



Paul's Loving Concern for the New Believers 1 Thessalonians 2 and 3

Introduction

The new believers in Thessalonica were heavy on Paul's heart. He spent the first portion of his letter thanking God for them and showering them with praise and encouragement. We learn that even after Paul had been forced to leave, without his presence for support, they had persevered in faith. Their spoken testimony of Christ and their changed lives were evidence that their faith was real. The news of their faith had spread far and wide. Everyone was talking about how they had *turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God* (1:9).

Oh, how Paul longed to be with his Thessalonian flock. His mind was filled with things he wanted to tell them, and he was eager to speak with them in person. During his time with them, he had not had time to give full instruction in Christian doctrine and practical living. Because the unbelieving Jews had stirred up a mob of evil men against them, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy had been forced to leave Thessalonica in the dead of night. Their ministry had been cut short but their care and concern for the new believers was not dampened.

Left alone, how would the Thessalonians fare in the midst of continued persecution? Would they back down and return to their pagan way of life? Would they become discouraged without their trusted missionary counselors? Would they begin to have second thoughts about Paul and their decision to follow the gospel he preached? Had Paul's visit to Thessalonica been in vain? In Chapters 2 and 3, we see that these are the things that weighed heavily upon Paul's mind. These are the issues that he addresses.

Outline of 1 Thessalonians 2 and 3

- I. Paul Defends His Ministry - 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20
- II. Paul Sends Timothy Back to Thessalonica - 1 Thessalonians 3:1-9
- III. Paul Prays - 1 Thessalonians 3:10-13

I. Paul Defends His Ministry in Thessalonica - 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20

Because of the abrupt manner in which he had been compelled to leave the city, Paul felt it necessary to defend his ministry there.

In the first century Roman Empire, there were many philosophers and promoters of various religions who wandered from city to city making their living off those who would listen to and follow them. Paul may have been accused by his persecutors of being one of those. In defending himself, he reminds the Thessalonians of his conduct while he was with them, specifically his preaching and his way of life.

NOTE: Throughout his letter Paul uses the plural "our" and "we", including Silvanus and Timothy in all he says. Since Paul is the actual writer, these lesson notes will not repeatedly add the names of Silvanus and Timothy when referring to the "we" sections of the letter. However, keep in mind that Paul does include his missionary companions in all he says and they are behind him and supporting him as he writes.

A. Paul's Conduct - 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Paul reminds his readers that even though he had previously suffered spiteful treatment in Philippi, (see Acts 16:16-40) he did not shrink back from preaching the gospel there. In fact, he spoke even more boldly in spite of the new persecution that arose in Thessalonica.

1. Paul's preaching - 2:1-6

Paul writes that he was *bold in our God* to speak *the gospel of God* (2:2). He was able to do this because he had *been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel* (2:4). Paul was not preaching his own message, nor was he doing it in his own power. His boldness was not the result of human courage -- it was inspired by God. The good news Paul had brought to Thessalonica was from God and Paul had been charged to proclaim it.

Paul stresses his integrity in sharing the gospel. His aim was never to be a man-pleaser. His only desire was to please God, who does not judge by outward actions. God looks deep inside the individual and tests the heart. *For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7).

Paul did not use flattering words to entice the Thessalonians to give him money, as the wandering philosophers were known to do. Nor did he seek personal glory or special treatment. He did not assert his authority as an apostle. Quite the contrary, Paul and his fellow missionaries had humbled themselves.

2. Paul's way of life - 2:7-12

Rather than acting in a domineering way and demanding honor *as apostles of Christ*, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy poured out their lives for the sake of Thessalonian believers.

a. Gentle - verses 7-8

The Thessalonians were so dear to Paul that he treated them as his own children. He compares his care for them to a nursing mother cherishing her helpless infant.

b. Hard workers - verse 9

Paul did not expect the Thessalonians to provide for his financial needs. In fact, he labored *night and day* because he did not want to be a burden.

c. Blameless - verse 10

Paul's behavior was nothing like that of the wandering philosophers who sought personal honor and monetary gain. The behavior of Paul's missionary team *was honest, straightforward, and above criticism* (J.B. Phillips New Testament).

d. As a father - verse 11

Not only was Paul as gentle as a nursing mother, he had a fatherly relationship with the Thessalonians as well. He gave them instruction, comfort, and encouragement as they began to grow in the Christian faith.

3. Paul's purpose - 2:12

By God's grace, the Thessalonians had been called *into His [God's] own kingdom and glory*. God's "kingdom" is both present and future. It is eternal salvation lived here and now in the providence of God's sovereign grace. The future aspect of the kingdom is eternal *glory*. Paul's words in his letter to the Colossians beautifully explain the reality and blessing of being called into God's kingdom. God *has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins* (Colossians 1:12).

