Waiting for Christ’s Return
Waiting for Christ's Return
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1.
Waiting for His Son from Heaven

...and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1:10)

In Paul’s first symphony,* which we usually speak of in more prosaic terms as the letters to the Thessalonians, we find a constant motif that recurs in the richest variations: waiting for His son from heaven.† Since we

*It is generally agreed that the letters to the Thessalonians are the earliest of Paul’s epistles.

†See 1:2, 23 and all of II Thessalonians.
already hear this “Maranatha” at the very beginning of the first letter, the matter that filled Paul’s mind and soul at the time cannot escape us: it is the return of Christ.

Paul did not write this letter because he feared that the Christians in Thessalonica would forget about Christ’s return. On the contrary, he thanked God that among the many good things he had heard about their faith (see 1:2, 8-9) was the report that they looked forward to Christ’s glorious return. The problem was that the Thessalonians, who had developed some peculiar notions of their own, moved this point too far to the right, with the result that the tension became too great and threatened to become overexcitement. It seems to me that today’s Christians, who are oriented too much to the left, who would rather hear about détente than tension and overexcitement, and who are in greater danger of shipwreck on the rock of unspirituality than on the rock of overspirituality, also have something to learn from this servant of Jesus Christ as he assigns the “day of the Lord” its proper place in the life of faith, namely, in the middle.

“Waiting for His Son from heaven” is a doctrine confessed by the Christian church of all ages. We are waiting for the day when Christ comes again to “judge the living and the dead.”

Paul also proclaimed it as a dogma in Thessalonica. Now, we know quite well that Paul was not the dry dogmatician he was long taken to be—and still is. Suppose Paul happened to be in the audience of a strongly doctrinal preacher who went on and on about some point in one of Paul’s own letters. The apostle would then visit this preacher sometime during the week—not immediately after the service, as some elders like to do—and say: “My dear brother, that’s neither what I said nor what I meant.”

Paul would be somewhat less friendly, I suspect, toward anyone who came to offer him an honorary membership in some ethical society or other. He would be even
less interested in any vague sermon on “the experience of Christ.” Neither would his purposes be served by any effort to explain away doctrines and redemptive facts with pious phrases. If someone were to tell him that our salvation does not depend on facts, Paul would reply: “It certainly does depend on facts. All I’ve ever done is preach redemptive facts. When I preached in Thessalonica for three weeks and presented the people there with the facts of Christ’s resurrection, His ascension into heaven and the final judgment, the heathens turned away from idols to serve the living God.”*

Just as the Christian church accepted the doctrine of Christ’s return, Paul proclaimed it as a fact. This truth must live in our minds. But—doesn’t being a Christian mean more than accepting a certain number of facts? Restricting ourselves now to the return of Christ, we must admit that it is possible to accept this article as part of our confession without attaching any more value to it than to many other “articles” that we keep on the shelf. If you were then to be asked what good it does you to believe all these things, you would have to answer, “None whatsoever.” In fact, it would harm you, for in your zeal to defend this article against attack, you yourself might not be preserved in your secure position on the mountain of Samaria on “that day.”

You do believe your confession, and that’s wonderful, but there’s still something missing: you don’t profess it and live it. That you still have to learn. Corresponding to the outward fact (the Son who comes from heaven) there must

*See Acts 17:2-4. Paul presupposed these truths as familiar, although no one had preached in Thessalonica before him. This means that his first sermons as missionary already dealt with these topics. His two letters also leave us with the impression that he had communicated other central or less central redemptive truths (e.g. creation, the Antichrist, the restrainer) to the Thessalonians. Texts such as II Thessalonians 2:15 show that Paul’s preaching was a “passing on” of truths.
be an inward fact (your expectation).

From heaven above we hear the cry "Behold, I come." Its echo should awaken in our hearts a longing for our home. We sing that our soul yearns for God, that we thirst for God in a parched and weary land where no one can find relief. But this beautiful confession remains an idle word game if we don’t live our lives in expectation of His Son from heaven. Therefore Paul praises the Thessalonians not because they have accepted the fact of Christ’s return as incontestable—which by itself means nothing—but because they are waiting for Christ’s return.

Do you sense the difference? All of us believe this article of the Apostles’ Creed. But do we all wait for the Son, who will come when the hands of God’s clock point to the final hour? Let’s pause here for a moment and think about that question. What is this waiting, this expectation?

Expectation involves tension. I know there are many who do their best to turn the great waiting room of this world into a living room in which they make themselves as comfortable and relaxed as possible. Although the train carrying passengers to eternity screams down the track, they act just as though they notice nothing, as though their houses will stand forever, as though there will be no “day of the Lord.” They are sadly mistaken.

Mere waiting is a relaxed resting, with our arms folded and our minds undisturbed. Expectation, however, involves tension. The family of almost any fisherman can tell you what this means. Father has been at sea for months. During his absence there has been bad weather. Once there was such a storm that the family feared the roof would collapse. Many times Mother and the children went on bended knee to ask Israel’s Protector to watch over Father out there on the turbulent sea. But tonight, according to Mother’s calculations—and she never makes a mistake in this matter—Father is supposed to come home.

They wait. The tension hangs in the air and clings to
everything in the room. The tension makes Mother’s hands tremble and the corners of her mouth twitch. The tension is evident in the behavior of the children: they do not play as they do other evenings. They are somewhat more boisterous, but they are also quieter. Mother picks up her knitting from time to time, but she lays it down as often as she picks it up. Every sound startles her. With every foot-step that comes near, she holds her breath. All nerves are taut. She waits. She listens.

Do you now sense what it means to wait for His Son from heaven? He, Jesus, is on the way. He’s coming! It may take a while, or He may arrive tomorrow. No one knows the hour.

Are you familiar with the tension that expectation brings? Do you listen with taut nerves for His footsteps, which can already be heard in the signs of the times?

Could it be that this listening and looking toward heaven will turn us into impractical dreamers? Each day again we are caught up in the hustle and bustle of life with its demands. Is it possible that this tense posture of expectation will leave us unprepared for these demands?

Come now, surely you don’t mean that! Think again of the fisherman’s wife. How busy she is getting everything in perfect order. The furnace is on and the meal is ready, for—Father is coming home! This kind of waiting is a matter of working—and not dreaming.

I know very well from my own experience as a pastor how feverishly people clean up, sweep and polish when “important visitors” are expected. Well then, you, too, are expecting an important visitor—God’s Son from heaven, Jesus, the King of all kings.

If this is how you understand expectation or waiting, the return of Christ will never be a dead article in your confession or a fading ideal in the distant future. It will assume
a place in the middle of your life and give it new color. Then there will be a festive tension in your home and in your heart, just as there is when you are expecting guests and you clean house thoroughly. This housecleaning is what we call “daily conversion.”

Brothers and sisters, will you please take a good look around the home you live in? There may be rooms covered by layers of dust and permeated by the stench of sin. Are you waiting for His Son from heaven?

This expectation elevates earthy life to a higher plane and also makes it possible for us to appear before God’s judgment seat “without fear.” We do not appear there without fear because our tension and efforts have somehow made us holy. We know that no one will appear righteous before God on that day, for we all stand accused by our own hearts. The word wait already suggests a state of imperfection. Even the holiest among us must confess that his life is imperfect and stained by sin.

Therefore it’s fortunate that Paul tells us that this “Son from heaven” is Jesus, who “delivers us from the wrath to come.” He is the same Jesus who earlier subjected Himself to God’s judgment for my sake.

Blessed is the man who has learned the passivity of waiting as well as the activity of expectation. “I wait for thy salvation, O Lord” (Gen. 49:18). He will not be disappointed in his expectation.

The expectation of the world, which does not go beyond the horizontal level of earthly life, will be bitterly disappointed, like so many women who wait in vain for husbands who have not returned from the great dark sea with its insatiable appetite. This world and every nominal Christian in it will be assailed by a furious monster from hell.* That monster will seize anyone whose confession is a

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*This is what Paul means when he speaks of “the wrath to come.”
mere game, anyone who knows nothing of the tension involved in expectation.

But from heaven will come the shining figure of Jesus to gladden those who live in expectation of His coming. Those who wait for the Lord will not be put to shame.
2. Giving Thanks in a Specific Way

We always mention you in our prayers and thank God for you all, and constantly remember before God our Father how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ (1:2-3 JB).

Although there were various things to be set straight in the congregation at Thessalonica, Paul opened his letter with thanksgiving. This reminds us of Jesus Christ, the heavenly letter writer, who found reason to praise His
seven churches in Asia Minor despite all that was wrong with them.*

The apostle had a special reason for giving thanks: he gave thanks for the spiritual condition of his readers because they themselves did not dare do so. They feared they had been deceived by Paul's gospel, for his credibility was being disputed in Thessalonica—not so much by the believers themselves as by enemies of their faith. It was whispered that Paul was really a great deceiver who, like so many other "philosophers" and wizards in circulation those days, lived off the credulous crowds.

Well, what about it? In all probability those slanderous suggestions were not without effect, especially if they came from people whom the Thessalonian Christians had come to respect.† If the criticisms of Paul were well founded, then their faith would be nothing but a great illusion.

Paul was later to refute all those charges at length (see ch. 2), but something of his argument already comes through at the beginning: he writes that he is thankful he can demonstrate the divine power of his gospel. The demonstration is that it has succeeded in planting in their hearts the three virtues of faith, hope and love, which are virtually unknown in heathendom.

But he does not let the matter rest with this statement. By a precise, specific description, he goes on to show that these three virtues are of the purest gold: he reminds the

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*Sardis and Laodicea were the only churches of which nothing good was said. The situation there must have been very bad indeed (see Rev. 3:1-6, 14-22).

†It's likely that woman believers were taunted about these suspicions by husbands who were not believers (see Acts 17:4). Paul must have thought these suspicions were still alive, for he expressed his fear "that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor would be in vain" (3:5).
Thessalonians how they showed their faith in action, worked for love, and persevered through hope. The Thessalonians had nothing to worry about, then, for they bore the clear imprint of God’s Spirit.

Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving was not a flood of words, as ours all too often become. Every word had its own meaning. What Paul did was simply what any good steward in God’s Kingdom does when talents are entrusted to him: he gave a specific, detailed account of the faith of the Thessalonians (as a proof of his own credibility). Isn’t this just what you require of the treasurer of your club or association? You aren’t interested in hearing him recite numbers or totals from memory. No, you aren’t satisfied until you are given a list of receipts and expenditures. If a treasurer hopes to be trusted, he must go into details.

Paul was a conscientious man and was very careful with the things of God, even in prayer and thanksgiving. It would be well worth our while to observe how Paul went into details in his prayers, how he brought individual persons and congregations to mind one by one, laying their special needs on the steps of God’s throne of grace. “We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers” (1:2).

From this we can learn a valuable lesson. We should not become annoyed so quickly at “long prayers.” We should not get irritated when our preacher goes into so many details in prayer. Instead we should thank God that he, too, has learned from Paul’s specific way of praying.

But prayer is not my topic at this point. What I wish to deal with is Paul’s specific description of the spiritual condition of Thessalonians. He gives thanks for “how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope.”

Here the apostle allows faith, hope and love to dress in the clothes best suited to each. Faith is in action and wears working clothes. Love wears the garment of labor. Hope wears the trailing dress of “perseverance.” (The word in the original text means capacity for holding out.)
Faith is active. Love is a labor like that of childbirth. Hope looks patiently toward the heavens. Faith is the masculine element, while love is the feminine element, and hope is childlike.

The Thessalonians translated faith into action. I would like to know what kind of faith does not involve action. Any such faith demonstrates its own superfluousness and worthlessness. It is as repulsive as a man who wastes all his time and lets his wife and children go hungry.

Just what work faith must do I haven’t told you. The faith that is willing to work need not go out looking for an assignment. There is so much work that needs to be done all around us that we never get finished. But this does not make faith disconsolate. Each morning it rises from its bed bravely and cheerfully. It faces the day’s work in the belief that it will find pleasure and enjoyment in it. Such faith will have nothing to do with strikes.

The Thessalonians worked for love. Thus Paul was talking about the “labor of love.” If you take a careful look at love, you’ll notice something painful about the expression on her face. I hope I don’t have to tell you why, for you should know from experience that love for God and our neighbor can be very difficult and painful. Love requires self-denial and is always enveloped in sacrificial flames. But love doesn’t cry about this. It is like a mother who finds bliss in the painful labor of childbirth. (Are there still such mothers?)

The Thessalonians persevered through hope. Hope is like a child. When a child is frightened, he flees by running into his father’s arms, but once he is safe there, he sits enthroned as triumphant as a king. It is just as hard to destroy hope as it is to shake a child’s firm faith in his father. Hope stands firm, no matter how “dark” God’s ways may be. It says to the storms: “Go ahead with your pounding and shrieking, for I can take it.” It says to the waves: “Roar and rush as you please, for Father will carry me safely through.”

Can you, too, speak of your faith, hope and love in
this specific way? Generalities won't get you anywhere. If you can manage no more than a few vague phrases, you will rightly have to fear what the Thessalonians wrongly feared, namely, that your Christianity is a great illusion.

When the Son comes from heaven, you will have to prove your faithfulness and trustworthiness by rendering an account in specific terms, like stewards to whom ten or five or two talents have been entrusted. You will have to show how you translated your faith into action, worked for love, and persevered through hope.
3.
Higher Knowledge

For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you (1:4).

If Paul could preach again in our time, I don’t believe he would fill the church. For many churchgoers, he would not be “deep” enough. If he were weighed by the standards of those who sample sermons and test the heart, he would doubtless be deemed a “lightweight.”

Although the older Paul can certainly be regarded as one of the great writers of antiquity, he cannot be compared with them when it comes to elaborating on the subtle movements of the mind and discovering the truth behind the truth. In the estimation of many, Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ, was much too superficial. Just listen to how
he preaches and writes: “For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you.”

What a powerful sentence! Paul doesn’t write this to one brother in Thessalonica whom he got to know as a “born-again Christian” but to the whole congregation. He includes all the brothers, and thus all the sisters as well. It appears that Paul knew nothing of the theory of “one in the whole city.”

Furthermore, he does not hope that they are chosen: he knows it. He testifies of himself that he has been converted, but he also gives this testimony of the Thessalonians. He does not say: “I got there by the amazing Damascus route, and if you’re ever fortunate enough to undergo the same thing, I hope you’ll reach the point I’ve reached.” He does not stand there barring the door to heaven and saying: “Where I am you cannot come unless you make the same conversion journey I made.”

There is nothing of this in Paul. He leaves heaven’s door wide open for the Thessalonians: “For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you.” We know it!* That’s quite a mouthful.

Paul does not just hope or pray for their conversion. No, he reaches for the highest truth—election. He knows they have been chosen. His words are straightforward, massive in their import, and bold—much too bold for today’s wavering, worried, complaining, miserable, unbelieving generation.

It is important to bear in mind that Paul did not spend more than about three weeks in Thessalonica. When he arrived, the Thessalonians were still complete heathens. He preached to them on many topics—on the Antichrist and the restrainer, on the necessity of working faithfully, on not deceiving each other, on not living an irregular life, and so forth. It was not all “getting to know each other.”

*Paul used this unequivocal language also because of the doubts of the Thessalonians. He wanted to give them some encouragement.
When Paul was not preaching, he was busy with manual labor to support himself, as he tells us explicitly. Thus it is clear that he did not have time to tell the Thessalonians all about his own conversion journey. Nor was he able to have very many personal discussions with them. He had barely arrived when he was already forced to leave. Therefore he got to know the Thessalonians in a very hasty way, doing most of the talking himself. And now, some months later, this man writes calmly: “For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you.” It’s amazing. Yet it also seems superficial.

Paul’s sentence might have continued in a style popular today: “. . . and we would like to come once more to convert you and be arrested again, but it won’t be quite that simple, my friends.”

Is Paul’s statement superficial? No, taken as a whole it’s not superficial. Paul has solid reasons for making his bold assertion, reasons he reveals in the following verse, which is introduced by the word for.

What had taken place in Thessalonica, then? Had surprising and shocking events occurred? Had voices from heaven been heard? Was there talk of amazing conversions?

There was nothing of the sort. There was not as much as a word or phrase about any such thing. Paul based his bold assertion on something else: “For our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power.”

Divine election, Calvin explains in connection with this passage, is something hidden in itself, but it is made manifest through its characteristics. And Paul now looks at these characteristics not in particular things but, very simply, in the way the Thessalonians have changed under the influence of the gospel or, if you like, in the effect the Word has had on them.

Paul’s gospel was not only a matter of words. The Thessalonians did not let the preaching flow over them like
Higher Knowledge

a flood of verbiage. They did not accept the gospel for information and then return to the order of the day, the one to his field and the other to his business. On the contrary, the preaching stirred them and took hold of their souls. It did not have the effect of silencing them for a moment before everything returned to “business as usual.” No, the gospel came “in power.” The Thessalonians did not go back to “business as usual.” They turned away from idols, as Paul later says, to the service of the living and true God.

Thus you can be certain of your election through the influence that the preaching of the gospel has on you. Nothing more is necessary, but you can’t get by with anything less.

