

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR WINTER 2008-09

1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS— INTRODUCTION

Paul was a prolific writer, who likely wrote more letters than the New Testament includes. Among those preserved for us through God's guidance are well-thought-out theological presentations such as Romans and Ephesians. Among numerous personal letters Paul probably wrote, the Letter to Philemon was written to a Christian friend on behalf of a converted slave. However, most of Paul's writings are occasional letters that address specific situations and questions. His First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians fall into this last category.

WRITER

Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians begin by identifying Paul as the writer. In addition, 2 Thessalonians ends with a personal note the apostle identified as originally appearing in his own handwriting. Paul, his Roman name, is first introduced in Acts 7:58 as "a young man named Saul" (his Jewish or Hebrew name) who was present at Stephen's stoning. Paul was a Roman citizen from Tarsus in Cilicia (see Acts 21:39). His parents likely were Hebrew-speaking Jews (see Phil. 3:5)—strict Hebrews in a Hellenistic culture. Paul became a Pharisee who studied under the noted Jewish rabbi Gamaliel [guh MAY lih uhl] (see Phil. 3:5; Acts 22:3). Paul zealously persecuted early Christians because he viewed them as a threat to Judaism (see Acts 22:3-5). On his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, he encountered the risen Christ and was converted (see 9:1-18). Paul immediately began to preach in Jewish synagogues, declaring that Jesus was God's Son, the Messiah (see 9:20). After a number of years, the church in Antioch of Syria commissioned Paul and Barnabas to spread the gospel to other areas. Paul became Christianity's preeminent missionary and theologian.

Paul typically dictated his letters to a secretary but added his signature to the end of each letter himself (see Rom. 16:22; 1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18). Thus he probably dictated his Letters to the Thessalonians, perhaps to Silvanus (Silas), who was with Paul when he wrote (see 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). Silvanus recorded Peter's first letter as the

apostle dictated it (see 1 Pet. 5:12), so he evidently was a skilled writer adept at accurately recording spoken messages.

Some Bible scholars have questioned whether Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Interpreters who question whether Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians have contended that because the letter exhibits differences from 1 Thessalonians in style, tone, vocabulary, and theology, someone other than Paul must have written it. These scholars point particularly to perceived differences in the two letters concerning Christ's second coming.

Each argument against Paul as the writer of both letters can be countered easily and convincingly. The letters differ in tone and somewhat in specific purpose. Paul wrote the first letter out of his relief and joy when he learned of the Thessalonian Christians' overall faithfulness. He wrote the second letter out of a need to encourage the believers as they faced persistent persecution and his concern to correct a false teaching and to address a lingering, major problem in the church. Furthermore, Marcion's [MAHR shuhn's] list (A.D. 140) and the Muratorian [MYOOR uh TAWR ih uhn] Canon (A.D. 180), two of the earliest lists of accepted New Testament books, included both 1 and 2 Thessalonians as authentic writings of Paul. In addition, several early church leaders attested to the letters' genuineness. Both letters claim to have been written by Paul, and with complete confidence we can acknowledge that fact.

BACKGROUND AND RECIPIENTS

Thessalonica [THESS uh loh NIGH kuh] was one of the leading cities of the first century. The city originally was named Thermai because of the hot springs located there. In 315 B.C., Cassander rebuilt the city and named it Thessalonica for his wife. It was a free city, with no Roman troops stationed there. It was self-governing, with its own assembly and magistrates. It was a major seaport, and because it was situated on the Egnatian [EG NAY shuhn] Way, the city was a center of commerce. It also was the administration center of the Roman province of Macedonia. Thessalonica was a strategic city whose population at one point reached approximately two hundred thousand people.

Paul had preached the gospel and had won converts in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey (see Acts 17:1-4). He had begun his work in the Roman province of Macedonia in the city of Philippi, where he and Silas had

been imprisoned and ultimately ushered out of town. They went to Thessalonica, where for three Sabbaths Paul "reasoned with [the Jews] from the Scriptures" (17:2). As a result, some believers "including a great number of God-fearing Greeks" and "a number of the leading women" became believers (17:4). Paul remained in the city long enough to establish a church. Jews in Thessalonica became jealous of the missionaries' success, "formed a mob," and caused "an uproar" (17:5). The Thessalonian believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea for safety. Word reached the Jews in Thessalonica that Paul and Silas were having a productive ministry in Berea, so Thessalonian Jews went to Berea and stirred up trouble. The Berean believers sent Paul away, but Timothy and Silas remained in Berea (see 17:10-14). Paul's escort of believers took him to Athens. After he proclaimed the one true God, some Athenians became Christians (see 17:34). Evidently Timothy joined Paul in Athens, whereupon Paul sent him to assess the situation in Thessalonica (see 1 Thess. 3:1-2). Then Paul traveled from Athens to Corinth, where Silas and Timothy rejoined him (see Acts 18:1,5).

OCCASION AND DATE

Shortly after Timothy arrived in Corinth with news concerning the Thessalonian believers, Paul wrote two letters to them in a brief span of time. He likely wrote the letters from Corinth in A.D. 50 or 51. First and Second Thessalonians may have been Paul's earliest letters, although some scholars favor Galatians as his first letter. The Letters to the Thessalonians are important because of what they reveal about Paul's theology, his conduct as a missionary, his constant battle against opponents, and his instructions to new Christians concerning how they were to behave in their pagan environment. The letters also reveal his pastoral care for the churches he established.

PURPOSE

Buoyed by Timothy's "good news about [the Thessalonian Christians'] faith and love" (1 Thess. 3:6), Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. He urged the believers to continue in faithfulness (3:8), to grow spiritually (4:1), and to strengthen their bonds of Christian love (4:9-10).

Not all the news from Thessalonica was good, however. Opponents sought to discredit Paul, so he wrote to counter their false accusations (see 2:1-12). Some unbelievers in Thessalonica were persecuting the Christians, so Paul

encouraged his readers by reminding them they were not alone in suffering opposition (see 2:14). Evidently some believers faced the temptation to revert to their pagan lifestyles, so Paul encouraged them to maintain moral purity.

Some Thessalonian Christians had died, and the surviving believers questioned whether their deceased brothers and sisters in Christ would have a part in His second coming (see 4:13-18). Paul wrote to reassure believers that those who had died would not miss out on the blessings associated with Christ's return (4:16). Paul also advised against useless speculation about a date for the second coming (see 5:2-11).

Some Christians had ceased working and were content to let others support them. Paul urged that a warning be issued to "lazy" Christians (5:14). He also issued brief practical exhortations concerning Christian living (see 5:14b-22).

Shortly after Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, word reached him of continuing problems the Thessalonian church faced. Because Christians experienced persistent persecution, Paul assured them God would punish the persecutors and give His people rest (see 2 Thess. 1:3-12). A false teaching that Christ already had returned alarmed some believers, so Paul corrected that misconception (see 2:1-12). Also, some Christians still refused to work and Paul gave strong directives to remedy the situation (see 3:6-15).

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DEC. 7

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

THE BACKGROUND

Jews jealous of Paul and his coworkers' success in Thessalonica had forced the missionaries to leave the city. From Athens, Paul had sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to minister to believers there. Paul was concerned about the small group of Christians surrounded by paganism. He had waited anxiously in Corinth for Timothy's arrival with news about the young church. When Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth, the first part of the young coworker's report emphasized the believers' faithfulness, and Paul's profound relief issued in an expression of gratitude.

1. LOOK FOR GOD'S WORK IN YOUR LIFE (1 THESS. 1:1-4).

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

As was customary in the first century, the First Letter to the Thessalonians begins with an identification of the writer. The writer of 1 Thessalonians identified himself as Paul. Saul of Tarsus, the converted Pharisee, used his Roman name Paul as he worked in largely Gentile areas (see Acts 13:9,13). Thirteen New Testament letters begin with Paul's name as the writer.

Paul included Silvanus [sil VAY nuhs] and Timothy in his greeting to the Thessalonian believers. Although some interpreters view their inclusion as indicating joint composition of the letter, Paul's two coworkers likely did not help write it. They were included because Silvanus (and probably also Timothy) had labored with the apostle in establishing the church in Thessalonica, and Timothy had been sent to the church as Paul's emissary. Paul wrote the letter under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, but the other two missionaries shared Paul's love, concern, and appreciation for the Thessalonian Christians.

When Paul and Silvanus reached Lystra, they met "a disciple named Timothy" (Acts 16:1), who had a good reputation among believers. Paul enlisted him to go with the missionaries, and Timothy became a valuable coworker for the remainder of Paul's ministry. Toward the end of his

life, Paul would encourage Timothy to remain in Ephesus to provide leadership for the church there (see 1 Tim. 1:3). Timothy played a significant role in the early growth of Christianity.