Paul's desire was for the new believers in Thessalonica to live worthy of their deliverance from darkness through the blood of God's own Son. The majority of these men and women were Gentiles who, having turned from their pagan ways, could no longer participate in the imperial cult that honored the emperor as god. Their allegiance was now to God's kingdom and not to Rome. It was a radical change and a threat to their very lives.

How has your life changed since becoming a Christian? To what or whom do you give your allegiance? Are you committed to God and His kingdom above all else? Or are you committed to yourself and your own desires and pleasures? Perhaps your commitment is to another person, a group, or a certain way of life. Will you take time now to examine your life, your priorities, and your commitments. What is it that consumes your time, your thoughts, and your energy? Why are these things more important to you than God and His kingdom?

B. Paul's Thankfulness - 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Because Paul was confident of the purity of his intentions and his manner of life among the Thessalonians, he was overflowing with thanksgiving to God. He was first of all thankful for the way the Thessalonians had received the word of God. He was also thankful for the way the word had effectively worked in their lives.

1. The Thessalonians received the word of God - 2:13

The Thessalonians had not merely received the word of God, but had welcomed and rejoiced in it. More importantly, they had welcomed it *not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God*. The gospel Paul preached was nothing like that of the religious and philosophical charlatans of the day who often called their message the good news (or gospel). Neither was Paul's gospel like the hypocritical traditions of the Pharisees (Mark 7:4-7). Paul's gospel was God's true word.

2. The Thessalonians became imitators - 2:14-16

Through no conscious effort of their own, the persecuted believers in Thessalonica became imitators of the Christian churches in Judea. Like the Judean Christians, they suffered public persecution by their own countrymen for choosing to follow Christ. In Thessalonica, persecution by the pagan Gentiles was also influenced and intensified by the meddling of unbelieving Jews.

a. The Jewish threat - verses 15-16

Paul elaborates on the religious persecutions in Judea. The Jews (Judeans) had *killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets*. See Acts 2:22-24. Furthermore, they had persecuted Paul. Everywhere Paul went on his missionary journeys, though he always went to the synagogue first, there were Jews who despised him, despised his teaching, and wanted him dead. The Book of Acts, beginning with Chapter 9, testifies to this.

It is interesting to note that Paul confesses he was formerly one of these persecuting Jews. See Galatians 1:13. But The Lord had changed Paul's life! He had met Paul on the road to Damascus, changed his heart, and called him to preach the gospel and suffer for His name's sake. See Acts 9:1-16.

b. The Jewish sin - verse 16

In persecuting the new believers and thwarting the missionaries' efforts to share the message of salvation with the Gentiles, the Jews were piling up their sins and storing up God's wrath. In fact, Paul says, *Wrath has come upon them to the uttermost* (literally, "to the end"). Marvin R. Vincent takes the meaning of this to be, "that the divine wrath had reached the point where it passed into judgment" (Word Studies in the New Testament). This seems to concur with Paul's statement in Romans 2:5, *In accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart, you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.* God's eternal wrath was upon the unbelieving Jews who rejected Christ and actively denied Him to others. "God's promised wrath....is so certain that it is spoken of as having come already" (John MacArthur, The MacArthur Commentary).

C. Paul's Longing - 1 Thessalonians 2:17-18

Although he had only been absent from them for a short time, Paul longed to see the Thessalonians again. His heart was still with them. He had made attempts to visit, but each time he had been hindered by satan. The word "satan" means "adversary". He is the adversary of Christ, the church, and each individual Christian. The apostle Peter warns, *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour* (1 Peter 5:8).

D. Paul's Crown of Rejoicing - 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

Paul's life, his hope, and his joy were wrapped up with his converts in Thessalonica. In Paul's mind, standing with the Thessalonians in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ at *His coming* would be his *crown of rejoicing and his glory and joy*. The *crown of rejoicing* does not refer to a royal crown, but a victor's wreath. The Thessalonians were his symbol of future reward. To stand with them before the Lord Jesus would be a victory won.

II. Paul Sends Timothy Back to Thessalonica - 1 Thessalonians 3:1-9

The anguish of being separated from his flock in Thessalonica and concern for their faith finally became too much for Paul to endure. He decided to send Timothy to *establish and encourage* them in their faith. When

Timothy returned, he would bring a report of their faith and love. Concern for their faith was obviously heavy on Paul's heart. In this section of the letter, he mentions their faith (*your faith*) five times (3:2; 3:5; 3:6; 3:7; 3:10). One's faith is of utmost importance because, *Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him* (Hebrews 11:6).