When you are told that things in your church are not exactly as they ought to be right now, are the sounds you hear mere words that you listen to critically or with a certain amount of annoyance? When you are told that you cannot love God and hate your brother at the same time, do you dismiss this admonition as “mere words”? Or do such declarations represent a power, a power that knocks you down, a power that drives you to your knees with the prayer “O Lord, be gracious to me, to my family, to my church”? Do such words represent a power that also lifts you up, a power that gives you a sword in your hand to do battle and a trowel to build and reform, a power that draws you away from idolatry and turns you toward the service of the living God?

We hear so many words—big words, hollow words, pious words. But we sense so little power in those words. We want to be just as hearty and enthusiastic as Paul, so as soon as we sense even in the smallest way that the gospel came to you not only in words but also in power, we will call out joyfully to all of you without exception: “For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you.”

We know it! That’s just what we need in our weak, spiritless days. What we need so desperately are not com-
plaining Christians but singing Christians who are certain of their election. This certainty makes them steadfast wherever they go and whatever they do. Their song rises up to heaven. They carry their banners high as they sing of God's honor. And while they are singing, they wait for His Son from heaven, so that He will find faith on earth when He comes.
4.

Thessalonica as an Evangelism Center

From Thessalonica the word of the Lord rang out; and not in Macedonia and Achaia alone, but everywhere your faith in God has reached men's ears (1:8 NEB).

Can you imagine that? It was only a few months ago—half a year at most—that the Thessalonians first came into contact with the gospel. And now Paul can already write: "From Thessalonica the word of the Lord rang out; and not in Macedonia and Achaia alone, but
everywhere your faith in God has reached men’s ears.”*

By the word *everywhere*, the apostle must mean Asia Minor as well as Greece. Apparently this small group that had only recently been converted from heathendom made the Word of the Lord known all over Asia Minor and Greece. The phrase *rang out* could well be translated as “broadcast.” Therefore—if it were not an absurd anachronism—one could almost think in terms of a Christian broadcasting center in Thessalonica with a transmitter of its own. Otherwise it is virtually inconceivable that the Word of the Lord should “ring out” through half of the known world in so short a period of time.

This extremely rapid spread of the gospel can probably be explained as follows. Thessalonica was an important center of trade situated at the intersection of important highways. At the time, the rulers of the Roman empire (to which Thessalonica also belonged) were constantly on the lookout for better roads. Thus there was already a busy, vibrant commercial traffic from city to city.

Now, what could be more natural than for the Christian merchants of Thessalonica to make their journeys just as they had always done, but carrying more than they used to carry? They took their merchandise together with the treasure of the gospel. They simply could not remain silent about the marvelous change in their lives but spoke to others of God’s grace—also to their business associates. They did not keep the good news to themselves with the remark “Business is business.” No, the Word of God “rang out” like a trumpet. It was heard in offices, in

*Although Calvin argues for a later date while other, more recent scholars argue for an earlier date, it is generally accepted—on good grounds—that Paul wrote this letter when he found respite in Corinth after being driven out of Thessalonica and passing through Beroea and Athens. It is clear from the letter that the events in Thessalonica had taken place only a short time before.*
marketplaces, and on board ship—if not through their words then certainly through their deeds. There was nothing they wanted so much as for others to be as happy and fortunate as they themselves were. (The words rang out should not lead us to think of a systematic evangelism program, as some scholars do.)

Great was their joy, naturally, when they met a brother or sister in the faith, e.g. from Philippi or from one of the churches in Asia Minor. And so it came to pass that all the churches in Greece and Asia Minor found out very quickly what great things the Lord had done in Thessalonica. Thus, when representatives from the various churches came to see Paul in Corinth,* he did not have to say anything about the good news, for “they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols” (1:9).

This was a beautiful testimony to give about the Thessalonians, who had shown how well they understood Jesus' command that we are to be His witnesses. Although they did not have wireless broadcast facilities at their disposal, they nevertheless found ways and means to spread the Word of the Lord.

We should be ashamed of ourselves when we think of this young congregation. There are old, established congregations and confirmed Christians that have never made the Word of the Lord ring out. It is true that without love I am a worthless, clanging gong—and that is a dreadful judgment—but producing no sound at all is also wrong.

We are proud of the extent and scope of our Christian action, and rightly so. From our midst the Word of the Lord has sounded forth. It has been heard in the east and

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*This is the only way Paul could have heard about it. Thus the bond between churches is very old.
the west through the work of our foreign missionaries, on our own streets and in the marketplace through the work of our evangelists, and on the air through our broadcasts. All of this is wonderful and commands respect. But in all this zeal and activity, there may still be something of the clanging gong—for example, if the broadcasting is never done out of our own homes but only from a centrally located broadcast tower.

Every congregation should be a broadcasting station, and every Christian should be a broadcaster. We are still too busy with our radio and television receiving sets. We receive so much—but without broadcasting anything ourselves. Do you make the Word of the Lord ring out in the factory, in the barracks, at the stock exchange?

Paul speaks of “ringing out”! Our word echo is derived from the Greek word used here. Thus, what the apostle is really telling us is that these converted heathens made the echo of heaven resound not only in their words but especially in their deeds.

It sounds beautiful. Sin makes our lives a harsh, discordant sound, but grace turns our lives into a sounding-board that catches the pure tones of the “Word of God” and passes them on—an echo of heaven. And where we find the heavenly music, the life of God’s favored children is also made musical, even though the sounds do not come through strongly, just as an echo does not reproduce the full richness of the voice that originally made the sound. This is the same idea that the Heidelberg Catechism expresses so beautifully when it tells us that we “begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath” (Answer 103).*

You might be inclined to argue that the false sounds issuing regularly from this person or that group are hardly

*That Paul mainly has deeds in mind is clear from the connection with verse 9, where he speaks of conversion to God and the service of the living God.
echoes of heaven, and you would be right. The quarrelsome tone in the life of many a family, the spiteful things we say to one another, the polite and impolite deceitfulness through which we so often hurt each other—surely all of this is not to be regarded as heavenly music!

This leaves us with a question: Why is it that there is so little beauty to be seen or heard in the lives of Christians? This question is not difficult to answer. If you stand on one of the roads leading through the polder land that the Dutch have reclaimed from the sea, you will be surrounded by pastures and more pastures, as far as the eye can see. If you then say something out loud, the echo of your voice will not return to you, even if you have a powerful tenor voice. Echoes are heard only under a high roof or where there are high mountains. There lies the answer to our question. We remain too bound up in the horizontal relationships of life and forget to descend into the depths and to climb the highest of God’s holy mountains.

We must wait for the Son of man from heaven. The mountains will then be bearers of peace, and the hills will shine with holy righteousness. There will no longer be any place for echoes, because the eternal reality of the new heaven and the new earth will be actualized. Then Paul and Silas and Timothy and all the servants of the Word will no longer have to say anything. Their imperfect sermons will be put aside and their trumpets put away, for you yourself will proclaim the honor of the One who is and who was and who is to come, the One who lives to all eternity.
5.
Like a Mother and a Father
(First Apologia)

We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God (2:7, 11-12 NIV).

After Paul relates what he knows about the Thessalonians (chapter 1), for which he thanks God continually, he calls to mind what they knew about him (chapter 2), introducing his thoughts with the words: “For you
yourselves know, brethren, that our visit to you was not in vain.” He goes into the smallest details in reminding them about his contacts with them. As a result, we might feel prompted to ask whether the apostle is perhaps talking too much about himself. When we hear him declare that he never used flattering words, that he was gentle to the Thessalonians (2:7), that he worked night and day to avoid becoming a burden to anyone (vs. 9), that he was righteous and blameless in his behavior (vs. 10), we feel like reminding him of the proverb: “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth” (Prov. 27:2). But because we know that Paul’s sole ambition was to boast not of himself but of the Lord, and that his only passion was the cross of Jesus Christ, for which he himself was willing to perish, we immediately suppress this inclination and think further. There must be a good reason why Paul is so busy talking about himself.

Now, there is indeed something important behind it. When the apostle is forced to draw attention to his exemplary conduct in Thessalonica, he does speak of himself but he does not mean himself. The problem was that after Paul’s departure, the enemies of the gospel, both Jews and heathens, tried in all kinds of ways to break down what he had built up so laboriously. One of their weapons was slander. They tried to portray the apostle as an artful deceiver in the style of the many “wizards” who traveled around creating ecstasy and stirring up the gullible public, using all sorts of “flattering words” to get their hands on other people’s money. Thus the appearance of someone like Paul was not at all unusual in those days. There were dozens of spiritual charlatans and idlers who called themselves “philosophers” circulating through the land; they tried to use their arts, their beautiful words and their schemes to gain food and shelter. They were gifted deceivers, and when they began to speak and show you beautiful things, professing all the while to be concerned about your salvation, you had to keep an eye on your money, for that’s what they were after!
Now you can see why Paul talked at such length about himself. If it could be shown that he was really one of those traveling carnival operators, his gospel would be discredited immediately. If the founder of the congregation was a deceiver and hypocrite, then the entire faith of the Thessalonians was an illusion. The gospel itself would stand or fall with its proclaimer, and therefore Paul had to defend himself against these suspicions. His defense was essentially a plea for the gospel of which he was a bearer.

Of the many accusations, that of Paul’s “selfishness” or “masked greed” (2:5) was certainly the most vicious. You can imagine how much this slanderous charge must have hurt if you think of the situation in a home in Thessalonica where only the wife had become a Christian (see Acts 17:4). What turn would the conversation take if such a wife started “talking about her faith” again?* Her husband might answer: “You women are all too easily taken in, and your hearts are so easily moved. When it comes to money, you’d better listen to me. Don’t you know that the Philippian Christians have already sent Paul money twice?† And now he has taken off with the money, and you’ll never see him again.” It should not surprise us that the poor women were not able to counter these hard-hitting arguments immediately and were sometimes shaken up by them. Here again we see that the accusations that all Christians are hypocrites and that the church is the willing servant of capital are very, very old.

Paul had an effective answer for this sordid slander: his life was one great refutation of what he was charged

*We read that their faith was well known. I certainly don’t imagine that there were no “arguments,” for that’s usually an indication that faith is not alive and operative.

†See Philippians 4:16. Paul’s answer to this accusation begins with verse 17.
with. His conduct was diametrically opposed to the conduct of those who have “schemes” for sale, and all greed was foreign to him. This was not just talk on Paul’s part: six times he appealed to the memory of the Thessalonians as witness in this matter (2:1-2, 5, 9-11).

You yourselves know—this is the forthright way he begins his apologia—that we did not come to you with empty hands. We did not come with hands outstretched to ask for money (like mendicant monks); we came instead to give. Our hands were filled with the “unspeakable gift” of the gospel of God.

Now, to the natural eye, Paul and Silas did come to Thessalonica with empty hands. Stripped of everything they had and still bearing scars on their hands and feet from the stocks of Philippi’s jail, they arrived in Thessalonica as poor tramps. Nevertheless, although they had just escaped danger and could be all but certain that preaching the good news in Thessalonica would cost them their freedom and perhaps their lives, these battered men immediately began to preach the great, rich gospel again: “But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the face of great opposition” (2:2). This is hardly what we would expect of someone who is not a messenger of Christ, someone motivated by no higher drive than food.

In an exceptionally tender and delicate way, Paul refutes the accusation of greed and personal ambition. Although he could have asserted his authority as an apostle of Christ (2:6), he never dreamed of “pulling rank” but reports instead: “We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.”

Paul was like a mother to the Thessalonians. A mother who seeks to favor herself at the expense of her children is no real mother. There is an unbridgeable gulf between genuine motherhood and selfishness. Egoism is as far removed from a mother’s love as the east is from the west. To speak of motherhood is to speak of self-
sacrifice.* How far a mother’s love is removed from self-centeredness is illustrated by the poem about the degenerate son who cuts out his mother’s heart. As he walks off with the heart and stumbles, the heart rolls away and asks, “Did you hurt yourself, son?”

Paul was like a mother to the Thessalonians, but he was also a father to them. The problem with a mother’s love is that it can become one-sided and lead to indulgence. Therefore the apostle adds a few verses later that he avoided this one-sidedness: he also exhorted and encouraged the Thessalonians as a father does his children.† This, too, is part of Paul’s apologia. To the sharply worded charge that Paul with his beautiful words was a deceiver, the apostle answers simply: “I loved you, and I was like a mother and a father to you.”

Isn’t that beautiful? Paul was certainly learned enough to be able to present an “apologia for Christianity” in the form of an extensive argument, but he chose a better way. The proof of the gospel’s truth, he argued, is my life, a life in which the splendor of gold cannot match the splendor of God, a life in which greed disappeared like a morning mist and was replaced by love.

It seems to me that this is the best possible apologia for “Christianity.” We certainly need apologists of this kind. We have Christian universities, and we have professors who make apologia part of their subject matter—which is fine. But the world just doesn’t listen to arguments and sermons any more. However, it does have an ear for preaching that proceeds from a Christian’s life and conduct. If the world is no longer willing to listen to

*See verse 8, where Paul apparently works out the metaphor of the mother somewhat further.

†In verse 17 Paul comes back to this comparison once more, when he declares that he was bereft of the Thessalonians. We should think here of a mother who has lost her children.
the “law” and our “confessions,” it is still willing to pay attention to the witness of our lives. Is our life and conduct such a witness?

The philosophers, wizards and fortune-tellers of Paul’s day bore the image of this world. They let themselves be driven by greed, however many beautiful words they may use to disguise their selfishness. Gold and hatred are the ultimate motivating forces driving those who are without Christ. Christians are just as far removed from the world as Paul from those wizards. The proof of your Christianity is that God has replaced gold, that love has replaced greed, and that all relationships are permeated by love and have become family relationships.

This is even more true now that we are waiting for His Son from heaven. The closer the time comes, the more the love of many will grow cold, while egoism, greed and lovelessness increase. A cold shower of selfishness is chilling the world, as class conflicts become more and more acute. Nothing would be easier than to go along with this general tendency, and nothing is more difficult than swimming against the stream.

The church of Christ must be careful! It can spoil so much by its conduct, and it has already done so. Do you know how many souls have turned back after reaching the threshold of God’s Kingdom because they felt the cold wind of lovelessness blowing there? They will not be able to use the attitudes of others as an excuse. But there will be no excuse for you either. Their blood will be on your hands.

The church of Christ must be careful, for both selfishness and greed play far too great a role in our lives. I wonder how many “wizards” there are inside the church, i.e. people who know how to conceal a greedy heart behind a pious mask, people who try every day to reconcile Christ and Mammon.

Some churches speak of these “wizards” in their communion liturgy. Perhaps you have thought to yourself
on occasion that such references are antiquated, but now you can see that they should be retained, for there are still such people around today. We must testify to them in the name of Jesus Christ that as long as they continue in such sins, they can have no part in the Kingdom of Christ.
6. Working Night and Day (Second Apologia)

For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God (2:9).

Paul, it is clear, was not afraid of work. He did not take Mondays off, as many ministers do. It seems that this amazing man did not suffer from fatigue or exhaustion. Nowhere do we read that he took a vacation. Anyone who reviews the busy life of this apostle must throw up his hands in astonishment and say, “What a man!”.
His three-week stay in Thessalonica already testifies to his enormous energy. Paul himself says of this period that he worked night and day. This is not figurative language but language that must be taken literally. Paul would never have been able to accomplish so much in Thessalonica if he had not sacrificed some of his rest each night.

First of all, Paul preached while he was in Thessalonica. He did not give himself much time to catch his breath. He had learned a great deal in Philippi and had just made a tiring journey on foot. But with the marks of his imprisonment still visible on his hands and the dust still on his feet, he went right to work.

Paul viewed his task as a preacher in Thessalonica in broad terms. He didn’t just give a simple evangelistic talk now and then but seized the opportunity to deal with a worthy series of subjects; he spoke not only on central redemptive truths but also on peripheral topics (2:2). And since it was not his method to deal with everything in one or two sermons, it’s highly probable that he preached not only on the three sabbath days but also during the week. Moreover, he never preached without careful preparation. All in all, his preaching alone must have cost him a great deal of time.

In addition, Paul made pastoral calls on his congregation. This is apparent from 2:11, where we read: “For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you.” Calvin comments on this as follows: “Paul does not state that he had been a father merely to the whole body, but also to the individual members. It is not enough that a pastor in the pulpit should teach all the people together, if he does not also add particular instruction as necessity requires or occasion offers. . . . Instruction given to all is sometimes of little service, and some cannot be cured or corrected without particular medicine.”

Thus Paul did not let his sheep go astray. He gave his full attention to ministering to individual souls and visited the people in their homes. The Thessalonians had no
reason to complain that they never saw “the minister.” The apostle was a shepherd as well as a teacher. Preaching and pastoral calls together occupied a great deal of Paul’s time.

And let’s not forget the hour he set aside for prayer. We like to speak of the “hour of prayer,” but I believe it would be more accurate for today’s Christians to speak of “minutes of prayer.” In our busy age we have little time left for prayer. I am fully convinced that Paul, who was certainly busy enough, spent hours with God, for only in this way can his enormous energy and his amazing success as a missionary be explained.

He spent hours with God, for he prayed daily for all the churches. It was his custom to review all the churches one by one in his prayers, mentioning the names of all the members (see 1:2; II Cor. 11:28). Since prayer is not just a way of relaxing but requires exertion and struggle, it must be included under the heading “working night and day.”

