

Other titles by Alec Taylor:

A Pilgrim's Treasury – 366 daily devotional readings from each book of the Bible (published by Evangelical Press).

Pilgrims under Pressure – Encouraging words in difficult and uncertain times. 366 daily readings from God's holy Word (published by Evangelical Press).

The Promise — 31 Daily Bible Readings introducing the Christian Message (published by The Banner of Truth Trust). 'The Promise' has also been published in French, Spanish, German and Slovak.

They Met the Lord Jesus – 31 daily Bible readings introducing the Lord Jesus Christ (published by Evangelical Press). Many people claim to believe in Jesus, but do not really know what he is like. When Christians think about Jesus, the word '**GREATNESS**' often comes to mind.

Why is Jesus so great? He is the greatest Prophet ever to have walked this earth, but he is more than a Prophet. He is the holy Son of God who took a human body when he came into the world. Many consider his claim to be God's Son as blasphemy because this is the same as saying that he is God. The Bible, which is God's holy Word, clearly affirms that Jesus is God and that he has always existed (John 1:1–18; Philipians 2:5–8). **This booklet is available from Alec Taylor.**

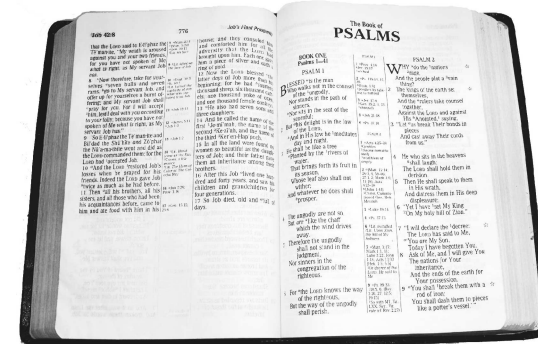
'They Met the Lord Jesus' has also been published in German and Slovak.

Pilgrim Bible Notes – Published each month and covering complete books of the Bible. The Scriptures are simply explained in these devotional notes. These can be freely downloaded from the 'God's Glory, our Joy' website: www.ggoj.org.uk

The Holy Trinity – A Bible Study leaflet which supplies ample Bible references to show that the Lord Jesus Christ is God, that the Holy Spirit is a Person who is God. The teaching of the Holy Trinity is then proved from Scripture.

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



December 2017

1 Thessalonians chapters 2 to 5
Psalms 120 to 134

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Book	Date
Daniel	August 2008; Pilgrims under Pressure
Hosea	May 2009
Joel	July 2010
Amos	November 2010
Obadiah	November 2010
Jonah	July 2011
Micah	July 2011
Nahum	July 2011
Habakkuk	August 2011
Zephaniah	December 2011
Haggai	January 2012; Pilgrims under Pressure
Zechariah	February 2012
Malachi	June 2012
Matthew	March to August 2012
Mark	August to October 2015
Luke	October, November 2013; February, March 2014
John	January to March 2011; Pilgrims under Pressure
Acts	June to August 2009; February to April 2016
Romans	October to December 2015
1 Corinthians	July, August 2016
2 Corinthians	November, December 2016
Galatians	February, March 2017
Ephesians	May, June 2017
Philippians	September 2017
Colossians	October 2017
1 Thessalonians	November, December 2017
2 Thessalonians	November 2012
1 Timothy	December 2012
2 Timothy	March 2013
Titus	March 2013
Philemon	June 2013
Hebrews	June, July 2013
James	July 2014
1 & 2 Peter	October 2014; Pilgrims under Pressure
1, 2 & 3 John	December 2014; Pilgrims under Pressure
Jude	March 2015
Revelation	April and May 2015; Pilgrims under Pressure

Regular notes began publication in 1990. 'Through the Bible in a year' (selected readings from every book) was published in 1989 and 1996.

Bible Reading Notes Index 2008 to 2017

Book	Date
Genesis	November, December 2013; January 2014
Exodus	April to June 2014;
Leviticus	August to October 2012
Numbers	August, September 2014
Deuteronomy	January to March 2015
Joshua	October, November 2008; January, February 2016
Judges	May, June 2016
Ruth	June 2016
1 Samuel	September, October 2016
2 Samuel	January, February 2017
1 Kings	March, April, May 2017
2 Kings	July, August 2017
1 Chronicles	August, September 2011
2 Chronicles	October, November 2011
Ezra	January 2012; Pilgrims under Pressure
Nehemiah	May 2012; Pilgrims under Pressure
Esther	May, June 2012
Job	March to May 2011
Psalms 1–16	November, December 2012
Psalms 1–12	Pilgrims under Pressure;
Psalms 17 to 23	March, May, June 2013
Psalms 24 to 66	Jan, June, July, Sept, November & December 2014
Psalms 67 to 78	March and December 2015
Psalms 79 to 89	June, October, November 2016
Psalms 90-106	December 2016
Psalms 107–134	June, September, November, December 2017
Psalms 135 –150	January, February, March 2012
Proverbs	January, February 2013
Ecclesiastes	March 2008; Pilgrims under Pressure
Song of Solomon	April 2013
Isaiah	April, May; August, September 2013
Jeremiah	May to August 2015
Lamentations	October 2015
Ezekiel	April to June 2008; Pilgrims under Pressure

NB. Pilgrims under Pressure is a 400 page book published in 2016. It is available to download.

1 DECEMBER

1 Thessalonians 2:17–20

But Satan hindered us

Paul's love and affection for the church at Thessalonica shines through these verses. He had been forced to leave them through persecution (Acts 17:5–10). Look at his description of his parting from them: 'We, brethren, having been taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured more eagerly to see your face with great desire' (17). The Greek word translated 'taken' means 'bereaved'. The parting had been like a bereavement. Paul wrote that he had planned on several occasions to return to Thessalonica to be with them, '*But Satan hindered us*' (18). The devil is always active when God is working, especially when the gospel makes progress. Let us remember, however, that Satan can only go as far as God permits (Job 1:12; 2:6).

Satan may do his worst, but God overrules his opposition to further the gospel. Though Paul had been torn away from them, the Thessalonians had boldly sounded forth the Word of the Lord (1:8). The devil may have hindered Paul and his companions from returning to Thessalonica but he would never be able to prevent a glorious reunion when the Lord Jesus comes again. Paul rejoiced that he would see them in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ at his coming (19–20). What a great day that will be, when there will be no more parting, when every true Christian will be *in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming!*

The apostle was not disheartened by Satan's attacks. He knew that God works all things together for good to those who love him, and that includes our disappointments and setbacks (Romans 8:28). If the devil has been getting at you, hindering your work for the Lord or whispering doubt and discouragement into your mind, remember that God is sovereign. Trust in him and he will bring you through victorious.