Interestingly, in his greeting to the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 1:1) Paul did not identify himself as Christ's apostle—an emissary the Lord sent with His authority—as he did in some of his other letters (see 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1). This identification also is missing in Paul's Letter to the Philippian Christians, with whom he had a close relationship. His personal Letter to Philemon, his "dear friend and co-worker" (Philem. 1:1), omits this statement of credentials also. Paul's exclusion of a reference to his apostleship in his greetings in 1 and 2 Thessalonians probably reflects a strong, warm relationship with that community of faith.

Paul addressed his letter to the church of the Thessalonians. The Greek word translated church is *ekklesia* [EK klih SEE uh], which comes from a verb that means "to call out" or "to summon," as to a public assembly. The assembly could be social, political, or religious. New Testament writers used the noun to designate a Christian assembly or congregation. The term was general enough for Gentiles to understand it and to distinguish Christian gatherings from Jewish synagogues. In the New Testament, the word *ekklesia* most often refers to a local church. In some instances, however, it carries the idea of the universal church—all Christians of all time (see Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22-23).

Paul described the Thessalonian church as being in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Believers enjoyed an intimate relationship with the Father through His Son, lived in the sphere of Their presence and power, and belonged to Them. To what had become the proper name Jesus (Savior) Christ (Messiah), Paul added Lord (Deity). (See also Jas. 1:1.) The Greek word translated Lord occurs in the Septuagint (a major Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) for God. Each time Paul used the complete designation for Christ, he stressed that Jesus of Nazareth was God's Messiah, Deity in human flesh. The Thessalonian Christians were not on their own in the pagan culture surrounding them; God the Father and Jesus the Son were with them.

In all 13 New Testament letters that bear Paul's name, the benediction grace . . . and peace appears near the beginning of the letters, and the words always occur in

that order. The phrase reflects the common Greek and Hebrew greetings but goes beyond them. Grace is God's sheer gift of Himself—His favor given even though we do not deserve it. Grace is His amazing love in action on our behalf. Peace is wholeness, soundness under His rule. I do not believe Paul's consistent inclusion of the words was a mere formula he followed; each occurrence was a reminder that only through God's grace are sinners made whole. He knew this truth by experience, for he never lost his sense of wonder at the marvelous grace that had transformed him.

Verse 2: We always thank God for all of you, remembering you constantly in our prayers.

As Paul customarily did in his letters, he expressed gratitude for his readers. Again, he was not merely following a form of correspondence; he was truly thankful for the Thessalonian Christians. Only at the beginning of his Letter to the Galatians is thanksgiving absent because of the seriousness of the situation the apostle addressed. Paul was honest; he expressed appreciation when to do so was warranted. In 1 Thessalonians 1:2, he was careful to stress that he thanked God for all of them. He called them to mind constantly; every time he prayed, he mentioned them to God.

Verse 3: We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ,

Paul specified three focal points of gratitude in his prayers to God. First, he recalled the Thessalonian believers' work of faith. The Greek word translated work is the general term for purposeful activity. The readers' faith in Christ—their trust in Him—kept them busy producing good deeds. The term faith comes from a root word that means "to persuade," then "to be convinced" or "to believe." Yet faith is much more than accepting facts. A related verb means "to place confidence in" or "to trust." It carries the thrust of commitment. The Thessalonian Christians' commitment to Christ issued in good works He enabled them to do.

Second, Paul consistently called to mind the Thessalonian believers' labor of love. The Greek term rendered labor comes from a word that means "to cut," "to lash," or "to toil." It is more intense than the term for work. It can have the sense of hardship.

Third, Paul repeatedly recalled his readers' endurance

of hope. The Greek term translated endurance comes from a word that means “to abide or remain under” with the sense of persevering. It presents the picture of an athlete or soldier being able to take a blow and having the strength to press forward to victory. Though sometimes translated “patience,” the term does not convey the idea of waiting in passive inactivity; it has the sense of forging ahead in the Christian life with total trust in God’s presence and provision. The word hope has the idea of confidence or assurance based on God’s ability, not on what human strength and ingenuity can do. The phrase in our Lord Jesus Christ can be connected with the word hope. If so, Paul may have had in mind the confident expectation of Christ’s return. Most likely, however, the phrase refers to all three elements of Paul’s prayer of gratitude for his readers and has the sense of the Christian life, lived in the sphere of Christ. The believers’ work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope were possible because of their being in Christ.

Verse 4: knowing your election, brothers loved by God.

Paul used the word brothers to emphasize the closeness and warmth of his relationship with the Thessalonian Christians. It was an inclusive term that encompassed both male and female believers in the church. The apostle used the plural term brothers exclusively of believers over 20 times in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The term stresses the family relationship believers share as the Father’s children. Paul also reminded his readers they were objects of God’s love. The form of the word translated loved has the idea of love that began in the past, continued in the present, and would reach into the future. God’s love for the believers was constant and never-failing.

Paul was convinced of God’s activity in the believers’ lives. The word election points to God’s work as the basis of their expressions of their Christianity. As believers today, we have no cause for congratulating ourselves in any of God’s work in our lives. When our lives demonstrate authentic Christianity, we are acknowledging His work in us. Our only appropriate response is gratitude.

2. RESPOND WITH JOY (1 THESS. 1:5-6)

Verse 5a: For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with much assurance.

Paul moved to the reason he was sure the Thessalonian believers were truly God’s people. The word for that begins verse 5 also can be translated “because” and introduces the basis of Paul’s certainty. The phrase our gospel refers to the message Paul preached—the good news of salvation through faith in Christ he had proclaimed in Thessalonica and elsewhere. It was not his message in the sense that he had authored it; rather it originated with God, and Christ was its content. Paul had experienced it, and Christ had commissioned him to announce it.

Paul had communicated the good news of Christ verbally, but three key elements had accompanied his good words. First, power resided in the words. We get our words dynamite, dynamo, and dynamic from the Greek term Paul used. It carries the sense of the inherent ability to accomplish a purpose, to cause something to happen. The gospel is God’s power to save people who accept His grace by faith (see Rom. 1:16).

Second, the Holy Spirit guided the presentation of the gospel to the Thessalonians and made it effective. Paul did not depend on his verbal skills and persuasiveness in his preaching. He stated elsewhere that God had called him to preach the good news of Christ, but “not with clever words” (1 Cor. 1:17). In fact, the apostle did not consider himself to have “brilliance of speech” (see 1 Cor. 2:1). Paul’s eloquence had not persuaded the Thessalonians to accept the gospel; rather, God’s Spirit convicted the hearers and drew them to Christ.

Third, the gospel had come to the Thessalonians in much assurance. The idea may be that the Holy Spirit’s presence and working assured the believers of their salvation and assured the missionaries of God’s working through them.

Verses 5b-6: You know what kind of men we were among you for your benefit, and you became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with the joy from the Holy Spirit.

Paul reminded the Thessalonian believers of the example he and his coworkers had set while they were working in Thessalonica. The phrase what kind of men implies strongly that the missionaries had demonstrated the highest qualities of Christian character. It also may convey the idea that the Thessalonian Christians had been able to see clearly the three evangelists were God’s genuine em-

issaries who had the people’s best interests at heart and did not seek to profit off the Thessalonians. Rather, the missionaries had acted for the people’s benefit.

Because of the worthy models of Christian living Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy had provided, the Thessalonian believers had imitated the missionaries. Paul certainly was not boasting that he and his coworkers were super Christians. They had been good examples, no doubt aware they were the only models the new believers had. They not only had taught with words but also with their lifestyles. They qualified as models only because they reflected Christ’s character. In 1 Corinthians 4:16, Paul later urged his readers: “Be imitators of me.” In 11:1, he added the essential qualifier: “Be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ.”

In imitating worthy models, the new Christians in Thessalonica had become imitators of Christ. One specific area in which the believers imitated the missionaries and Christ was by enduring severe persecution. The Greek word translated persecution means “a pressing together,” thus “pressure,” “oppression,” “affliction,” or “distress.” The verb form was used of grapes being crushed in a winepress. A picture in our day would be of an object in a vice or a pecan or a walnut in a nutcracker. New Testament writers often used the word to indicate unjust and undeserved suffering because of a person’s commitment to Christ. Paul and Silvanus had experienced opposition in Thessalonica. Because of the missionaries’ success in reaching God-fearing Greeks and many leading women, jealous Jews had caused an uproar. As a result Thessalonian believers had sent Paul and Silvanus (Silas) to Berea by night (see Acts 17:1-10). The pressure from opponents did not cease when the missionaries left Thessalonica. The new believers there suffered affliction (see 1 Thess. 2:14).

Even in a context of opposition and pressure, the Thessalonian Christians had received the gospel with joy. To people who placed their faith in Christ, the news that by grace their sins were forgiven and they had a new start in life was good indeed!

The Source of believers’ joy was the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who energized the gospel and made it effective gave the Thessalonian Christians joy even when they suffered persecution because of their faith. They had experienced the Spirit’s power and work as they heard Paul’s preaching, had responded to the Spirit’s leading,

and had become believers. The Spirit continued to reside in them and to work on their behalf.

