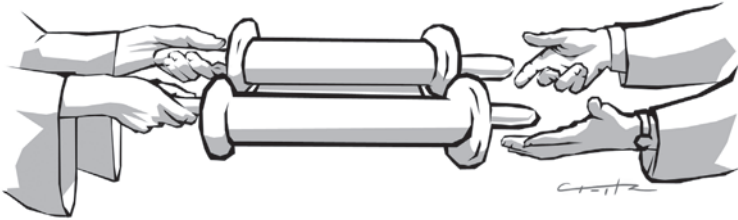


Keeping the Church Faithful (2 Thess. 2:13–3:18)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Thess. 2:13–3:18, Acts 17:11, Luke 10:25–28, Matt. 7:24–27, 18:15–17.*

Memory Text: “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (*2 Thessalonians 2:15, ESV*).

Key Thought: Even with all the grand and glorious promises for the future, we have to deal with daily challenges and struggles in the church. The Thessalonian church was no exception.

Churches are a lot like plants. If a plant does not grow, it will die. In other words, change is wired into the way plants were designed by God. Similarly, a church that does not change and grow also will die. But not all change is good. Change can lead us away from who we are. It can cause us to lose touch with God's purpose for us. The Seventh-day Adventist Church must be especially on guard because this present-truth message is being proclaimed by no one but us! That's a heavy responsibility—one we all, whether laity or ministry, must never forget.

Through revelation and Spirit-guided consensus, God has led the church to even more light. The light of the past helps the church to navigate its way through the treacherous waters of change. Paul's final word to the Thessalonians gives us inspired guidance in this crucial area.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 29.*

Faithful by God's Choice (2 Thess. 2:13–17)

The language of this section recalls the prayer at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians. It is almost as if Paul is returning to the place where he began, creating a natural conclusion to this pair of letters. Paul here expresses his concern that the believers in Thessalonica not deviate from the path on which he has placed them.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17. Why does Paul thank God for the Thessalonians? What does he ask them to do in this passage? In what ways are these words so pertinent to us today, so near the end?

The lives of the Thessalonians provided evidence to Paul that they had been chosen as “first fruits to be saved” (*ESV*). Some translations say “from the beginning.” Though salvation is a gift, the believer experiences it through sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth. The life of the believer is more than just a subjective experience; it is solidly grounded in truth.

That is why Paul is so concerned that the Thessalonians hold to the doctrines they have been taught, both by letter and the spoken word. People’s grasp of truth often slips with the passage of time, which is why we must always be affirmed by those who preach and teach us.

In the early days of the church, there was even a preference for oral tradition over written tradition. Oral tradition is less subject to unintentional distortion. Tone of voice and gestures communicate meaning more accurately than do words on a page. This is why preaching as a method of communication never grows old.

But written tradition, as in the letters of Paul, is less subject to intentional distortion by those who would alter the gospel for their own purposes. The written word provides a secure and unchangeable norm by which one can test the oral messages that come through preaching. In the book of Acts, the Bereans were commended because they combined attention to the oral messages with careful examination of the Scriptures (*Acts 17:11*).

Read again the texts for today. So many forces are always at work trying to pry us away from the truth. Look at how you have changed over time. Do these changes reveal a slow, steady settling into the truth or a slow, steady movement away from it? In other words, in what direction is your life moving?

Confidence in the Face of Evil (2 Thess. 3:1–5)

In today’s world many people laugh at the idea of a literal Satan. In their mind, he’s a myth, a holdover from a superstitious and pre-scientific era. They feel that good and bad are simply the random consequences of cause and effect; or, in some people’s minds, good and bad are only culturally constructed concepts relative to specific times and places, nothing more.

But the Bible clearly asserts that Satan is real. And it is often to his advantage in some parts of the world to hide himself or even allow himself to be mocked in the form of a red devil with horns. The caricature goes a long way in making people think he’s not real, which is exactly what he wants. (“The devil made me do it!” one comedian used to famously mock.)

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5. Though the challenges to our faith are out there, Paul expresses hope. On what is that hope based, and what is the condition upon which we can be certain to claim it? See also *Luke 10:25–28, Deut. 8:1*.

Paul begins this passage with a request for prayer (*as in 1 Thess. 5:25*) that the gospel will spread rapidly and be honored through his work. Paul also wants the Thessalonians to pray that he will be delivered from evil men (*2 Thess. 3:2*). The expression here implies that he has in mind specific individuals whom the recipients of the letter might even know.