*When Satan appears to stop up our path,
And fills us with fears, we triumph by faith.
He cannot take from us, though oft he has tried,
The heart cheering promise, the Lord will provide.*

(John Newton)

We are appointed to this

The apostles had been obliged to leave Thessalonica in a hurry following mob violence stirred up against them by unbelieving Jews. Jason and other Thessalonian believers were accused of welcoming Paul and Silas and had been bound over to keep the peace. For this reason it was thought prudent to send them away by night to Berea (Acts 17:5–10). Their enemies in Thessalonica followed them to Berea and stirred up the crowds against them. Paul went on to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea (Acts 17:14–15).

When they joined him in Athens, it was decided that Timothy should return to Thessalonica. They were very concerned for the infant church and they could *no longer endure* the suspense of not knowing how they were doing in the face of suffering (1, 5). Timothy's mission was to *establish* the infant church, and to *encourage* them concerning their faith, and to ascertain the state of their faith (2, 5).

The Thessalonian church had been born in the face of persecution (cp 1:6; 2:14). The apostles had warned them that they would suffer tribulation and they did not want this to disturb their faith (3–4). Some false teachers tell us that the Christian should be able to live above suffering and trouble. This is nonsense! The Word of God tells us, '*We are appointed to this*' (3; cp. John 15:20; 16:33; Acts 14:22; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12–13).

Some sects (eg. Christadelphians) deny the existence of the devil as a person. Such teaching is a denial of the teaching of Scripture. The tempter (Satan) is always active! (cp. Matthew 4:1–11). If he cannot shake our faith by persecution, he will seek to entice us from God and into sin through temptation (5). **We are appointed to suffer with Christ, but we shall also reign with him (2 Timothy 2:12). When we understand this, we will not sink under suffering, but rather glory in it and be stronger for it (Romans 5:3–5).**

Bless the LORD

The last of the Songs of Ascents is a doxology. The first two verses are a call by the congregation to the priests and Levites who remain in the temple throughout the night to *bless the LORD* and to lift up their hands in prayer (1–2; cp. 1 Chronicles 9:33; 1 Timothy 2:8). What does it mean to '*bless* (Hebrew = 'to declare blessed') *the LORD*'? Let Spurgeon give us the answer: 'Think well of Jehovah, and speak well of him. Adore him with reverence, draw near to him with love, delight in him with exultation. Be not content with praise, such as all his works render to him; but, as his saints, see that ye bless him. He blesses you; therefore, be zealous to bless him. The word bless is the characteristic word of the psalm. The first two verses stir us to bless Jehovah, and in the last verse Jehovah's blessing is invoked upon the people. Oh to abound in blessing!' (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

The psalm closes with a benediction. The pilgrims who have gone up to worship in the house of the Lord are about to return home: *The LORD who made heaven and earth bless you from Zion* (3). We should pray for God's blessing to be upon ourselves and others. The Lord does bless his worshipping, obedient people.

Many people spend their lives complaining but Christians should be different! It is a great privilege to serve the Lord and the more we count our blessings and praise him, the more we will rejoice in him. Christian, it is God's will that you give thanks to him in all circumstances. *In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you* (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Count the blessings of salvation. Bless God for choosing you in eternity past, for adopting you into his family, for redemption through the blood of Christ, for the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:3–7). Bless God for giving his beloved Son to be your Saviour. Bless God for his love and goodness to you. *But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light* (1 Peter 2:9).

*How good and how pleasant it is for brethren
to dwell together in unity!*

The theme of this great little psalm is the blessing that comes from unity between believers. *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!* (1). It is good because God is honoured and it brings his blessing upon us. It is pleasant, because it is pleasing to the Lord and it brings joy to his people, promoting spiritual life (3). Two pictures are used to describe this unity:

- It is like the sacred oil used in the anointing of the high priest (2; cp. Exodus 29:7). The oil did not remain on his head but ran down his beard and on to the edges of his garments. Unity leads to the spread of God's blessing and this is also seen in the next illustration.
- It is like the refreshing dew of Hermon coming down on the mountains of Zion (3).

Spiritual unity has nothing to do with the kind of togetherness promoted by the ecumenical movement which seeks to unite people, many of whom deny essential Christian truths. Truth must never be compromised or sacrificed but we should work for unity between churches who love God's Word and are zealous for its doctrines. We must also maintain unity within the local church (cp. Ephesians 4:1–3; Philippians 2:1–11). We have differing personalities, abilities and gifts which must serve to unite and enrich us rather than to divide us. Unity is promoted by denying ourselves, by submitting to each other, by showing love to each other in words and deeds of kindness (Ephesians 4:30–32; 5:1–2,21; 1 John 3:16–18). **When a church is united in joyful, loving fellowship in Christ, it is a taste of heaven on earth. What are you doing to promote unity in your church?**

*How sweet, how heavenly is the sight,
When those who love the Lord
In one another's peace delight,
And so fulfil his word!*

(Joseph Swain)

We were comforted ... by your faith

It would appear that Silas went from Athens to Macedonia soon after Timothy, for both returned together to join Paul at Corinth (Acts 18:5). Timothy brought good news to Paul of the faith and love of the Thessalonians (6). Faith and love are inseparable graces in the Christian's life and they are often coupled together in Scripture (eg. 5:8; Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 6:23). Love for God is seen in obedience to his Word and love to our fellow-Christians is seen in practical concern for each other (John 14:15; 1 John 3:16–18). If these things are not apparent in our lives, then our faith is either very weak or it is spurious. The news from Thessalonica greatly encouraged the apostle who was enduring affliction and distress through opposition at Corinth (7). It gave him a new lease of life in his own difficult circumstances and he wrote, *'For now we live if you stand fast in the Lord'* (8).

Paul prayed fervently that God would soon direct his way to them (10–11). Notice that Paul addressed his prayer to *our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ*. The Bible teaches that Jesus is God (eg. John 1:1; 20:28) and those who deny this truth are in great error. If Jesus were not God, Paul would not have addressed his prayer to him. Though he was encouraged to hear of the faith and love of the Thessalonians, he prayed for their continued growth in the Christian life. There was room for progress in their faith (10), in their love for each other (12) and in their sanctification (*'holiness'* – 13). The same is true of all of us. However long we have known the Lord, there is always room for further growth in grace and in our knowledge of Christ.

The coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ is a great incentive for us to be holy (13; cp. 2 Peter 3:11–13; 1 John 3:2–3). We must never be complacent or content with our Christian lives. Are you progressing in faith, love, and holiness? Could your pastor write of you, *'We were comforted ... by your faith'* (7)? **Do you give him much cause for rejoicing, or do you break his heart? How is your Christian life?**

The will of God, your sanctification

Paul now returns to the theme of walking (living) to please God (1; cp. 2:12). How are we to please him? We please him by obeying the commandments of the Lord Jesus (2). What is God's will for my life? *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality* (3). This is a very timely warning as we live in a corrupt society, where sexual immorality is tolerated and accepted, rather than condemned. Humanists and other ungodly philosophers insist that we can have morals without God. This just is not true! To hold such a notion is to take a very light view of sin. Humanist Julian Huxley is quoted in the heretical book of the late Bishop John Robinson published over 50 years ago as saying, 'For my own part, the sense of spiritual relief which comes from the idea of rejecting God as a supernatural being is enormous' ('HONEST TO GOD', page 41) That says it all! Sinful men hate God and want to be free of his laws (cp. Romans 1:28-32). We are reaping a terrible harvest of family breakdown and misery in our nation as a result of such godless notions.

Those who love Christ have been called to be different from those around us *who do not know God*, who allow sinful passions to control them (5). It is God's will that we should keep ourselves pure (cp. 1 Timothy 5:22)! Each one of us is to exercise control over his own body ('*vessel*' – cp. 2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul had warned the Thessalonians about the importance of sexual purity when he was among them. Those who fall into adultery and defraud a brother of his wife will surely bring God's judgment upon themselves (6).

The message of these verses is most important today and we cannot afford to be complacent! Some who have appeared to be strong Christians, some who have held office in the church, even in pastoral ministry, have fallen. Many a church has been wrecked by immorality. Let us be determined not to feed our minds on unclean things, whether on television or from the internet and newspapers. *God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.* If we reject this commandment, we reject God (7–8).

The LORD has sworn in truth to David; he will not turn from it

This psalm divides into two sections:– The oath of David (1–10) and the oath of the Lord (11–18). The psalmist prays that the Lord will *remember David and all his afflictions* (1). David had suffered many hazards and had encountered much trouble before he was anointed king over Israel. When he was settled on the throne, he was still restless because he yearned to have a place for the Lord, a dwelling-place for the ark of the covenant. He made an oath that he would not rest until he had found such a place (2–5). Are we restless because we long to see the work of God prosper?

The mind of God had not been sought at the ark of the covenant since the days of Saul and the people eagerly responded to David's plan to bring it back to Jerusalem (6–10; cp. 1 Chronicles 13:1–6). The enthroned Lord is pictured as resting his feet on the ark which is described as '*his footstool*' (7). Verses 8 to 10 were quoted by Solomon in his prayer at the dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 6:41–42). The Lord's answer to this prayer is found in verses 13 to 18.

David's desire to house the ark in a permanent building was honouring to God but the Lord had other plans for him which he revealed to Nathan the prophet. God's will was not for David to build the temple, but for Solomon to do so (2 Samuel 7:1–13). He made an oath to David: *The LORD has sworn in truth to David; he will not turn from it* (11). God's promises never fail; he does not change or turn from them! David wanted to build a house for the Lord but God promised to build him a house. This was a dynasty which would last for ever, his descendants reigning after him (11–12; 2 Samuel 7:11,16,27). God's oath to David was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ (17; Luke 1:32–33,67–69).

The church is now the dwelling place of God (13–14; cp. Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:5). The Lord is with his people to bless them by supplying all their needs, to satisfy them and to give them joy (15–16). **Let us praise him for all his mercies to us!**

Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul

Spurgeon says of this delightful psalm, ‘It is one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn. It speaks of a young child, but it contains the experience of a man in Christ. Lowliness and humility are here seen in connection with a sanctified heart, a will subdued to the mind of God, and a hope looking to the Lord alone’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID). David shunned the proud look which God hates (1; cp. Proverbs 6:17) and did not seek to concern himself with things which were too profound for him. Though he was a king, he recognised that he had his own limitations. We do not have all the answers to life’s mysteries and we are foolish to pretend that we have (this was the problem with Job’s three friends).

It is a mark of Christian maturity to be able to say, ‘*Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with his mother*’ (2). Before a child is weaned, it craves and demands to be fed at its mother’s breast. Once weaned, it will no longer desire to possess the breast to feed from it but will rest contented on it. This is a picture of a humble believer who has learned the art of Christian contentment (Philippians 4:11–12; 1 Timothy 6:6). He has learned to find much comfort in Christ even in times of loss or disappointment. His confidence is in the Lord and he looks to him (3); he knows the peace of God ruling in his heart (Colossians 3:15).

Are you feeling restless, harassed or stressed? Are you hankering after things which God sees fit to deny you? **Oh, learn to delight yourself in the Lord (Psalm 37:4) and as you spend time in his presence, you will learn to be calm and quiet before him!**

*Simply trusting thee, Lord Jesus
I behold thee as thou art,
For thy love so pure, so changeless,
Satisfies my heart;
Satisfies its deepest longings,
Meets, supplies its every need,
Compasseth me round with blessings;
Thine is love indeed!*

(Jean S. Pigott)

Also aspire to lead a quiet life

We are again reminded of the importance of brotherly love (9–10; cp. 3:12). Perhaps we congratulated ourselves when we read yesterday’s passage because we have shunned all forms of sexual immorality? If we do not show practical Christian love and concern for each other, we also break God’s commandments. The Lord Jesus has given us a new commandment that we should love one another as he has loved us (John 13:34). Do you keep this commandment?

There are now some further instructions on living the Christian life (11). We must *also aspire* (the Greek verb means ‘to make it our aim’):

- *To lead a quiet life.* If we are undisciplined or restless, we will always be up and down in our Christian lives, not enjoying the peace of God ruling in our hearts. Paul is not suggesting for a moment that we should seek the quiet of a graveyard. We are engaged in spiritual warfare but we should always seek to know the poise and calm of God’s peace ruling in our hearts. ‘*A quiet life*’ also encourages stability and blessing in our lives.
- *To mind our own business.* We must show our concern for others without being busybodies (cp. 2 Thessalonians 3:11; 1 Peter 4:15). Busybodies love to put everyone right but never seem to be aware of their own faults and failings. They generally show little love in their lives and cause hurt and trouble.
- *To work.* We must work to keep ourselves. In times of recession many Christians are unemployed but that is no excuse for idleness. There is plenty of work to do through the various ministries of the church. We can also use the time to improve our knowledge of God’s Word. A lazy Christian dishonours the Lord.

If these aims are achieved, our testimony before unbelievers will be enhanced (12). What are your spiritual aims?

We ... shall be caught up ... to meet the Lord in the air

Some in the Thessalonian church were grief-stricken over loved-ones who had died as believers. They were confused as to what would happen to them when Christ returned. Would they miss out on the great day of resurrection? To die without God is to die without hope (13; cp. Ephesians 2:12) but Christians who die are blessed (Revelation 14:13). A pagan tomb from Paul's time has the inscription, 'I was not – I became – I am not – I care not.' What a bleak view of life and death!

