past the coming of verse 15, the word “remain” implies that some then living wouldn’t die, and the word “precede” implies two resurrections of the same type, one preceding the other - the first one in AD 70 (which will be spelled out more clearly in verse 16) and a resurrection of those who live past AD 70. In a bit we will see when they are raised - after they die. It’s not right away. But for now just notice that there is a resurrection of those who have died prior to something, and that resurrection won’t precede ours. That’s all that verse 15 demands.

Some people believe that verse 17 deals with that second resurrection at the end of history. That is possible. I am open to that. But I will give you my reasons why I don’t believe so. But first, verse 16:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Let me make a few preliminary comments about this. Dispensationalists state that this descending from heaven seems to be different from the Second Coming mentioned elsewhere. And I see some of the same differences. However, *they* believe that it is a secret rapture that precedes the Second Coming by seven years. But if it is a secret, it is the noisiest secret ever because it would be accompanied by the voice of an archangel and the sound of a trumpet.

And people say, “OK. Well, back at you - did that happen in the first century?” And I say, “Yes it did - exactly as stated.” The descent of Christ in the sky in the first century was by no means a secret. The Romans saw it and described it, as did the Jews, and as did Christians. We have several ancient eye witness accounts of an awesome man in the sky who led an army of chariots and angels. Both Romans and Jews said that they heard a loud voice from heaven. Seutonius, the Roman historian, says that all the people heard a loud trumpet. I’ve quoted these things in the Revelation series, so I won’t go over all those quotes now. But we also saw in the Revelation series that this event was accompanied by other loud noises, the sky appearing to be ripped open, and every mountain and island in the Mediterranean region being jostled and moving (in some cases by several meters). Seismologists and archaeologists working in the Mediterranean have said this:

... Field studies of salt deposition and of erosional features indicate that the upward crustal displacements raised the land by as much as 6.66 meters on the average above the ancient sea level (corrected for eustatic sea level variation). Maximum uplift in one area was as much as 9.9 meters⁸

In case you don’t know how much 6.6 meters is, it is 21.6 feet that the earth moved upward on average. And in one place it moved upward 32.4 feet. That’s a massive movement that would have scared the daylights out of the people in that day. *This event was no secret.* It was a noisy and earthshaking event. But it wasn’t the end of history either. Revelation 6 goes on to say that people continued to live after that event. And these verses indicate that people lived past that event as well. Verse 16a was clearly not the end of history.

The next event to happen after Christ appears in the sky was the first resurrection in verse 16b. In my Revelation series I point out that the voice of the archangel happened in AD 66, and the resurrection happened three and a half years later in AD 70.

And if you look at verse 16 you will see that he uses the word “first” in connection with this resurrection, not the word “second.” This is not the second resurrection. Revelation 20 speaks of two resurrections. The first one takes place in the first century and it goes on to say, “But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished.” On every view of eschatology the thousand years don’t get finished till the last day of history. Well, look at the last clause in verse 16: “And the dead in Christ will rise first.” All Christians who had died prior to AD 70 rose from the dead.

⁸ <http://www.drgeorgepc.com/Tsunami365ADeEastMedSea.html>



In Revelation 20 I documented the difference between this *first* literal resurrection of the dead and the *second* literal resurrection of the dead that will happen on the last day of history. It's the difference between the Barley Harvest and the Wheat Harvest that I have pictured on the back of your outlines. The Barley Harvest was the first resurrection, and it came in two stages (the firstfruits, which is Christ) and the main harvest, which happened in AD 70. The Wheat Harvest is the general resurrection of the righteous *and* the unrighteous on the last day of history. And interestingly, on that day, the *unrighteous* will be raised *first* and then the righteous. That's different than here. Matthew 13:30 says of the final day of history,

“Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

So that is significantly different. So there was a resurrection in AD 70. Verse 17 goes on to say,

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

The word “then” is not the word τότε, which means at that time. If this occurred at the same event, then Paul would have used the word τότε, which means “then” as in “at that point in time.” But this is not τότε. This is ἔπειτα, which is a sequential word that means “after that.” It doesn't define how long after that, but it is after that.

So that opens up two possible interpretations of verse 17. The first interpretation is that verse 16 is the first resurrection and verse 17 is the second resurrection. So that would focus on one resurrection in sequence after the first one. And that certainly fits one of the two meanings of the word. And it is precisely the use of the word ἔπειτα in 1 Corinthians 15. The dictionary says that the word can mean either “being next in order of time” or it can simply mean “after that event.”

I tentatively take it in the second way - “after that event.” I'm open to either interpretation.

But let me first of all explain (for the sake of the argument) why it is very difficult for an Amil or Postmil to take *both* verses as referring to the last of day of history.