3. SPREAD THE WORD OF JESUS (1 THESS. 1:7-10)

Verse 7: As a result, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

As a result of the Thessalonian believers' positive response to the gospel "in spite of severe persecution" (1:6), they became an example to Christians in Macedonia and Achaia. The Greek term translated example (tupos, "type") is rich and suggestive. It first meant "stroke" or "blow"; then it conveyed the idea of the mark a blow left (see John 20:25). It came to have the sense of the figure a blow formed; thus the term took on the idea of a seal or an image. It came to mean "model," "pattern," "form," or "mold." The Thessalonian believers had become an outstanding model or pattern for other communities of faith. The church was an island of Christianity in a sea of paganism, yet it presented an encouraging and challenging model of faithfulness under fire.

The Thessalonian Christians impacted Macedonia and Achaia [uh KAY yuh] with their example of courageous perseverance. The Roman province of Macedonia stretched from the Adriatic Sea to the Aegean Sea in the northeast part of ancient Greece and provided the major land route between Asia and the West. Thessalonica was the province's seat of administration. Not only was Thessalonica a political capital, but also Paul identified it as a spiritual center from which a positive witness for Christ radiated. The whole province of Macedonia as well as other areas had felt the Thessalonian church's influence. Achaia was a smaller Roman province south of Macedonia. Corinth was its administrative center.

Verse 8: For the Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out, so we don't need to say anything.

The good news of salvation through faith in Christ available to all people sounded out loudly and clearly from the Thessalonian church. Note that Paul referred to the gospel as the Lord's message, literally, "the word of the Lord." Previously he had used the phrase "our gospel" (1 Thess. 1:5). The phrase the Lord's (1:8) could convey the idea of "from the Lord" or "concerning the Lord." Likely

the phrase includes both ideas. The good news originated with God, and its content is what God in Christ has done to redeem sinful people.

The phrase rang out could have the sense of a trumpet's sound or of the roll of thunder. The idea is that the gospel spread from the Thessalonian church like a reverberating echo. The church presented a strong witness for Christ, not only in Greece but also in areas beyond. Thessalonica was situated on the Egnatian [EG NAY shuhn] Way, and travelers who passed through the city would carry reports concerning the church there. The Thessalonian believers' faith in God had become known far and wide—so much so that as Paul and his coworkers traveled through that area, they had no need to speak of the Thessalonian Christians' faithfulness.

Verse 9: For they themselves report about us what kind of reception we had from you: how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

On Paul's second missionary journey, he traveled from Thessalonica to Beroea, Athens, and Corinth. Along the way, he and his coworkers encountered people who knew about the Thessalonians' response to the gospel. Instead of remaining enslaved to lifeless idols and a pagan lifestyle, the Thessalonian believers had turned to the God of life, love, and grace.

Verse 10: and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

The Thessalonians were eagerly expecting the return of Christ. Theirs was an active waiting; they were serving God as they anticipated Christ's second coming. Paul emphasized the heart of the gospel: God raised His Son—Jesus of Nazareth—from the dead. Without the resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth would have been only a remembered, revered figure of history. Because He arose from the grave, He is the Lord of history and is present in His people. Because He lives, He is able to give eternal life to people who place their faith in Him.

The risen Savior rescues His people from the coming wrath. The word rescues stressed the peril's seriousness and the Deliverer's power. The phrase the coming wrath refers to the final judgment. People who reject God's offer of grace in Christ face ultimate judgment. In a real sense, they are self-judged because of their refusal to confess their sins, repent, and place their faith in Christ. They have passed sentence on themselves already (see John 3:18).

By grace through faith in Christ, believers have been made new creations (see 2 Cor. 5:17). We express gratitude for God's creative work in our lives by influencing others through being positive examples of Christianity. Faithful, consistent service to our Lord is a powerful witness.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DEC. 14

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-16

THE BACKGROUND

Paul began his First Letter to the Thessalonians in what would continue to be his customary manner. Following a brief greeting, he expressed gratitude for his readers. They had welcomed the gospel joyously and had begun to model their lives after Paul and his coworkers—and, most importantly, after Christ. The Thessalonian church sounded forth the good news of Christ in Macedonia, Achaia, and beyond. Paul and his missionary team were encountering people who talked about the Thessalonians' warm, eager reception of the messengers and their message before the three missionaries had opportunity to broach the subject. The Thessalonian Christians' turning from idols to the one true God was having a powerful impact for Christ.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1, Paul began a review of his conduct among the Thessalonian believers. Evidently his integrity as a genuine spokesman for God was under attack. Opponents were demeaning the messenger and the message he preached. Paul reminded his readers of his exemplary motives and behavior among them.

1. SPEAK WITH COURAGE (1 THESS. 2:1-4)

Verse 1: For you yourselves know, brothers, that our visit with you was not without result.

Paul called his readers' attention to their firsthand experiences with him while he was in Thessalonica. The word for links the Thessalonian believers' receiving and imitating him with his work among them. In the Greek text, the word yourselves is placed first and thus is emphasized; the phrase you yourselves know stressed that the readers were Paul's witnesses. He called the Thessalonian believers brothers to emphasize their close relationship in the fellowship of faith. The word know in this context means "to perceive" facts gained by experience and to rehearse that knowledge until it becomes a conviction. The Thessalonian believers were well aware that Paul's stay with them had not been unproductive or without result ("vain," "empty," "fruitless," or "ineffective"). The word visit literally means "entering in" and refers to Paul's initial contact with the Thessalonian believers and

their accepting him and his message. Paul's ministry in Thessalonica had not been a failure; conversely, it had been a resounding success. The Thessalonian believers' eager initial response to the gospel and their continuing Christian witness were overwhelming evidence of that truth.

Verse 2: On the contrary, after we had previously suffered and been outrageously treated in Philippi, as you know, we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel of God to you in spite of great opposition.

The Greek word translated on the contrary introduces a sharp contrast. Far from being ineffective in ministry in Thessalonica, Paul boldly and courageously had proclaimed the gospel in spite of recent ill treatment. Paul and Silvanus (Silas) had been outrageously treated in Philippi [FIH lih pigh] From Troas, Paul and his coworkers had eventually traveled to Philippi (see Acts 16:11-12). At a place of prayer outside the city, they won some converts and established a center of operations in the home of Lydia, a merchantwoman who had become a Christian. When Paul cast a spirit of prediction out of a slave girl, thereby angering her owners, the city authorities had Silvanus and Paul beaten badly and thrown in jail, where they were placed in stocks (see Acts 16:16-24). This experience was the shameful and insulting treatment of a Roman citizen to which Paul referred in 1 Thessalonians 2:2. His subsequently being delivered from jail and receiving an official apology did not lessen the pain and the indignities he and Silvanus had experienced at the hands of overbearing, haughty authorities.

Rather than discouraging the missionaries, their experience in Philippi had resulted in a more determined boldness in their task. God had used their suffering to reinforce their determination to proclaim His message—the good news of salvation in Christ that God had provided. God had given them boldness. The phrase the gospel of God points to God as its author. With confidence and courage, the missionaries had preached the gospel in Thessalonica in spite of intense opposition they encountered (see "Background and Recipients," pp. 7-8). From the Greek term translated opposition is derived our word agony. The term came from athletics and conveyed the idea of conflict, outward or inward. The missionaries' previous suffering had helped prepare them for strenuous effort against opponents they continued to encounter. In

light of Paul's emphasis on imitation of the missionaries in 1:6, he well may have meant to teach his readers to meet continuing persecution with God-given courage and confidence as he and his coworkers had done.

Verse 3: For our exhortation didn't come from error or impurity or an intent to deceive.

Evidently detractors were accusing Paul of preaching for profit. He defended his presentation of the gospel to the Thessalonian Christians. He called his preaching and instruction exhortation. The missionaries had preached the gospel to persuade the Thessalonians to place their faith in Christ. Their message also included admonition and encouragement.

Paul described what his preaching was not. His words seem to refer to his message's origin and character. First, he did not preach out of error. The related verb meant "to cause to stray" or "to lead aside from the right way." Paul was not off the mark in the gospel he proclaimed because it originated with God. He had not been led astray, and he was not leading others astray. Second, he did not preach out of impurity. He had no ulterior or wrong motive. The word impurity could suggest opponents were accusing Paul of greed or of immorality. Most likely, the false charge was that Paul preached to line his pockets. Third, Paul had no intention of defrauding the people in his presentation of the gospel. The Greek word translated deceive has the sense of entrapment—of luring people by the use of enticing bait. Paul's preaching was not marked by cunning or craftiness. The dual emphasis is that Paul did not concoct his message, and it was not designed to trick people out of their money. He was not a religious peddler selling his wares to gullible people.

Verse 4: Instead, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please men, but rather God, who examines our hearts.