Death cannot separate believers from the love of God (Romans 8:38–39); they are safe and secure in the arms of the Lord Jesus. For the believer, death is likened to sleep (14; 5:10; John 11:11). This is the 'sleep' of the body not of the soul. When a Christian dies, he is absent from the body and present with the Lord in heaven (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:21–23). Our bodies will not be raised until the return of Christ, however.

Paul teaches that the second coming of Christ will be wonderful for all Christians, past and present. It will be a day of resurrection for God's people. The Lord will come from heaven with a great shout and a trumpet blast (16; 1 Corinthians 15:51–55). When Jesus comes again, every eye will see him. He will not come in secret (Revelation 1:7). *The dead in Christ will rise first* and believers who are alive at that time will also have new bodies and *shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord* (16–17). We will see our Lord in all his breathtaking splendour and glory (2 Thessalonians 1:10) and we will admire, adore and worship him. **We do not sorrow as others who have no hope (13). Let us comfort one another with this glorious truth!**

*We expect a bright tomorrow, all will be well;
Faith can sing, through days of sorrow, all, all is well:
On our Father's love relying,
Jesus every need supplying,
Or in living, or in dying,
All must be well.*

(Mary Peters)

With him is abundant redemption

The psalmist was in the depths (1), not because of trial or suffering, but because of his sin. He realised that his sin left him guilty and hopeless before God. He said, '*If you LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared*' (3–4). The word '*but*' in verse 4 makes all the difference! (See the '*but*' in Ephesians 2:4 following the previous verses which describe man's plight as a sinner). Spurgeon comments, 'None fear the Lord like those who have experienced his forgiving love. Gratitude for pardon produces far more fear and reverence of God than all the dread which is inspired by punishment ... it is grace which leads the way to a holy regard of God, and a fear of grieving him' (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

In many of our churches, we have lost the emphasis of God's holy wrath upon sinners and the reality of hell. **As a result, we do not see the dreadful situation that we are in, nor feel the evil of our own hearts. It is when we have a sense of sin and God's awesome majesty that we realise our hopelessness and we cry out of the depths (1).** It is then that we will wait upon God, and hope in him (5–7). We will then be able to proclaim, '*With him is abundant redemption*' (7). This redemption is abundant because:

- It was purchased at tremendous cost, even the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19).
- It redeems us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13).
- It brings forgiveness for all our sins (8; cp. Ephesians 1:7).
- It frees us from the power of Satan and sin (Ephesians 2:1–3).
- It is eternal (Hebrews 9:12).

The redeemed will go to heaven and there we will sing of this abundant redemption as we worship the Lord Jesus and praise him for all that he has done for us (Revelation 5:9–14).

Let all those who hate Zion be put to shame

Spurgeon describes this psalm as ‘a mingled hymn of sorrow and strong resolve.’ Israel had known affliction many times from her youth as a nation in Egypt through to the captivity in Babylon (1–2; Exodus 1:11; 2:23–25; Psalm 137). She had also experienced trouble when she returned from exile (Ezra 4:1–5; Nehemiah 4:1–23). The Christian church has also experienced affliction throughout her history. There is resolve in the statement, ‘yet they have not prevailed against me’ (2). *All who desire to lead a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution* (2 Timothy 3:12) but we must have a holy resolve to persevere whatever the discouragement. The affliction of God’s people is likened to the long furrows made by a ploughman in the fields (3), but God has wise and gracious purposes in all such suffering (cp. Job 23:8–10).

There follows a prayer for the malediction of the enemies of God’s people: ‘*Let all those who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back*’ (5). How does such a sentiment fit in with the words of the Lord Jesus, ‘*Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you*’ (Matthew 5:44)? Let Spurgeon answer: ‘Loyal subjects wish ill to those who plot against their king. “Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks,” is but a proper wish, and contains within it no trace of ill-will. We desire their welfare as men, their downfall as traitors. Let their conspiracies be confounded, their policies be turned back. How can we wish prosperity to those who would destroy that which is dearest to our hearts? This present age is so flippant that if a man loves the Saviour he is styled a fanatic, and if he hates the powers of evil he is named a bigot’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

Let us pray that the Lord would confuse and overthrow every plot against his church.

Let us watch and be sober

Paul continues with the subject of the return of Christ which is referred to as ‘*the day of the Lord*’ (2, 4). He had no doubt that the Thessalonians knew that the Lord Jesus will return unexpectedly *as a thief in the night* (2; cp. 2 Peter 3:10). Though it will be wonderful for the Christian, it will be dreadful for the ungodly who will not be able to escape divine judgment (3; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9). The unbeliever is lulled by Satan into a false sense of security and he sleeps a deadly slumber so that he is unaware of coming judgment.

We are *sons of light and sons of the day* (5). We have been called out of the darkness of spiritual ignorance and sin into the marvellous light of Christ (1 Peter 2:9). What does light do? It shines! We are to shine as lights in this dark world (Matthew 5:14–16) *to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ* (2 Corinthians 4:6). **How well are you shining as ‘a son of light’?**

We do not know when Christ will return but we must be ready for the great day. We must:

- *Watch* (6). The non-Christian slumbers in his sin as if there were no day of judgment but the Christian must be on his guard to keep himself from sin. Watchfulness is often linked with prayer (Mark 14:38; Colossians 4:2; 1 Peter 4:7).
- *Be sober* (6, 8; cp. Mark 14:38; 1 Peter 5:8). To be sober is to be serious and clear-minded. The drunkard sees the world through glazed eyes and from a swirling head. The sober person sees things as they really are. The Christian who is ‘*sober*’ can be relied upon for his spiritual judgment and common sense. He is not carried away with the latest religious fads. There are many ‘giddy’ Christians who go round in circles getting nowhere. *Let us watch and be sober* (6).

*Christian! seek not yet repose,
Cast thy dreams of ease away,
Thou art in the midst of foes:
Watch and pray.*

(Charlotte Elliott)

God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation

We must not only be on our guard by being vigilant and serious-minded, but also by *putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation* (8). The breastplate protected the heart of a Roman soldier just as a bullet-proof jacket provides protection to a modern soldier. Faith in Christ and love to God and his people is a great protection from the attacks of the devil. The helmet protects the head. The word ‘*hope*’ means an assured conviction. What a blessing it is to possess assurance of salvation! Do you put on *the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation* for your protection?

The Christian will not perish because *God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ* (8–9). Vincent (WORD STUDIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT) describes God’s wrath as his ‘holy hatred of sin, his essential, necessary antagonism to everything evil.’ We *were by nature children of wrath* (Ephesians 2:3) but God who is rich in mercy has chosen us to salvation and has given his beloved Son to die for us so that we can be freely forgiven for our sins and escape punishment on the day of judgment. *Our Lord Jesus Christ died for us, that ... we should live together with him.* What comfort there is in this glorious truth! Let us be encouraged and build up each other as the Thessalonians were doing (10–11).

God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He is worthy of our love and devotion. Let us rejoice in him and seek always to please him.

