



Chapter Four

1 Thessalonians chapter four represents a shift in Paul's line of thought. In chapter 3, he concluded with a prayer that expressed his heartfelt desire to see them again, face to face, and encouraged them to continue in love for one another. Chapter four begins with some practical instructions for growing in holiness, then followed by instructions for how to grow in love for each other and those outside the church.

Then at verse 13, Paul changes the subject to deal with what seemed to be most pressing problem in Timothy's report. There was some disagreement or confusion among the Thessalonian believers concerning believers who had already died and Christ's second coming. Paul takes that last portion of chapter four, and much of chapter five to address their concerns. Outside of Revelation, 1 and 2 Thessalonians combined have more to say about Christ's second coming than most other apostolic letters (See also 1 Cor 15:50-58). Because of that, much of the remaining time in this study will be devoted to this subject.

1 Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

When Paul says, "Finally," it signals that he's finishing up the thoughts that he's been writing. So, in light of what he's been saying, Paul says these things. He starts these finishing thoughts by telling the believers to keep on doing what you've been taught, but do it *more and more*. He doesn't want them to get too comfortable with how they're doing things, but instead make it a point to keep increasing, keep improving, and do so constantly.

Q: What is the inherent danger of being too comfortable with how well you do things? (See also Revelation chapters 2-3, the letters to the seven churches)

3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7 For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.





It's interesting that Paul tells us God's will for us - our sanctification - then he zeros in on one aspect of our sanctification: sexual conduct. Sanctification is the ongoing transformation from immaturity to maturity, from self-likeness to Christ-likeness, and *every believer is in this process*. It involves far more than just our sexual conduct, but because this is a consistent theme of instruction in nearly all of Paul's letters, it is an important aspect for our growth. We may think of sexual purity as a conversation for the youth, but adults of all ages are responsible to be sexually pure as a part of their ongoing sanctification. If you're engaged in sexual sin, you are practicing immaturity, and building up chastising judgment for yourself because *God is an avenger in all these things*. It will be brought to light, and it will cost you.

Q: Why does God care so much about our sexual conduct? Why is it tied so closely to our sanctification? (See also *Ephesians 5:31-32*)

⁹ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

While at times it may be tempting to weigh the words of Paul against the words of Peter or even the words of Jesus, if we believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the human authors, then all of the authors carry the same weight. Verse nine deals with those who will be dismissive of Paul's teachings, particularly on sexual conduct. In 1 Corinthians people were dismissive of Paul's teachings because they preferred Apollos or Peter. But this verse serves to remind us that all of Scripture is inspired by the LORD, so disregard for any of it isn't just against its human author, but against God, who inspired the author.

Paul, then takes it a step farther. You don't get to disregard something because it's too hard. Why? Because the LORD has also given you His Holy Spirit who empowers you to do hard things that you can't do on your own.

Q: When has the LORD asked you to do something too hard for you, but not too hard for Him? (See also *Luke 1:37; 1 John 4:4*)

⁹ Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,
¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹ and





to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you,¹² so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

The love that the Thessalonian believers were displaying wasn't a secret. It was apparent, not only to the people in Thessalonica, but to every believer in all of Macedonia. Though they were young in faith and relatively unlearned in the Scriptures, their love out-shined what they lacked in knowledge. And still, like earlier, Paul tells them to do it *more and more*. But this *more and more* would show them how to love people outside of the church. Acts 17 tells us how the city was put into an uproar by people who hated the Gospel. Paul instructs them not to make matters worse. Live quietly, mind your own affairs, and work with your hands. In doing this, they would demonstrate decency toward outsiders, and remain independent of their generosity.

Q: How does verse 11 shape our response to the actions and beliefs of lost people? (See also *Proverbs 17:14; 1 Peter 4:15; Ephesians 4:28*)



Verse 13 is the start of Paul's discussion about the return of Christ. As we mentioned at the start, there was confusion about this issue among the Thessalonian believers. It's unclear how the confusion started, but what is clear is that it centered around the issue of believers who had already died. Before we begin this phase of the discussion, it should be noted that the subject of Christ's return is not without controversy. The controversy isn't over whether He'll return, but how events will unfold leading up to the moment he returns. The major positions that people take are each defensible with Scripture, so it's important to remember no matter which position you might believe, you might be wrong. For reference, here is a list of the major points of view that have been a part of Church teaching for centuries. Each point of view centers around how we should interpret the 1,000 year reign of Christ that is mentioned in Revelation 20:1-10.