Paul follows this with wordplay (*2 Thess. 3:2, 3*). Not all men have “faith” (trust in, or commitment to, God), but the Lord is “faithful” (dependable—one who inspires faith and commitment). This faithful Lord is dependable and will guard them against the evil one, or Satan. The good news is that, though Satan is more powerful than we are, the Lord is more powerful than Satan, and we can find safety and power in the Lord.

Paul ends this passage (*2 Thess. 3:4, 5*) by once more commending the Thessalonians and offering a prayer in their behalf. He is confident that they are doing what he has asked and that they will continue to do so in spite of the opposition of Satan and the people he inspires. He offers a “wish-prayer” (*2 Thess. 3:5*) that the Lord direct their attention to “the love of God” and “the patience of Christ” (*NKJV*).

Even amid trials and suffering, Paul’s letters are always so full of faith, hope, and certainty. How can we learn to have this faith, hope, and certainty for ourselves, regardless of our often difficult circumstances?

Scripture and Tradition (2 Thess. 3:6–8)

When Jesus walked this earth there was no New Testament. The Bible of Jesus was the “Old Testament.” But, from the start, obedience to Jesus’ spoken words was the wise thing that His followers did (*Matt. 7:24–27*). Jesus’ words and actions continued to be authoritative for the church in the years that followed (*1 Thess. 4:15, Acts 20:35, 1 Cor. 11:23–26*). Then, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were guided to rightly interpret the words of Jesus and the significance of His actions (*John 15:26, 27; 16:13–15*). And before the first generation of Christians had passed off the scene, the writings of the apostles were considered fully equal to those of the Old Testament prophets and could be called “Scripture” (*2 Pet. 3:2, 16*).

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6–8, 14. According to these texts, what would Paul include in his concept of truth?

By the time Paul arrived in Thessalonica, the early church considered the sayings of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles as supremely authoritative. *Tradition* in New Testament times was not necessarily a dirty word; it could refer to the church’s memory of the sayings and actions of Jesus and include the oral teachings and writings of the apostles. Tradition was to them much the same as the Scriptures are to us. It could be commanded and was to be obeyed.

For the Thessalonians, tradition meant more than just the letters of Paul. It included all that Paul had said to them while he was in Thessalonica, and included also his actions, which they were to imitate. The fact that Paul worked hard to support himself in Thessalonica did not merely show that he cared for them (*1 Thess. 2:9*); it was a “tradition” that he expected them to apply to their own lives.

Paul was not idle while he was among them; he did not eat other people’s food without payment. He labored “night and day” so as not to be a burden to anyone. And anyone in Thessalonica who lived differently was “out of order.” So, Paul’s definition of disorderly people was not limited to those who were disruptive in the church or community; he broadened it here to include anyone who did not follow the teachings or practices of the apostles.

These texts reveal how important Paul’s actions were for the Thessalonians. Though he had truth directly from the Lord (*Gal. 1:1*), Paul bore witness as much by his life and actions as by his words. How well do our lives reflect the truths that we have been given?

Working and Eating (2 Thess. 3:9–12)

What unique type of problem does Paul face in the Thessalonian church? *2 Thess. 3:9–12.*

In these verses Paul applies the tradition of what he did and said to a specific situation. A significant group of members was disorderly or out of order (*2 Thess. 3:6, 11*). Paul had mentioned the problem in the previous letter and addressed it gently there (*1 Thess. 4:11, 12; 5:14*). But he uses much stronger language here.

As an apostle, Paul could have required the church to provide him with income, housing, and food. But in 1 Thessalonians he sets an example among them of “working night and day” in order not to be a burden on them (*1 Thess. 2:9*). This was an example of love. But according to 2 Thessalonians 3:8, he also works “night and day” in order to create a model of how everyone should take care of their own needs, as much as possible.

If Paul had only set an example, some could have responded that the tradition was not clear. But Paul had also addressed this issue with words. During the short time he was with them in person, he often expressed (as the Greek imperfect tense implies) a popular saying as a command, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (*2 Thess. 3:10, ESV*).

In this passage Paul is not criticizing the efforts to care for those in need, or those who can’t take care of themselves. After all, Jesus Himself left a powerful example of compassion toward those whose circumstances in life have left them helpless or destitute.