Paul worked as a pastor, he taught, and he prayed. How he used up his strength in the service of his God! But that wasn’t all he did. He devoted the hours that were left to manual labor, in order to earn his own keep. Although he was certainly qualified to earn a living through the gospel, he preferred to provide for his own support. Thus one could see this toiler busy in his workshop until late at night, trying to earn his meager fare with his blistered hands.

By engaging in manual labor, Paul was doubtless a pioneer in the Greek world. Manual labor was universally disdained as work fit only for slaves. But along came Paul with his gospel and suddenly started doing manual labor. By his example he elevated work more than he could possibly have done through any eloquent discourses or theories. Keeping Paul’s example in mind, our fathers also dared to speak of the most lowly kind of work as a “divine calling.” The gospel is not a pale shadow or a ticket to
heaven but something that penetrates the most ordinary realities, giving color to everyday life and turning water into sparkling wine.

At the same time, Paul uses this point as an eloquent refutation of the charge that he was a member of the philosopher's guild, that he liked to live off the sweat of another's toil and could better be called lazy than tired. Thus he follows up his first apologia (in which he answers the charge of greed by pointing to his self-denying love) with a second, in which he points to the hard work he did so faithfully.

There is indeed no better "apologia for Christianity" than hard work done faithfully. We recognize the true Christian by his faithfulness, just as Paul pointed to faithfulness to distinguish himself from the "deceivers." Anyone interested in "marks" for distinguishing true Christians from hypocrites should put faithfulness at the top of the list.

What this means first of all is faithfulness in working for the Kingdom of God. In this context I am not thinking primarily of "going to church faithfully." However praiseworthy this is in itself, we must be careful never to use the beautiful word faithfulness when we are talking about mere habit or routine.

I am thinking of the gigantic labors that must be accomplished for the Kingdom of God. Many laborers are needed in this Kingdom. There is no danger that so many hands will reach out for the work to be done that some will remain unemployed. In fact, there is so much work that we need day-shifts and night-shifts. But please don't give us any people who bite off more than they can chew and don't finish anything.

God asks for faithful workers. This faithfulness manifests itself more in little things than in big things. I believe that someone who distributes evangelistic pamphlets faithfully every Saturday night is held in greater
esteem by God’s angels than a pastor who amazes his congregation with his glittering lectures but forgets to look after his sheep. Let those who often refuse to participate by arguing that they “just don’t have the time” take a close look at Paul, who was able to say that he worked night and day.

But a Christian is also known by his faithfulness in ordinary daily work. If you’re looking for a sign of your true conversion, don’t investigate all sorts of extraordinary possibilities. Look here first.

This standpoint is not superficial or unspiritual; it is deeply spiritual. Just consider for a moment what our “book of comfort,” the Heidelberg Catechism, says about it. We must do good works, this beautiful, down-to-earth catechism teaches us, and one of the reasons why is that good works give us an assurance of our faith (Answer 86). In other words, faith is known through its fruits. These good works or fruits of faith are discussed under the heading of “Gratitude” in the part of the Catechism that deals with the ten commandments and the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer. And isn’t it interesting that faithful labor is mentioned twice in the Catechism as the fruit of faith in the life of gratitude? First it is mentioned in connection with the eighth commandment: I must “work faithfully so that I may share with those in need” (Answer 111). It is also mentioned in connection with the prayer “Thy will be done.” “Help everyone carry out the work he is called to as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven” (Answer 124).

Faithful labor is the Christian’s apologia as well as his mark. It is through this faithfulness that Christians can always be recognized, no matter where they are at work.

This faithfulness is still to be found “in the world.” In fact, many unbelievers put Christians to shame in this
respect. But such unbelievers are faithful for the sake of goods that will ultimately perish. Theirs is a faithfulness for the sake of man, a faithfulness that conforms itself to man. But a Christian faithfulness, which is the fruit of faith, is a faithfulness for the sake of God. It is conformed not to man but to the angels.

No doubt you have noticed how many figures in the Bible have been called to higher things from faithful daily work. Gideon was called away from looking after cattle to become a general, and Elisha to become a prophet. David was a shepherd and was called to become a king. The shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock at night were called to the cradle of Jesus. If the wise men had not been faithful to their calling of studying the stars, they would never have encountered Christ. Those who mend their nets receive an apostle’s crown.

Therefore let faithfulness be your motto, so that you will be a lighted candle and the salt of the earth. Be faithful especially in the use of your time during the evil days before the Son of man for whom we are waiting returns from heaven. Be faithful before His all-seeing eye, for faithfulness will play an important role in the final judgment. “You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21).

I would remind you that Paul made these sober statements in a letter written in the twilight of Christ’s return, a letter overflowing with expectations about the future. Now we know what waiting means!
7.
The Word at Work (Third Apologia)

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers (2:13).

In the first 12 verses of chapter 2, then, Paul argues in a convincing way that he was not a hireling without concern for the sheep. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy,” says Jesus (John 10:10), and the heathen “philosophers” of Paul’s day looked a lot like such
thieves. But the apostle showed that he was a good shepherd willing to lay down his life for the sheep: “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (2:8 NIV). There was no change in Paul’s love after his departure,* as he makes clear in verses 17 and 18: he would gladly have returned, but satan stood in the way.

The verses 13-16 form an intermezzo in which Paul does not speak of his own relationship to the Thessalonian congregation—which does not, of course, mean that they do not fit in properly with the train of thought in the letter. They are part of Paul’s great defense of himself and are different only in that the apostle now draws a different weapon from his well-stocked arsenal.

The burning question in Thessalonica was this: Is the gospel brought by Paul the Word of God or the word of man? The enemies of the Christian faith declared unequivocally: “It is the word of man and is in no way superior to the practices taught by the heathen preachers and teachers.”

At this point Paul reminds his readers that their estimation of the value of his message when they first heard it from his own mouth was much greater: they received it not as the word of man but as the Word of God. They immediately heard in it the prophetic “Thus says the Lord.” Paul tells the Thessalonians not to be led astray now that others are trying to undermine his preaching and rob it of its value. The conclusive proof of the divine origin of the Word preached by Paul follows at the end: that Word is “at work in you believers.”

God’s Word works! It really does. In this respect it is the complete opposite of the word of man, which is more useless than idleness itself and bears on its forehead a

*This was another of the charges against Paul. It will be discussed later.
testimony to its own poverty. Let the words of Baal’s priests rise up from Mount Carmel to heaven in ever greater volume, for they will never make fire descend from heaven. Let Rachel’s moans be heard throughout all the hills of Judea, and let them penetrate to the marrow of our bones, for she will not get her children back.

But the voice of the Lord has power. His Word does not return to Him empty. His Word does something; it works. It is full of energy, as Paul puts it here. It seethes with living force. It burns and sparks and glows; it is a consuming fire. It explodes as soon as it touches something, like a grenade thrown into a trench.

It is a Word that works. God speaks—and it is there. He gives a command—and it is done. He says to the dark chaos, “Let there be light,” and the light arises joyously. He says to the sinner’s black heart, “Let there be peace,” and peace descends like dew. He says to the waves, “Be still,” and the storm subsides. He says to devils, “Get out,” and they obey.

This active, effective Word was with God in the beginning. I believe Goethe must have been overwhelmed by the power of that Word when he substituted “In the beginning was the deed” for “In the beginning was the Word.”

It is a Word that works. The effect of the proclaimed Word can be devastating. It can harden you. Just as one and the same sun ripens delicious grapes and poisonous berries, so God’s Word can ripen you for heaven or for hell. The Word always does something to you. Therefore we should attend church with a holy fear. We never leave a church service in the very same condition we were in when we entered. You cannot shake off that Word as you might shake drops of water from your coat in the entrance to the church on a rainy Sunday morning. You can eat and drink judgment to yourself when you participate in the sacrament of communion, but you can also be judged for failing to respond to the proclamation of the Word.
When Paul writes that the Word is “at work in you believers,” he is talking not about the devastating effect of the Word but about its quickening effect. In chapter 1, Paul already gave us a glimpse of how that Word worked among the Thessalonians. Returning briefly to that chapter, we see in verse 6 that Paul declares first of all that the gospel brought forth in their souls a sanctifying faith: “You received the Word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.”

In itself, the fact that someone receives the Word with joy is no proof of an upright faith. It is possible to receive the Word joyfully and still be left weeping throughout eternity. We must think, of course, of Jesus’ disturbing warning about the danger of “receiving the gospel with joy” when the joy has no lasting value because it is too much like the seed that has no depth of earth and withers when the sun beats down. Perhaps you know some people like that, fine people with hearts soft as wax. (Or are you one of them yourself?) They are easily moved by a fine sermon and quickly make all sorts of decisions—but difficulties arise when they face the realities of life! And then Christ comes with His demands every day, asking them to bear their cross and deny themselves. Maybe things are still going well on Monday and Tuesday, but—there’s simply no depth of earth.

On this point, however, the Thessalonians could be at ease. They had received the Word with joy—in the midst of affliction. They did not receive it when everything looked rosy, when the sky was blue and the sun smiled down on the flowers. No, they received it when the sky was dark with thunderclouds—in short, in the midst of affliction. The faith that takes root in the midst of affliction will also unfold and develop in hard times.

This was the first and most important effect of the Word—the transformation of their minds and of their very souls. New joy came into their lives.
Those who are without Christ do not know what joy is. Perhaps they know what fun is. They go to the world’s parties and dance until they drop. They stuff themselves—until they choke. But joy is something else.

The Thessalonian Christians, after all, were not changed only on the inside. The transformation of their minds was followed immediately—as happens in every true conversion—by a transformation of their entire lives. Their hearts had indeed been changed, but so had their feet, which now followed the path of God’s commands, so that Paul could declare that they “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1:9).

They turned away from idols to God. Here we have the antithesis. They didn’t even try to hang on to the old gods for a little while as they served the living God. This is the snare in which the great enemy of your soul always tries to trap you, by telling you that God and Mammon are entirely compatible, that it is possible to stand with one foot on the narrow path and the other on the broad way.

The second effect of the Word, then, was a complete reversal. We might put it this way: they nailed shut the windows facing the world and opened wide the windows “facing Jerusalem.”

Finally, there is a third point to be made. The Thessalonians did not start down the path in order to catch their breath at the side of the road. No, they plunged ahead with such energy that they soon reached the front ranks of the pilgrims on their way to the City of God, with the result, writes Paul, that they became “examples to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.”

They became examples! Grace always makes examples of us. Good Christians are exemplary fathers, exemplary employers, exemplary workers. In short, they set an example in all they do.

It is clear, then, that the Word had a substantial effect on the Thessalonians. Paul used this effect as ammunition
in his defense of the gospel. I wish we could be equally effective in our defense of the truth of the Bible. I wish today's preachers could say: "Take a look at me and the members of my church, and observe how our faith is not just a tranquilizer but something that has an effect on us believers." Actually, this effect is not just evidence for "those who are without Christ" but is also evidence for us of the genuineness of our faith.

Is the Word at work in you? Does it descend upon you as a living power to transform your life within and without? Are the flames of the Word also licking at the house of your life, burning up everything that cannot withstand God's judgment? Is the re-creating Word of God slowly but surely drawing from the devastation and emptiness of your sinful existence a new creature and a new creation?

In our text for this chapter, Paul says of the Thessalonians that they received and accepted the Word—which is fine—but he goes on to say that it was at work in them. There are many who go no further than receiving and accepting. They do with the Word what we do with a resolution. We accept the resolution—for information, at least—and then go back to "business as usual."

Perhaps that Word has not yet borne the same blessed fruits in your life that Paul was able to point to in the lives of the Thessalonians. (Could the reason be that you have spent too many Sundays under the burning sun of the Word?) If so, I have a question for you. Has that Word never had its shattering effect on you? Has it never given rise to deep dismay in your hearts? You answer that it certainly has, and that you sometimes feel like the publican who cried out: "O God, be gracious to me, a sinner." Don't you remember that the publican went home justified? Are you aware that at the very instant when you think of yourself as lost, God calls you chosen? That's how
it looks from God’s side. From your side it’s only a matter of taking a bit more courage in your faith.

I can very well imagine that you would like to experience not just the negative, chastening effect of the Word but also its positive, sanctifying effect, and that you would like to follow the lead of the Thessalonians and become an example to others. What child of God’s grace would not long for this? Do you know how to achieve this? You won’t achieve it by your own efforts and good intentions, for the road to hell is paved with good intentions—and not the road to heaven.

Paul knew the secret, for when he testifies of the Thessalonians that they had become examples, he first points out that they were imitators of the Lord. The more you imitate the Lord, the more you can be an example to the world. The more dependent you are on God, the more independent of the world you will be. The smaller you are in the sight of God, the greater you will be in the sight of the world.

Being an imitator is beneath the world’s dignity. It wants nothing to do with imitation, copying and tradition but tries to be original instead. In its eyes, imitation represents a loss of freedom. Yet, it is indeed glorious to be bound to the path that Jesus took. Only the train that stays on the track will reach its destination.

Even this imitation—however easy it might appear—is impossible on the basis of our own strength. We all go astray like sheep, and therefore we must fix our hope not on our own faithfulness but on the faithfulness of the Good Shepherd, who carries the lost sheep home on His own strong shoulders. Our daily prayer should be: “Lord, hold my two hands with Your power. Keep me on the narrow path. I can’t take a single step by myself. O faithful Shepherd of my soul, take me, a pauper, with You.”
8.
The Same Suffering
(Fourth Apologia)

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews (2:14).

It was a very wise move on Paul’s part to speak of persecution and suffering in his defense of the truth of the gospel. These words pop up frequently when Christians are presenting their credentials. Suffering and indignities are as inseparable from the life of the believer as smoke is from fire. The lies of the “philosophers” are received by the multitude with wild applause, but the truth which Paul spoke earned him imprisonment in Philippi, persecution in
The Same Suffering

Thessalonica, and contempt in Athens. The truth dwells on Golgotha, where it is nailed to a cross. The deceitful schemes of the "wise men of our age" are eagerly received: anyone who raises a clenched fist and preaches the doctrine of the class struggle is carried around on the shoulders of an enthusiastic public. But the gospel of the cross is an offense and a piece of foolishness. The mob cries: "Away with him! Crucify him!"

If Paul had received nothing but blessings on his missionary journeys, if he had been enthusiastically received everywhere, he would have had to ask himself seriously whether he was really preaching the gospel. The fact that he did run into opposition everywhere would convince him fully—supposing he did not already know it through some other channel—that he was indeed presenting the gospel of God. "A disciple is not greater than his master; they hated me, and they will hate you also."

This was something for the Thessalonians to hang on to. They had gotten into difficulties since they accepted the gospel. They were subjected to indignities and persecution by their fellow citizens and their own relatives as well. Divisions even arose within the home, which was most painful of all.

The remarkable thing, Paul writes, is that the afflictions of the Thessalonians were as similar to the sufferings of the mother congregation in the Jewish homeland at the hands of fellow Jews as one drop of water is like another. Since the Thessalonians became *imitators* and *confessed the same faith*, they underwent *the same suffering*. "You suffered just what they suffered," Paul reports, for in this regard the world is uniform. It always sings the same song. It knows only one tune—that of hatred. It makes no difference whether the world is called Jewish or heathen, socialist or liberal. Whether we consider the first century, the sixteenth century, or the twentieth century, the world always remains the same and relies on the same tools of persecution. Christians are always subject to the same suffering.
The believers in Thessalonica should press on undaunted, then. They should rejoice in their persecution. Their suffering was both a bond and an assurance. It bound them to the Christians in Palestine—and to the Lord Jesus Himself. And it was an assurance of the truth. Anyone who shares in the suffering will also share in the glory. Anyone who is wounded by the world’s hate will be drenched by the love of Jesus. This suffering is an apologia for Christianity. Anyone who shares in the suffering shares in the Savior and will be crowned with the same glory as the others who suffered.

This suffering, Paul says a little later, is our lot in life (3:3); it is our position in this world. Any other treatment would be unthinkable. Anyone who is a follower of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will be called a “sheep,” and sheep, as we all know, are “destined” for slaughter. Therefore we can count on the same suffering.

But if the world is consistent, if those who confess the name of Christ receive “the same” treatment in each century, then we as twentieth century Christians will also experience some suffering. Isn’t that a fair conclusion? Certainly, for anyone who stands up in public for the kingship of Christ, whether it be in government circles, in the press, or in some other area of life, does undergo the same suffering and is subjected to bitter derision and scorn. But in general, we Christians are not badly treated. We have a peaceful time of it. We are even respected. Instead of carrying wooden crosses on their backs, today’s Christians bear tiny crosses symbolizing knighthood. The “metal chains” that bound Paul have given way to “medals” of honor.

Now, I certainly don’t mean to say anything negative about those medals, nor do I wish to criticize the Christians who receive them. We should be thankful that God has given us more breathing space in this world. Yet, I would like to raise one general question. There are a great
many Christians who become uncomfortable when they hear about abuse and persecution for the sake of the Lord’s name. They’ve never experienced anything of the sort! That’s all ancient history! Is there something wrong with their attitude?

There are two possibilities to be considered when we try to explain the fact that confessing the Christian faith no longer leads to suffering: either the world has done away with suffering, or Christians have done away with their confession. Have we perhaps dropped our confession?