Premillennialism

Premillennialists believe that the prophetic events of the book of Revelation happen before the 1,000 year reign of Christ. This view is thought by many to be the most literal and oldest understanding of Christ's return and the point of view embraced by the Apostles and believers through the first three centuries of the Church. Premillennialism is subdivided into three thoughts about the "catching away" (or rapture) of the church. Premillennialism typically views the events of Revelation 6-19 as a seven year period called the Great Tribulation. The subdivisions of Premillennialism are pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, and post-tribulation. Pre-tribulation believes the rapture of the church will happen just before the Great Tribulation begins. Mid-tribulation believes the rapture will happen at the mid-point of the Great Tribulation. Post-tribulation (also called Classic Premillennialism be-





believes that the rapture will happen at the end of the Great Tribulation in the moments before the Jesus finally returns to establish His kingdom.

Postmillennialism

Postmillennialists embrace the belief that the Gospel, through the Church, will gradually overtake the world and usher in a golden age - millennium - of spiritual blessing for the Church. Then at the end of this golden age, there will be a brief apostasy, led by Satan, followed by the return of Christ to bring judgment and usher in the new heaven and new earth. This belief depends heavily upon a more figurative interpretation of prophetic texts. This view was very popular prior to the 20th century, but declined in popularity with the advent of World Wars I and II, and the increasing visibility of wickedness.

Amillennialism

Amillennialists believe that there is no literal 1,000 year reign of Christ. They believe His reign began with His first coming and we are living in a *figurative millennium* right now where He rules both on earth through believers (the Church) and from Heaven where He is seated at the right hand of the Father. Like Postmillennialism, Amillennialism relies heavily upon a figurative interpretation of the prophetic texts. This view became popular through Augustine in the fourth century and has been the majority view of the Church through its history. It remains the dominant view of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and some Protestant denominations.

It is important to note that each of these positions agree that Jesus will, at some point, physically return to earth to conduct final judgment and usher in the new heaven and new earth. This portion of our study through Paul's teachings will not debate which point of view is more correct. However, the verses that follow will unavoidably lead you to embrace a position. You will need to decide whether you believe this should be interpreted literally or figuratively, which will then point you toward one camp or the other.

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

It may seem like a strange description, but in Paul's day it was common to refer to those who have died as "asleep." The Thessalonian believers wondered if those who died had somehow missed the Lord's return. But Paul assured them that the LORD would bring those who had died with him when he returns.

Q: Why does this truth change the way we grieve over our loved ones who die in Christ? (See also 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; Jude 1:14)





¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

It's important that Paul starts this teaching with, "*we declare to you by a word from the Lord.*" That means this isn't just Paul's understanding of how things will go down, but the LORD Himself had told Paul that this is how it will be. The believers who are alive on the earth when Jesus Christ comes again will have to wait their turn. They will not meet the LORD first. First comes the dead in Christ. They will resurrect from their graves and meet the Lord before those who are still alive. This is the hope of every believer who has died before us: resurrection to a new glorified body.

Q: Does the promise of our resurrection give you hope? (See also 1 Corinthians 15:35-49; Revelation 20:4)

¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Part two of Christ's coming is what happens to the believers who are still alive on the earth after the resurrection of the dead in Christ. Those who are left will be "caught up" to the clouds where we will meet Jesus and the dead who just resurrected. The Latin word for caught up is where we get the word "rapture." So the *rapture* of the living believers will happen only after the dead in Christ have been raised. When the alive believers are raptured, their bodies will be transformed in an instant to eternal, incorruptible bodies. From that moment, we will always be with the LORD. Paul says we should encourage one another with these words.

Q: Does the prospect of being caught up to the clouds with Jesus in a split second give you hope? (See also Matthew 24:40-41, 1 Corinthians 15:53-55)





Notes

A large rectangular area filled with a grid of small dots, intended for handwritten notes.