Instead, the target of Paul’s concern was a group of people in the church who were willfully idle. They were busybodies, minding everyone’s business except their own (*2 Thess. 3:11*). Like some of the popular philosophers in the ancient world, these believers preferred a life of ease over labor. Perhaps they spent their time discussing theology or criticizing the behavior of others instead of earning their way. Paul commands them “in the Lord Jesus Christ” to follow his example and earn the right to speak by caring for their own needs first (*3:12*).

How amazing that, even so early in church history, Paul had to deal with so many problems among the members. How should this protect us (and especially new members) from the expectation that our churches are going to be filled with saintly people? More important, how can we be a positive force in our local church despite our own faults and weaknesses?

Tough Love (2 Thess. 3:13–15)

According to Matthew 18:15–17, how is the church supposed to treat a person who has been disfellowshipped?

The matter of church discipline is one of the most difficult issues that a local church faces. Often an errant member is another member's brother, mother, son, cousin, or best friend. Some members prefer never to discipline anyone; others prefer harsh sanctions. How does a church find the will of God in the midst of so many competing interests?

Matthew 18 suggests a clear and simple process. First, a one-on-one conversation between the offender and the one offended. The context indicates that forgiveness is to be the goal of that conversation, whenever possible (*Matt. 18:21–35*). Second, the offended member is to take one or two others along to avoid confusion as to what is being said by one party or the other. Only after these first two steps have been carefully followed should the process move to the church in business session. Then, if the offender does not respond to the church as a whole, he or she is to be treated as “a Gentile and a tax collector” (*Matt. 18:17, ESV*).

Here is the problem. What does it mean to treat someone like a Gentile and a tax collector? There are at least two different possibilities. On the one hand, Jesus could be calling the church to shun the offender the way the Gentiles and tax collectors were shunned in the society in which He grew up. On the other hand, it could be a call to treat the outcast the way Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors (with compassion and forgiveness).

What does Paul have to say about church discipline? *2 Thess. 3:13–15*.

Rightly applying Matthew 18 and 2 Thessalonians 3 to contemporary life is a challenge. No two people are alike. No two situations are alike. In some cases forgiveness softens the heart of an offender and brings reconciliation to the church. In other cases hardened offenders may respond only to a love that is tough enough to confront and administer consequences. This is why the General Conference does not disfellowship anyone. Such delicate processes are best handled by the local church, where the offender is best known.

Tough love is not a license for abuse. According to verse 15, the person being disciplined is still to be treated like family. The church must remain conscious that the offender is a brother “for whom Christ died” (*Rom. 14:15, 1 Cor. 8:11, NKJV*).

What experiences have you had with church discipline? How can the church maintain a balance between confrontation and acceptance?

Further Study: “The Thessalonian believers were greatly annoyed by men coming among them with fanatical ideas and doctrines. Some were ‘disorderly, working not at all, but . . . busybodies.’ The church had been properly organized, and officers had been appointed to act as ministers and deacons. But there were some, self-willed and impetuous, who refused to be subordinate to those who held positions of authority in the church.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 261.

“Paul was not wholly dependent upon the labor of his hands for support while at Thessalonica. . . . Philippians 4:16. Notwithstanding the fact that he received this help he was careful to set before the Thessalonians an example of diligence, so that none could rightfully accuse him of covetousness, and also that those who held fanatical views regarding manual labor might be given a practical rebuke.”—Pages 348, 349.

“The custom of supporting men and women in idleness by private gifts or church money encourages them in sinful habits, and this course should be conscientiously avoided. Every man, woman, and child should be educated to do practical, useful work. All should learn some trade. It may be tentmaking, or it may be business in other lines; but all should be educated to use the members of their body to some purpose, and God is ready and willing to increase the adaptability of all who will educate themselves to industrious habits.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 912.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How does our church keep its balance between hanging onto truths confirmed in the past and following the advancing light of God? How can we know when new “light” is, indeed, “light” and not deception?
- ❷ How do we deal with unruly and troublesome church members who always seem to be complaining about something? At the same time, what about those who are expressing concerns over real problems?
- ❸ Mentally summarize Paul’s essential message in these two letters to the Thessalonians in a way that makes them relevant to the situation in our church today.

