Philemon, 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Alright, let’s go ahead and get started, and let’s open with a word of prayer. Father we thank you again for loving us, and for calling us to be your people. I pray that we'll come to a greater understanding of what that means, and how to respond to that reality, having looked more depth in the documents that communicate and embody that calling and that identity of who we are as your people. So we pray for your presence and your enablement as we continue to think about, analyze, and study the New Testament, for the purpose of becoming the people that you desire us to be. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

We haven't had one of these in a while. I know you've been feeling deprived from not having a quiz. So this quiz is over: The Lost Letters and Introducing New Testament reading for today, for this week, and is a you he is a number three or four I can't remember the last D Antipas had not read “Luke very carefully had not been.

Alright, the last class period we finished up the book of Colossians and Philemon. Two books that we kind of departed from the canonical order of the New Testament texts, and treated them together for obvious reasons. But one of the issues that particularly the book of Philemon raises, but is raised in a few sections of the New Testament, is related to the main topic of the book of Philemon. That is, why does Paul not come right out and condemn slavery out right? Instead, when you look at, for example, the book of Colossians, Paul does address the issue of slavery, but he always does so in terms of how it is to be regulated, how masters are to respond to their slaves, and vice versa. But Paul never comes right out and condemns slavery, or says it's wrong, or calls on masters to release their slaves. So that has often raised the question, why does Paul not do that? Why does he choose to regulate slavery rather than come right out and condemn or speak out against it? Why didn't he just come out and tell Philemon and all other slave-owners, especially Christian slave-owners, to release their slaves?

Now, I don't know that I can or I want to try to provide an answer to that question. I don't think the answer comes easy to that question. Instead I want to just provide a
number of parameters, or a number of things to think about, in the addressing or thinking about that question. The first one has to do with how we understand slavery in the Greco-Roman world. The first thing you need to realize is that unlike our past, at least in the United States, in North American context our experience of slavery is usually post-Civil War where we think of slavery as something that is racially motivated. However, that was not the case in the first century, slavery was not a racial issue. One did not become a slave because of one's race or anything like that. Usually you became a slave because you are part of the nation or territory that had been conquered. You became the slaves of the conquering nation, or you would become a slave because you had to sell yourself into slavery for financial reasons. So it had nothing to do with a racial motivation.

The second thing to realize too is that at least in the first century, slavery ran the gamut between slaves that operated in very cruel conditions, such as those that were conscripted for service in mines--working in the mines in Rome, on one end. They were treated very cruelly and had very poor circumstances. On the other end, you have some slaves that worked for wealthy masters that were treated very well, and in some senses were better off than they were before they were slaves, especially if they were in extreme poverty or something like that. They might now be working for a master, and they may have had better food or lodging, and oftentimes a means of achieving their own freedom. So the circumstances and the Greco-Roman empire for slavery were very different than what we think of often today.

The third thing in relationship to slavery in the Greco-Roman world is that due to the ubiquitous nature of slavery, the fact that it was all over the place, it's almost as if, in one sense, the stability in the economy of the Roman government depended on it. I wonder if Paul thought that it would have been futile and perhaps more damaging to Christianity to try to speak out against it. In fact, it's interesting Paul apparently has no precedence for speaking out against slavery when you look at other Jewish writings, etc. Paul would've really been a maverick in trying to tackle the problem of the issue of slavery in the Roman Empire due to its nature and the fact that it was so ingrained and widespread.
Again, it's possible that had he tried to do so, and had Christians tried to undo the problem of slavery, that that could've again caused more harm and even threaten the existence of Christianity. That is, at least what some have speculated.

So the first thing it's important to realize that slavery in the Greco-Roman world was very different from what we think of or what we've perhaps experienced or those, of you that are from different cultures or countries where slavery is a part of life. In the United States we often think of slavery in terms of post-Civil War where it is in some ways a very different experience. So the first thing is to realize those three things. Slavery was not racially motivated. One became a slave by various means unrelated to one's, background or of one's nationality. Then second the fact that slavery was not always cruel or inhumane, but sometimes one's status as a slave, if one was a slave, one found him or herself in a better situation than prior to being a slave. Third just the fact that it was so ingrained in Greco-Roman culture, that perhaps again Paul saw or thought it would have been counterproductive to try to undermine and speak out against it.