First, if it was on the last day of history, no one *remains alive* after the resurrection of believers since Jesus indicated that the tares would be raised first, and then the wheat. Whatever verse 16 is talking about, believers are still alive and remain around for a time. In

fact, that word is defined in dictionaries as “to survive” (see Thayers, Strongs). These people in verse 17 are surviving something. Literally it is the “alive ones, the surviving ones.” There is no “and” in the Greek, which means the two phrases are equivalent. The alive ones are the surviving ones. The meaning is that the survivors of the judgment against Jerusalem and/or those left behind (who remain) after the resurrection will themselves die (as he will make clear in chapter 5:10). Well, the majority view doesn’t have anyone dying in verse 17 - those living ones are caught up bodily in the air on their view. Yet chapter 5 will make clear that everyone will die. Hebrews 9:27 says that it is appointed unto man once to die.

So here is the thing: Paul was addressing the question, “What happens to those who don’t get resurrected in AD 70? Does their soul go down to Sheol/Hades (like they did in the Old Testament) to wait until the resurrection of their bodies?” If that was the case, then they wouldn’t see their loved ones for thousands of years. Their loved ones would be in heaven and they themselves would be in Paradise-Hades. And Paul says, “No.” If you remain after AD 70, your soul will immediately be caught up to heaven when you die.

And that’s the third argument - that the word for being caught up is ἀρπάζω, a word that never once refers to a resurrection. Now it could technically be a synonym (just this one time) and mean that the bodies would be caught up. But the point is that it isn’t used elsewhere as a term for resurrection. But it *does* refer to Paul’s *soul* being caught up to heaven when he was stoned to death. 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 says that Paul had died and that his soul was “caught up to the third heaven” and in the next verses it repeats that his soul was “caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” So when he died, his soul was caught up to heaven - exactly the same word that is used here, but used twice there. So verse 16 relates to how those who had already died prior to AD 70 would have their *bodies* raised from the dead. Verse 17 tells us what happens to everyone else who survives AD 70 - “After that time, we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

The fourth argument is that this makes sense of the parallel language between chapters 4 and 5 on those who have fallen asleep and those who remain alive. Everyone agrees that chapter 4:13 is referring to people who had already died when it speaks of those who have fallen asleep. And they all agree that those who remain alive in verse 17 is those who remain alive after the resurrection of those who have fallen asleep. There is no controversy on that. But look at how chapter 5:10 words it: “who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.” There is a very important word order there that parallels chapter 4:16-17. I think it is a historical order. Everyone agrees that “whether we wake” in 5:10 is referring to those who were resurrected in 4:16. If that is true, then the parallelism on comfort requires that those who sleep mean “those who die” *after* the waking event. Well, that would completely rule out any interpretation that places both verses on the last day of history. There are people who die after the resurrection and then come to life. So look at 5:10 again. “who died for us, that whether we wake [that would be the AD 70 resurrection] or sleep [that would be bodies dying after the AD 70 resurrection], we should live together with Him.” The word “live” would be either our souls living, or more likely is a reference to our future resurrection.

Again, it is letting people know that if they miss the resurrection of AD 70 they won't lose out - they too will be caught up to heaven to be with the Lord and to be with the resurrected saints forever. I plan to write a much more detailed analysis of all the other options on this passage from all the eschatological perspectives so that people can see which ones fit most or all of the evidence. I believe that two interpretations fit the evidence pretty well, but that mine not only fits the facts but also the flow of Paul's argument in bringing comfort. What is it that the original audience was worried about? They were worried that they wouldn't see their loved ones for a long time - perhaps thousands of years. And Paul says No.

Chapter 5 - Several pleas for faithfulness during troubled times, followed by a prayer

And my view best fits together with chapter 5. Chapter 5 continues to give several pleas for faithfulness during the troubled times they lived in. And it is quite clear that he is not talking about the Coming at the end of history. For example, though unbelievers would be caught off guard and not know when Christ was coming (in the coming that *he* is talking about), Paul had given the church enough information that they would be totally prepared. *They would know when this coming would happen. In contrast, they would not know when the last day of history would be.* Starting to read at verse 1:

1Th. 5:1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. 2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. 3 For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. 5 You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. 6 Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. 8 But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. 11 Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.

The wrath of verse 9 that they were concerned about was God's wrath about to be poured out on Israel and the Roman Empire. That was the wrath that he introduced in chapter 2:16 where he said that their cup of iniquity was almost full and that wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. That wrath was not intended for God's people. It was actually designed to rescue His people *from* their tribulation that the Jews were producing.