Many present their faith as something so sweet, so pliable, so mild that one just wouldn’t dream of nailing them to a cross for it, for the simple reason that such a faith could never do society any harm. After all, if you always remain silent when it’s time to say something, if your way of life and your opinions are not a flaming protest, if you bend and compromise in order to get along as well as possible with a neighbor who isn’t “interested” in religion, then I can well believe that you will be applauded and praised for your “broad-mindedness.”

We must be so wary of putting on a show! Or isn’t what the Christianity of our time is up to a show? Lovely uniforms, flags flying, loud fanfare—it’s all very beautiful, but it’s all show! No one gets hurt, and no one carries a loaded gun. But then we remember what Jesus said: we must fight to enter the Kingdom. That fight is essentially a war in which some are killed and others are wounded. All are subject to the same suffering.

Let’s re-think this matter carefully. Can we be one with the Man of Sorrows without participating in His sorrows, without having suffered the same thing ourselves? Can we be “imitators” without taking His cross on our backs?

“In the Father’s testament,” writes Jonker, “there are two things: suffering and glory. The two are one. To break the unity would be to tear up the whole testament. Whoever shares in the suffering will share in the glory, and whoever does not share in the suffering will not share in
The Same Suffering

the glory. On every stone of the Church of the Holy Heart on the Montmartre in Paris is chiseled the name of one of the martyrs to whom the church is dedicated. Can we become living stones in the temple of God without receiving the imprint of holy martyrdom?"

The believers in Thessalonica suffered just what the believers in Palestine suffered. They underwent this suffering because in both places Christ was confessed. Thus theirs was a suffering for Christ's sake. They were following Jesus by bearing a cross.

I put the emphasis on the italicized words because not all suffering counts as Christian suffering or cross-bearing. Only suffering for the sake of Christ deserves the name. Today there are so many people who enjoy talking about their cross, e.g. when business is going badly, or when illness strikes. That's sacrilege! The old saying that every home has its own cross to bear is a lie, for Christ is not welcome in every home. The cross belongs within the sphere of the Kingdom of God. Anyone who does not feel at home within this sphere should not talk about the cross. To bear a cross is to suffer for Christ's sake.

Undergoing the same suffering, bearing your cross, being imitators—all of this involves giving something up, making a sacrifice, encountering difficulties because of your faith, because the Lord Jesus asks something of you. Must we then demand that every Christian be plunged into the same suffering? Is this an inescapable demand made of each one of us? Must we all undergo such suffering? Yes, definitely!

We must not think of this suffering exclusively in more or less external terms, e.g. as name calling at the factory because of your faith, or a disadvantage in business because of your Christian principles, and so forth. If that were all it meant, not all Christians would know what suffering is. But there is another kind of suffering, a suffering that takes place in the inward area of the life of the soul, a suffering that touches every Christian (or should touch every Christian), a suffering that we undergo daily—and
not just once in a while. This suffering is a cross that weighs you down, a cross that you never get used to. It is embodied in a powerful statement of Jesus: “If any man would come after me [Paul’s “imitation”], let him deny himself and take up his cross.”

Are you acquainted with the suffering we call self-denial? The word *self-denial* is still used quite often—more often, I believe, than self-denial is actually attempted. It’s a favorite word especially on the pulpit. When it’s spoken in the proper tone of voice, we nod our heads in agreement. But the chances are ten to one that it’s “just a word” to us, that we know what it is outwardly although it has never taken hold of us *inwardly*, that we have never “suffered” it.

What is “self-denial”? We all know what denial is from the familiar story of Peter, who declared: “I don’t know the man.” This story illustrates the concept of denial as clearly as we could wish. Denying someone, then, means not wanting to recognize him, not wanting to have anything to do with him, not wanting to be on his side.

To deny *someone else* is not difficult. It’s not a form of suffering. We see it every day. The suffering and the difficulties arise when that “someone” is a certain person whom you know very well, namely, yourself, your own dear self, “number one.” Then denial becomes *self*-denial, that is, not wanting to have anything to do with yourself, not wanting to be on your own side.

To take a concrete example, you have a quarrel with your neighbor. You’re right and your neighbor is wrong, because you’re *always* right and your neighbor is *always* wrong. Be that as it may, you remember Christ’s call to self-denial: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself.” This means admitting to yourself that you’re wrong. If your ego protests strongly against this and is inclined to hurl abuse at your neighbor or speak ill of him, then you say to your ego: “I don’t know you, and I want
nothing whatsoever to do with you. I’ll abandon you and take the side of my neighbor and offer him the hand of fellowship.”

I hope you feel how deep this goes. It’s also painful, for you give up part of yourself. That Jesus Himself viewed such self-denial as suffering is clearest, it seems to me, in the statement quoted earlier, which appears in all three synoptic gospels. When Jesus speaks of self-denial, He adds the words: “. . . and take up his cross daily.”

This well-known phrase is also misused daily. A cross, after all, is something that people die on. Thus it’s more than just a difficult situation in life. In Jesus’ day, a man who bore a cross was not someone who carried a heavy burden. No, it was someone who was about to be put to death on that cross. Therefore taking up your cross daily means “dying daily.” Paul spoke of dying every day, and the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of the old self as “dying away” (Question 89).

Undergoing the same suffering must not be something remote, something far removed from your experience. “Denying yourself” and “taking up your cross” are not just beautiful phrases. No one should look for roses to decorate his cross.

This leads us, finally, to thoughts about the grave and confronts us with the powerful demand that we dispense with ourselves. Someone might object and say: “That’s a fine theory and a beautiful ideal, but it’s contradicted by facts and actual circumstances, for 99 Christians out of 100 are more interested in self-assertion than in self-denial, and most people want nothing to do with the awful pain and suffering inseparably bound up with the cross of Christ.”

Now, that’s quite well possible, but I would then like to repeat what the famous German philosopher Hegel is once supposed to have said. When someone objected that his theories were in direct conflict with the facts, he replied: “Too bad for the facts.” Of course this was hardly
The Same Suffering

a humble statement on Hegel’s part, but the Christian has every right to assume an elevated point of view. If the “facts” of his life conflict with the theory of “the Word,” he must say to himself: “Too bad for the facts.” He must not bend and stretch the Word to fit his personal circumstances. Instead he should mould and shape the facts and circumstances to conform to “the Word.”

He must do so, for it is a matter of life or death. “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross.” It follows from all of this that any professed imitator of Christ who is not acquainted with this “suffering and death” but wants to assert himself cannot be a follower of Jesus. There is no third option.

Thus we see one continuing line. The believers of all ages must undergo the same suffering at the hands of the world without and must fight the same fight against the enemy within.

Yet this line will not continue forever (a prospect that would leave us without comfort). Suffering gives way to joy. When the Son of man for whom we are waiting returns on the clouds, joy will take over, and the endless line of the suffering and struggles of the children of God will be broken.

“What comfort is the return of Christ to you?” the Heidelberg Catechism asks. “In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. All his enemies and mine he will condemn to everlasting punishment; but me and all his chosen ones he will take along with him into the joy and glory of heaven” (Answer 52).
9.

Alone
(Fifth Apologia)

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone (3:1).

The insinuations raining down on poor Paul's head must have felt like bullets fired from a machine gun. His hasty retreat from Thessalonica after the uproar in which Jason had played a role was interpreted in a way that was not flattering to Paul. "He took off with the money,"* it

*They were quite well aware, of course, that Paul had not abandoned the Thessalonians but had been driven away. This was not the last time in the history of the church that someone who was driven away was accused of desertion.
was said, “and now he ignores his followers.” They were being persecuted and oppressed, while he lived like a king somewhere or other, planning eventually to deceive other people with his beautiful talk. If he were really concerned about the welfare of the congregation, it was argued, he would certainly have come for a visit or at least have sent a letter. But he did not come back. He took the greatest pleasure in abandoning the young congregation, which apparently meant nothing at all to him.

If the issue here were just Paul’s reputation and not the gospel itself, the apostle would probably not even have taken the trouble to defend himself against such slander. Allegations of this kind don’t deserve an answer. In such cases, a calm silence is often the most eloquent defense. But because these poisonous rumors had apparently been taken seriously by some of the believers, which made Paul afraid that the arch-liar was behind them in an effort to block the spread of the gospel and nullify his work (3:5), he regarded it as necessary to defend himself against the foul insinuations.

The separation from the Thessalonians had certainly been very painful for Paul; a mother separated from her children could not have suffered more than he did. “A short time after we had been separated from you—in body but never in thought, brothers—we had an especially strong desire and longing to see you face to face again” (2:17 JB). This demonstrated the utter falsity of what was being said about Paul, namely, that he no longer cared about the Thessalonians. He would certainly have returned to them long ago, he reports, if satan had not succeeded in blocking the way.

Contrary to what some interpreters of Scripture suggest, we should not think of satan’s intervention here as taking the form of a storm that came up suddenly or a serious illness or anything of that sort. All these things are under God’s control; they are not for satan to decide.
James has taught us to say: "If it be the Lord's will, we shall live to do this or that" (James 4:15 NEB). It was certainly not Paul's intention to amend this to read: "If it be the Lord's will and satan's as well..." The Lord is in control. We place ourselves calmly in His hands and confess simply that the One who controls the clouds and sky and wind, telling them when and where to make their appearance, will also find a path for our feet to follow.

As for satan blocking the way, I suspect that an order must have been issued in Thessalonica that Paul was not to return to the city under any circumstances. The "police" would have to be on the lookout for him. Paul, who customarily detected the hand of satan behind any human opposition to the gospel, such as the opposition that now raged so fiercely in Thessalonica, could have written that the government stood in the way, but his choice of words is better, for it gave the congregation a definite indication of how such opposition is to be interpreted.

Be that as it may, Paul did not accept the situation calmly. On the contrary, his desire to see the congregation at Thessalonica grew stronger and stronger as satan's opposition increased. He kept wondering how things were going with the young congregation. His curiosity could hardly be contained. He spent all his spare time wondering about Thessalonica. Finally, he decided to make a sacrifice. He just had to know how things were going there. Although Timothy, who was a first-rate missionary himself, could be of great use to Paul in Athens as his assistant, he resolved to send this faithful fellow laborer to Thessalonica. Thus Paul would rather remain entirely alone in the great heathen city of Athens—to die there, if need be—than see the young plant which he had planted wither and die under the cold breath of satan. That was what he meant by the words: "Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's servant in the gospel of Christ, to establish you in your faith."
Now, just how the sending of Timothy from Athens is to be reconciled with what we read in Acts 17 is a question that interested readers will have to look into with the help of some Bible commentary or other. The important point for my purposes is that Paul subordinated his own desires to the welfare of the congregation.

Being alone in Athens was quite something for the apostle. He remained alone in an idolatrous city without any way to defend himself against the fierce opposition springing up on all sides. There was no one to help him, no one to discuss things with, no one to encourage him. It was truly a great sacrifice on Paul’s part. In the simple words left behind at Athens alone, we feel the intensity and heat of the opposition, but in these words we also feel the holy fire of self-sacrifice and self-denial for the sake of God’s Kingdom.

This man had been asked: “What would you prefer—that you suffer or that the Lord’s cause suffer?” He did not hesitate long before answering: “I have decided to stay behind alone in Athens.” Thus Paul’s answer to the foul accusation made by his enemies was sacrifice.

Anyone who indignantly rejects the charge that he is a hypocrite or a nominal Christian should test the authenticity of his faith by asking: Am I, like Paul, ready and willing to sacrifice? But be careful as you gauge the condition of your spiritual life. Be very careful! After all, aren’t we often busy trying to fool ourselves and others? Don’t we like to play games with such powerful ideas as bearing a cross, giving, and being willing to sacrifice? I’m afraid we often speak of “willingness to sacrifice” as though there’s nothing to it.

Do you realize what this phrase means? When I think of “sacrifice,” I think of an altar and glowing flames. Sacrificing is certainly not just putting a quarter into the collection plate—or perhaps a dollar bill, if you’re in a generous mood. Sacrificing is giving part of yourself. Ac-
According to the interpretation we find in the Heidelberg Catechism, it actually means giving all of yourself. The Catechism describes the Christian’s priestly task as “presenting myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks” (Answer 32). Therefore, willingness to sacrifice must be understood as the willingness to climb onto an altar and be consumed by God’s flames.

Let’s not pretend to be something that we aren’t by bragging about making sacrifices. Instead, let’s take a careful look around to see whether there is an altar somewhere in our lives.

Paul’s sending Timothy to Thessalonica, then, must be seen as a deprivation and sacrifice. Paul declared that he would rather remain alone because he realized that his personal desires would have to take second place to the Lord’s cause. Don’t you think we should be more like Paul in this respect?

Unfortunately, our beloved personal desires have a tremendous hold on us. First you must look out for yourself and your children, you argue, and then set aside some money for your retirement, and then, of course, there’s always the church, but that’s definitely all you can afford to pay out. You probably reason this way because you fear that “too much giving” will get you into financial difficulties and make you poor. If so, you’re deeply mistaken, and I must remind you that Paul became unspeakably rich through his sacrifice and “loss.”

Paul would rather remain alone. In a certain sense, this is the tragic element in every Christian life. Anyone who seeks not his own interest but the Kingdom of God above all else will have to sacrifice again and again and give up an enormous amount. He must give up not only money and material goods and many of the beautiful things of this world but also friends and perhaps even his father and mother, for anyone who loves his father and mother more than he loves Christ is not worthy of Christ.
I'd rather be alone. Yet I'm not really alone. I'm always with Him, for He will never leave me alone. I'm with our Lord Jesus Christ, who did not seek his own interest either. On the cross He showed the greatest possible willingness to sacrifice. In His most desperate hour, He was left alone and suffered alone. For our sake He declared that He "would rather be alone."

Hallelujah! Son of God, re-make us in Your image!
10.
An Apparent Contradiction

... so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them (3:3 NIV).
... to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory (2:12).

Was Paul speaking forthrightly and honestly when he first preached the gospel in Thessalonica? He spoke to the Thessalonians of glory, a glory enjoyed by the King's children. Those are roughly the terms in which the apostle himself described the content of his message, for he wrote
to them: “We charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” Those were liberating words. The church bells of the glorious year of liberation pealed. One could hear chains falling.

That’s how matters stood when Paul left. But it did not take long before disillusionment set in. The Thessalonians soon heard how things were going with Paul in Athens and Corinth: everywhere he ran into chains, fetters and affliction.* And that’s what gave rise to doubts. The Thessalonians no longer understood what Paul meant. Didn’t he talk about “kingdom” and “glory”? But all they saw now was affliction and chains of slavery. Wasn’t reality in conflict here with preaching? Had Paul won them over by preaching only half of the truth to them? Or, worse still, could it be that what Paul preached was not the truth at all? If so, wouldn’t it be better for them to give up the Christian faith?

Those were the questions that some people in Thessalonica were asking, first in a hesitant way and then out loud. Paul talked about “wavering because of these afflictions.” The Thessalonians couldn’t reconcile the afflictions with the promised “glory.”

Now Paul writes them a letter, but his “clarification” makes the whole matter even more mysterious. He doesn’t comfort them by saying: “Brothers and sisters, the afflictions are the labor pains of childbirth that precede joy. Be patient and wait.” Instead he declares, in direct contrast with his original gospel: “Affliction is to be our lot, as you yourselves well know.”

Now the light is really getting dim! Doesn’t this gospel

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*When Paul warned the Thessalonians not to waver because of “these afflictions,” he was probably referring to *his own* afflictions (see 3:4).
An Apparent Contradiction

remind you of the oracle at Delphi, which was always right because it was so ambiguous?

Yet, if the Thessalonians had listened properly—which apparently they didn’t do, or they wouldn’t be “wavering”—they would have been aware that there is no conflict between Paul’s earlier statement and his later statement. When the apostles preached about God calling them into His “kingdom and glory,” he thereby predicted the affliction that was to come, for kingdom and glory are not words that are used interchangeably in the Bible. Speakers and preachers love to pile synonyms on top of each other and wear down their hearers by deft verbal acrobatics, but the Bible does no such thing.

The “kingdom” is not the “glory” itself but leads to the “glory.” The “kingdom” is the narrow path and gate, while the “glory” is our Father’s spacious home. The “kingdom” is below and is “within you,” while the “glory” is above. The “kingdom” is a battlefield where all the powers of the devil are used against us, where we face evil conspiracies against God’s Word, while the “glory” is the perfection and completion of God’s Kingdom, in which He will be all in all.* The “kingdom” is the tough, daily routine, while the “glory” is our assured victory. The “kingdom” is the battle, while the “glory” is our rest.

All whom God calls to be conquerors in His “glory” are first given a place below among those who are fighting for His “kingdom.” God does not call us only to glory but to His kingdom and glory—in that order. Because this struggle is inconceivable without bloodshed, because a battlefield always leads to tears, Paul is entirely justified in writing about “leading a life worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory,” and then adding in the same letter that no one should waver under this

*See Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 123.
affliction, for “you yourselves know that this is to be our lot” (3:3).

Furthermore, the opposition between “kingdom” and “glory” is not absolute. It’s not true that everything here is misery, while there it’s all festivity.

This formula, which is as cheap as it’s unscriptural, is all too often served up and eagerly accepted. But then we should not be angry when people tell us scornfully that Christianity sells tickets to eternity, for this misconception is in large measure our own fault. We like to wonder about who will be blessed; that is to say, we like to transpose glory into an unknown future. But God’s Word declares simply that those who are called to glory are blessed—here and now. Glory is part of the familiar present. Jesus tells us that the poor in spirit are blessed and that the peacemakers are blessed. “Blessed is the man,” Psalm 1 begins.