Instead, I wonder if perhaps Paul decided to take another tact, and that he thought that the very gospel and this seems to be what underlies his argument in Philemon, proclaimed an equal share in the person of Jesus Christ. Or an equal inheritance or equal sharing of the gospel remembering back in Galatians where Paul said, "in Christ there is no male or female no slave nor free." So that I wonder if Paul perhaps thought that the preaching of the gospel itself would have at least with Christians, would eventually be the undoing and the unraveling of slavery.

It was the former New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce who for a long time taught in British universities. F.F. Bruce said something along the lines that he thought Paul would've been convinced, that through the gospel, the preaching of the gospel that emphasizes unity in Christ and emphasizes each quality in Christ that transcends social distinctions, Bruce said that that gospel would have created an environment where slavery could only wilt and die eventually. He may he have a point. So perhaps Paul thought that the preaching of the gospel would itself be the eventual undoing of slavery. Another time Paul was willing to speak directly to certain issues, but perhaps within that these areas
a number of comments I've made is at least a start of addressing why perhaps Paul did not explicitly speak out against slavery, or condemn it outright. I would guess in our society he probably would have. I'm just guessing that maybe in our society where he may have had more freedom of speech in this regard and perhaps not some of the entanglements he might've had politically he may have spoken more outright against it today. It appears that, it's the way he addresses, I'm convinced what he's doing in Philemon and his emphasis on especially in a book like Galatians where in Christ there's neither slave nor free, and the idea that he seems to emphasize the New Testament that social classes don't matter in Christ and should not be a cause of division within the church that this is one area he would've spoken out against. Again, I think he's doing so implicitly in a book like Philemon. I think there's a lot more work to do and I'm not an expert at all on Paul's thought on slavery, but there's probably a lot of work to do in that area.

Let's move on and open another piece of the early church's mail, and so we'll reach into the mailbox and pull out a letter or actually two letters that are addressed to a church in Thessalonica or I talked to one person from Greece that says no it's Thessaloniki. Whatever you want to call it. I kind of call it Thessalonica I don't know why, but there's a variety of ways to pronounce it, but we’ll talk about two letters. Letter number one and letter number two that Paul addressed to the church at Thessalonica, and we’ll have to ask again why two letters? Again we looked at 1st and 2nd Corinthians and saw that those two letters were actually just part of Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian church. We know of at least four letters that Paul wrote to Corinth. Two of which have survived in what we call 1st and 2nd Corinthians, and so now we have two letters addressed to the church in Thessalonica. So we’ll have to ask why two letters? What situations occasion of the writing of these letters.

First of all, letter number 1.: Why did Paul write this letter that we call the first letter to the Thessalonians? As you can see, you’ve seen a map similar to this before, but this is a map, and you can find all kinds of variations, but this was nice and colorful and uncluttered so I decided to put it up. This is obviously modern-day Greece and modern-day Turkey or ancient Asia Minor, and these different colored lines simply
represent Paul's missionary journeys from the book of Acts. We looked at the three primary missionary journeys. The red line is demonstrating or representing Paul's last journey to Rome that ends the book of Acts in chapter 28, but you'll notice that up here is Thessalonica, it is that Paul especially in Acts chapter 17. So that's the primary background we have for the book of 1 Thessalonians is Acts chapter 17. Paul spent only a few months in Thessalonica. He actually left under rather hostile circumstances. His reception in Thessalonica was not overwhelming by everyone, so he was only there for a few months in Thessalonica. Which if you remember in the ancient world, Greece was divided up into two empires of Macedonia in the north, and Achaia in the south. Thessalonica was in the northern part in Macedonia, the northern part of the modern-day Greek empire, and down here is Corinth. We talked a little bit about Corinth being in Achaia, the southern part, but there is Thessalonica, and Paul visited that in one of his missionary journeys that we find recorded in Acts chapter 17. So after a few months Paul had actually established the church and then he hears news about the church in Thessalonica and a couple of issues that he needs to address. So that's basically why 1 Thessalonians is written.