The word translated approved was used of testing coins to determine their genuineness. God had determined Paul's worthiness to be His spokesman and continued to approve of him. The Lord had entrusted him with the gospel; He had committed this valuable treasure to Paul's charge as His steward (see 1 Cor. 4:1; 2 Cor. 4:7). Paul did not preach to win people's favor; his goal was to please God, who continually tested His servant's heart. Even as he did not preach for personal gain, he did not seek personal glory. The Greek word translated examines is a form of the same

term previously rendered approved. God constantly views our hearts or inmost beings; we must strive to speak and act from proper motives. We can have no loftier goal than to please Him.

2. SPEAK OUT OF LOVE (1 THESS. 2:5-8)

Verses 5-6: For we never used flattering speech, as you know, or had greedy motives—God is our witness—and we didn't seek glory from people, either from you or from others.

From their interaction with Paul, the Thessalonian Christians were aware the apostle had not used flattering words to win his hearers. The phrase flattering speech conveys the idea of saying what was popular or pleasing. Moreover, Paul did not preach from greedy motives; that is, he did not seek to take advantage of people out of a desire for money or other personal gain. In that time, itinerate teachers often used deceptive speech and dishonest methods for personal gain. Paul invoked God as his witness as he distanced himself from such manipulative hucksters.

The word rendered glory also means “praise” or “honor.” Paul did not preach to gain anyone's applause or approval. He did not proclaim the gospel to win compliments. That had not been his motive in Thessalonica, even as it had not been his goal elsewhere in his travels. He had announced the good news to draw people to Christ. People's accolades meant nothing to him; God's approval meant everything.

Verse 7: Although we could have been a burden as Christ's apostles, instead we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother nurtures her own children.

An apostle was a person sent on a mission with the authority of the sender. As Christ's messenger, vested with His authority, Paul could have expected the Thessalonian believers to meet his needs as he ministered in Thessalonica. From sheer apostolic power, Paul also could have made authoritative demands for obedience. As we would say, he could have thrown his weight around. Instead of exercising his authority and becoming a burden to the believers, however, he adopted an approach of gentleness. Paul used the analogy of a mother tenderly nursing her baby. The word nurtures contains the ideas of cherishing and providing tender care. The word picture conveys the

depth of Paul's feelings for the Thessalonian believers; it emphasizes he had not been self-seeking but self-giving in his ministry in Thessalonica.

Verse 8: We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.

Paul had developed strong affection for the Thessalonian believers. The Greek word rendered cared has the sense of a parent's love for a child. Paul not only was willing to give the gospel but also to give himself. He withheld nothing that would benefit the Thessalonian believers. The apostle was generous with his time, energy, and spiritual insights; even more, he established a strong spiritual bond with the Thessalonian Christians. Paul's love for these believers issued in a close relationship marked by warmth and sharing.

3. SPEAK WITH YOUR LIFE (1 THESS. 2:9-12)

Verse 9: For you remember our labor and hardship, brothers. Working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God's gospel to you.

Paul reminded his readers of his intense toil while he was with them. He used three Greek words to emphasize how he provided for himself instead of accepting contributions from them. The term translated labor had the sense of fatiguing work with the hands—manual labor. Coupled with the word for hardship, the idea was toil that involved difficulties. The term working can refer to laboring for pay. The phrase night and day emphasized Paul had worked hard and consistently to support himself—probably through his tent-making trade (see Acts 18:1-3). When Paul was not working, he preached God's good news to them. His conduct contrasted sharply to religious hucksters who taught for gain. Also, his full daily schedule was an example for people prone to laziness (see 2 Thess. 3:6-13). Paul was not suggesting that churches had no responsibility to support pastors. In situations where the possibility existed for the charge that he preached for money, he worked in order to be financially independent. Such was the case in Thessalonica.

Verse 10: You are witnesses, and so is God, of how devoutly, righteously, and blamelessly we conducted ourselves with you believers.

Throughout chapter 2 to this point, Paul's words give the

distinct impression that opponents in Thessalonica continued to accuse him of being a charlatan who taught a bogus message for personal gain. He had defended his message, motive, and manner of making a living among the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 2:1-9). In verse 10, he defended his lifestyle and character. His readers had watched him for the period of time he was with them and knew what kind of person he was. He again appealed to God as a witness (see 2:5).

Paul used three words to describe his behavior during his stay in Thessalonica. First, the apostle asserted he had conducted himself devoutly. The Greek term means “religiously observing moral obligations,” “free from wickedness,” and “pure.” Paul was not claiming to be sinless. Rather, he was stating he consistently fulfilled his duties toward God by keeping His guidelines and living by His standards.

Second, Paul had lived righteously among the Thessalonians. He may have meant he had kept human laws. He had not violated the norms or standards of the area; he had been a law-abiding citizen. His relationships with other people were marked by fairness.

Probably, in Paul's mind no sharp distinction existed between living devoutly and living righteously. The terms may have expressed for him the whole spectrum of people's relationships with God and other individuals.

Third, Paul had behaved blamelessly. He had conducted himself toward God and people in such a way that no valid charge could be leveled against him.

Verses 11-12: As you know, like a father with his own children, we encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to walk worthy of God, who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

In verse 7, Paul used the illustration of a mother tenderly, warmly nourishing her children to stress his deep care for the Thessalonian believers. In verse 11, he switched to the analogy of a father's nurturing his children. One of the father's primary responsibilities was to give his children moral instruction. No doubt, during his stay in Thessalonica, Paul had taught the new converts what behaving as Christians meant. The new Christians had been converted from paganism, and they remained in an environment that constantly exerted a strong pull to their former way of living. Paul's instruction was necessary because of the stark moral contrast between Christianity and paganism.

All new Gentile converts needed Christian Behavior 101.

Paul employed three words to describe his work with the Thessalonian believers. The term encouraged presents the picture of someone's coming to a person's side to help. It has the idea of active support. Paul also had comforted the new believers in Thessalonica. The word comforted conveys a similar idea. It can mean "encouraging" or "cheering." Paul well knew the difficulties the new believers faced, so he was compassionate toward them.

Finally, Paul had implored the Thessalonian believers to live in a manner worthy of God. The Greek term translated implored basically means "to testify" or "to bear witness." It can have the sense of making a solemn appeal. Paul had charged the Thessalonian believers to lead exemplary lives. The word rendered walk had a Hebrew background and was used for "live." It occurs in the New Testament for regulating behavior or for conducting oneself in a certain manner. God was the standard Paul set for his readers' lifestyles. Their lives were to exhibit His character and to reflect well on His reputation.

4. SPEAK FOR CHANGE (1 THESS. 2:13-16)

Verse 13: Also, this is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the message about God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the message of God, which also works effectively in you believers.

Paul gave an additional reason he never ceased to thank God for the Thessalonian Christians. They had welcomed the gospel. They had been aware humans had not contrived or formulated the message; they were convinced God had originated it. The divinely designed gospel they had accepted was still working in them. The phrase works effectively translates a Greek term that conveys the sense of divine power or energy in operation. The gospel truly is God's message in its inception, its effectiveness in drawing people to Christ, and its working in power in believers' lives.

Verse 14: For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, since you have also suffered the same things from people of your own country, just as they did from the Jews.

The word for connects the gospel's continuing to work in power in the Thessalonian believers with their experiencing

suffering because of their faith. The Thessalonian church was imitating the churches in Judea in the area of persecution. Clearly the Thessalonian believers did not choose to adopt the model of suffering or invite persecution; they were opposed because of their faith. Christians in both locations suffered at the hands of their own people; they could draw encouragement from their fellowship of suffering. Non-Christians in Thessalonica, including unbelieving Jews and Gentiles, continued to oppose the Christians there. In Judea, unbelieving Jews persecuted believers. Paul was not anti-Semitic. His major emphasis was on the Christians' suffering at the hands of their own people. He did not condemn all Jews or even those who rejected the gospel; he had in mind only Jews who oppressed believers.

Verse 15: They killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and persecuted us; they displease God, and are hostile to everyone,

Paul catalogued and condemned the actions of unbelieving Jews who actively opposed the Christian movement. Jewish leaders had conspired to enlist the Romans' help to kill Jesus. Paul used the phrase the Lord Jesus to emphasize that Jews who had been determined to get rid of Jesus actually killed the Lord—God incarnate in Jesus.

Paul also charged persecuting Jews with killing the prophets. He could have had in mind early Christian prophets such as Stephen or the apostle James. On the other hand, he may have meant the Jewish persecutors descended in general from the people who killed the Old Testament prophets (see Matt. 23:29-31). Either way, persecuting Jews set themselves in opposition to God's work. Paul pointed out that some of his own people had persecuted him (see Acts 17:1-10).

Paul stated that Jews who persecuted Christians displeased God. He wrote with the conviction of personal experience. He had been a Pharisee who viewed Jesus' followers as a threat to Judaism. He had ravaged the church, going house-to-house looking for Christians and imprisoning any he found (see Acts 8:3). He thought he was pleasing God but later discovered he was opposing God's redemptive work (see Acts 9:4). Jews who persecuted believers were tragically wrong in thinking they were doing God a favor by their opposition.