The disciples asked: “Are there only a few who will be blessed?” Jesus answered: “Will be blessed? That’s not the important thing. Fight for your place!” The blessedness lies in the struggle to which Jesus calls us. In other words, the glory above shines through in the kingdom here below.

To us, “eternal life” is a faraway land across the sea, but Jesus tells us in His own powerful way that eternal life is knowing the Father. Therefore the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of the eternal joy that I already experience in my heart (Answer 58).

For the present, blessedness is to be sought not in the enjoyment of “glory” but in service in the Kingdom, for whoever is called to the Kingdom is called to be a subject of the King. But serving this King is blessed, even when it leads to affliction.

Let’s not forget that service is our inescapable lot in life. No man is his own lord and master. Those who don’t
serve Christ serve satan. But satan is a tyrant. Serving him is slavery, for his oppression is deadly.

But those who take their places in Christ’s Kingdom serve a gentle King whose yoke is light. Therefore we sing that serving Him never brings us to grief, and that under His rule we are blessed and free.

Paul writes that God calls us “into his own kingdom and glory.” Here, as elsewhere in this eschatological letter, he gives clear expression to his expectations about the future, in another variation on the theme “waiting for His Son from heaven.”

But Paul was not the sort of person to be satisfied with working out concrete ideas of what to expect. He was too level-headed for that, and so is the gospel. What he presents here is not wild fancy or idle speculation, nor is it a cozy and comfortable game of the kind some Christians like to play. He is not building castles in the air but training men and women to storm heaven and take possession of the citadel of Zion that will be established in eternity. What Paul presents is not a tour of the courtyard of our ever-changing feelings but a trumpet call to rally us in our march to the eternal God. He speaks of a God who calls us to His kingdom and glory. Thereby he calls us back from the dream (glory) to the reality of the struggle (kingdom) and creates a bond between the future and the present, between what will be and what must be now.

The expectation of a glorious future presses us to keep moving ahead. It makes us struggle in this life as we work for sanctification in the present. The gospel is both promise and demand. Paul wants to make it clear that anyone who hopes to get to heaven must not forget that he is first to take his place in the Kingdom. He must become a soldier and learn to obey.

Yes, God calls you to His glory. But don’t skip the word kingdom as you read this verse. No one will receive the crown of glory if he has not fought the good fight. Paul speaks of kingdom and glory—both of them.
11. Renewal

_It is the breath of life to us that you stand firm in the Lord (3:8 NEB)._ 

Paul did not have an easy time of it in this world. He spent a good part of his life in jail, and when he was free, his archenemies the Jews nipped at his heels constantly. On his back there were clear traces of the beatings he had suffered, and on his wrist one could see the marks left by his chains. Once he was left for dead outside the city walls. At Ephesus he fought against wild animals. His health was very poor. This poor man was plagued by blows from satan's angels.
But there were also times of relief, days when he recovered completely and seemed to forget all about his suffering. Sometimes the sun broke through and shone brightly. When did this happen? When the thorn in his flesh bothered him less? Or was it perhaps when his enemies gave him some respite? That’s the sort of answer we would expect, but it’s not the answer Paul gives. Listen to what the apostle himself says about when the sun shone in his life and his spirit and strength were renewed: it was when he heard that things were going well in the churches. “It is the breath of life* to us that you stand firm in the Lord.”

This is what Paul wrote when he was still undergoing affliction (see 3:3,7). What an amazing man!

Paul had actually been somewhat worried and afraid that things would go wrong in Thessalonica. He feared that the devil would destroy everything he had built up, and that his work would be in vain (3:5). This fear plagued him and caused him pain. If he himself were to perish, that wouldn’t be so serious. Then he could sing: “We are always of good cheer.” But the thought that God’s church might perish made him a broken man.

Just as Paul was giving in to these fears in his desperate effort to calm himself, Timothy arrived on the scene. He had just come from Thessalonica.† He was tired and dusty from his long trip, but his eyes sparkled, for he had good news to report.

Immediately he began telling Paul the news. Two things in his report merit our attention. First of all, he left

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*The Greek word used suggests relief and renewal of strength.

†The Greek text in 3:6 indicates that Timothy had just arrived.
out completely what we normally start with when we haven’t seen one another for a long time, namely, a report on our health, our business, and so forth. The *spiritual welfare* of the Thessalonians occupied the attention of the two men totally. Secondly, Timothy talked about the *faith* and *love* of the Thessalonians but said nothing about the third member of the famous trinity—*hope*. Unfortunately, he could not praise the Thessalonians on that score. As far as the question of Christian hope was concerned, there were still a few things to be set straight. Their expectations about the future were much too direct and immediate, and they labored under some misconceptions about what happens to those who die in the Lord (see 4:15).

Paul would have to write to them once about these matters. But he should not find too much fault with the young congregation, for the main thing was that the devil didn’t get his way with them. Their faith and love had not been perverted. They still *stood firm* in the Lord.

As Timothy told his story, he could see Paul’s tension subside. It was just as though Paul had become a new man. His spirit was renewed. Within an hour his secretary was busy taking down a letter on parchment. Still deeply moved* by his joy, Paul wrote: “It is the breath of life to us that you stand firm in the Lord.”

If someone were to do some careful research into what brings about a “revival of strength” or “renewal of interest” in people today, he would get some disturbing results. Most people are revived in spirit only by the prospect of money. The very scent of money makes them jump like a Jack-in-the-box. Their depleted energy is suddenly renewed when new financial opportunities present themselves. They breathe deeply again. In general, the only exceptions to this rule are exceptionally well-mannered

*The compact character of this sentence, which really contains two thoughts, shows us that Paul was deeply moved when he dictated this letter.
people, e.g. aristocrats from distinguished families. Yet, their horizon doesn’t extend beyond this earth either, nor can they even imagine the possibility of getting excited about things other than money and material goods. If you were to confront such people with Paul, who was cheerful when he encountered misfortune but was tormented when God’s cause ran into trouble, they would look at you in amazement and say to themselves: “He’s out of his mind!” You don’t need to go out into the world to find such people: you’ll find row after row of them sitting in church each Sunday morning.

There are others who sit up straight and suddenly become interested not when someone “stands firm in the Lord” but when someone falls. Then they have something to talk about. They whisper in your ear: “Did you hear about so-and-so?” They put on a very compassionate face. They think it’s just awful. They shake their wise heads and say: “Won’t this damage the name of the Lord?” But in the meantime they relish the shocking story. It revives them in spirit. In fact, they positively enjoy it. Unfortunately, this kind of quickening or renewal of interest is far from unusual among “Christians.”

We must admit that a wanderer through the streets of today’s ecclesiastical Jerusalem would hardly maintain that the basic theme of every conversation he heard was the Pauline declaration: “It is the breath of life to us that you stand firm in the Lord.” If someone did maintain this, we would quickly brand him naive.

There has been a great deal of talk in our time about the decline of the church. It would be foolish to deny this decline, for we see it all around us. We see a decline in spiritual life, in church awareness, and in morality. Some people try hard to make the situation look healthier than it really is, but this is not doing the church a favor. Paul was level-headed enough to see the shortcomings of the Thessalonian church, despite all the good he had heard
about it, and therefore he spoke of “supplying what is lacking in your faith” (3:10). He had already been forced to drop one of the members of the trinity of faith, hope and love. The question now was whether he would be able to maintain the other two when it came time to write a letter to this church.

Flattering remarks won’t do us any good. What we need are prophets to call us to repentance, prophets like Amos to call our ecclesiastical home a “fallen house” (Amos 9:11) and show with plumb line in hand how hopelessly crooked its walls are.

It would be foolish to gloss over what’s wrong with the church. But it would be just as foolish to lament the state of the church without lamenting our own shortcomings. Reformation is not brought about by deep sighs and a flood of words. What we need is personal conversion. We need to be converted to the standpoint of Paul, who takes an intense interest in the church, who is ready to perish with it, if need be. “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither away” (Ps. 137:5). We can speak of a genuine renewal of the spirit or revival not if we are awakened by the rustle of dollar bills but only if each one of us is personally renewed by Zion’s prosperity, only if we cry—yes, cry—about Jerusalem’s destruction.

The greatest evil of our time is that the doctrine of the church of the Lord is no longer a question of life and death for most people. The church, some people seem to think, must be built on the firm rock of “integrity.” Its value is not absolute but only relative. We are interested in it in the same way we are interested in a “social project.”

The glorious blossoming of the early Christian church can only be explained by the fact that there were people like Paul willing to live and die with the church. The decline in our time is a result of the fact that people can also live and die without the church.

O Holy Spirit, inscribe these Words of Yours in our
hearts: “It is the breath of life to us that you stand firm in the Lord.” Only then will we, like Paul, take fresh courage to place our lives—which includes our participation in the church—in the light of Christ’s return, so that we may be “blameless in the sight of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus Christ comes with all his saints” (3:13 JB).
12.
Sanctification
and Exploitation

For this is the will of God, your sanctification... that no man transgress or wrong his brother (4:3, 6).*

The theme of the two letters to the Thessalonians is the return of Christ. The Thessalonians lived in the unshaken expectation that this day would soon be upon them. And it was entirely possible that it would, of course,

*In this chapter I must part company with the interpreters who regard verse 6a as a continuation of the thought of verse 5. I favor the view that what Paul has in mind here is the business ethics of the Thessalonians.
for no one knew the day or the hour—not even Paul. From various of the apostle’s remarks we can infer that he himself hoped to experience the return of Christ.

Anyone inclined to think that this hope would lead Paul to surrender himself to quiet, mystical meditation or fill his letters with the sound of a holy homesickness is quite mistaken. Paul exhorts his readers to be sober (5:6) and sets an example of sobriety himself. In this letter on Christ’s return, he gives some sober, practical, down-to-earth warnings about ordinary daily life.

We find an example of this in our text for this chapter: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” God begins where we would like to stop. We think we have reached the goal with our regeneration (i.e. our acceptance as children of God, our conversion), but the Bible teaches us that at this point we’re only getting started. Then comes that long, fearsome road of the struggle against sin and the world. God wants us to be sanctified.

In 4:3-6, Paul tells us what is involved in this sanctification. We must pay special attention here. When he talks in verse 6 about mistreating our brother, he is not turning to an entirely new subject. It still falls under the heading of the “sanctification” mentioned in verse 3. The apostle is telling the Thessalonians that their sanctification must be worked out in two areas in particular. In the area of marriage (vs. 3-5) and in the area of social and community life (vs. 6), they must make it obvious that they are changed, converted people. The reason why Paul mentions only these two areas is that this young congregation had only recently come over to the Christian faith from heathendom and was still living in the midst of a heathen environment. Marriage and social life were the two areas in which the heathen world was in particularly bad shape.

When the Thessalonians were converted, their eyes were opened to this problem. But it’s not as easy to break with your old way of life as it is to take off your coat, for
example. Meanwhile, we are also led to wonder whether marriage and social life might not be the two areas most in need of sanctification and reformation in our own time as well.

First Paul makes some remarks on marriage. The Thessalonians must abstain from fornication. Each one must know “how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor.” Paul’s way of talking about women sometimes sounds less than respectful in our modern ears. Yet, although we know he was not married and although he wrote that it is better not to marry, he never meant to be hostile to women as such.

Although many things could be said about the sanctification of marriage in our time, we now move on to the second area—social and community life. There, too, says Paul, sanctification must take place. The new life created by the Holy Spirit does not allow itself to be bound or limited. It is like the new wine that forces the top off the bottle. It jumps over the walls of church and home into the midst of everyday social life.

That Paul means the life of society comes through more clearly in the original Greek text than in many of the translations. He uses such strong language that we might feel inclined to suspect him of exaggeration. But although his language might sound like socialist propaganda, in his mouth it is sanctified and has a deep, serious meaning. “No one is to exploit or cheat his brother,” he proclaims emphatically. He is talking, of course, about trade or business. The word trade is also used in the well-known parable of the talents, when the master says to the servants who received the talents: “Trade with these until I return.” Thus, what Paul apparently wants to say is that in trade or business or industry, no one is to exploit or cheat his brother.

He speaks to the Thessalonians in a very sober, down-to-earth way, doesn’t he? But life is indeed a sober busi-
ness. The place to prove you are a Christian is in ordinary daily life.

Here we have some valuable instructions for employers, for merchants, for anyone with both feet in the business world. The desire for more lives in the heart of each one of us, and therefore the sins of exploitation and cheating are an ever present danger. Let no one claim that he is totally innocent. Exploiting and cheating your brother—of all people—is a great evil under the sun, and it is also present in today's society.

Paul did not try to restrain this evil by giving the Thessalonians all kinds of laws and regulations, however valuable laws and regulations might be in themselves. Paul did not set his hopes on contracts, auditors and inspectors. Now, I don't mean to imply that such things aren't useful today. My point is simply that they're there for "the world." You, as a Christian, should be driven by completely different motives, which means that you should abstain from exploitation and cheating because it is God's will that you be sanctified. If you, as a sanctified person, deal with others honestly when you enter your office or workshop or when you make decisions about your business or stand behind the counter selling things or deliver your goods, then everything will work out even without written regulations. The reason for this is that the following words are imprinted in your heart in flaming letters: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification . . . that no man transgress or wrong his brother."

What Paul wants to tell us is that anyone who supposes that a different moral standard applies in social and community life than in the church is completely mistaken. Anyone who takes off the Christian faith as though it were a jacket when he arrives at work, at the stock exchange, at home, at the marketplace, or at school is a Christian outwardly but not inwardly.

When the apostle warns us that no one is to exploit or
cheat his *brother* in business, he does not, of course, mean to imply that we may cheat anyone who is not our "brother." Perhaps Paul uses this word to point out that this evil does indeed occur between brothers but that there especially it cannot be tolerated. He writes all of this in a letter overflowing with the return of Christ, which shows us that Christ's return is not just a doctrine.
13. Politics and Future Expectations

But we exhort you, brethren, ... to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs (4:10-11).

There are many Christians in our time who love to squabble and bicker about all sorts of little things. These Christians should feel deeply ashamed of themselves when they hear Paul saying to the congregation in Thessalonica: "But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have anyone write to you" (4:9). Things were in order there as far as brotherly love was concerned. The Thessalonians had learned from God Himself to love each other. Anyone
who receives this divine instruction gets practical lessons as well as theoretical lessons. "And indeed you do love all the brethren," writes Paul (vs. 10).

Yet, in all honesty, I must point out that this view of the matter is not entirely correct, for it also happened in Thessalonica that one brother exploited or cheated the other in business (4:6), which is certainly no manifestation of "brotherly love." The apostle even had to write, "Be at peace among yourselves" (5:13) and, "See that none of you repays evil for evil" (vs. 15). Naturally, you wonder how these statements are to be reconciled with what Paul said earlier. Perhaps he was speaking ironically when he made the more or less flattering remark: "But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you."

Now, Paul did use irony on some occasions, but this was not one of them. Here he says what he means and means what he says. The proper explanation for this statement is that Paul was using this reminder about Christian love as a way of leading up to the subject he wanted to deal with, namely, Christian hope or Christian future expectations. This is the topic at the heart of this letter, and he goes into it in detail.

Of course Paul is well aware that he began the letter with the trinity of faith, hope and love (1:3). He now elaborates on this theme. Paul was not one to write in a haphazard way. On the contrary, his letters are systematic. He leaves faith out of the picture for the present. As far as brotherly love is concerned, things are in order—in principle, at least—for the Thessalonians have been instructed by God Himself. But they’re not perfect in this area, and therefore Paul writes: "But we exhort you, brethren, to do so more and more" (4:10). One could say that when it
came to brotherly love, they were on the right track but hadn’t reached their destination yet. They could and should go further—and they would doubtless do so in time. At bottom the situation with regard to their love was sound. In principle there was nothing to straighten out. Paul could let the matter rest with an exhortation to bear still more fruit. It was not necessary to write anything beyond that.

Unfortunately, he could not say the same of Christian hope, for in that area the Thessalonians were certainly not on the right track. Hadn’t Timothy reported to him on their fine progress in faith and love without being able to say the same of hope? Indeed, their expectations about the future were completely out of line. Proper insight into these matters was entirely lacking; they misunderstood these matters in principle. In short, it was urgent that Paul write about Christian hope, and so he did: “But we exhort you . . . to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs.”

What were the Thessalonians doing, then, that Paul had to tell them to live quietly? This will become clear once we understand what he meant by aspire. In the Greek text we find a verb that is often used in connection with competition for a position of honor, e.g. membership in a city council or legislative assembly. Thus this word brings us into the area of politics. People who “aspired” were people who “hoped for” a seat in some assembly; they were candidates for office who zealously made propaganda for their candidacy.

By using this particular word here, Paul is apparently alluding to the fact that the Christians in Thessalonica were “getting involved in politics” and putting up candidates for posts in the city government. They did not do so to show off or gain glory for themselves—not at all! The Christians in Thessalonica lived in the firm conviction that the day of Christ was at hand (see II Thess. 2:2). That’s
what they had understood Paul to say. The imminence of Christ’s return, they believed, must be the guiding consideration for all measures decided on by the city and the state. The city would have to be governed in accordance with the “program” of their Christian eschatology. This was what “principle” demanded. But how was this to be worked out in practice? That was not easy to determine. In fact, the Thessalonians probably didn’t know themselves. They hadn’t figured out yet just how their program was to be realized; they simply hadn’t gotten around to it. As long as they themselves didn’t have to bear the responsibility of governing, they could safely create a big stir, make propaganda for their ideas, and accuse those who didn’t agree with them of being “unfaithful to their principles.”