Much like 1 Corinthians, Paul gets wind of a couple of problems. Apparently the problems are little more serious in Corinth and there are more of them, but still there were a couple of issues that Paul felt necessary to sit down and sort out and address the Thessalonians about. Now what were those issues? Actually here, these are a couple. This is the modern-day city of Thessalonica. Paul stayed in this upper floor when he was in Thessalonica. Here are some of the ancient ruins of first century Thessalonica. Another picture, interesting you'll notice the contrast between some of the archaeological work that’s been done in the ancient city and the modern structure right behind it. These are not pictures I’ve taken. They were handed on to me. Kind of an interesting contrast between the ancient city or the remains and then above it, the modern structure that has been built. The letter actually divides quite simply into two parts. The first three chapters, may tell us something about Paul's relationship with the Thessalonian church and the nature of the problems. Again they don't appear, least in comparison with some of his
other letters to be quite as severe or to have Paul quite as upset. But in the first three chapters Paul basically praises the readers because of the news he’s heard about their progress in the gospel has been nothing but good. So he, following a common convention in some letters, Paul is basically getting his readers on his side so that when he does have specific instructions for them, hopefully they'll be more likely to be receptive towards them and to follow through.

So the first three chapters are a kind of one long thanksgiving. Remember most of Paul's letters begin with the thanksgiving. In the sense, that thanksgiving is extended throughout the first three chapters as Paul praises his readers because of the progress they've made in the gospel that he first preach of them back in Acts chapter 17. But again in chapters 4 and 5, Paul does have further instructions for them and the two issues that he addresses; one of them is sexual purity. Again if you member in most of the Greco-Roman cities, sexual immorality or looser morals would have been the standard of the day. Often in connection with certain religious observations and in worship in certain temples among the Greco-Roman gods, but even more generally beyond. So it's possible that some of the Thessalonians, who had been converted under Paul's ministry to Christianity may still have found it tempting to go back to their former lifestyle. So Paul, as much as he did, in 1 Corinthians now instructs the Thessalonians in regard to sexual purity, which he places in the category of their sanctification and their holiness. So, according to Paul, holiness and sanctification knew no boundaries. It encompassed all of one's life. But another issue that Paul deals with is the second coming of Christ. This would be the “not yet.” Remember we’ve talked about the “already but not yet” eschatological tension. The fact that the future has already arrived, for example in Jesus’ teaching in the kingdom, the kingdom was already present yet it had not yet arrived in its fullness. Now Paul addresses the “not yet.” That is, he talks about the second coming of Christ at the end of history to bring salvation and judgment. One thing that’s interesting is when you read, you almost anticipate this when you read 1 Corinthians that at the end of chapter 15 there is a key reference to the coming of Christ--to the future coming of Christ. And then when you get to chapter 4 of Thessalonians, Paul finally addresses that in more
Now in chapter 4 this is what Paul says, at least I can't remember the last time I’ve ever heard this text preached, except at a funeral. So it's likely that this is where you’ve heard this text, but he begins by--I'm down starting in verse 13 of chapter 4: “But we do not want you to be uninformed brothers and sisters, about those who have died so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord.” I want to go back to that phrase, “by the word of the Lord,” what is that? “That we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with the cry of command, and with the shout of an archangel, and with the sound of God's trumpet will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive who are left will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” Verse 18 is the key. This is meant obviously to encourage these beleaguered Thessalonians because of what they've experienced. We’ll talk about what may have been the problem Paul is addressing that called for this kind of lengthy section treating the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the return of Christ to earth and gathering everyone to meet him in the air. What is that referring to, and why did Paul have to talk about that?

But, first of all let me just say one thing to kind of get it out of the way. One of the things that have interested most people is how does 1 Thessalonians fit within the Bible's overall teaching about eschatology and end times material? One of my hobbies is whenever I go to churches I like to read their doctrinal statements. Mainly, I just like to see what they include and how specific they like to get and what kinds of things they exclude and what kinds of things they include. A church’s doctrinal statement is simply the statement of what is distinctive about what this church believes, as far as what they think the Bible teaches. This is what identifies those who belong to this church as far as their system beliefs related to who God is, who Jesus Christ is, what they think about the Bible, what they think about the Holy Spirit, and what they think about the church. There's
usually some kind of a statement about what they think about the future. So there's interest in what 1 Thessalonians 4 says about the future and that is, how is God going to bring this world to an end? A number of churches like to construct rather elaborate schemes of where a lot of the details fit. Can we form a kind of detailed timeline, or at least a general timeline that describes how things will unfold when Jesus Christ returns. Now, interestingly when you go all the way back to the early creeds, like we cite the Apostles’ Creed once in a while or read some of the early creeds--the Nicene Creed. Again, on through history to our modern-day doctrinal statements the church has always believed that Jesus is going to come back and bring history to a conclusion. Then he will inaugurate a new heavens and new earth which we’ll talk about later in Revelation. Churches differ on how we fill in the details around that very general scheme.