*Chosen not for good in me,
Wakened up from wrath to flee,
Hidden in the Saviour’s side,
By the Spirit sanctified,
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show
By my love how much I owe.*

(Robert Murray M’Cheyne)

Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways

Most people want to be happy and many seek satisfaction in the pursuit of wealth, pleasure or worldly honour. Those who seek happiness as an end in itself will never find it. The secret is found in this psalm: *Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways* (1). The word ‘*blessed*’ is the same Hebrew word translated ‘*happy*’ (2). The fear of the Lord is not a cringing, miserable state, but is to do with reverence for God. Spurgeon urges us to ‘cultivate that holy filial fear of Jehovah which is the essence of all true religion:– the fear of reverence, of dread to offend, of anxiety to please, and of entire submission and obedience ... none but those who fear the Lord will ever walk in his ways’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

Notice that there is no exception to the rule of verse 1: *Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways* (1). Such a person does not walk *in the counsel of the ungodly* (Psalm 1:1). When we walk in the ways of the Lord, he walks with us. Those who are not Christians cannot comprehend the blessing that comes from walking in the ways of God. **Those who fear the Lord know by experience a happiness that nothing in this world could ever impart – satisfaction, peace, joy and contentment in Christ.**

The person who fears the Lord knows satisfaction in his work and his future is assured – *and it shall be well with you* (2: cp; Isaiah 3:10). He enjoys happiness in his home (3) and how important this is when so many families are breaking up. *Behold, thus shall the man be blessed* (Hebrew = ‘declared blessed’) *who fears the LORD* (4). If your marriage is unhappy, could it be that you or your spouse are not fearing the Lord and walking in his ways?

The psalm ends with a blessing and a prayer for peace to be upon Israel (5–6; cp. Psalm 125:5).

Unless the LORD builds ... unless the LORD guards

This psalm is one 'of' or 'for' Solomon (see title). Solomon was also known as Jedidiah, meaning 'beloved of the LORD' (2; cp. 2 Samuel 12:25). The Book of Ecclesiastes demonstrates that life without God is vain (see especially chapters 1 and 2). We need to humbly depend upon the Lord in every area of our lives. The words, '*in vain*' are found three times in verses 1 and 2:

- *Unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain who build it* (1). The word, 'house' may refer to a building or to a family. A family must be built up on obedience to God's Word if it is to know his blessing.
- Every precaution may be taken to guard a city but *unless the LORD guards it*, the work of the watchman is in vain (1).
- It is vain to work from early morning till late at night and to fret (*to eat the bread of sorrows*) in a quest for a secure, fulfilled and happy life, if God is not in our work (2). Lasting contentment only comes to those who lead a godly life (cp. 1 Timothy 6:6).

Children are a precious gift from God (3–5). When someone says that their child was 'a mistake' (in other words, not planned or intended) they do not speak as a Christian. No child whom God gives is a mistake, but is a heritage from the Lord. One old saint commenting on verse 4, wrote, 'Well doth David call children "*arrows*"; for if they be well bred, they shoot at their parents' enemies; and if they be evil bred, they shoot at their parents.' (Henry Smith, 1560–1591; quoted in THE TREASURY OF DAVID). **It is a great privilege to have children but they bring a solemn responsibility to parents. We must give them a godly training (cp. Proverbs 22:6).**

Believing singles or childless couples must not feel that they are second class Christians when they read these verses. The apostle Paul had no children of his own, but he had thousands of spiritual children who brought him much joy (cp. 1 Thessalonians 2:7–12, 19–20; 1 Timothy 1:2). We should all long to bear spiritual children.

Esteem them very highly in love

The apostle Paul had been much encouraged by the spiritual vigour of the Thessalonian church (1:2–3; 3:6) but they still needed to be challenged. He closes his letter with some very necessary exhortations. The first of these exhortations concerns our attitude to overseers in the church (our pastors/elders). We must *recognize* ('appreciate' – Hendriksen) them for what they do among us (12):

- They *labour* – toiling in the word and doctrine (cp. 2:9; 1 Timothy 5:17). Think about John Eadie's definition of what is meant by the word 'labour' (see notes for 24 November): 'Labour (Greek 'kopos') is earnest and toilsome service, into which the whole heart is thrown, travail of soul, often self-denial and exhaustion... it busies itself in kindness of all shapes, in the doing of which it spares no pains and grudges no sacrifice.'
- They are *over us in the Lord* – Oversight carries awesome responsibilities. Elders are overseers who must not lord it over the church but be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2–3). They watch over your soul and they must give account to God (Hebrews 13:17).
- They *admonish* us (the same Greek word translated '*warn*'; 14). The faithful pastor and his fellow-elders lovingly warn their people against false teaching and the deadly effects of sin (cp. Acts 20:31).

Pastoral oversight is essential to spiritual well-being. When you become a church member you willingly accept such oversight. Many people today resent authority of any kind. Do you resent your elders when they warn you of spiritual danger or shortcomings in your life? Oh, repent of such a worldly attitude! God's will is that you *esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake*. We must accept and respect pastoral authority if we are to be *at peace* among ourselves (13). **If you are not a church member, why not?** Could it be that you refuse to accept instruction and admonition, or have you never given it much thought before now?

But always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all

We are now directed to the correct attitude that we should show to each other. These instructions are for all in the church. ‘Brethren’ in verse 14 does not refer only to the oversight (see verses 1,4,12). We must:

- *Warn the unruly.* The word ‘unruly’ is a military term; the Greek word is used to describe those who break rank with the rest of the troops, those who are out of step. Such people are a hindrance in any fellowship and there were such people at Thessalonica who were idle busybodies and would not work to support themselves (2 Thessalonians 3:6–12). Have you the courage to warn someone who is gossiping or seeking to cause dissent in the church?
- *Comfort the fainthearted.* The Greek word translated ‘comfort’ is different to that used in verse 11 and 4:18 (which means ‘to help’). The word used here means ‘to speak kindly’ (as in 2:11). A kind word can do much to encourage a Christian who is depressed, anxious or passing through a period of trial.
- *Uphold the weak.* Help those who are prone to fall into sin. This takes time, much grace and much patience. We need to be strong Christians if we are to support the weak.
- *Be patient with all.* The word ‘patient’ is elsewhere translated ‘longsuffering’ (Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 4:2). Some people are very trying but we must learn to be patient with them.
- *See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone.* We must not seek to get even or to allow revenge-seeking in the church (cp. Romans 12:17,19–21; 1 Peter 3:8–9).
- *Always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.* We do good for ourselves by living for God and by setting time apart for daily devotions. **We will do others good by having the attitudes described in verses 14 and 15. How are you doing?**

The LORD has done great things for us, whereof we are glad

We do not know when this lovely psalm was written but many commentators believe that it was after the return of the exiles from Babylon. The collapse of the Babylonian empire and the release from captivity brought great joy. The laughter and singing of the returning exiles was observed by the Gentiles who acknowledged the hand of God upon them: ‘The LORD has done great things for them’ (1–2). The joyful Israelites took up the same refrain, ‘The LORD has done great things for us, whereof we are glad’ (3). Spurgeon comments, ‘The Lord who alone turns our captivity does nothing by halves: those whom he saves from hell he brings to heaven. He turns exile into ecstasy, and banishment into bliss.’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

The returning exiles soon encountered opposition when they began rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. They discovered that God’s work brings satanically inspired opposition (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah). How true this is of the Christian life! At conversion we have the experience of forgiveness and acceptance by God, of deliverance from the power and pollution of sin. We have the joy of new found fellowship with God and with his people. This may seem too good to be true and cause us to wonder whether we are dreaming or not (see verse 1). We then face the battles of the Christian life and satanic attacks and know discouragement and disappointment but if we *sow in tears we shall reap in joy* (5).