Paul now had to tell these clamorous, flag-waving political propagandists that they should aspire to live quietly and mind their own affairs. Unfortunately, much of the beauty of Paul’s way of putting this is lost in translation. The words aspire, live quietly, and mind your own affairs all have precisely defined meanings in Greek, and the meaning of the latter two phrases is the exact opposite of the meaning of the word aspire. What they mean is living as a citizen without office, that is, staying away from public life. What Paul was saying, in a more or less paradoxical way, was this: “Work hard not to be elected. Announce your candidacy for the office of citizen without office. Make it your ambition not to get a position of honor. Live quietly instead and mind your own affairs. If you want to devote yourself to something and use up some energy, go ahead, but there are better uses for your energy than politics. Aspire to live calmly.”

We must view this passage in exactly this context, for what Paul is advising against here is being too quick to elevate our own favorite ideas to the status of Christian political principles. We should be thankful for this warning, for the deplorable practice of taking some text or other out of context and using it as a protective shield for
our own sins is also present in Christian circles today.

But those who love to be passive, those who avoid the struggle against sin just as carefully as they avoid contagious diseases need not argue that it is their “ambition” to live calmly, for Paul isn’t talking about spiritual life here. That would indeed be a gospel “to their liking,” but you needn’t look for such a “gospel” in the Bible. A calm life is simply not to be expected in God’s Kingdom. Anyone in that Kingdom who seeks the office of “citizen without office” is at the wrong address. As far as Jesus Christ is concerned, we all hold an important office—in fact, a threefold office, the office of prophet, priest and king.

And if you’re one of those people who sit in an easy chair with the newspaper and let others do the work, you have no right to appeal to our text by saying that it’s your “ambition” to live quietly and mind your own affairs. Indeed, you must be very “zealous” about living quietly and keeping your own house in order, for we never see you or hear from you. You’re much too busy with your “own affairs” to concern yourself with what’s going on in the church. You claim that you’re not qualified to be an office-bearer in the church. You claim that you’re not interested in evangelism and that you have no time for meetings. You occupy a seat on the church’s train, but you let others do the work needed to keep the train moving and only make yourself heard when the train is in danger of being derailed. Don’t you dare appeal to Paul as your patron saint, for in this passage he’s not talking about church life at all. When he does talk about it, you’ll hear something completely different.

Paul here makes the light of God’s Word shine especially on politics. Don’t bother with it, he writes. Don’t try to influence events in that area.

What a shame! Doesn’t that rule out Christian political activity entirely, together with the whole political
enterprise? Of course not. That’s not what Paul means. He wouldn’t dream of saying any such thing. This is simply not to be expected of the man who wrote: “All things are yours” (I Cor. 3:21). All he means to say in this context is this: “You Thessalonians are completely mistaken when it comes to the question of Christian hope. Don’t be so foolish as to proclaim your view of this business as a fixed principle. You who want to assume high office still have to learn to sit at my feet. Aspire to live quietly and listen. You who want to be teachers will first have to be students. Don’t proclaim as principles things that aren’t principles at all. Anyone interested in proclaiming principles will have to begin by studying principles.”

Hear the voice of God!
14.
Social Action and Future Expectations

Work with your hands, as we charged you, so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody (4:11-12).

Thought almost always governs life and pushes it in the right or wrong direction, depending on whether the guiding ideas are derived from God’s Word. Therefore it was high time for Paul to set the Thessalonians straight about what was to come. Mistaken ideas about the return
of Christ had not only caused those who were interested in politics to lose their heads but had also had an effect on the working class, with the result that the workers were in danger of losing the sober attitude which the apostle repeatedly recommends in this letter.

It appears that in Thessalonica and elsewhere, the gospel preached by Paul got the best reception from the middle class and the workers, just as it does in our country. The workers, who were in effect slaves and had no rights, were in a difficult position and had to sweat profusely just to make a living. When these people now heard—or believed they heard—that Christ was to return soon, they stopped working. After all, Christ’s return would bring them a rich inheritance, and it was only a question of weeks—or months, at most—before this inheritance would fall into their laps. They could count on it. These people were the “idle brothers” (see 5:14 and II Thess. 3:6, 11), with whom we will deal later. Thus, dislike of work was also a phenomenon of that era. (Because of the slavery of that time, it was more excusable then than it is now.)

We should also remember that in the Greek world of that time, work (especially manual labor) was not held in high esteem. “Working with your hands,” which was what Paul did, was actually regarded as something disgraceful. No one in that era dreamed about writing poems about workers or idolizing them in any way. Work was for stupid people—that’s all there was to it! Workers were slaves.

Those slaves would not have believed their eyes and ears if they had been able to observe the labor movement of our time. In those days one did not speak in neutral terms of “employers” and “employees.” There were simply slaves and free men. The latter, the free citizens, knew better than to do any work with their hands. They preferred to philosophize and engage in disputes, spending their time in “nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21).

It should not surprise us that when these workers heard the gospel of God, in which there is neither slave nor
free man, they tried to climb the ladder leading to the status of "free citizen." They didn't see why there shouldn't be equality. Consequently, words like emancipation, freedom and equality filled the air. Like free men, these workers wanted to "do nothing." Therefore they went on strike.

Paul took his stand in the middle of these demonstrating strikers. He did not feed their false enthusiasm but simply sent them back to their jobs with the command: "Work with your hands, as we charged you."* He did not speak of higher wages, shorter hours and the abolition of slavery but simply showed them his own calloused hands, sang to them the song of the worker, and urged them to get back to work. That's all there was to it!

This is a sober approach. It's almost enough to disillusion us. But that's the character of the gospel.

False expectations about the future, whether they have a Thessalonian religious flavor or the secularized flavor of contemporary socialism, always create confusion in society and make people close their eyes to reality. Paul, too, was an enthusiastic person, but he was not a dreamer. He was an idealist—and therefore a realist in the good sense. He announced to the workers that they were children of the King, but at the same time he taught them to toil and sweat for their bread. He told them they were richer than millionaires, but he also urged them to work faithfully and earn a little money. He proclaimed that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand and that Christ was coming soon on the clouds, but he also exhorted the workers to continue working faithfully at their posts. It was a question of both/and—the one because of the other.

Anyone who has walked in the heavens and spent

*The words as we charged you indicate that Paul already made this point when he preached to the Thessalonians. Apparently the social element was not absent in his first missionary sermons to the heathens.
quiet hours on the mountain with the coming Christ will return to ordinary life with a shining face. That person can truly sing. He can sing the song of the worker, even when he is sweating. He sees things as they are—but in the light of what is to come, when the hills shall show forth righteousness. He is not in a hurry. Indeed, anyone who understands the gospel of Christ’s return (parousia) is fully equipped for any good work, whether he be a politician or a worker.

Without deifying the worker, Paul gives work its place as a divine calling. He tells the Thessalonians to “work with their hands.” This is something for Christian labor unions to take note of!

In Thessalonica the workers went on strike and demanded an “elevation of the worker”—not for selfish reasons or in the name of the class struggle but in the name of religion. This shows us again how evil causes can be promoted with pious words and flying banners. This is always a danger. The name Christian is no guarantee that what it is applied to is really Christian, for it can be used for all sorts of false, non-Christian ideals.

All work is a “divine calling,” but it is to remain a “calling.” In other words, work should not be regarded simply as a means of earning money, as a necessary evil that we drop as soon as we have earned enough to retire. Work makes man noble, but the Christian worker, who knows of a higher nobility—every Christian is a nobleman—must show that a nobleman works, too, and has not forgotten the song of the worker.

In our text for this chapter, Paul goes on to say: “. . . so that you may command the respect of outsiders and be dependent on nobody.” What does Paul mean when he talks about not being dependent? After all he said to the emancipated workers of his day, we might be inclined to think that the apostle is continuing his line of thought along the nineteenth century liberal lines: “You workers have everything you need. What are you after with all your complaints and demands? Just see to it that you get
through this life with God and with honor, and don’t ex-
pect anything beyond that. After all, you’re only workers.
In other words, you’re fine people, but nothing more. You
don’t need anything else. Workers are workers.”

But anyone who supposes that this was Paul’s line of
thought does him a great injustice. He does not say that the
workers must work so that they will need nothing, for that
just wouldn’t fit into this context. What he says is that they
should work so that they will need no one;* in other words,
they must work so that they will not become beggars
dependent on the generosity and gifts of others. Thus Paul
opposes the true ideal of proud independence to the false
ideal of equality.

Here Paul quietly touches on the other side of the
social question. The workers may and must establish
themselves as independent, in order to be able to “develop
as God’s image bearers,” as we would say today. He does
not want them to be dependent on the whims and moods
of their employers. He wants them to assure themselves of
an independent place in society by working with their
hands.

Paul also gives employers an indirect hint. To the
worker he says: “Work with your calloused hands.” To the
employer he says: “The worker is worthy of his wages, for
his wages enable him to become independent.”

“So that you may command the respect of outsiders,”
writes Paul. This is a good point to make, for those who
are “outside” keep a close eye on those who are “inside.”
Let those who are “outside” know that you are waiting for
His Son from heaven, who may come unexpectedly, ac-
cording to your confession. He may come when the
machines in the factories are in operation, when hammer
blows are heard, when sirens are wailing.

*The Greek text permits either of two readings: nothing or
no one. I choose the latter because the former does not make
sense within the context of Paul’s argument here.
15.
Mysticism and Future Expectations

And so we shall always be with the Lord (4:17).

Paul was not telling the Thessalonian Christians anything new when he informed them that “we shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” when God’s trumpet sounds to announce the coming of the Bridegroom and the beginning of the great feast in heaven. All the meditation of the Thessalonians was already focused on these matters, for, like the young women in the parable, they wanted to meet the Bridegroom. They wanted to greet Him “in the air” as He was arriving from His
home in heaven. They wanted to prepare a “joyous entry” into the new earth beneath the new heaven. The very thought of union and the prospect of experiencing that “joyous entry” in the spirit already made them “jump for spiritual joy.” Every morning and every evening they listened for the voice of the archangel.

Then something happened for which they were simply not prepared: death entered their midst and took a few of them away. Death does not ask us about our future expectations and is not daunted by our elaborate plans. With its bony fingers it crumples up our ideals. Instead of a bridal carriage, the Thessalonians now needed a hearse. Instead of angels in white garments they saw men in black mourning clothes. The bridal veil which had been prepared was put away, and the veil of mourning was taken out of the closet. Some members of the joyful bridal party who wanted to meet the Lord in the air now had to go under the earth, where no one sings the praise of the Lord.

Death always makes us cry. But those deaths in Thessalonica were exceptionally painful. They inserted a shrill and sour note into the high-pitched future expectations. The Thessalonians had believed so firmly that the Lord was coming soon, and that He would find all of them alive to greet Him. Then death and its tears entered the picture!

What was most painful of all for them was the thought of what would become of the dead. These Thessalonians were not thinking about themselves in the first place. Certainly the deaths represented a tremendous setback for their hopes and weakened their expectation of personally experiencing the day of Jesus’ royal return, but at least there was still a chance that their hopes would be fulfilled. But what about the dead? Who was to say where they might be when Jesus came again? In any event, they would not join the festive chorus in the air. They would have to miss that glorious meeting. They would not be able
to enjoy what they had looked forward to for so long. The
dead, their dear dead brothers and sisters, would be left
behind. On the day of the great feast, they would lie
motionless in their cold resting places.

That’s what the Thessalonians thought. But they
didn’t have to think that way, for Paul, who had literally
omitted nothing in his preaching in Thessalonica, had also
talked about the “resurrection of the dead.”

The problem is that it’s difficult to listen to the entire
Word of God. The joy of the “return,” which interested
the Thessalonians especially, had made a deep impression
on them, but they had forgotten that somber talk about
“the dead.” Then came the disappointment.

We should not be too severe in our judgment of these
Greek Christians who were so far out of line with regard to
the “question of Christian hope,” for the soil from which
their errors grew was love. Indeed, it was not necessary for
Paul to write to them about brotherly love, for what made
the tears flow so freely in Thessalonica was concern about
the salvation of others. What made the Thessalonians
weep was that their dead brothers and sisters would have to
miss so much. Their primary concern was not with them-
selves. To them, the most important existential question
was not whether I will make it and get my share. In holy
concern, everyone was preoccupied with the salvation of
his neighbor’s soul. There was a communion of the saints
among the Thessalonians, a concern that each and every
one share in the treasures and gifts of communion with
Christ. These Christians did not seek this happiness only
for themselves; in a burning way they desired it for others
as well. They did not wish one another God’s blessings on
the first day of the year and then forget all about each
other during the remaining 364 days. The communion of
the saints of which the Apostles’ Creed speaks was realized
at Thessalonica.
Mysticism and Future Expectations

Such love is praiseworthy, but love by itself is not enough. If love follows the right path, then hope cannot go astray, for these two are sisters that belong together. Therefore Paul now returns to the mistaken hopes of the Thessalonians. His intention was not to air his own expectations about the future; he appealed instead to the highest authority. He set them straight by reminding them of something the Lord Jesus Himself once said. The Lord, writes Paul, declared that “we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.” Thus the dead will not be left behind. They will be awakened first. The living and the dead will then be taken up into the clouds together.*

Therefore the Thessalonians could set their minds at ease, for the dead will enjoy Christ’s glorious return along with the living. The Thessalonians could certainly mourn the dead, for although the gospel makes granite figures of us, it does not turn us into people with hearts of stone, people who cannot cry. Yet they were not to mourn like “the others” who have no hope.

What reason is there, after all, to mourn without hope? Those who have passed away are not really dead: they have only fallen asleep. Only one person has died in the full sense of the word—Jesus. He didn’t fall asleep: He died. Around His rough wooden deathbed there was no chorus in the heavens. Around the cross were clouds and darkness. God was not present there, for Jesus has been forsaken. But because He died, His chosen ones can fall

*In 4:15 we read: “For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord.” Thus the apostle was quoting a familiar statement of Jesus that does not appear in the gospels but was quite well known at the time through the tradition. Not all the “Words of the Lord” are in the gospels (see John 21:25). In Acts 20:35 another saying of Jesus is quoted: “It is better to give than to receive.”
Mysticism and Future Expectations

*asleep.* And although they are sleeping, God’s trumpet will wake them up in time on that day. Then, after they have been taken up into heaven, the feast will begin and they will enter eternity. We will be with the Lord always.

“Always with the Lord,” writes Paul, and this expresses both his future expectation and his deepest mysticism. If someone were to ask Paul what life in heaven will be like, he wouldn’t get much of an answer, but Paul does say positively that it is always being with the Lord. For him, that’s the culmination of heaven’s glory: everything else is secondary. What’s important is not the feast or the golden streets or the palm branches but God—Christ above all. The heavenly marriage is not a marriage for the sake of money, in which the important thing is the wealth of the bridegroom, but a marriage for the sake of love. It is a marriage in which the bride wants to possess the Bridegroom, to have Him eternally. It’s being with the Lord forever!

Here we are allowed a glimpse into the soul of Paul, this outstanding mystic. His entire longing for heaven is expressed in the words being with the Lord. For him, what is most glorious of all is Christ, the communion with the Lord Jesus, being with the Lord always.

Thus Paul says very little about heaven here—and yet he says very much. He certainly tells us enough to enable us to determine whether we’re eager to go to heaven and whether we would feel at home there.

But who would not be eager to go to heaven? Doesn’t everyone want to go to heaven? Don’t be too sure. The fact of the matter is that there are many people who do not

*Paul clearly has this contrast in mind in 4:14, where we read: “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*
want to go to heaven. What I mean is that they don’t want to go to *the* heaven, although they do want to go to some heaven or other. They want to go to a heaven where they can really enjoy themselves, where gold lies on the streets for the taking, where every day is a holiday—in short, a heaven that would be no less heavenly *without the Lord*. Indeed, the absence of the Lord would make their festival even more joyous, for the presence of Jesus is always somewhat painful for them. Such a heaven is a Mohammedan heaven but not a Christian heaven, for in heaven the most blessed thing is to be with the Lord always. A Mohammedan heaven is a false dream. Anyone who lives in that kind of future expectation is living in a dream world. Ultimately he must be regarded as one of those who have no real expectations, i.e. “the others who have no hope.”

Heaven is a continual *communion with Christ*. The Heidelberg Catechism asks at one point whether there is any way to escape punishment and return to God’s favor (Question 12). Now, anyone who regards “escaping punishment” as the highest good and simply passes over the part about “returning to God’s favor,” that is, to a blessed communion with Christ, has understood neither the Catechism nor—worse still—Jesus Christ, and so has never “known” Him.