Now generally in Jewish eschatology going back to the Old Testament, and also some of the Jewish literature written leading up to and during the time of the New Testament, one way to characterize Jewish eschatology, that is their understanding of the end of history, is the return of God to vindicate God's people to set things right, to renew the earth, to restore and to establish his kingdom. That is the “not yet” part of things. Jewish eschatology would have understood that they were already living in the present age generally, an age dominated by evil and sin. Although God was still active it was an age where Satan was the ruler of this world and evil still held sway, but one day God would intervene and bring in the age to come, or the new age would arrive. By this I don't mean the New Age movement, I mean the new age referring to God's promise of salvation. The kingdom of God that Jesus promised, the not yet part of it that, the new creation that God would one day inaugurate would take place when God returns, restores all things and judges the earth but vindicates and rewards his faithful people. Now leading up to that time, a lot of Jewish literature also envisions what are often called eschatological woes or birth pangs. They often describe a period of intense suffering that would precede the coming of God's arrival to renew all things and establish a new creation and set up his kingdom. That period in the future would be preceded by a period of these eschatological woes or what some have called them birth pangs. In the same way that when you know a
woman knows she's going to give birth as the pains intensify as a prelude to giving birth, that's how the Jews understood these woes for this tribulation that would take place. It would be a prelude to and inaugurate the coming of, the visitation of God, to establish his kingdom, to renew all things and establish a new creation. So that sets the backdrop for what we find in books like 1 Thessalonians and the book of Revelation. And the question is: where does 1 Thessalonians in this teaching get this idea of being raised to meet Christ in the air, and the idea of being caught up to meet him, being with him forever and meeting him in the clouds? Where does all that fit into this understanding of this future, this “not yet” when Christ will come and set up his kingdom, and inaugurate a new creation, rule all things to judge, the world, but to vindicate and reward those who’ve remained faithful? Where does 1 Thessalonians fall into that?

Now, the main thing that people are interested in, and I hesitate to bring this up because I don't think it's personally a big issue, but so many Christians still get exercised over this. That is most of it has to do with this period here. The eschatological woes are a period of tribulation. So in 1 Thessalonians 4 we read this phrase in verse 17, “we who are alive who are left will be caught up in the clouds.” That phrase “caught up” is translated with a Latin version of the Bible, translated with the Latin word from which we get the word “rapture.” Interestingly in a number of church doctrinal statements you'll find them talking about “the rapture of the saints.” That is a time when we get caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Which is what we find in 1 Thessalonians 4. The question is, when does it happen in this scheme? When does this being caught up to meet the Lord in the air take place? The problem is 1 Thessalonians 4 doesn't tell us everything there is to know about eschatology--the end times. Because again, Paul's main concern is only to say enough in verse 18 so that they can comfort each other with these words to address the problem he's addressing. So we cannot expect Paul to say everything there is to say about eschatology, or about the “not yet”—the second coming of Christ. But when does this being caught up occur? So you may have heard of this language. Is this the tribulation that stands for the eschatological woes in the last chart, the Jewish idea of eschatological woes, or birth pangs, or sufferings and tribulation and distress that will immediately
proceed the second coming of Christ. The key is when does this being caught up that we call the rapture, when does this take place in relationship to these messianic or eschatological woes, this tribulation, or these birth pangs. If you read church doctrinal statements you probably won’t find these two as much. You'll often find this one, and that is the view known as pre-tribulation rapture which says, this being caught to meet the Lord in the air in 1 Thessalonians 4 happens before or pre-those eschatological woes. That we know is the Greek that Paul, or other authors called “the great tribulation” or again the Jews Jewish literature called it the “eschatological woes,” or “the birth pangs.” So preacher says Jesus will catch us up in 1 Thessalonians 4. Jesus catches up before that ever takes place.