Second, chapter 5:4 explicitly says that Jesus would *not* come as a thief in the night for those Thessalonians, since they *knew* the signs. Yes, He would come as a thief in the night for unbelievers, but not for these believers. They weren't in the dark. Likewise, verse 3 says that it would be as obvious to them that Jesus was about to come as it would be obvious that a baby is about to come when the mom is in labor pangs. That is not the condition of the earth at the end of history. No one will have a clue when Jesus is coming back at the end of history. There are no signs leading up to His *final* coming, but there are numerous signs of *this* coming. They were not in the dark about it.

But again, verse 10 comforts them that whether Christians (like Paul) have their bodies awakened in the resurrection and go to heaven in bodies, or whether their bodies subsequently sleep, their *souls* will be in heaven together with Jesus. Their *souls* will not sleep.

I know all of this is super complicated. I won't say anything more on that subject.

But Paul (always a pastor at heart) ends this book with several admonitions that would be needed during the last days leading up to AD 70.

Verses 12-13 encourage them not to abandon the church. It's very easy for preppers to go off the grid all by themselves and completely miss the fellowship of the saints. He knew that these Thessalonians would need the church, and they would need leaders, and he calls them to recognize and esteem their pastors highly. Don't go it solo.

Verses 14-15 are admonitions that would be needed since during troubled times it is easy to snap and its easy to become impatient with others.

Then in verses 16-17 he says,

1Th. 5:16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Again, it would be so easy to allow persecution to make you lose your joy and perspective. All of these admonitions were perfectly suited to the first century saints who were about to go through the Great Tribulation. There are many applications, but there is only one intended meaning for the first century audience.

Verses 19-22 are warnings concerning becoming cynical with all the false prophets that would descend upon the church. Jesus had predicted, "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many." And it would be very easy for them to become so cynical that they would reject all prophecy. And Paul said "No."

1Th. 5:19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies.

Those prophecies were God's inerrant Word to them and they needed to value the prophecies. One of the prophecies that Paul didn't want them rejecting was this uncomfortable book of 1Thessalonians that was rebuking them for their sin. He wanted them to cherish that book and not despise it, since the book was a prophecy. We are in deep water when we despise any prophecy of the Scriptures. Why? Because it is the inerrant word of God.

These congregations in Thessalonica were also despising other prophets that had been sent to them to teach them three things: 1) The mystery of Jew and Gentile being in one body (Eph. 3:1-6), 2) bringing warning of God's covenant lawsuit against Israel (and I have a bunch of Scriptures that show that prophets were being sent to warn the church about God's imminent lawsuit against Israel - Luke 11:49-51; Matt 23:29-38; Rev. 1:3; 10:7,11; 11:3,6,10,18; 16:6; 18:20,24; 22:6,7,9,10,18,19), and 3) warning of the coming apostasy that was almost upon them. 2 Thessalonians 2 especially was given to warn about the coming Great Apostasy. But other prophets did as well (2 Thes. 2:1-12; Acts 20:28-29; 1

Tim. 4:1-3; Matt 24:10-14,24-25). So those prophets were valuable. The prophets God sent to the various congregations were trying to keep them from falling away, yet despite their valiant efforts, a massive apostasy was happening even in the days of the apostles. The people were despising the prophets God had been sent to them.

So when Continuationists ask, “Why would God put a temporary command in the Bible when it cannot apply to us all?” I would reply 1) that it was desperately needed in the first century, 2) everyone recognizes that there are other temporary commands all through Scripture, 3) and third that the general equity of it continues to be needed today because feminists, queer hermeneutics, marxist hermeneutics, and many other groups do despise the prophecies of the Scriptures when they twist them to their own hurt. So even though the meaning of this passage is not manifold but one - in others words it was directed to the Thessalonians during the age of prophecy, the applications continue.

And it is important that we not stop reading at verse 20. Verses 20-21 say,

21 Test all things; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil.

Verses 19-22 are all one paragraph dealing with good and bad prophecy. Just as prophets needed to be tested in Deuteronomy as to whether they were true or false prophets, and the way they were tested was testing their fruit, Paul called the Thessalonians to test the prophets, to hold fast to ones that were good and to completely reject (that’s the word for “abstain”) every prophetic tree that was evil. Matthew 7 says much the same. Jesus warned about false prophets and how to tell the false ones from the true ones. And He said that false prophets don’t bear any genuine prophetic words while 100% of the fruit of a good prophetic tree is good. So Paul was telling the Thessalonians that once you’ve tested a prophet to be false (because one prophecy proved wrong), don’t treat any of his prophecies as being authoritative.

Then he gives a wonderful benediction in verses 22-23, calls for prayer on behalf of his team in verse 25, gives greetings and ends with another benediction.

But from start to finish, whether praising and blessing them or warning and pleading with them, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy model in this book what it means to pastor and shepherd a flock. He cares for their souls and pours himself out on their behalf, he protects them from wolves. Pray that we elders would be faithful shepherds. Amen.