Why would Paul state that Jews who were set against Christianity were hostile to everyone? Their opposition was impeding the spread of the gospel that offered salva-

tion to all people who would place their faith in Christ. Thus Jewish persecutors became other people's enemies.

Verse 16: hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. As a result, they are always adding to the number of their sins, and wrath has overtaken them completely.

Paul spelled out his Jewish opponents' hostility. They were hindering Paul's efforts to proclaim the good news of Christ to Gentiles. The word rendered hindering conveys the idea of withholding or denying something from someone. The persecuting Jews were persistent in their efforts to stop Paul from spreading the gospel, thereby seeking to deny Gentiles the opportunity to be saved.

The persecuting Jews' actions against God's redemptive purpose were extensive. They killed Jesus and the prophets, persecuted Paul, displeased God, and sought to deny Gentiles the gospel's saving power. As a result, they were always adding to the number of their sins. The term rendered sins is the common Greek word for missing the mark. Persecuting Jews, who thought they were doing God's will, were tragically off-target and were moving toward disaster.

The Greek word translated wrath conveys the idea of God's settled opposition to sin (see 1 Thess. 1:10). In God's continuous opposition to sin, He seeks to call sinners to repentance and faith; but if people persist in rejecting Him, He will honor their choice, and their sins will lead to destruction (see Rom. 1:18-32). In 1 Thessalonians 2:16, Paul stated that wrath had overtaken the persecuting Jews completely or to the end. Paul's meaning is difficult to determine.

I prefer to think Paul viewed the persecuting Jews' continuing opposition to the gospel's spread as placing them in opposition to God. Their self-chosen separation from God was progressive. Even as a person who insists on constantly closing out the light eventually will go blind, so an individual who stubbornly rejects God's love in Christ and resists God's redemptive purpose moves farther from God's grace. To reject God's truth is to live a lie that ends in ultimate judgment. The persecuting Jews' continuing attempts to thwart God's plan of redemption would result in His sure judgment on them.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DEC. 21

LUKE 1:26-56

THE BACKGROUND

Luke the physician and accurate historian was aware that other written accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, based on eyewitnesses' testimony, were available in his time. Yet after careful research, he wanted to write an orderly narrative of God's great redemptive event. He addressed his Gospel to Theophilus [thee AHF ih luhs (th as in thin)], perhaps a Roman official and Christian convert who may have helped underwrite Luke's extensive writing project. Luke wanted Theophilus to be sure the Christian instruction he had received was accurate and reliable (see Luke 1:1-4). Under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, Luke wrote his Gospel (and Acts, the second volume of his two-volume work).

Luke began his account of God's fulfilling His plan of redemption with an angel's surprising announcement. Zechariah, an elderly priest, was performing the typical only once-in-a-lifetime privilege of burning incense in the temple's holy place. He and his aged wife Elizabeth were Aaron's descendants and were righteous, scrupulously keeping God's law. Yet they bore a heavy burden: they were childless, which meant Zechariah had no son to continue his line and Elizabeth carried the stigma of not being able to bear a son. The angel Gabriel appeared beside the altar of incense and announced Elizabeth would bear Zechariah a son to be named John. God had heard their prayer for a son (see 1:5-17).

Stunned and incredulous, Zechariah asked for proof of the angel's promise. The priest and his wife were old. He needed evidence that what Gabriel said was true. Zechariah received a sign he no doubt would not have chosen. He would be unable to speak until after his son's birth. When he emerged from the holy place to address the people gathered outside, he had to communicate by motioning to them (see 1:18-22).

When Zechariah had fulfilled his time of service in the temple, he returned home. Soon Elizabeth became pregnant and secluded herself for five months. She credited God for favoring her with a child and thus taking away her stigma of barrenness (see 1:23-25).

1. HEAR (LUKE 1:26-33)

Verse 26: In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth. The phrase in the sixth month refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. At that time, God sent the angel Gabriel on a second mission (see 1:11,19). The word angel means "messenger," in this case a heavenly messenger. The name Gabriel means "strong man of God." In verse 19 the angel described himself as standing in God's presence, a position of special ministry and perhaps of dignity and rank. He is one of two angels named in the Bible; Michael is mentioned in Daniel 10:13,21; Jude 9; and Revelation 12:7. Gabriel consistently announced good news from God.

Earlier, God had sent Gabriel to Jerusalem, the Jews' revered religious center (see Luke 1:8-11). In verse 26, the Lord dispatched him to Nazareth in Galilee, the northernmost part of the Holy Land. The term Nazareth may mean "watchtower" or "sprout." In size and significance, the village of Nazareth was the antithesis of Jerusalem. Located about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea in the lower part of Galilee, Nazareth was a small and somewhat secluded village. It was situated in a valley or basin open only to the south. It was not on a main highway, though it was near a major road and the important city of Sepphoris [SEF uh riss]. It well may have been somewhat scorned, for when Philip told Nathanael about finding the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael responded: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Verse 27: to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

God sent Gabriel to a virgin named Mary. The context makes clear that Mary was morally pure; she had not engaged in sexual activity (see Luke 1:34). The Greek term translated virgin in this verse occurs approximately 15 times in the New Testament and refers only to women of sexual or spiritual purity. Mary was engaged to be married. The word translated engaged literally is "betrothed." Betrothal was much stronger and more binding than engagement is in our time.

Jewish marriage involved three steps. First was the engagement, usually when both people were children. Parents customarily arranged the engagement. The next step was the betrothal, at which point the girl could opt out of

the arrangement her parents had made. If she still agreed to the marriage, she was betrothed for a year. The betrothal was legally binding so that only divorce could break it. The man and woman were considered husband and wife, but they did not have marital relations. If the man died, the woman was considered to be a widow. If the woman had sexual relations with another man during the betrothal, her act was considered adultery and was punishable by death. The third step was the marriage celebration, after which the husband took his wife to his house and they began living together as husband and wife.

When Gabriel appeared to Mary, she was at some point in the one-year period of betrothal, considered to be Joseph's wife but not living with him. Luke indicated Joseph was David's descendant. This fact is important because with Joseph as Jesus' legal father, Jesus technically would be a descendant of David. Matthew further described Joseph as being righteous (keeping God's laws) but not harshly legalistic, because when he discovered Mary was pregnant he wanted to spare her the disgrace of a public divorce. He intended to divorce her privately, but he obeyed God's directive to take Mary as his wife (see Matt. 1:18-25). Mary is the focus in Luke 1:26-56, but God chose both her and Joseph for significant roles in the Savior's coming.

Verse 28: And the angel came to her and said, "Rejoice, favored woman! The Lord is with you."

We easily can miss the drama of Gabriel's approaching Mary. We have no description of his appearance, but she must have been startled and somewhat afraid of the messenger who spoke to her. Gabriel probably intended the usual Greek salutation rejoice to calm and reassure Mary. Actually, the Greek term rendered rejoice is related to the word for grace and meant something like "hail" as a greeting.

Gabriel addressed Mary as being a favored woman. Literally, the Greek text reads "one having been favored." God already had bestowed His favor on her. He had chosen her to bear the Messiah. That favor continued in the present and would be operative in the future. The word favored is a form of the term grace; Mary had received and was continuing to receive God's grace. She had done nothing to merit it; He had taken the initiative to extend it to her. The highest privilege to which a Jewish maiden could aspire was to be the Messiah's mother. God granted that favor to Mary; she did

not choose the role for herself.

Clearly, Mary is a central figure in the account of Jesus' birth. As did Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Joseph, she represented the best of Judaism. She was genuinely pious in the best sense of that term. Yet we must be clear that she was a recipient of grace, not a dispenser of grace.

Verse 29: But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be.

If Gabriel's approach startled Mary, his greeting disturbed her deeply. The word troubled can have the idea of being agitated or upset. The term wondering has the sense of reckoning up reasons or of being puzzled. Mary was trying to figure out what Gabriel's unusual greeting meant. What did being a favored woman mean, and why was she singled out for divine favor?

Verse 30: Then the angel told her: Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

Although Mary was by no means hysterical, Gabriel sought to calm her perplexity and confusion. Agitation and bewilderment could lead to fear, so He encouraged her not to be afraid. She had no need to be afraid of Gabriel or of what God had planned for her. The messenger emphasized again that God had chosen to favor or to extend grace to her.

Note that God's grace fueled what was happening in the beginning stages of His great redemptive act. In verses 28 and 30, forms of the basic term appear three times. What was taking place was not people's doing; God was at work, doing for people what they could not do for themselves. Sheer grace—God's love in action—was providing salvation.

Verse 31: Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call His name JESUS.

Gabriel directed Mary's attention to what he was about to say. The Greek word translated listen also can be rendered "behold," "observe," or "consider." His words would amaze her, but she needed to process them carefully. His first statement no doubt shocked the young virgin; the unexpected announcement caught her completely off guard. She would conceive and bear a son. Because we know the rest of the story, we often skip lightly over these words without considering their impact on Mary. She was not married, and the stigma of bearing a child out of wedlock would be a terrible burden for her to bear.