Another view, there’s actually a number of views. I've been really kind of simplistic and just touching on dominant views in church history. Another view that isn't, I don’t hear it argued for anymore. There's kind of a version of it, but you don't hear this one that’s mid-trib. position. I guess they couldn't make up their minds so they said it was kind of in between. That's not why, but that is in the midst sometime in the middle of these eschatological woes, this time of tribulation that in the preceding slide comes right before the coming of Christ. It is in the middle of that before it really gets bad and gets going the church will be caught up. So when Paul says we’ll be caught up in verse 18 to meet the Lord in the air, he's referring to sometime in the middle of these eschatological woes, this period of tribulation and distress.

Finally, is what is known as the post-tribulation position. That is, this being caught up to meet the Lord in the air, the so-called rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4 comes post- or after these woes of the period of tribulation. So this so-called rapture and the second coming of Jesus are the same event. These other two views say the rapture, this being caught up in 1 Thessalonians 4, and the second coming of Christ to set up his kingdom and to the new creation to renew all things are two different events. This one says, “No, they are the same thing when Jesus comes back to catch us up to be with him, that's when he'll bring history to an end and establish his kingdom.” So the idea is that God’s people will experience these eschatological woes, these birth pangs, this tribulation, but at the end of
that time at the end of history, then God will come and gather his people to himself. Then re-create the entire world, judge the world, reward his faithful people, and set up his kingdom that will last forever. So that's if you hear this terminology and this is the one you'll most likely see when people talk about this, but if you hear this terminology that's what it's referring to. It's where does 1 Thessalonians in verse 17 “being caught up to meet the Lord in the air” fit in the scheme of these woes, or this tribulation that leads up to precedes the second coming of Christ, to set up his kingdom and to set up his new creation.

This presupposes that I guess we’re in heaven with Christ awaiting for this kind of situation to play itself out, and then we would return with him to earth to set up his kingdom. Now you can sleep at night knowing exactly what all these positions, pre-trib and the post trib. Mean. But again I bring that up just because it is part of the language of our church today and has been historically. Just let me say one thing, the church as far as I can tell, the church has always tolerated a variety of views on this issue. Unfortunately, this issue has often been used to cause division, and to cause separation among churches and among other Christians. That should in fact be celebrating that they both believe that Jesus is going to come back definitely in history, and he is going to set up his kingdom and bring history to a close. That has always been what the churches believe. Again, go back and read the Apostle’s Creed, go back and read some of the early creeds where they simply refer to the fact that Jesus will in fact return to Judge, but to also save and reward his people. Jesus will return to set up his kingdom and bring history to a close. All the details surrounding that, in my opinion, are up for grabs. The main thing is that we don't get too caught up in using this to divide, and to even worse label those that are spiritual or not, or have common sense or not. The church has always tolerated a variety of views on this.

Interestingly, to demonstrate this there is a book, I think it's actually been revised, but there's a book produced several years ago called The tribulation: Pre-, Mid. or Post. And they had three persons arguing for each position and they are all from the same school, the exact same seminary. They each argued their position and they interacted with each other. So it's one of those issues you may or may not be confronted with, but certainly one of those issues that ultimately should be approached with a fair degree of humility.
Instead we should choose to focus on what we can be certain about, and what we can agree on when it comes to understanding the eschatology of the Old and the New Testament.

Alright, you probably want to know which one I follow. I'm not going to tell you. A couple of other things, okay I’m on the last one, but again I don't really care. A couple of things, number one in relation to this, and part of the problem is listen to the very next verse chapter 5 verse 1. Paul says “now concerning the times and seasons brothers and sisters you do not need to have anything written to you.” This is a clear indication of, remember we used the telephone metaphor as a way to understand the letters that we’re listening in on one end of the phone conversation and apparently Paul says I’ve already told you about this so he doesn't see any need to rehearse all the details. So again in chapter 4, Paul isn't telling us everything he knows and everything he's already told the Thessalonians. He's already told them that and so he says, you don’t have any need for me to write to you in more detail about this, I've already told you. Probably when he was with them back in Acts chapter 17, and now he just summarizes. So in a sense we’re a little bit impoverished. We come at this with a very partial knowledge or to use one of Paul's metaphors we see through a glass or a mirror dimly, when it comes to reading 1 Thessalonians 4. So part of the problem is we just don't have all the information because Paul had already told them, and doesn't see the need to rehearse all the details again.