Jesus is the first and the last in heaven. And we might well ask whether heaven would not be a great disappointment for those who have not gotten to know Jesus on earth as the first and the last. Would heaven truly be heaven for such people? The Bible teaches us that in heaven many things will amount to “nothing” (see I Cor. 13). Appetite and food will mean nothing, as well as marriage and languages and talents. But wouldn’t heaven then mean endless boredom for those who regard these things as the highest happiness and greatest enjoyment for their souls? When we’re in the mood, it’s easy enough to say: “Away
with the world and its treasures. You have no idea how rich I am. I have lost everything, but I have chosen Jesus, to whom I now belong.” But if you really do lose everything once and the world approaches you with armloads of its treasures, what will you do then?

Thus the question what heaven will mean to us is reduced to the question what the Lord means to us. Anyone who does not know Christ on earth as the “highest good” will never be able to honor Him in heaven as the highest of all. The question of heaven is a question to be dealt with on earth. Our expectations about a distant future are determined by the mysticism of the present. The heavenly enthusiasm of the future will parallel the enthusiasm of the present. (I am using the word enthusiasm here in its literal meaning, i.e. communion with God. This word is made up of three Greek words that mean being in God.)

Contrasted with that future “always with the Lord,” our lot on earth is not a “never with the Lord” but a “not always with the Lord.” And that’s just what God’s children find most painful—the “not always,” the brokenness, the feeling of being separated from God at times, the dark days. But after suffering through such dark days, the joyful ideal of “being with the Lord always” is even more appealing to us.

Paul speaks of being with the Lord. The Pharisees spent time in Jesus’ presence. So did Judas. And many nominal Christians are in His presence when they hear the Word being preached. But they are not really with Him. The apostle John was with Him, as were Mary and Martha and Peter and—or course—Paul!

The expectation of “always being with the Lord” in the future should never cease to influence our lives in the present. We will have to get used to His continual presence while we are still here, and we should want to get used to it. This getting used to the Lord means seeking His coun-
tenance in our mystical hours. It means getting used to Him by obeying His commandments, which are not arbitrary and severe. Then we will be sure to feel right at home in the midst of the angels, who are willing—always willing—to do His bidding.
16.
Falling Asleep

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep (4:14).

The believers are waiting for the Son from heaven. Consequently, their *outlook on life* is entirely different from the world's outlook on life. Those who look heavenward see things in a completely different light than those who are busy digging in the earth. Our future expectations and our outlook on life are very closely related and affect each other.
The Christian’s view of death is also diametrically opposed to the unbeliever’s view. The children of God take leave of this life in an entirely different way than the children of the world, for the children of the world die, while the children of God fall asleep.

Here and elsewhere in his letters, Paul speaks of “falling asleep” rather than “dying” (see, for example, I Cor. 15:6, 18). He does so not to be different or simply to emphasize some small point; his reason is rather that he has an entirely different view of death. The phrase falling asleep can be found in any dictionary, but it really belongs only in the dictionary of the Christian. Falling asleep is a privilege reserved for those who are in Christ. Although death remains an enemy with whom we can never be reconciled, we are allowed to give it the least fearful name anyone could think of—falling asleep.

The physical event we call death remains exactly the same for all men, regardless of whether they have been born again. In this respect all men are in the same boat, for all must die. It can even happen that the death of a child of the world is more peaceful than the death of an upright child of the Lord. The child of the world may pass away quietly, as a candle slowly goes out, while the soul is torn from the body of the child of God only after a fearful struggle.

But appearances are deceptive. From the outside everything looks beautiful when a wealthy man dies. There is a first class funeral with many flowers and wreaths, numerous mourners, and a series of eulogies at the graveside. Stephen, on the other hand, died under horrible conditions. Sharp stones whizzed through the air, shattering his bones and reducing his skull to fragments. But the rich man died, while Stephen calmly fell asleep under the shower of stones. The difference is not to be sought in anything visible but in something invisible. Some die and wake up again in pain, while others fall asleep in the Lord.
Falling Asleep

The way in which natural death takes place is a secondary issue, then, and we would do well not to pay too much attention to it.

Paul does not use the term falling asleep as a euphemism, i.e. a pleasant sounding word for something awful. It was not his custom to cover up an ugly reality with beautiful language. When the Bible uses this gentle term for death, it is not offering us flowers to counteract the gruesome effect of death. No, for the believer, death is in fact a sleep.

Try to see the comfort in this. Death is the end, says the world. When the coffin is lowered into the grave and all the onlookers remove their hats, it’s over. No, says Paul, then it’s not over, just as it’s not over for someone who has gone to sleep. Sleep is not the end of life but a new beginning; it is but a step on the way to an exquisite awakening. Sleep is not an end but a means. It is a link between the evening’s twilight and the morning’s dawn. Death is really only a transition, and we can safely stop worrying about it. It is not a dead-end street but a hallway, a passageway to eternal life. Just as sleep serves to make you feel refreshed and rested when you wake up, so death opens the door to a new morning.

And what a morning that will be! After that awakening we won’t have to put on our daily sinner’s clothes again, as we’re so used to doing, for the white garments worn by the holy will be laid ready for us. That morning will not be followed by an evening and a night. Only then will we really begin to live. Compared to that life, our earthly life hardly deserves the name. Yet, that glorious life is inaugurated by death.

We will fall asleep! Anyone who goes to sleep remains alive. If it’s late at night and you’re the only one who’s still up, you don’t think of the members of your family as dead. They’re alive, sleeping in their bedrooms upstairs. In the same way, your loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus are not really gone. They’re asleep. A child who was asked by a stranger how many children there were in his
family replied with joyful assurance that there were eight—although only six of them were still alive. That child was right.

Since it’s possible that we may not experience the day of our Lord’s return either, we have to face the prospect of death. What will we call it when it comes? When your eyes or mine are finally shut, when the men in black come to take away the coffin, when the funeral music is played, will the eternal night of endless death begin or the new morning of a joyful awakening? The apostle Paul gives us a clear answer to this: “Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”

Thus it all depends on your faith—your faith that Jesus died and rose again. Naturally, the important thing is not just that we accept the historical facts. The devils also believe the facts—and they tremble. (In doing so, they may even be a couple of steps ahead of those who are at ease in Zion.) No, believing that Jesus died and rose again goes much deeper. It means having an intimate relationship with the Lord who died and is alive again. It means dying with Him and living through Him.

Jesus died. He is the only justified one who did not fall asleep. He really died and descended into hell. He died in our place. And believing that Jesus died means clinging to that vicarious death as your life. It means stumbling up the hill called Golgotha with the sins that held you in bondage to death, in order to pray there, where the fear of hell robs you of all comfort: “O Lord, save my soul.”

Jesus also rose from the dead. And believing that Jesus arose means entering into a living relationship with Him and knowing the power of His resurrection. Believing that Jesus arose means filling your soul and mind with this
resurrection experience; it means really living, as long as you’re on earth.

Relying on Paul’s imagery, we could put it this way: anyone who wants his death to be a sleep must see to it that he is awake all of his life.* That’s very logical. Anyone who wants to sleep must first have been awake, and the more awake and active he was during the day, the better he will sleep at night.

Living as a Christian is difficult and requires effort on our part. The life of a Christian is a life of struggle, a life of building and prayer (which is the most strenuous of all). Anyone who takes it easy during the day will not sleep well when night comes. And anyone who’s dozing when it’s time to be awake and at work will not be ready when the cry is heard: “Look, the bridegroom is coming. Let’s go meet Him.” Anyone who wants to fall asleep in the blessed hope that the voice of his Father will awaken him had best be on the alert now.

Stay awake and pray, little children, for it is the last hour. We are waiting for His Son from heaven.

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*It is not unlikely that chapter 5, where Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to stay awake, is a further elaboration of the theme contained in the term fallen asleep.
17.
Like a Thief in the Night

You know very well that the Day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night. It is when people are saying, "How quiet and peaceful it is" that the worst suddenly happens, as suddenly as labor pains come on a pregnant woman; and there will be no way for anybody to evade it (5:2-3 JB).

Although Paul cannot and will not name the particular point in time when the day of the Lord is scheduled to come upon us, he does tell us something. That day will come in the night.
When he uses the image of the “thief in the night,” his point is not only the thief (the first element) but also the night (the second element). In fact, the second element receives the emphasis. Now, Paul’s statement is not to be taken literally, as though the Bible were teaching that Jesus will definitely come at night. It is meant figuratively: He will return during a night of moral degeneration and spiritual darkness.

However brightly the light of science may shine in our time, the life of the world looks more and more like night. A growing darkness is hiding the clouds. The world is sinking into an ever deeper darkness of sin and unrighteousness.

But Jesus will not come before the measure is full and the unrighteousness of the Amorites is complete. He is extremely merciful. He waits until the clock strikes twelve. He waits until all the lights have gone out and sin has reached its climax.

We are now living in this world’s evening hours. The darkness is becoming oppressive. There are not many seconds left before the clock strikes twelve. Then, when the movie theaters are jammed, when the dance halls are lit by electric lights, when people are congratulating themselves on mankind’s incredible progress and claiming to see peace and security all around them, Jesus will return.

Thus the day of the Lord will come at night—a striking contrast. On the great day of the re-creation of heaven and earth, when darkness covers the abyss, God will say: “Let there be light.” The night will become day, eternal day, and no shadow of sin or darkness will ever again fall on the new earth. The day comes as a light in the darkness. The light discovers all the dark corners and makes everything in them clearly visible. The light condemns the darkness.

But I have a question for you: Are you certain that the light of day is shining in all the corners of your home and
your heart? Is it possible that although you have not spent as much as an hour in the “tents of wickedness,” you belong there anyway? Is it possible that you have washed yourself in the water of the covenant but are a child of darkness nevertheless? Woe to you if the light of grace has not yet fought against the darkness of sin in your life, if it has not yet broken through in principle!

The image of the thief in the night also contains the idea of the unexpected. The thief doesn’t announce his arrival in advance. He doesn’t send you a letter telling you that he hopes to honor you with a visit at such-and-such an hour on such-and-such a night, so that you will have time to transfer your valuables to a safety deposit box. He doesn’t phone you for an appointment first.

Those who have taken measures and are awake when the thief comes have nothing to fear from him. Only the careless ones, those who are at ease in Zion, those who slumber with their doors wide open, are in danger.

Aren’t there a lot of those people at ease in Zion? They are worried and concerned about earthly things but unbelievably careless and unconcerned about heavenly things. Why do so many people postpone their conversion and go further down the path of sin in the vain belief that they still have plenty of time? Will they receive a letter just before their time is up warning them to get ready?

That’s not how the Lord does business. He will come like a thief in the night, as you well know. One morning a machine in your factory or a fall from a scaffold or an accident on the highway may make a corpse of you. By tomorrow you may be so sound asleep spiritually that no alarm clock will be able to awaken you. Tomorrow is always too late. Therefore provide for the safety of your soul today by letting the Almighty protect you.

Finally, Paul says that their destruction will come
upon them as labor pains come upon a woman about to give birth. This shows that their destruction does not come about from the outside. It is not the outcome of some attack made by a foreign force. No, the seeds of their destruction are within them. This destruction is nothing but the ripe fruit of their own life of sin. The sinner actually furthers his own destruction. Anyone who clings to his sin finally recognizes the deformed monster called Decay as his own child.

If only the eyes of all of us could be opened to the awful fruit that sin bears, the fruit that appears so lovely and appetizing to us. We should live by the Latin proverb that tells us to uproot and destroy the very first seeds.

Let us open our hearts to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that the seeds of the new birth may be planted in them and come to full and rich fruition on that day.
18.
Calling and Clothing

So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation (5:6, 8).

Paul did not know exactly when Christ would return. Only God knows how long it will be—even though many clever people have seated themselves at God’s desk to figure out the exact day and hour, in order to announce it to a world waiting to be deceived. To show how unknown the time of Christ’s return is and how unexpected His arrival will be, Paul made use of an image which the Lord
Himself had used in His teaching, i.e. that of the thief in the night. And this image, of course, suggests a series of contrasts, i.e. day and night, light and darkness, being awake and being asleep, being sober and being drunk. The final chapter of I Thessalonians is full of these contrasts. Yet, they do not lead Paul away from his main point. At the end he returns to his point of departure in an ingenious way: “He died for us so that we, awake [i.e. alive] or asleep [i.e. dead], might live in company with him” (5:10 NEB).*

This now gave Paul a golden opportunity, for his task was not only to instruct and comfort the Thessalonians but also to admonish them. (Every good sermon admonishes those who hear it.) In the style of the Old Testament prophets, Paul declared that “that day” would cause terror only in the sleepers, the children of darkness, but would bring peace and blessedness to the true Israel. “You are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief” (5:4). But then the believers must also be “children of the light and of the day” in the full sense.

Paul, who lived in the spirit of the prophets, also speaks the language of the prophets here. To show that someone in his total being belonged to this or that, the prophets would say that he was a son or child of such-and-such. Thus they talked of children of Belial, children of death, children of hell, sons of perdition, and so forth. Paul follows the lead of these prophets by declaring that he wants the Thessalonians—and us as well, of course—to be children of light and of the day, with their total being, that is, with all their soul, their mind, and their strength. Halfway is not enough. They are not to be children of light today and children of darkness tomorrow. There is no

*This was the point at issue among the Thessalonians. Would those who had “fallen asleep” also live with Jesus?
room for compromise or indecisiveness, for a man cannot serve two masters. We must be children of light completely—or not at all. “Whoever is not for me is against me.” We must choose and take a side. Such is the radicalism of the gospel.

Being a “child of the light” means first and foremost being awake and sober. With these words Paul describes our calling. He adds that we should put on a certain breastplate and helmet, thereby telling us something about our clothing.

Let us remain awake and sober. The world, Paul explains simply, is not sober but drunk; that is to say, it sees things upside down and makes a mess of everything. The world lives the life of a drunk, which is a dreadful life, and it will die the death of a drunk, which is even more dreadful. Let’s keep that in mind whenever the world looks enchanting and attractive to us. It’s a drunken mess, says Paul bluntly.

These are not flattering words. If you hear the children of the world expound their wise, profound theories, Paul warns, remember that they’re using the language of a drunk. If you listen to their “explanations” of life’s riddles, he warns, you’ll become a drunk yourself. If you pay attention to their dreams and hopes for the future, you may succumb to the illusions of a drunk.

No, what Paul has to say is not flattering. All the same, it’s true. It’s bitter medicine for the proud and sophisticated world, which has so little respect for the church, to hear the Bible declare that the world just isn’t sober. How painful it is for the world to recognize that believing Christians, the people it normally calls “dreamers,” are the ones with a firm grasp on reality, the ones who see things as they are—precisely because they are sober.
It hardly needs to be argued that believers, who move as sober people through a wobbling, wavering world, have a *calling*. Paul describes this calling by means of the word *being awake*.

Being awake is not something passive in the sense of waiting for something; it is a very active and intense business. Someone who must stay awake has to fight against sleep. The flesh wants to sleep, but the spirit is determined to stay awake. Staying awake is a *duel* between flesh and spirit, between nature and grace. Anyone who has to stay awake must gather sufficient strength during the day to carry him through the night.

That’s your calling, children of the light! Carry the power of the day, of the spirit, of grace into the spiritual night of the world. Fight the good fight wherever you are, and conquer darkness with light. Be sources of power in the world because you yourselves know how to draw on the eternal source, i.e. God’s power. Try to get rid of the intoxicating and numbing beverages of this world in order to give the world, which is stumbling down the path to death, the true food and drink that does not numb anyone—the eternal Word of Truth.

Since we are “of the day,” let us be sober and “*put on* the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.”* Here Paul does not go over to a new image, that of the man of war, but simply continues in the same line of thought. Anyone who goes to sleep takes off his clothes, but someone who stays awake keeps them on.

The idea of being *properly clothed* is contained in the idea of being sober and awake. It appears as though a substantial number of today’s Christians, especially women, feel that they have to participate in the world’s festivities

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*Here again we see the trinity of faith, hope and love, which I have pointed to several times.*
and fashion parades and subject themselves to the intoxication of a world that disdains sobriety. Let them pay attention to what Paul says here: if we are to be sober and show others that we are children of light, we must be properly clothed.

What clothing should we be wearing? It's striking that when Paul mentions what we should wear, he lists only things we need to defend ourselves—a breastplate and a helmet.* As sober people we have a calling with regard to others but also a calling with regard to ourselves, namely, to guard ourselves against dangers and protect ourselves if need be. The world is intoxicated—it's “under the influence,” we might say—but we must be very careful not to come “under the influence” ourselves. Intoxication is very contagious, and if it lasts long it's dangerous.

Yes, living in a drunken world is dangerous. The company you keep every day may be dangerous. Therefore, equip yourself properly. Protect yourself with the breastplate of faith and love, and use the hope of salvation as your helmet.

*In Ephesians 6, however, Paul speaks of putting on “the whole armor of God.”
19. The Idle Brothers

And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idlers (5:14).
Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us (II Thess. 3:6).

Anyone who studies the Scriptures prayerfully is repeatedly amazed by their overwhelming riches. Rays of light emanate from the Bible constantly. No preacher of the Word is forced to say the same thing every Sunday in different words. If preachers have a justified complaint,
it’s not that there’s *too little* material in the Bible but that there’s *too much*. Those who immerse themselves in God’s Word stumble across new treasures every day.

An example of this is the seemingly simple pair of texts we will examine in this chapter. These texts deal with practical wisdom.