Summary: Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians have taught us a great deal about how to be a church in a difficult environment. However different the immediate context he dealt with is to ours, the principles he espoused are enduring and eternal because they are inspired by the Lord Himself.

A New Master

People living in the small West African country of Guinea Bissau lead lives of uncertainty and fear. Ongoing political unrest breeds fear for the future. But an even greater fear comes from the spirits that they believe control their lives.

Throughout the country “devil trees” stand as a reminder that the devil and evil spirits are never far away. Some people claim to have heard spirit voices coming from these trees. Often these voices sound like people from the nearby village who have died. Spirit priests offer sacrifices to the spirits living in the devil trees, and parents may dedicate their children to the spirits in hopes that the children will be protected from harm.

Tat is a young man whose grandmother had dedicated him to the devil when he was a child. He wore an amulet, a small goat’s horn, around his neck at all times to protect himself from evil spirits. His grandmother often warned him that sickness or death would surely come if he should ever break the covenant she had made on his behalf with the devil.

Tat, now a young man, learned of the evangelistic meetings being held in his neighborhood. He decided to attend. As he listened to God’s message of love, his heart was touched. And when the young speaker invited those present to give their hearts to God, Tat felt called to respond. He fingered the goat’s horn hanging on his chest as he struggled with the truths he was learning. He wanted to follow Jesus Christ, but he had seen firsthand what Satan could do to those who tried to break away from the spirits. Just days earlier, a friend who also had been dedicated to the devil as an infant had died mysteriously. And as far as Tat knew, his friend hadn’t broken away from the spirits. *The spirits hadn’t protected him after all*, Tat thought.

Tat continued to attend the meetings. The speaker explained that the devil rules by fear, but God rules by love. And God’s perfect love casts out fear. Tat cast off his amulet and chose to follow Christ.

Dozens of people in Guinea Bissau, who once had been slaves of Satan, declared their freedom in Christ during those evangelistic meetings. Our mission offerings help break chains of fear and bondage every day. They help nurture and train new believers around the world to share God’s love with others.

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a statement of twenty-eight fundamental beliefs. And though we must always be open to more light, a firm consensus on these beliefs is crucial to the unity and mission of the church. What has brought together millions of people from all over the world into a unified movement other than our shared doctrines? The fourth quarter 2012 *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, entitled: “Growing in Christ,” by Kwabena Donkor, will focus on some of those teachings. Though we believe that all twenty-eight are foundational and fundamental to our identity as Seventh-day Adventists, we cannot study them all in one quarter. We do hope to present a systematic and coherent guide to most of those beliefs. Special attention will be given to belief Number 11, “Growing in Christ,” which was accepted during the General Conference Session in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2005 (see lessons 5–7). This belief, in and of itself, didn’t add new or previously unknown teaching but, rather, in response to needs in certain parts of the world, helps to clarify the church’s understanding of God’s power to give believers in Christ victory over the forces of evil. In fact, all the lessons in this quarter will be framed within the context of the struggle between Christ and the forces of evil. It is what we call “the great controversy.”

Lesson 1—The Great Controversy: The Foundation

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Controversy and Its Players** (*Genesis 3:15, Revelation 12:1–17*)

MONDAY: **Lucifer’s Fall** (*Isaiah 14:4–21, 1 John 3:8*)

TUESDAY: **God’s Weapon** (*Genesis 3:15*)

WEDNESDAY: **Satan’s Fight** (*Matthew 2:1–18, 4:1–11, 16:21–23, 27:39–42*)

THURSDAY: **Destinies** (*Revelation 14*)

Memory Text—*Genesis 3:15*

Sabbath Gem: The great controversy motif is the overarching concept that gives cohesion to Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs.

Lesson 2—Revelation, and the God Revealed in It

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Doctrine of Scripture** (*2 Peter 1:19–21; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17*)

MONDAY: **The Nature of Inspiration** (*Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:26, 1 Kings 6:1*)

TUESDAY: **The Mystery of the Triune God** (*Deuteronomy 6:4, Mark 12:29*)

WEDNESDAY: **The Attributes of our Creator** (*Genesis 1:1, Hebrews 11:6, Romans 10:17*)

THURSDAY: **The Activities of God** (*Genesis 11:9*)

Memory Text—*Hebrews 1:1, 2, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: However important it is to understand the way biblical inspiration works, it’s more important to know the God revealed to us through that inspiration.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audiocassette to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097.