The other thing is that a comment I want to make back to verse 15. Paul says, “for this we declare to you, by the word of the Lord.” Now what is the word of the Lord that Paul's referring to? Some are convinced that he's had a prophetic message from Jesus Christ himself that Christ has perhaps audibly spoken through his Spirit to Paul, which he does claim. Remember back in 1 Corinthians he discusses the gift of prophecy. So maybe Paul has received a revelation from Jesus Christ regarding what he's about to teach. What do you think might be another option? When Paul says, what I'm saying is the word of the Lord, what could be another option? It’s a possibility that he's received a revelation, a divine revelation from God himself, from Jesus himself about what he says in chapter 4. How else might we account for chapter 4 being the word of the Lord. Okay, it's probably referring to a past section of Scripture, either the Old Testament or maybe something that
Jesus himself taught, or maybe a combination of both. In your notes, notice that I have a little chart with parallels between 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, and Matthew 24. Matthew 24 is the lengthiest section of Jesus teaching on his return—on the second coming. So I personally think when Paul says “what I'm saying is the word of the Lord,” he’s basically, summarizing what Jesus taught in Matthew chapter 24. Not that Paul had Matthew, but that he may have had a written account or again a lot of the sayings of Jesus were circulating orally. But I think what Paul means when he says what I'm telling you in verse 15 is a word of the Lord is that chapter 4 is the word of the Lord, because it's based on Jesus teaching from a section like Matthew chapter 24 and 25. So if you go back to Matthew 24 and 25 you’ll read a rather detailed teaching of Jesus on the coming of Christ. I’m not going to go through all of these but it's interesting that there are just so many parallels between what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 and what Jesus said back in Matthew 24, that it just makes you think that Paul is directly depending on Jesus.

Now finally, what problem was Paul addressing? Then I want to move to 2 Thessalonians very very quickly, as if we haven't gone through 1 Thessalonians quickly. What problem might Paul be addressing? In other words, why did he have to remind them again? This isn’t the first time he taught this. He appeared to be reminding them of what he's taught them before. Why does he have to rehearse this and remind them? Well perhaps it is a scenario like this: is it possible when Paul was with the Thessalonians back in Acts chapter 17, for some reason teaching concerning the second coming of Christ was important and he spent some time teaching them about Christ’s return, and about his coming, and about the messianic woes etc. and the coming of Christ as the day of the Lord. We’ll come back to that phrase, “day of the Lord” and 2 Thessalonians, but perhaps Paul spent some time talking about that. Perhaps between the time Paul is in Thessalonica and the time now that he writes the letter, it appears that several people perhaps in the congregation in the church in Thessalonica had died, and now some of the Christians who were still living then were wondering if they were going to miss out, or if they were going to be at a disadvantage when Jesus Christ returns. So do you see that Paul had taught them that when he was in Thessalonica in Acts 17. He taught them about the second coming of
Christ, and then he's left and perhaps a couple or a few of the members have died. Some of the members in the church then are worried that their loved ones who have died, and will they miss out when Jesus returns. Will they miss out in those events or will they be at a disadvantage? Paul's response is: No, they won't. That’s why I think he says, “the dead in Christ will rise first and then we who remain will meet them in the air.” That’s Paul's way of saying: No they won't be at a disadvantage. They will participate fully in the events that take place when Jesus Christ returns. Therefore, don't be upset, don't lose hope, but instead encourage one another with these words. Your loved ones will fully participate in the events that transpire when the “not yet” arrives--when Jesus returns. Although he doesn't say a lot as to why they thought they might miss out. But that seems to me to be a likely explanation.

Alright, so Paul has instructed the Thessalonian church regarding two issues, sexual immorality but now the coming of Christ. Perhaps because some of the Christians in Thessalonica wondered if those who had died, who are Christians, would miss out when Jesus returns. Paul assures them they'll participate fully.