At this point I do not plan to comment on how Paul’s preaching paired his strict *authority* as a messenger of the Lord (he commanded them “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”) with fervent *brotherly love* (he repeatedly addressed his readers as “brethren”) and thereby chose a happy medium between a pleasant gentleness and a cold harshness. Moreover, I will only point in passing to how he *exhorted* the brethren to *admonish* the idle in the first letter, and in the second letter *commanded* them to *keep away* from the idle.

Here again we see the apostle as a shepherd. He does not take drastic measures immediately. He begins in a tender way with *exhortation*. He is interested not in driving anyone away but in keeping everyone. But at the same time, he does not plan to let the evil continue unchecked or let the matter rest with some pleasant advice. He keeps the ones who have wandered from the path in mind constantly, for he knows how contagious sin is and how dangerous it is to the congregation for the evil to continue.

He also knows what to do in case the gentle exhortation should prove insufficient, as it did in Thessalonica.* Those who don’t want to listen will have to feel it. If writing “We exhort you” doesn’t help, then in the next letter he will have to write: “We *command* you to keep away from those who are idle.”

Neither Paul’s first approach nor his second should be

*The entire second letter is more severe in tone. Apparently the errors had not been eradicated, and the “idle brothers” persisted in their evil ways.*
regarded as a rule to be followed in church discipline. His approach in discipline cases was entirely different (see, for example, 1 Cor. 5). In Paul’s eyes, the “idle ones” are brothers: “Keep away from any brother who is living in idleness.” The apostle’s intention is simply to share some of his wisdom with the Thessalonians, to give them a lesson about life. We will return to this lesson later.

First, I would like to point out once more that our text shows us what Paul preached to the congregation. And this should be of great interest to preachers and hearers alike. Paul declares explicitly that this “idle way of life” was not the tradition they had received. By tradition (see II Thess. 2:15) he means the “synopsis” of his preaching as it came out wherever he preached (including Thessalonica).

Included in the content of this preaching was how we are to live. Paul declared that this “idle way of life” is not in accord with what he preached. Thus Paul did not only preach “doctrine.” His preaching wasn’t all “dogmatics,” as some critics maintain. He also dealt with “ethics.” Yet he did not just pass on some pleasant advice or survey the various moods of the soul. No, this apostle of Jesus Christ—he himself claims the title—preached in a down-to-earth way about how we are to live; he examined practical everyday life under the magnifying glass and told the Thessalonians how they must live. In other words, he told them to live by God’s will and Word. If he were to preach today, he would certainly be attacked for being “legalistic” or—worse still—“moralistic.” Perhaps some would say that his preaching was nowhere near deep enough.

The fact that Paul’s preaching had this content is even more remarkable when we recall that he was in Thessalonica only for a short while. Thus he needed all his time to instruct the newly converted heathens in the most basic things, in the fundamental truths of the gospel. Our text now makes it clear that among these most basic things
was instruction in how we are to live.

But there is more to be said. What we learn here is not just that Paul said some things in general about how we are to live. Paul didn’t like “generalities.” When he dealt with how we are to live, he went into details. As this text shows us, he said some very ordinary and sober things in his sermons. After all, what the apostle says—and it is expressed in a very ordinary manner—is this: “The way of life of the idle is not in accord with what I have preached.”

Now, if we could determine what he meant by the “way of life of the idle,” then we would also know what he preached. By this “way of life of the idle,” Paul does not mean an immoral life or anything of that sort. No, he means something completely different and yet quite ordinary. He uses this phrase to refer to people who neglect their daily work. To put it in plain English, the people he means are the ones who show up late at work, the ones who loaf, the ones who take it easy. That this is indeed what he means is clear from II Thessalonians 3:11, where this “way of life of the idle” is further referred to as “not doing any work.” It is even more clear from verse 12, where the apostle opposes the demand of regular work to the “way of life of the idle” and declares: “Now such persons we command . . . to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living.” The correctness of this interpretation is also apparent from the fact that he contrasts the “way of life of the idle” with his own example, reminding the Thessalonians that he worked with his hands “night and day” to earn his own living, although he did not have to do so (vs. 8-9).

Why did these people lay down their tools and quit work? Although they can be compared to some extent with people who like to take it easy, they also had nobler motives. Nevertheless, these motives were wrong.

It got started because of all that Paul had said about the return of Christ. This left some of the Thessalonians in an overexcited state. They became obsessed with Christ’s
return. They thought Jesus had already returned and was spending His time somewhere in Jerusalem, or that it was at most a question of a few weeks. Living in this expectation, they simply let their work lie. Why should they be so busy and make the sweat pour down their faces if they were shortly to be fed with heavenly manna at the Lord’s table? Thus they spent their time wandering around in mystical contemplation.

Moreover, they spent far too much time visiting others, which led to unrest in the congregation. They kept those who were willing to work from doing their work. And because they had to eat anyway, they did not eat “their own bread” but got all their meals at the homes of others.

It’s clear that these people with their pious language were taken seriously, and therefore Paul tells the Thessalonians not to indulge them at all. Keep away from them, he warns, and do not encourage them in their evil by providing means for them, even though you are never to tire of doing good to those who are really in need (II Thess. 3:13). To make sure there is no doubt about this matter, he goes on to say: “If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed” (vs. 14). In other words, don’t be afraid to tell them off.

By now you should be fully aware of what Paul means when he speaks of this “way of life of the idle.” In our time there are also “idle brothers” who neglect their household and the care and upbringing of their children for the sake of their so-called spiritual nourishment. It is clear as day that this sort of thing was not begun at Paul’s instigation, for one of the major emphases in his earliest preaching was: do your daily work faithfully. Alongside the mighty cry “Maranatha, the Lord is coming” and the gentle appeal “We beseech you, be reconciled to God,” Paul did not forget the sober advice “Be faithful in your
work” and the admonition “If anyone will not work, let him not eat” (vs. 10).

Therefore I must emphasize that your daily work is not something alongside your religion but is part of your religion. Your conversion and your godliness will be manifest in the faithfulness you show in little things. Never forget that this was the apostle Paul’s message. And as for those who turn religion into empty contemplation and would rather preach when the time for working is at hand, stay away from them, so that they may be ashamed.
20.
The Appearance of Evil

Abstain from all appearance of evil (5:22 KJV).

When you advise someone to avoid even the appearance of evil, you are doubtless giving him good advice in full agreement with the spirit of the Scriptures. But never claim apostolic authority for such advice, for it does not appear literally anywhere in Scripture—not even in I Thessalonians 5:22, where older translations have Paul talking about avoiding any “appearance of evil.”

That Paul did not mean to warn against the appearance of evil in this text can be shown easily enough. The
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Apostolic admonitions in his letters are always related to particular circumstances and problems in the congregations. As a good shepherd, Paul also knew the problems in Thessalonica and kept them in mind as he wrote. He knew very well that preaching jammed full of generalities is of no use whatsoever. Therefore he did not talk about everything under the sun but got right to the point and put his finger on the sore spot.

Now, were there Christians in Thessalonica who did not concern themselves enough with the appearance of evil, so that Paul had to admonish them on this score? Not according to the text. But we do read about people who were not sufficiently on guard against evil itself (see 4:1-8 and 5:15).

Furthermore, we should note that the Greek word which was translated as “appearance” in the older translations really means the form in which something appears. The newer translations take this into account. The Revised Standard Version renders this text: “Abstain from every form of evil.” Thus, what Paul meant to say was: abstain from all evil, in whatever form it may appear.

When we read the text this way, its relation to the whole passage becomes clear. In 5:12-21, we read a series of admonitions about church life, especially about the relationship between the congregation and its leaders. These admonitions end with: “Do not despise prophesying.” Paul told the Thessalonians—just as he told the Corinthians—that prophesying was to be regarded as a special gift enabling someone to interpret Scripture. This gift was not to be despised. The Thessalonians were not to ignore the warnings that flowed from prophecies, for then those who possessed this gift would get discouraged. The gift of prophecy would cease to live in them, and the spirit of prophecy would be extinguished. “Do not quench the Spirit” (vs. 19).

On the other hand, they were not to accept un-
critically everything offered as explication of Scripture. They could and should test prophecy—against the doctrine they had received from Paul. Therefore Paul also told them to “test everything.” He meant that they were to test what they heard as one tests gold to find out whether it is genuine. Thus verses 20 and 21a of chapter 5 actually form one sentence: don’t despise prophecies but be sure to test them. There is also such a connection between the two following statements, i.e. verses 21b and 22. (The Greek text here includes a curious play on words that does not come out in the English translation.) This time Paul uses a contrast, declaring that we are to hold on to what is good and let go of everything evil. This is the final conclusion of the long series of admonitions that begins with verse 12. In short, Paul’s message is: “Hold on to what is good and let go of what is evil.”

I beg your forgiveness for entering this exegetical discussion. You are welcome to question the necessity of my remarks and simply accept them for information—as long as you do not do so with the warning of the Scriptures, that is, as long as you remain on guard against every form of evil.

When evil reveals its true nature, i.e. its meanness, brutality and hideousness, Paul’s warning can be regarded as unnecessary, for most people want nothing to do with brutality. Only degenerates enjoy it. But evil wears disguises—sometimes pious disguises. Evil often appears in the form of good, and the “evil one” sometimes appears as an angel of light. John tells us that the evil spirits emerging from the bottomless pit and swarming over the entire earth in his vision had hair like women’s hair and teeth like lions’ teeth. These spirits must have looked charming and enchanting with their women’s hair, just as young women do when they have their hair adorned in the latest styles. But watch out when these spirits open their mouths, for they also have the teeth of lions—teeth capable of tearing
anyone to pieces. With their beautifully kept hair they attract their prey, but once they seize their victims, they use those fearsome lions’ teeth to devour them.

Evil can assume such beautiful forms. Sin can put on an innocent face as if to ask: “What could be wrong with that?” Evildoers often walk around in the garments of virtue. Stinginess, for example, is then called thriftiness, and sensuality disguises itself as vitality. Egoism is nicely traded in for “firmness of character.”

Evil manifests itself in so many forms. Be on your guard against every form in which it appears, for its goal is to ruin you. Although satan may appear with the hair of a woman, he has the teeth of a lion. Despite all the forms he assumes, he remains a roaring lion.

True to the plan of his letter, Paul couples this admonition with a reminder about the return of Christ: “May your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming* of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:23). This reminder is far from superfluous. Anyone who forgets the psalmist’s prayer “May avarice not trap me in its snares,” who goes to sleep when he should be on guard, who can no longer recognize evil when it marches toward him in the garments of virtue—any such person is in danger of being caught in the quicksand of sin without being able to get out again, without recognizing sin for what it is. This is the great danger of the lie, the danger of expectations of heaven based on our own imagination.

Think, therefore, about the future of our Lord Jesus Christ. Know that all things will be naked and open before Him. If even the mountains flee before His face, what will become of the intricate network of lies we use to cover up evil?

*A better translation would be “at His entry.”
In your thoughts every day, live through the hour of judgment and remember that although you will never reach perfection, God does ask of you a completely upright spirit. Remember that He takes pleasure in the truth within you. Be on guard against every appearance of evil.
21. Reciprocity in Prayer

Brothers, pray for us also (5:25 NEB).

In this letter the apostle Paul said a great deal about working. Repeatedly he urged his readers to work faithfully. We got to know him as an exceptional worker, laboring days in the Kingdom of God and working with his hands at night to earn a living.

But Paul knew very well that getting up early, staying up late, and undergoing affliction is all in vain if God does not place His blessings in the outstretched hands of those whom He loves. He proceeded from the idea that the way to cut a path through the thorns and thistles is not
with *muscular arms* but with mouths open for *prayer*. He loved the quietness and loneliness of the soul’s private communion with God in prayer more than the loud song of the worker. Therefore Paul begins and ends this remarkable letter with prayer. Prayer is its alpha and omega. Everything else is safe between those two walls.

He begins by declaring that he *always* thinks of the Thessalonians in his prayers, and he ends by asking the Thessalonians to think of *him* always in their prayers. Thus he asks for reciprocity in prayer. Paul is to pray for the congregation and the congregation for Paul. The shepherd is to pray for the flock and the flock for the shepherd. He can only regard the congregation as safe when he spreads the protective wings of prayer over it, and he can only regard himself as safe when the congregation does the same for him.

All those people bowed down in the dust hardly form an impressive sight. Nothing in themselves, Paul and the congregation lie there, bowed down before God’s great throne. But God in His good pleasure puts the reins of world government in folded hands. Those who pray are mighty in their weakness. It’s not so much a question of numbers, for God has little interest in statistics. A few praying hands are mightier than a whole army of Amalekites.

Prayer is necessary always and under all circumstances, for it is an indispensable link in the chain reaching from heaven to earth. It is through this chain that God gives us good gifts and perfect blessings.

Prayer is necessary first of all because it is a *sign of life*; it is the breath of the soul. A person who doesn’t pray is a person who isn’t breathing, i.e. a spiritual corpse. Those who have never learned what prayer is are lost, even though they may have been taught to recite a prayer. Someone who does not *pray* on earth will *curse* in the outer
darkness, even if he has never uttered a curse here on earth.

But the necessity of prayer becomes clearest—or should become clearest—when our thoughts are focused on the return of Christ. It was not by chance that Paul opened and closed this letter, which is full of this return, with prayer. He learned this from Jesus Himself. When the highest Prophet and Teacher gave His mighty address on “the last things,” when the ears of His listeners were still ringing with the words “I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed, and one will be taken and the other left,” when Jesus could already hear the wings of the eagles of judgment flapping—then He spoke to His audience in a parable to try to make it clear that they must always pray and not go to sleep. The parable ends with an eschatological question that calls for an answer in each age: “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 17:20—18:8).

More and more, faith will have to become prayer; more and more, it will have to learn to fold its hands. The gathering of believers will have to become a prayer gathering. The times will be such that we will not be able to unfurl the banner of Christ’s kingship everywhere. Instead, like a flock of frightened sheep destined for slaughter, the church will have to crowd together in the house of prayer. Just as the “adversary” in Jesus’ parable stretched out a greedy hand to seize the widow’s house and tried to take her sons to exploit them as slaves because of the debt owing, so the adversary of whom Paul speaks in the second letter to the Thessalonians (i.e. the Antichrist) will stretch out his greedy hands to seize our sons and daughters. Therefore, the signs of the times, which indicate that we have a bitter struggle ahead of us, call for prayer—and not for relaxation.

What we need especially is intercession—intercession for the sons of the church and for the coming generation. “Brothers, pray for us.” The church must never take off it’s widow’s dress—especially not now. The widow’s dress
Reciprocity in Prayer

is a long, trailing garment. The long dress is no longer in style. But woe to the church if it goes along with fashion here and becomes ashamed of its trailing garment of prayer! Woe to the church if it puts prayer away in the museum as something that has gone out of style! When the Son of man returns, will He still find faith on earth? Will He find faith that always prays and does not go to sleep?

The prayer that Paul practiced in his letter about “the last things” is intercession, just as the prayer of the widow was intercession. The prayer of the congregation waiting for His Son from heaven must also be intercession: we must pray for others. Certainly we must pray a great deal for ourselves as well, but intercession comes first. The prayer of the bride, “Come, Lord Jesus,” is intercession in the deepest sense.

This requires a bit of clarification. You know that the prayer “Come, Lord Jesus” will not be fulfilled until the last of the chosen ones has been gathered in. His bride, His body, His Church must first be complete. The number on which the Father has decided must first be reached. As soon as this has happened, the Lord Jesus will return—but not an hour earlier. Thus, what we are waiting for is not so much Jesus, who stands ready, but the ingathering of the last of the chosen ones. The prayer “Come, Lord Jesus” is really the prayer “Lord, take all whom You have chosen to Yourself.” The two prayers are identical. Thus the “Maranatha” prayer directed to heaven is at the same time a prayer about the earth, a prayer for the wandering ones, an intercession.

The church is really one big family. It is late in the evening: “Little children, it is the last hour.” But not all the children are home yet. Some are wandering around in the darkness. They can’t find their way home. What are the ones at home doing about it? Some are out looking for them. Others are on their knees. Their unrest has become feverish prayer to Israel’s Protector. It is as though they
hear someone calling from the darkness: “Brothers, pray for us.”

Does the church in our day know the unrest of “not being complete,” the unrest that presses us to search for those who are lost and pray for them? Or is it complacent in the exalted awareness of belonging to the company of those who are “within”? Let us learn to wait for the Son from heaven in the way Paul recommends.

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let all who are thirsty and have no money come. Let them buy and drink the wine and the milk, without money and without payment.

Come, Lord Jesus. Yes, come quickly!
Waiting for Christ's Return

On Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians

Waiting for Christ’s return is not a passive matter of sitting back and doing nothing, as some of the early Christians thought. This Paul makes clear in his first letter to the Thessalonians.

Herman Veldkamp focuses on the highlights of this letter in 21 short chapters, conveying to us something of the tense expectation that fills the lives of those who live for Christ and long for His final triumph.

Paul opens his letter by giving thanks. He then offers some practical advice and sets the Thessalonians straight on their misconceptions about the last things. It is the “breath of life” to Paul when he hears that the young congregation is “standing firm” in the Lord.

Veldkamp gives us a vivid picture of the struggles of the Thessalonian Christians. The message hits home, for many of their failures and misconceptions are ours as well.

The late Rev. Veldkamp served as a minister in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. He is best known as the author of many popular works on the Old Testament prophets, one of which, The Farmer from Tekoa, is now available from Paideia Press in English translation.