If we love the Lord we cannot be indifferent to the plight of the lost. We will want to win souls for Christ. We can read all the best books on personal evangelism and soul-winning and seek to put what we learn into practice and still lack success. Could it be that we rarely weep? Spurgeon comments, ‘Winners of souls are first weepers for souls.’ **When did you last weep before the Lord over the plight of the lost?** Have you been discouraged in your work for God? Do not give up! Remember what the Lord has done in the past and be encouraged. *The LORD has done great things for us, whereof we are glad.*

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion

Matthew Henry comments that this short psalm may be summed up in the words of the prophet, ‘*Say to the righteous, that it shall be well with them ... Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him.*’ (Isaiah 3:10–11). The psalm sets before us:

- The stability of the believer: *Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion which cannot be moved* (1). Some professing Christians are very unstable. They never settle in a church and are always looking for some exciting or sensational new thing. They are blown about by the winds of strange doctrine. If you have no stability, you must ask yourself why this is. Are you really trusting in the Lord? Are you eager to read your Bible and to hear it preached? Do you obey God’s Word? Are you disciplined in your devotional life?
- The safety of the believer: Jerusalem is surrounded by mountains (eg. the Mount of Olives) and any attacking army would first need to take the surrounding heights. *As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people* (2). The Lord is our Protector now and for ever.

Verses 4 and 5 have a prayer and a warning. The psalmist prays that the Lord will do good to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart (4). **Do you pray for politicians who seek to honour God’s Word in parliament and in our local councils? There are very few of them and they need our prayerful support. Do you pray for your fellow-Christians?** Spurgeon comments, ‘We wish well to those who do well. We are so plagued by the crooked that we would pour benedictions upon the upright.’ (TREASURY OF DAVID). By contrast, those who turn aside to crooked ways have no stability or security. The Lord will lead them away to judgment (5).

The psalm concludes with a benediction on Israel. The same thought is found in Galatians 6:16 with reference to the church which is ‘the Israel of God’. *Peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.*

Rejoice always

(Additional Readings:– Habakkuk 3:17–18; Matthew 5:11–12; Acts 5:40–41; 16:22–25; 2 Corinthians 6:10; 1 Peter 1:6; 4:12–13).

Many people have the mistaken notion that Christianity is a dull, drab, miserable affair, but that is not so! Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and it is linked to rejoicing (Galatians 5:22; 1 Peter 4:13). We must not confuse spiritual joy with having lots of fun and being jolly, nor with working up a frenzy in an emotionally charged meeting. Does God ask of us the impossible when he says, ‘*Rejoice always*’? We can be *sober* (6) as well as rejoicing in the Lord. How can we cultivate a joyful disposition in our lives? We do so by glorifying God and enjoying him.

Worship and praise bring great joy (Psalm 9:2). Do read and ponder the additional readings given at the beginning of today’s notes which illustrate this truth. Troubled, anxious Christian, can’t you find anything in which you can rejoice? Rejoice now in God’s great salvation so freely bestowed upon you. Rejoice in the love of God from which nothing can separate you. Rejoice in past blessings and in God’s precious promises which are all true.

Do not complain because that does not glorify God. A joyful Christian is a great blessing to others. Someone once said, ‘Joy is like jam – it sticks to you when you spread it.’ Fanny Crosby, the blind hymn-writer of such hymns as ‘To God be the glory’ and ‘All the way my Saviour leads me,’ wrote these words when she was just eight years of age:

*O what a happy soul I am!
Although I cannot see,
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be;
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don’t!
To weep and sigh because I’m blind
I cannot, and I won’t.*

Pray without ceasing

(Additional Readings:– Ephesians 6:18; 2 Thessalonians 1:11).

Many of us are guilty of neglecting the place of prayer in our lives. It is often crowded out through time-wasting or various distractions, or we may lose heart (cp. Luke 18:1). Prayerlessness is sin! (cp. 1 Samuel 12:23). It is not enough for us to have a set time each day for personal devotions. We must *pray without ceasing* (cp. 3:10). This does not mean that we are to engage in non-stop prayer. If we concentrate our thoughts in prayer while driving on the motorway or when crossing a busy road, we may reach heaven sooner than we anticipated. It is impossible to pray every moment of the day.

What then does this verse mean? It means that we must cultivate a spirit of God-consciousness and of prayer in our lives, so that we ‘walk with God.’ How can we do this? We should meditate on God’s Word and turn those meditations into expressions of worship, praise and petition. We should of course give thanks before meals, pray for God’s protection before we go on journeys and turn to God in prayer when faced with a problem (cp. Nehemiah 2:1–4). It is a sad fact that many Christian homes are prayerless homes, apart perhaps from the giving of thanks before meals. Family devotions are absent and children are not given any example of humble, believing prayer in the home, or of shared thanksgiving for answers to prayer.

The church notice-board which proclaimed ‘Seven prayerless days make one weak’ expressed a vital truth. **Prayer brings us into joyful fellowship with God at his throne of grace and Satan hates to see us pray.** We will not *rejoice always* if we do not *pray without ceasing*.

*Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;
Prayer makes the Christian’s armour bright:
And Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees*

(William Cowper)

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side

The psalmist called upon the Lord for mercy in the previous psalm. In this psalm, Israel is urged to remember past mercies and deliverances given by God. They were called to consider, ‘*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side*’ (1–2). Israel could have had all manner of human help but they would not have survived as a nation without the help of the Lord. What would have happened to them if God had not been on their side?

- Their enemies would have swallowed them up (3).
- They would have been overwhelmed and carried away like those in the path of a raging torrent (4–5).
- They would have been given to their enemies as prey to the teeth of a hungry beast (6).
- They would have been like a bird caught in a snare – helpless and having no hope of escape (7).