Gabriel instructed Mary to name her son Jesus. Jesus is

the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Joshua. The Hebrew name is a contraction of the term Jehoshuah, meaning "Yahweh is helper," "help of Yahweh," or "Yahweh delivered." The word Jesus can be rendered "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh saves." Matthew explained the significance of the name for his readers: "He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Likely, Mary would have recognized right away that she would be the Messiah's mother. The phrase "mixed emotions" is a poor description of what she must have felt: elation at giving birth to the Messiah; apprehension about being an unmarried mother.

Verse 32: He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.

The Son born to Mary would be great in contrast to the rest of humanity. Also, unlike John the Baptist, His greatness would be unqualified (see Luke 1:15). Jesus' greatness would lie in His exalted Being or essence; He would be called the Son of the Most High. The title Most High indicated God's exalted and unsurpassed rank. Jesus was God's Son—Deity in human flesh—and people would recognize Him as such.

In addition, God would give Jesus the throne of His father David. One strong messianic expectation among the Jews was that the Messiah would be David's descendant—a military-political leader who would drive out the despised Romans and restore the nation to the power and prominence it had enjoyed under David, Israel's great king. Jesus, however, would be a different kind of Messiah and would rule in a different way. Jesus would be King, but His kingdom would not be of this world (see John 18:36).

Verse 33: He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.

The phrase house of Jacob was a designation for Israel, God's people. Jesus was Israel's long-awaited Messiah. In 2 Samuel 7:16, through the prophet Nathan God promised David his kingdom would endure and his throne would "be established forever." With Jesus' coming, God's kingdom (rule) broke into history. The kingdom Jesus inaugurated is spiritual, not political, even as His ministry is spiritual—providing salvation from sin.

2. RE-DISCOVER (LUKE 1:34-37)

Verse 34: Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have not been intimate with a man?"

Mary had listened in amazement to Gabriel's words: She was to bear the Messiah. She asked how such a thing could be accomplished. She had not been intimate with a man—Joseph or any other man—so how could she conceive? Her response to Gabriel's message differed from Zechariah's earlier response. He had doubted that he and Elizabeth could have a son and had asked, "How can I know this?" (Luke 1:18), meaning "How can I be sure?" or "What proof do I have?" He wanted evidence. Mary did not doubt God could give her people the Messiah through her; she asked about the means or the process. She wanted more information about how a pure, chaste young maiden—who no doubt intended to remain a virgin until marriage—could conceive.

Verse 35: The angel replied to her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.

Gabriel answered that God's sovereign power would make possible Mary's bearing the Messiah. The Holy Spirit—God's Spirit—would come on her, and the power of the Most High (God) would overshadow her. Gabriel used poetic parallelism to emphasize God's creative presence and power behind a miraculous process. Ancient mythological accounts related sexual unions between gods and women that produced children. The language in verse 35 does not describe such a union but echoes Genesis 1:2, which reveals the Spirit's creative activity. The account of Jesus' miraculous conception places the emphasis where it belongs—on God's act of providing salvation, not on anything humans did to produce it for themselves. Mary, a virgin, did not have the ability to conceive and bear a son; but God could give her—and through her, the world—the Son who saves.

Gabriel referred to Jesus as the holy One. The word holy meant "set apart" and conveyed separation for God's purpose or service. The title Son of God was a recognized designation of the Messiah. The words will be called the Son of God do not mean Jesus became Deity at conception but that people would recognize and acknowledge Him as God's Son. Gabriel stressed that Deity was about

to be clothed in human flesh to provide the salvation people could not produce for themselves.

Verses 36-37: And consider your relative Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

To reinforce the truth of God’s ability to enable a virgin to conceive a son, Gabriel told Mary about her relative Elizabeth’s pregnancy. The word relative (Luke 1:36) indicates a kinswoman, not necessarily a cousin. Elizabeth was advanced in age, yet she was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Once she had borne the stigma of barrenness, but soon she would realize the deep desire of every Jewish wife—she would present her husband with a son. No doubt, Gabriel’s words brought to mind a familiar Old Testament account of childbirth in old age. God had given Abraham and Sarah a son through whom He would extend His covenant (see Gen. 21:1-7). Here he was giving another elderly couple a similar gift.

3. BELIEVE (LUKE 1:38)

Verse 38: “I am the Lord’s slave,” said Mary. “May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel left her.

If Mary was a young girl in her early or mid-teens, as many interpreters suggest, she showed a spiritual maturity far beyond her years. Her response is evidence that in her, God chose for Jesus’ mother the best Judaism could offer. She had been understandably perplexed and disturbed when Gabriel approached her. She listened to him, asked a legitimate question, and was attentive to his reply.

Mary had reached the most critical point in her life. She could have declined the opportunity the angel conveyed. She could have decided the negatives outweighed the tremendous privilege of giving birth to the Messiah. The choice was hers, and if she had said no, I believe God would have selected someone else with equally superb qualifications to be the Messiah’s mother. Her refusal would not have thwarted God’s plan, but Mary would have forfeited her magnificent opportunity to cooperate with Him in His plan of redemption.

Mary seized the moment. She believed the angel’s message, accepted its truth, and agreed to serve God and let Him work in her life. She referred to herself as the Lord’s

slave. The Greek term translated slave literally is ‘bondmaid’ or ‘handmaid.’ It has the sense of a person who gives herself up wholly to a master’s will. The response “May it be done to me according to your word” expresses Mary’s submission to God’s will. From this point, she would be God’s slave-girl awaiting her Master’s directives in the unfolding events. After her response, Gabriel left her.

4. CELEBRATE (LUKE 1:46-56)

These verses have been called the Magnificat [mag NIF ih kat] of Mary, based on the opening verb of verse 46 in the Latin Vulgate (“magnifies” or “proclaims the greatness” [Holman CSB]). The poetic form of her words indicates a song or hymn with parallels to Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Although Elizabeth’s pronouncement of blessing in verse 42 has been called the first Christian hymn, I consider Mary’s song in verses 46-55 to be the first. In a sense, it is the first Christmas carol.

Verse 46: And Mary said: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,

Mary began her song of praise to God by exalting or extolling Him. The word soul refers to the total person and can have the sense of “I.” The Greek word translated proclaims the greatness of means “lauds” or “celebrates.” It has the idea of glorifying God. Mary’s praise was continuous; her song expressed what she habitually did. The word Lord means “Master” and conveys ownership. God was Mary’s Master, and she praised Him for fulfilling His promise to send the Messiah.

Verse 47: and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior,

Mary used the term spirit to refer to her innermost being; and, as in the case of “soul” (1:46), the word may refer to the whole self in the sense of “I.” She had experienced great joy, at the angel’s announcement that she would be the Messiah’s mother and/or at the prospect of what God would do for her and others. Mary recognized God as Savior; He was acting in sovereign power to provide deliverance from sin.

Verse 48: because He has looked with favor on the humble condition of His slave. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed,

Mary praised God because He had favored her by choosing her to be the Messiah’s mother. The Greek word

translated has looked with favor in this context conveys the ideas of regarding with kindness or having compassion. The phrase humble condition could refer to Mary’s low status in life measured by the standards of her time. She was probably a young peasant girl, and she would be a carpenter’s wife. Yet God had blessed her beyond anything she could have dreamed. She remained His bondmaid (see 1:38), and future generations would call her blessed, not because of her worthiness or personal piety but because of what God was doing through her.

Mary continued her hymn of praise to God in verses 49-53. She celebrated God’s mercy, which He would give to all who revered Him (see 1:50). Beginning in verse 51 Mary may be looking back at specific actions in the past where God has done the deeds she mentioned. On the other hand Mary may be looking forward in a spirit of prophecy and acknowledging that what God will do in the future is so certain that it can be referred to as already accomplished. The Lord’s activity would result in great reversals. He would depose rulers and lift up lowly people. He would feed the hungry, while He would divest the rich of their wealth.

Verse 54: He has helped His servant Israel, mindful of His mercy,

God’s sending the Messiah was the help the Lord had promised Israel. Jesus was sent first to His own people (see Matt. 15:24; Rom. 1:16). With Jesus’ birth, God was acting to fulfill His covenant. The phrase mindful of His mercy does not mean God had forgotten to be merciful to His people and suddenly remembered His covenant obligations. For God to remember was for Him to act on behalf of His people (see Ex. 2:24). In His love for sinful people, He was acting to provide a Savior.

Verse 55: just as He spoke to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever.

God made and reaffirmed His covenant with Abraham (see Gen. 12; 15; 17). The Lord had extended it through Isaac and Jacob, Abraham’s descendants. Jesus’ birth would be a continuation of God’s redemptive activity—an act of His covenant faithfulness. Mary stayed with Zechariah and Elizabeth for three months; then she went back to Nazareth.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DEC. 28

1 THESSALONIANS 2:17–3:13

THE BACKGROUND

Following his greeting and expression of gratitude for the Thessalonian Christians, Paul devoted extensive space in his letter to defending himself and his message (see 2:1-12). Evidently opponents were attacking his integrity and charging that he was preaching for people's approval. Paul insisted his motive was pure; he sought to please God, not people.

