Lesson 31
Acts 15:36–18:22; 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Almost all of our Sunday School lessons must cover an incredible amount of material in order to get through the book in question in one year. However, this lesson covers even more material than usual: three chapters of Acts, five chapters of 1 Thessalonians, and three chapters of 2 Thessalonians. To try to make the material more manageable, these questions will focus on 1 Thessalonians 4–5.

First Thessalonians is the oldest New Testament document we have, written before any of the Gospels or other letters. Thessalonica was a Greek city, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. You can see its location on your Bible maps. Acts 17:1–14 tells of Paul’s missionary work in Thessalonica. A review of those verses would be good background for reading this letter.

Some of Paul’s letters are letters of correction, responding to doctrinal and other problems in congregations that he has left behind. First Thessalonians, however, is a letter of exhortation. Paul wishes to strengthen the congregation by reminding them of his preaching. Because it is a letter of exhortation to an early branch of the Church, 1 Thessalonians is also a good example of how Paul taught the gospel. See the Bible Dictionary for more information about and an outline of 1 Thessalonians. The outline shows that there
There are two major parts to Paul’s letter, a section in which he reminds them of his work among them and of his integrity in doing that work (chapters 1–3) and a section in which he exhorts them to live expecting Christ’s return at any moment (chapters 4–5). These notes will focus on the second section.

1 Thessalonians 4

Verses 1–2: Clearly the early Christian leaders taught their converts how to live: “as you have received of us how ye ought to walk and please God.” Paul speaks of the Thessalonians receiving instruction for how to live in verse 1, and he reminds them in verse 2 that they know the things they have been taught.

Being a Christian meant more than confessing belief that Jesus was the Messiah. It meant adopting certain rules and conventions of behavior, and the essence of those seems to have been “Live as Jesus lived.” (See 1 John 2:6.) Can you paraphrase as closely as possible what Paul is saying in verse 1?

Paul uses a Hebraism: the word walk to mean “behave.” In other words, he uses a Greek word in a way that reflects Hebrew usage. (This Hebraism is common in Paul. For examples of the Hebrew usage, see Genesis 17:1; Exodus 16:4; Leviticus 18:3 and 26:3; and Deuteronomy 8:6.) How do you imagine that walking became the metaphor for behaving? Why is walking a good metaphor for behavior?

What does it mean to “abound more and more”?

To what authority does Paul appeal in both verses 1 and 2? Why does he state that authority explicitly and repeat it? (Compare 1 Thessalonians 2:13.)
Verses 3–8: Italicized words in the King James Version (KJV) are words inserted by the editors, words they believed were required to make the English more readable. However, how does verse 3 read if you remove the word *even*: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication”? Now try also placing a colon after the word *sanctification*. (The Greek text had no punctuation, so the punctuation has all been supplied by the editors.)

Here’s the result of making those changes: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: ye should abstain from fornication.” Does that make the verse more intelligible? Does it change what Paul is teaching? If so, is that change for the good or the worse? Are there other possible ways to read the verse that make sense?

When the KJV was translated, the word *fornication* had a broader meaning than it has today; it referred to sexual impurity in general. It translates a Greek word that also often has that broader meaning of the King James English. Does that change your understanding of what Paul teaches?

The word translated *sanctification* in verses 3 and 4 could also be translated “consecration.” Would doing so make a difference to the meaning?

In verse 4, to what do you think the word *vessel* refers? (The Greek word—*skeuos*—means “pot” and is one of the root words for our word “casserole.”) The two most common interpretations are that it means (1) one’s own body or (2) a wife. Which do you think most likely? Why? Are there any scriptures that might provide evidence for one of these rather than the other?
Given your interpretation of vessel, what does it mean to possess one’s “vessel in sanctification and honor”?

Another translation has “lustful passion” instead of “lust of concupiscence” in verse 5. Does that change the meaning of the verse?

Paul says that the will of God is that the Saints refrain from sexual impurity and that they not defraud their brothers (verse 6). Some understand verse 6 to refer to adultery rather than to business fraud. What do you think of that proposal?

If you understand verse 6 to be about fraud in its usual sense, why do you think he singles out avoiding lust (verse 5) and being honest (verse 6) to summarize God’s expectations of those who accept him?

What warning does Paul give in the last half of verse 6? What motivation for obedience does Paul give in verse 7? How does that motivate obedience? What does it mean to be called to holiness?

Paul is preaching sexual purity to people who live in a society that has little concept of it. For a man in Roman society, sexual relations outside of marriage were seldom frowned on. Sometimes some were encouraged. It was not unusual, for example, for wealthy men to marry in order to establish business and political ties and to provide an appropriate mother for their children and, at the same time, to have a mistress for intellectual companionship, friendship, and most of the other things we associate with a good marriage today. Greek and Roman philosophers taught moderation, but moderation did not preclude marital infidelity. Preaching the gospel in this society required that one emphasize...
the completely different standard required of Christians (the same standard, by the way, for which Jews were already known). It probably helped that many in the audiences to which the early Christians preached were Jews or proselytes of the gate who had similar moral expectations. (See the study materials for Acts 10 in lesson 30.) How would they have made their case to those in the wider community?