Now let's look at the next piece of mail, the second letter to the Thessalonians. I'm going to assume that 1st and 2nd Thessalonians were written in that order it. It doesn't have to be that way, again remember Paul's letters are generally arranged in the order of length, not in the order in which they're written. 2 Thessalonians could've been written first, but I’m going to argue it makes better sense to see 1 Thessalonians written and then 2 Thessalonians. So why another letter to the Thessalonians? Well apparently the Thessalonians responded, this isn't the whole problem or the whole issue, but apparently they overreacted to and responded a little bit too well to Paul's teaching in 1 Thessalonians. That is, listen to this, “as to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and to our being gathered together with him.” That’s the reference back in chapter 4 “being caught up to meet the Lord in the air.” Now Paul says, “know that as to the coming of the Lord and being gathered, we beg you brothers and sisters not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed either by spirit or by word or letter as though from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.” Apparently the Thessalonians now, after Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians,
they’ve reacted to the opposite extreme, and they think that they are already in the day of the Lord. They think that they are about to witness the return of Christ, the second coming, the “not yet,” to wrap up history. That may have as Paul says, that may have come about because someone wrote a letter to them telling them that, as though Paul wrote it. Again perhaps that was an overreaction. Notice how Paul, spoke in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. You can see where, along with a number of other things the Thessalonians may have overreacted when Paul says that, “we who are alive who are left until the coming of the Lord.” Could that not be taken by some to suggest that” “we’re going to be alive when Jesus Christ returns.” Therefore, we’re already in the day of the Lord. So whatever the case, however they got there, the main problem in 2 Thessalonians is the Thessalonian Christians now think that they are already in the day of the Lord.

The day of the Lord was a term that referred basically to the end of that time. It wasn't necessarily a literal day, a 24-hour period. It just referred to the time when God will return and set up his kingdom, and the new creation. He would judge evil, and he would reward his people. That was referred to in the Old Testament as the day of the Lord. Now some in the Thessalonian church thought they were already there, that the day of the Lord had already arrived. Now here then is Paul's response, just to summarize he basically says, the day of the Lord has not come. So Thessalonians you're not in the day of the Lord, because there are certain things that have to happen that have not yet happened. That's basically a summary of Paul's letter to 2 Thessalonians. Thessalonians you're not in the day of the Lord because before the day of the Lord can come, certain things have to happen and they haven't happened yet. So therefore you're not in the day of the Lord.

Now the problem is the key section is chapter 2:2-11. The problem is the things that Paul lists, these haven’t happened yet and until they do the day of the Lord can’t arrive. So Thessalonians don't be deceived into thinking you're already in the end, that the coming of the Christ to end history is right around the corner. Don't be deceived into thinking about that. Paul should come back and say those things today. I was talking to some people the other day and the latest prediction is May 12th 2011, Jesus is coming back. That’s kind of how the Thessalonians were. It is a version of that that they thought they were already in
the day of the Lord, and history was going to wrap up.

So Paul says, “No, no there are certain things that have not happened,” but the problem is the things that Paul lists. He lists three things. Number one the rebellion. He says the rebellion hasn't happened yet. The man of lawlessness hasn't come yet, and the restrainer that has to be taken away has not been removed yet. So does that help you out? Well the problem is, when is this rebellion? The idea here is some apostasy or turning away from God, but Paul isn't real specific about what that is or what that will look like. To what extent is that going to take place? What about the man of lawlessness? Some have tried to identify this as a specific figure, like an antichrist figure. Is Paul referring to a specific figure? Is he referring more to a kind of spirit or an attitude of rebellion that pervades society? Paul doesn't say much about the restrainer? There have been all kinds of suggestions. Paul says the restrainer is now holding back evil, and only when the restrainer is removed then evil will run its course and then the end will come. What in the world is a restrainer? Some have suggested the restrainer is God himself. Some have suggested it’s the Holy Spirit. Some have suggested it's a church. Some have suggested it’s the Gospel--the preaching of the gospel. Some have suggested that it’s the Roman Empire in the first century.

There have been all kinds of suggestions, but the problem is we can't be sure exactly what any of these things are. Whether perhaps the problem, Paul says, don't you remember when I told you about these things? I have no need to tell you about the days and the times, because I've already told you. So maybe the Thessalonians and Paul know exactly what's being talked about, and we’re the ones that are left in the dark about exactly what these are. But I think at the very least, the point is that Paul can say that there are certain things that have not happened that must happen and until then don't get so worked up, and don't think that you're already on the verge of the end. Don't think that you're already in the day of the Lord. That's basically what 2 Thessalonians is about. Now I think when we put 1st and 2nd Thessalonians together it communicates a profound message about how we should think about the coming of the Lord.

We’ll talk more about that on Wednesday.