The charge he was preaching for money was ludicrous; he had taken no pay for his ministry in Thessalonica; in fact, Paul had worked tirelessly to support himself. His warm, self-giving nurture of the Thessalonian believers gave ample evidence of his genuineness. His blameless conduct reinforced his integrity.

Opponents also attacked the message Paul preached, saying he had carefully fabricated it to win over his audience. Paul countered that the message he proclaimed was God's message; the Lord originated and energized it. Paul did not shape it to communicate what people wanted to hear.

The Thessalonian believers had received Paul's message as God's good news. As a result, people in Thessalonica persecuted the believers. These Christians became part of a fellowship of suffering for Christ's cause (see 2:13-16).

1. SPEAK PERSONAL WORDS (1 THESS. 2:17-20)

Verse 17: But as for us, brothers, after we were forced to leave you for a short time (in person, not in heart), we greatly desired and made every effort to return and see you face to face.

Paul turned from acknowledging the Thessalonian believers' receiving the gospel and subsequently suffering because of it to his situation since leaving Thessalonica. He again addressed the Christians warmly as brothers in the faith and reinforced the depth of their relationship with the reminder he had not chosen to leave them. The phrase were forced to leave you literally is "having been orphaned from you." The Greek verb carries the idea of bereavement and expressed Paul's love for his readers and his deep sense of longing for them. Paul had used

the strong metaphors of a mother nursing her children (see 2:7) and a father nurturing his children (see 2:11-12) to portray his care for them. In 2:17 he presented the picture of a child's being torn from his or her parents to convey the grief and sense of desolation he felt at being separated from the Thessalonian believers.

After a brief ministry in Thessalonica, Paul had left under duress. Jews jealous of his success in winning Gentile converts had caused a riot. Fearing Paul and Silas would be harmed, believers sent them to Berea under cover of darkness (see Acts 17:5-10). Opponents had cut short Paul's work in Thessalonica. He had not left willingly; others had snatched him from the believers there.

Paul referred to his separation from the Thessalonian believers for a short time. Precisely how long the apostle had been gone from Thessalonica at the time he greatly desired and made every effort to return to Thessalonica we do not know. Evidently several months had passed by the time Paul wrote this letter, enough time for Paul to minister briefly in Berea, Athens, and Corinth (see Acts 17:10–18:4). Those months must have seemed an eternity to Paul, who was anxious about the welfare of cherished believers he knew to be under pressure. He quickly assured them his heart was with them; they were separated physically but he kept them in his thoughts. Separation had not weakened the bond between them, and his deep care for them continued.

Verse 18: So we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.

For emphasis, Paul repeated his deep longing to visit the Thessalonian Christians. His coworkers joined Paul in wanting to return, but Paul added the words even I, Paul to personalize the longing to see the readers. Time and again or repeatedly, Paul had in mind to return to Thessalonica. Each time, he had encountered a barrier he identified as a hindrance of Satan. The Greek word translated hindered literally meant "cut in" and was used of cutting a trench across a road, making it impassable. The term also was used of a roadblock set up to stop an advancing expedition. Metaphorically, the word was used of a runner in a race cutting in front of another runner, impeding the second runner's progress.

The word Satan means "adversary." Paul used this term more often in his letters than he used the word Devil, meaning "accuser," to refer to the personal spirit of

evil. Satan is the evil spirit who is the enemy of God and of people—the supernatural evil being set in opposition to God's purposes. Satan is not equal to God, but Paul deemed him "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4) and "the ruler of the atmospheric domain" (Eph. 2:2). To Paul, any hindrance to God's work constituted spiritual warfare; any impediment to the gospel's spread was evil. We only can guess what prevented Paul's return to Thessalonica. Suggested possibilities are illness, the Thessalonian Jews' fierce opposition, and problems in Corinth. Whatever the obstacles were, Paul's point was that his failure to visit the Thessalonian believers certainly was not the result of a lack of love and concern for them.

Verse 19: For who is our hope, or joy, or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you?

Paul paid the Thessalonian believers a high compliment designed to encourage them and to assure them of his ongoing care for them. His question was rhetorical, and he supplied the answer. The word hope conveyed the sense of confident expectation based on God's ability. The term joy expressed gladness, delight, and well-being in relationship with God—a quiet, settled confidence in God. The word is related to the celebration of God's triumph over evil. The Greek word translated crown was used of the laurel wreath awarded victors in athletic games. Paul's crown of boasting ("glorying" or "rejoicing") at Christ's return, that is his reward, would be the faithful Thessalonian believers. Observe that Paul piled up words to stress his certainty God would sustain them through persecution to share in Christ's victory.

Verse 20: For you are our glory and joy!

For emphasis, Paul repeated that his readers were his glory and joy. The word rendered glory indicates honor or respect and could be a synonym for "crown" in verse 19. The faithful Thessalonian Christians were the outward indication of accomplishment Paul wanted. They continued to be a source of joy to him.

2. GIVE HONEST ENCOURAGEMENT (1 THESS. 3:1-5)

Verse 1: Therefore, when we could no longer stand it, we thought it was better to be left alone in Athens.

Paul continued to assure the Thessalonian believers of his genuine concern for them even though he was sepa-

rated from them. Because he cared so deeply for them, he had arranged to contact them. When Paul no longer could patiently endure being away from the Thessalonian Christians and receiving no word about their welfare, he sent Timothy to assess their situation. Even though sending Timothy involved cost for Paul, he was willing to continue his work without Timothy's help for a while in order to receive news about his valued brothers and sisters in Christ. The Greek words translated left alone convey a deep sense of desolation or of abandonment.

Verse 2: And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith,

Timothy was Paul's able and trusted coworker in the missions endeavor. (See p. 8 of the Introduction.) Timothy had been with Paul and Silas when the group traveled from Philippi to Thessalonica and was involved in the work there (see Acts 17:1-4). Surely the Thessalonian believers knew him. Why did Paul commend him to them in such glowing terms? Evidently, although Paul was the missionary group's leader and Timothy was a subordinate member, Paul wanted to affirm Timothy's important status in the missions enterprise. Timothy's role was not minor, and he did not lack authority. In our terminology, he was no mere errand boy; he was a messenger of elevated status. Paul's sending such a valued, indispensable representative underlined the Thessalonian believers' importance to the apostle.

Paul referred to Timothy as his brother. Their relationship was not that of superior to underling; they shared a bond forged by grace. Timothy also was God's co-worker or "fellow worker of God." The phrase in its plural form occurs in 1 Corinthians 3:9 and almost certainly has the sense of sharing in God's work, not as His equal partners, but under His authority—workers together in the redemptive enterprise He underwrote and directed. Thus, in 1 Thessalonians 3:2 Paul likely meant that even as he worked under God's leading, so did Timothy. Timothy had his own ministry and a status approaching Paul's role.

Paul had not sent Timothy merely to check on the Thessalonian believers but also to strengthen and encourage them. The Greek word translated to strengthen means "to establish" or "to make firm." Part of Timothy's assignment was to shore up the Thessalonian believers' courage in the face of persecution. The term rendered to . . . encour-

age conveyed the sense of calling someone to another's side for the purpose of active support. It also means "to exhort." Timothy was sent to provide spiritual support for these embattled believers.

Verse 3: so that no one will be shaken by these persecutions. For you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.

A major difficulty Paul's readers faced was persecution at the hands of their own countrymen (see 1 Thess. 2:14). Paul did not want any of the believers to be shaken by opposition. The Greek term rendered be shaken literally meant "to wag the tail," with the further meanings "to flatter" or "to move." It also could mean "to agitate," "to disturb," or "to trouble." Paul did not want the hardships the believers endured to dishearten them. Potentially, continuing persecution could discourage them.

Paul had no illusions about what being a Christian in a pagan environment meant. Neither should his readers. They were aware that professing and demonstrating faith in Christ inevitably brought persecution. They were appointed or destined to be opposed because evil always seeks to eradicate good, and darkness strives to extinguish light. The same evil that sought to destroy Jesus will assail His followers. The phrase we are appointed to this does not mean that God predestines persecution; rather, it refers to the fact that persecution is an inevitable part of the Christian experience. Jesus had warned His disciples, "You will have suffering in this world"; as we might say, "It comes with the territory." Then Jesus added words of encouragement: "Be courageous! I have conquered the world" (John 16:33). Paul's readers needed to know they had available power to face persecution.

Verse 4: In fact, when we were with you, we told you previously that we were going to suffer persecution, and as you know, it happened.