The psalm closes with an affirmation of faith in God: ‘*Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth*’ (8). The name of God reveals his character (cp. Exodus 3:13–14). God is the all-powerful One who cannot fail. ‘*The LORD*’ (Jehovah) is the covenant name of God and he is faithful to all his promises. If the almighty covenant God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31). God’s holy character is the ground of our confidence in all our trials both present and future. Our confidence also lies in the fact that God is the Maker of heaven and earth (8; cp. Psalm 121:2). The theory of evolution is a denial of God and it is not true. The almighty Creator is the God in whom we trust.

Christian, have you ever stopped to think what life would be like for you had not the Lord been on your side? You would not have his help in times of trial. You would be lost and without hope. We do not deserve to have God on our side but he has chosen us and saved us by his grace. Let us give thanks to God that he has made us his own and that he is on our side.

Unto you I lift up my eyes

Spurgeon describes this psalm as ‘The Psalm of the eyes’. *Unto you I lift up my eyes, O you who dwell in the heavens* (1). The psalmist was feeling the scorn and contempt of proud, godless people. They were at ease and free from affliction while he was in distress (4). He did what should come naturally to any child of God in such circumstances. He looked to the Lord and called upon him. We have here:

- A trusting look; the psalmist’s eyes were upon the sovereign God, who dwells in the heavens (1; cp. Psalm 115:3). Before leading Judah into battle, Jehoshaphat called upon God, saying, ‘*Our eyes are upon you*’ (2 Chronicles 20:12). The Lord gave the king a marvellous victory over his enemies. Jehovah is almighty and we belong to him. Can you imagine that he will ever fail you?
- A submissive and expectant look; in verse 1, the psalmist speaks in the singular but verses 2 to 4 are in the plural. Slaves and maidservants wait on their master or mistress with an attitude of submission and anticipation (2). The hostility or scorn of the wicked is very distressing and it is all too easy to turn our eyes away from the Lord at such times. We have a picture here of quiet submission: ‘*So our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy on us*’ (2). He then goes on to pray, ‘*Have mercy on us, O LORD, have mercy on us!*’ (3).

Have you been struggling in the face of scorn from those with whom you work? Have you taken your eyes off the Lord? Look to him, he will hear your prayers. *Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith* (Hebrews 12:1–2).

*Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye
When none but God is near.*

(James Montgomery)

In everything give thanks

(Additional Readings:– Psalm 103:1–5; 105:1–3; 106:1; 107:1; Philippians 4:6; Colossians 2:6–7; 3:15; Hebrews 13:15).

We have here another statement that appears to ask the impossible: *In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*. How can we give God thanks for some tragic loss or heartache? The Lord does not tell us to give thanks for these things! Notice that he says, ‘*In everything give thanks*’ and not ‘*for everything give thanks*.’ This verse is linked with the joyful and prayerful attitude described in the previous two verses. It does not mean that in adverse circumstances we must say, ‘Hallelujah this is wonderful!’ It means that whatever our circumstances, we should have a thankful heart because the Lord has done so much for us. There are approximately 140 references in the Bible to giving thanks to God. Ponder the statements found in our additional readings.

We must give thanks to God because it is his will that we do so. Praise and thanksgiving glorify God and please him (Psalm 50:23; 69:30–31). We were chosen to proclaim his praises (1 Peter 2:9). Ingratitude is a terrible sin in the sight of God (Romans 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:2). If we cultivate a thankful heart, we will be better equipped to face the trials and difficulties that come upon us. William Hendriksen rightly observes in his commentary on this verse, ‘When a person prays without giving thanks, he has clipped the wings of prayer so that it cannot rise.’

We can praise God in every circumstance for our Lord Jesus Christ and for his death and resurrection to save us from our sins. We can thank God for his goodness and grace which he has so freely bestowed upon us by saving us and bringing us into his family. We can give thanks in every baffling circumstance because we know that God is in control, wisely and lovingly working out his purposes for his glory and for our good (Romans 8:28). **Oh, let us thankfully count our blessings and we will be a blessing to others!**

Do not quench the Spirit

We often use the word ‘quench’ in connection with relieving our thirst, but the Bible links the word not with thirst, but with extinguishing flames of fire (Numbers 11:2; Matthew 12:20; Ephesians 6:16). The ministry of the Holy Spirit is often associated with fire in Scripture (eg. Matthew 3:11; Acts 2:3–4). Fire is a symbol of purity, of power, of light and of warmth. The Holy Spirit brings warmth and liberty into our lives (2 Corinthians 3:17) and we are instructed, ‘*Do not quench the Spirit.*’

To quench the Spirit is to dampen his fire and to stifle that liberty by neglecting our spiritual responsibilities. We will quench the Spirit if we shut out his voice when he speaks to us through God’s Word. We will quench the Spirit if we become worldly or entertain sin in our lives. We must always remember that the Spirit of God is the Holy Spirit. We quench him if we are not seeking to lead holy lives. We quench the Spirit if we are prayerless.

Those of us who do not speak in tongues, clap hands or dance at church services are sometimes accused of quenching the Spirit. That is of course quite untrue. We must learn to distinguish between spiritual fire and wild-fire, between true spirituality and the false. We must also avoid an orthodoxy which may be correct in doctrine but which is cold and dead in practice! **Does your heart glow with the warmth of the Holy Spirit or are you quenching him?**

*O thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart.*

*Jesus, confirm my heart’s desire
To work and speak and think for thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire
And still stir up thy gift in me.*

(Charles Wesley)

Let us go into the house of the LORD

David wrote this psalm ‘for the people to sing at the time of their goings up to the holy feast at Jerusalem ... It was most natural that they should sing of Jerusalem itself, and invoke peace and prosperity upon the holy city, for it was the centre of their worship, and the place where the Lord revealed himself above the mercy-seat. Possibly the city was not all built in David’s day, but he wrote it under the spirit of prophecy, and spoke of it as it would be in the age of Solomon.’ (C.H. Spurgeon – TREASURY OF DAVID).

This is a song of a pilgrim who is delighted when encouraged to go into the house of the Lord: *I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD’* (1). He was glad to go there because he loved the Lord and he wanted to give thanks to him (4). Do you look forward to worshipping God with his people on the Lord’s Day? Do you feel that it is a great loss when illness prevents you from being at the Lord’s house?

The church is the new Jerusalem, the Israel of God (Galatians 4:26–27; 6:16; Revelation 21:2,9–10). We live in very confusing times and the true church of God is often under attack. **Do you pray for the church as the Jews prayed for Jerusalem (6)? Do you seek the good of the church (9)?** Are you promoting the good of your local church by being an enthusiastic and reliable member? Are you keen to work for the Lord in your church or are you a spectator, watching others work while you are at ease? Are you an encouragement to your pastor and to other Christians?