Remember also that even Jesus’s disciples found his teaching about marital fidelity hard. In Matthew 19:9 he teaches his disciples that only adultery justifies divorce, and his disciples respond, “If that is how it is with a man and his wife [i.e., if those are the only grounds for divorce], then it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19:10). What do we take from these observations? Do they say anything to us about teaching morality, for example?

In verse 8, what is the object of the first use of despiseth? Is it another person, or is it Paul’s message in the preceding verses?

How is it relevant that God has given us his Holy Spirit? Does it have something to do with being called to holiness? What does it mean to be called to holiness? How would we put that in contemporary terms?

Verses 9–12: How does Paul know that God has taught the Thessalonians to love one another (verses 9–10)?

What is Paul asking them to increase at the end of verse 10?

Though verse 11 begins with and, perhaps a better translation would be namely. How would that link the previous and the following admonitions? Would that clarify anything for readers?
In verse 11, what does “study to be quiet” mean? The verb translated there, ἀσχολέω, means “to relax from normal activity.” How does one do that? What is Paul advising them in verse 11? Related words are used in Luke 23:56 and in Luke 14:4. Is he telling them to observe the Sabbath, or is he saying something else? Do the phrases that follow in verses 11–12 help define what Paul means here? What would it mean for us to take Paul’s advice to study to be quiet?

In verse 12 the Greek word translated honestly might better be translated appropriately. Does that change the meaning of the verse?

In the same verse, who are those who are “without,” in other words, outside? Outside of what?

How does loving those in the Church and living appropriately toward those outside make it so that we lack for nothing (verse 12)? In practical terms, what does “lack for nothing” mean? What is the difference between lack and want? Is it related to the difference between want and need? Why do you think Paul sent this particular message to those in Thessalonica? What might have prompted this part of his message?

**Verses 13–18:** Why might this message about the resurrection of the dead have been important to the Thessalonians?

What kind of sorrow is Paul trying to deal with (verse 13)? What kind of people would have had no hope for the dead? How is that relevant to our own situation today? When do we have that kind of sorrow?
What words is Paul referring to when he says “comfort one another with these words” (verse 18)?

What connection does Paul assume between Jesus’s resurrection and the resurrection of the dead in verses 14–18?

1 Thessalonians 5

**Verses 1–5:** Why does Paul feel it necessary to remind them that they do not know when the second coming will occur?

“The Day of the Lord” is a phrase from the Old Testament. See Amos 5:18, Joel 2:31, and Malachi 4:5, for example. What does it mean in the Old Testament? Is that the same thing that it means here?

**Verses 6–11:** In verses 2 and 4 Paul said that the Saints know the Lord will come as a thief. Then in verse 6 he draws his conclusion about how we should live if we don’t know when the Lord is coming: “watch and be sober.” How does what he says in verse 6 follow from what he said in verses 2 and 4?

_Sober_ is a literal translation of the Greek word. What does sobriety connote? How do verses 8–9 answer that question? (Compare what Peter has to say about sobriety: 1 Peter 1:13; 4:7–8; 5:8–9.) Other translations use _well-balanced_ or _self-controlled_. Are those helpful?

How is Peter’s advice in 1 Peter 4:7–8 related to Paul’s advice here?

How does verse 11 tie together the earlier discussion of love, the discussion of the resurrection, and this discussion of the second coming?
What does verse 10 tell us about the purpose of the atonement?

When we speak of the atonement, we often focus on Christ’s suffering in the garden rather than on his death. Why might Paul and other early Christians have focused, instead, on his death?

Verse 11 says that we ought to edify one another, and it recognizes that the Thessalonians are doing so. How do we edify one another? (Compare 1 Corinthians 3:9–17 and Ephesians 2:20–23.)

**Verses 12–13:** What does it mean to comfort another?

What problem do these verses suggest the Thessalonians have been having? Another translation of the word translated *know* (verse 12) is *recognize*. What does it mean to know or recognize those who labor over us?

Why does Paul say “labour among you, and are over you” rather than just “are over you”? Why do you think he phrases this as he does?

What does it mean to be over someone “in the Lord”?

Why should we love those who lead us (verse 13)?

What does it mean to be at peace among ourselves? Surely it doesn’t mean that we must agree on everything, so what does it mean?

**Verses 14–22:** Are verses 14–15 addressed to the leaders who were spoken of in verses 12–13 or to the members of the Thessalonica branch of the Church in general?
How does the substance of verses 16–18 differ from that of verses 12–15?

Verse 18 says “this is the will of God . . . concerning you.” To what does the word this refer?

What do verses 19–20 recommend?

How is verse 21 related to verses 19–20?

Would it make sense to begin verse 21 with nevertheless?

I believe that a better translation of the word appearance in verse 22 is probably form, making verse 22 a kind of synopsis of the previous verses. Do you agree or disagree? Give reasons for your response.

**Verses 23–24:** Paul often refers to God as “the God of peace.” Why?

Verses 22 and the first half of 23 (to the semicolon) might be one sentence rather than two. If they are one sentence, what does it mean?

Why is it important to remind the Saints in Thessalonica that God is faithful (verse 24)? What does it mean to say that he is?

Paul speaks of the members here as called. He uses similar language in Romans 1:6 and elsewhere. What does it mean to be called to be a member? Isn’t being a member something we have chosen to do rather than something we have been called to do? Does the name of the contemporary Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, tell us anything about what we are called to?

What does Paul promise that God will do (verse 24)?