Persecution should not have caught the Thessalonian Christians off guard. Paul had repeatedly warned them they would suffer persecution because of their faith. The Greek word translated told . . . previously conveys continuous action in the past. Paul had "kept telling beforehand" or "used to tell beforehand." He often had tried to brace them ahead of time for the opposition that was sure to come—and it had come. The plural we in the phrase we were going to suffer persecution included Paul, his fellow missionaries, and the Thessalonian believers. It may

have referred to Christ's followers in general. Again, the idea is probably that suffering for one's commitment to Christ is inevitable.

Verse 5: For this reason, when I could no longer stand it, I also sent to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter had tempted you and that our labor might be for nothing.

To emphasize his care for the Thessalonian believers, Paul repeated that his anxiety concerning them had become so unbearable he had sent Timothy to find out about their faith. The Greek verb translated by the phrase find out about here literally means "to know by experience." It conveys the idea of firsthand evaluation. Paul sent Timothy to obtain firsthand knowledge of the Thessalonians' faith. The term faith could refer to the Thessalonian believers' initial profession of faith in Christ. If so, Paul wanted to determine whether they were holding fast to their confession of faith (see Heb. 3:6,14; 4:14). He was not implying genuine believers could lose their salvation. All true believers endure to the end. If the word faith has the sense of faithfulness, Paul wanted to determine whether the Thessalonians were standing firm in the face of opposition. Faithfulness also would involve their being obedient to the basic Christian teachings, growing spiritually, and exhibiting a Christian lifestyle.

Paul feared the tempter might have led his readers astray. Paul used the word tempter as a synonym for "Satan" (see 2:18). The enemy of God's purpose also sought to lure believers into unfaithfulness and disobedience. If the believers were giving in to the pressure exerted on them and returning to their pagan lifestyle, Paul felt that his work among them would have been in vain or empty, ineffective and meaningless. Paul's anxiety had become so intense he had to have information about them. He could not go to them, so he did the next best thing. He sent Timothy, whom he later would describe as "like-minded"—the most qualified person available (Phil. 2:19-20).

3. GIVE UPLIFTING AFFIRMATION (1 THESS. 3:6-9)

Verse 6: But now Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news about your faith and love, and that you always have good memories of us, wanting to see us, as we also want to see you.

We almost can hear the long sigh of relief that coursed through Paul's next words. He had been deeply afraid the Thessalonian believers might have withered under the intense pressure of persecution. The word but draws a sharp contrast between his fear and the joyous reality Timothy's report had revealed. Timothy had returned from Thessalonica with good news. The missionary who proclaimed the good news of Christ received good news of steadfast Christian commitment or faithfulness in lifestyle and service.

Timothy also brought a glowing report of the believers' love. The word love (agape, God's kind of love) could refer to their love for Christ, for one another, or for the missionaries. Because of Paul's next words, some interpreters prefer the last possibility. Paul was relieved and elated because of the believers' continuing love for the missionaries. The Thessalonian Christians had fond memories of Paul and his coworkers. Persecution and allegations against Paul had not fractured their relationship. The believers longed to see the missionaries as much as the missionaries wanted to return to Thessalonica.

Verse 7: Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution, we were encouraged about you through your faith.

With the word brothers, Paul again stressed his depth of feeling for his readers (see 1 Thess. 2:1,9,14,17). In part, he had sent Timothy to Thessalonica to encourage the believers there (see 3:2). In turn, Timothy's report had encouraged Paul. Because the readers persevered in faith and love, remembered the missionaries fondly, and wanted to see them, Paul took heart. He had endured severe hardship. The word distress literally refers to a choking or pressing situation. The term persecution translates a Greek word that conveys the idea of being pressed or crushed. To what choking, crushing experiences was Paul referring? One suggestion is that he had in mind the troubles in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, along with limited success in Athens (see Acts 16–17). Timothy's arrival in Corinth with good news from Thessalonica, however, had invigorated Paul.

Verse 8: For now we live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

Paul paid the Thessalonian believers the highest compliment he could give. They were his life if they remained faithful to Christ. The word now likely refers to Paul's feelings as he wrote. The term live expresses ongoing action.

The sense seems to be that the Thessalonian believers' faithfulness constantly renewed Paul as he continued his work. Another suggestion is that he used overstatement for emphasis much as we would say: "I could not live without you"—or, as a popular song of recent years confessed, the singer would not last another day without the object of his affections. The phrase if you stand firm in the Lord does not express doubt; the construction in the original language assumes the condition to be true: "if you stand firm, and you do."

Verse 9: How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience because of you before our God,

Paul—the prolific speaker and writer—confessed he was at a loss for words in expressing thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians. Paul experienced abundant joy or abiding gladness because of his readers' steadfastness in Christ. The phrase joy . . . before our God points to God as the ultimate source of joy and differentiates such joy from human pleasure, which is based on circumstances. God had enabled the believers to remain faithful, so Paul's joy was grounded in God's gracious provision.

4. OFFER LOVING PRAYERS (1 THESS. 3:10-13)

Verse 10: as we pray earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith?

Doubtless Paul had a rich prayer life. The list of churches he included in his prayers grew as he continued his missionary work, yet he consistently interceded for each one. The Greek term translated pray meant "to ask" or "to request"; thus, Paul petitioned God on the believers' behalf. The word earnestly does not give the full force of the intensity of Paul's prayers. He used a compound term that means "overflowing all bounds." The phrase night and day emphasizes Paul consistently approached God with his need to visit his readers and asked His help.

Paul wanted to see the believers face to face in order to complete what was lacking in their faith. The Greek word rendered to complete means "to knit together" and was used of mending nets. It had the idea of repairing something or making it better. It could have the sense of fully supplying what a person needs to accomplish a given purpose. The word lacking conveys the sense of shortcomings or deficiencies. Paul probably was not indicating the presence of a major error or omission in the church; rath-

er, he likely meant he wanted to supply them with further instruction to help them grow toward spiritual maturity. He wanted to strengthen their existing faith, to facilitate their spiritual development. If that was his meaning, the apostle wanted to build on the good spiritual foundation that existed.

Verse 11: Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you.

Paul not only assured the Thessalonian believers of his consistent prayers for them, but he also included a brief prayer at this point in his letter. My guess is that when they first heard the letter read aloud to them (see 1 Thess. 5:27), they could almost hear Paul praying for them. He directed his prayer to God the Father and the Lord Jesus—an emphasis on Their oneness and a beautiful way to stress Jesus' Deity. Paul first prayed for himself—yet not merely for himself but also for the Thessalonian believers. He asked God to direct his way (literally, "to make straight (his) road" to them, that is, to clear all obstacles out of his way. This petition emphasized again his deep, genuine longing to see them.

Verse 12: And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we also do for you.

Paul's next petition concerned the readers' spiritual growth in the area of love (agape, God's kind of love). He wanted God to cause their love to increase or abound and to overflow. Only God could enable them to love as He loves. The word overflow may call to mind a picture of water being poured into a vessel until the vessel is full and the water spills over the rim. Paul used these two words that essentially have the same meaning to emphasize his desire that the Thessalonian believers grow in extending self-giving good will for others' best interests. He wanted them to have this kind of love for one another within the church and then to love others outside the body of believers. Paul emphasized that his love for the Thessalonian Christians continued to grow and overflowed. They had imitated him in other aspects of Christian living (see 1:6), and he wanted them to imitate his growth in loving inclusively.

Verse 13: May He make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. Amen.

Paul's final petition in this prayer was that God would render the Thessalonian believers' hearts steadfast. The word translated make has the ideas of "setting steadfast-

ly” and “establishing.” The term heart was used for the center of a person’s being—the seat of will, intellect, and emotions. Paul likely used it to indicate the whole person. He wanted his readers to be blameless in holiness. The term blameless conveyed the idea of living in such a way that others could not level valid accusations of wrongdoing. The term holy essentially conveys the idea of being set apart. The word rendered holiness could mean “moral purity” or “sanctification” in the sense of growth toward spiritual maturity. Paul may have had both meanings in mind. When we place our faith in Christ, He cleanses from sin and sets us apart to serve Him by serving others. Then we spend our lifetimes “growing into a mature man [person] with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (Eph. 4:13b).

The word before means “in the presence of.” It also can mean “in the estimation of.” Forcefully, Paul reminded his readers that at Christ’s return, they would stand before God. The apostle wanted God’s evaluation of them to be positive, with no basis for condemnation. He wanted them to be morally pure and spiritually mature.

Paul emphasized Christ’s second coming. The apostle recognized that Christians should live in the expectation of the Lord’s return, a tension that gives urgency to their witness and service and motivates them to maintain the highest level of Christian living. Paul stated that He will return with all His saints. All Christians are saints—people separated for Christ’s service. Believers are not spiritually perfect. They are imperfect followers of Christ striving to resist temptations and to be faithful to Him while growing toward spiritual maturity.

Paul’s assurance to the Thessalonian Christians that the Lord will return with His people anticipated his words in 4:13-18. In 3:13 he stressed that people who place their faith in Christ continue to live with Him beyond death.