*I love thy church, O God:
Her walls before thee stand;
Dear as the apple of thine eye,
And graven on thy hand.
For her my tears shall fall,
For her my prayers ascend,
To her my cares and toils be given,
Till toils and cares shall end.*

(Timothy Dwight)

The LORD is your keeper

We live in a very uncertain world and millions of people consult horoscopes. Some claim that it is ‘just for fun’, but they open themselves to occult influences. Many really do believe that the position of the stars and planets at a given time holds the key to their future. What nonsense! How can the stars guide us or determine our ‘fate’? Psalm 121 is our answer to horoscopes.

The psalmist looked out at the hills around Jerusalem (1), knowing that *as the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people* (Psalm 125:2). How can we be confident in the face of an unknown future? This psalm tells us: *‘The LORD is your keeper’* (5). The words ‘keep’, ‘keeper’ and ‘preserve’ come from the same Hebrew word and are found in every verse, except verses 1 and 6. Let us think about the One who keeps us:—

- Our help *comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth* (2). We do not trust in the stars, but in the One who made them (Psalm 8:3; Isaiah 40:25–26).
- Our help *comes from the LORD, who keeps our feet steady in the dangerous and difficult paths of life* (3). A traveller in the mountainous regions of Israel would need to be sure-footed, lest he tumble to his death. The moving or slipping of the foot indicates being in a situation of great danger (cp. Psalm 38:16; Psalm 73:2).
- Our help *comes from the LORD, who never slumbers nor sleeps* (3–4). In distressing times, we may feel that God is distant and perhaps unaware of our trials. Not so! – *He who keeps you will not slumber* (3).
- The Lord will protect us day and night (5–6). He will preserve us from all evil and keep us in all our ways for evermore (7–8).

The Lord will never let us go nor let us down. **Christian, are you being sorely tested and tried? Lift up your eyes to the Lord. He will never fail you. Your sovereign Protector lovingly cares for you. Come to him and cast all your cares upon him, for he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Hallelujah!**

Do not despise prophecies

Before the completion of Scripture, the Holy Spirit moved upon certain godly men so that they would make known his will or predict things yet to happen (Hebrews 1:1; 2 Peter 1:21). Genuine prophetic activity ceased with the close of the apostolic age, since divine revelation is now complete. There have always been false prophets and the Bible warns us against them (eg. Deuteronomy 18:20–22; Matthew 7:15). There are those who strongly believe that we should be prophesying today and the result has been confusion, error, and a neglect of Scripture. The so-called prophets are not being tested by those who listen to them, and many are being led into false doctrine and fanaticism. Others become disillusioned after the ‘prophecies’ they believed prove to be false.

I am well aware that I may be accused of doing just what our reading warns us not to do – *‘Do not despise prophecies.’* We are not to despise what is genuine, but we are also to *test all things* (the Greek verb was also used to describe the testing of precious metals to check whether they were genuine or counterfeit). If we accept that the gift of prophecy is no longer bestowed upon believers, we must conclude that there isn’t any genuine prophecy today apart from what is set down in the Bible.

We have God’s Word. Let us not despise it through neglect or by disobedience to its commands. The Lord speaks to us through the preaching and reading of the Bible. The true preacher declares the Word of God but he does not speak infallibly like the true prophet. We must check his teaching with what is written in Scripture. Let us be determined to *hold fast* to good doctrine and to godly living, and to abstain from all that is false and from every kind of evil (21–22).

Every word of God is pure; ... Do not add to his words, lest he reprove you, and you be found a liar
(Proverbs 30:5–6).

He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it

Paul now prays for the growth of the Thessalonians in the Christian life (23; cp. 3;13). Every Christian is sanctified; this means that we are set apart from a sinful lifestyle to lead a God-pleasing life. To be sanctified completely means that we give ourselves – mind, soul and body to please the Lord (cp. Romans 12:1–2; 1 Peter 1:15). Some Christians take verse 23 to teach that man is made up of body, soul and spirit. A close study of Scripture shows that the words ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ are often used interchangeably and that man is body and soul (or spirit). The verse before us can no more be used to show that we are made up of three parts any more than Mark 12:30 proves that we are four-part.

Complete sanctification does not mean that we will become sinless while on earth so that sin is eradicated from our lives. We should expect to progress in godliness, but there is no perfection for believers on this earth (though we should always aim for it). It is only in heaven that the spirits of just men are perfect (Hebrews 12:23). *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* (1 John 1:8).

There are two lovely descriptions of God here:

- He is *the God of peace* (23; cp. Romans 16:20; 2 Thessalonians 3:16). We have no need to be afraid in this troubled and uncertain world because he gives us his precious peace (John 14:27).
- He is faithful: *He who calls you is faithful* (24). Paul was confident that the faithful God would answer his prayer for the Thessalonians. **We too are able to pray with confidence because God is faithful. He cannot and he will not fail us.**

Paul goes on to ask for prayer for himself and his fellow-workers (25). The greeting with *a holy kiss* (26) has its equivalent in Britain to a hearty handshake. If we do greet with a kiss we must be careful that it is ‘*a holy kiss*’! The challenge for us here is to give a joyful welcome to each other and to make strangers feel wanted in our services. Paul charged that his letter be read to all the brethren and he closes by commending them to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (27–28).

In my distress I cried to the LORD, and he heard me

Psalms 120 to 134 each have the title ‘A song of ascents’ (or ‘A song of degrees’). Spurgeon comments, ‘This little psalter within the psalter consists of fifteen brief songs’ (TREASURY OF DAVID). There have been a number of suggestions on their significance. The most common are:

- That there were fifteen steps between two of the temple courts and that a choir of Levites or the priests sang one of these psalms on each of the steps as they went up to the temple.
- That these psalms celebrated the fifteen years added to Hezekiah’s life (Isaiah 38:5).
- That they were pilgrim songs which were sung by the people when they went to Jerusalem for the great feasts, eg. Passover and Pentecost.

The psalmist testifies of answered prayer : ‘*In my distress I cried to the LORD, and he heard me*’ (1). He is suffering from the slander of his enemies but he is confident that the Lord has heard him. He goes on to speak in the present tense calling on the Lord to deliver him from lying lips and a deceitful tongue (2). Though God had heard him, he did not remove the cause of his problem. He likens his distressing situation to dwelling in Meshech or Kedar, which were populated by fierce, warlike people (5). He laments that though he wanted peace, one with whom he dwelt hated peace and wanted war (6–7).

If you are suffering hostility to your Christian testimony you should not be surprised (1 John 3:13). *All who desire to lead a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution* (2 Timothy 3:12). If you are distressed, cry to the Lord and be encouraged by the words of Jesus, ‘*Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven*’ (Matthew 5:11–12). Spurgeon comments, ‘Even in distress we need not hesitate to cry unto the Lord. Silence to man and prayer to God are the best cure for the evil of slander ... Does not good come even out of that vile thing, falsehood, when it drives us to our knees and to our God?’ (TREASURY OF DAVID).