A. Paul's Concern -- 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

First, Paul mentions that he is concerned about their being *shaken by....afflictions*. Paul had warned the Thessalonians when he was with them that suffering was to be expected. Suffering for the sake of the cross followed Paul wherever he went. Indeed, suffering is the lot of the Christian. See Acts 5:4; Romans 8:18; Philippians 1:29; 1 Peter 2:20-21. Even more than that, Christians are to rejoice in their suffering; Romans 5:3-5 and James 1:2-4. The apostle Peter adds that Christians are called to suffer (1 Peter 2:21), but when we endure sufferings joyfully, we will be *glad with exceeding joy* when Christ's glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:13). This is a part of the Christian's hope. Is it your hope?

Paul was also concerned about the influence of satan on the Thessalonian church. He has already mentioned that satan hindered him from visiting them. He feared that while he was away, the adversary would tempt them to forsake their faith for the comforts of their former way of life. If this happened, all that he had put into his service for them would have been *in vain*. There would be no fruit from his labor.

B. Timothy's Good News - 1 Thessalonians 3:6-8

Timothy returned to Paul with the report that the Thessalonians' faith and love were flourishing. They remembered him fondly, and they *greatly* desired to see him.

The good news of the Thessalonians' faith was a soothing balm to Paul's soul. It brought relief to his concerns, comforted him, and brought him to life. John Stott seems to capture the emotion of the passage, "Paul was over the moon with joy and thanksgiving" (The Message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians). In reading these verses, did you relate to Paul's emotion in hearing the good news? Paul considered the Thessalonians to be his spiritual children. He was their mother (2:7) and their father (2:11) in Christ. His pastoral love was parental love.

Paul says he could really *live* as long the Thessalonians would *stand fast in the Lord*. The picture of standing fast is that of a loyal army refusing to retreat even though being bombarded by the enemy. Paul's heart must have swelled with joy at the thought of his Christian soldiers planted firmly in the Lord.

C. Paul Thanks God - 1 Thessalonians 3:9

Paul was overcome with thankfulness at the good news Timothy brought, so much so that he was filled with double joy! He rejoiced with joy as he worshiped before God. The shepherd rejoiced because he was assured that his flock was safe.

III. Paul's Prayer - 1 Thessalonians 3:10-13

The main thrust of the letter up to this point has been thanksgiving. Paul closes this section with a prayer addressed to God the Father and to the Lord Jesus Christ. He prays both for himself and for the Thessalonians.

A. Paul Prays for Himself - 1 Thessalonians 3:10-11

Paul's desire was to see the Thessalonians face to face. There were things they needed to know to make their faith complete and Paul longed to instruct them in person. Chapters 4 and 5 of this letter will address some of these issues.

Paul asks God the Father and His Son to direct his return to the Thessalonians. Satan had hindered his previous efforts to go to them and now he put the matter into God's hands, following the admonition of Psalm 37:5, *Commit your way to the Lord; trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.*

B. Paul Prays for the Thessalonians - 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13

The Thessalonians' love was already evident in their lives, but Paul prays that it might abound even more, not just to *one another* but to *all*: to unbelievers and even to their persecutors.

Paul asks God to establish the hearts of the Thessalonians so they might be *blameless in holiness* before Him at the coming of Christ. Each person's words and actions spring from the heart. The heart is the seat of understanding, will, and motivation. If the heart is stable in Christ, holiness in life will follow and there will be no need to fear Christ's coming when He will *bring to light the hidden things....and disclose the motives of men's hearts* (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Applications

1. Even though Paul was struggling with his separation from the Thessalonians, his letter to them is filled with boundless joy and thanksgiving. In spite of your present struggles, what will you choose to be joyful for right now? What will you thank God for at this moment?
2. What is the condition of your heart? Is your heart established in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Are you *blameless in holiness* because you practice your faith in everyday life? Being blameless does not mean being sinless. It does mean that sin has been dealt with, taken to the cross, and is forgiven. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9). Those who faithfully confront their sin, confess it, and seek forgiveness are blameless before God and no charge against them will stand. Is this you? If not, why not?

QUESTIONS

Questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

DAY ONE: Read all lesson notes and references.

1. List some important facts concerning Paul's preaching.
2. What impressed you about Paul's way of life among the Thessalonians?
3. In what way(s) would you like to emulate Paul?

DAY TWO: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2.

4. a. How does Paul address the Thessalonians in verse 1?

b. By what authority will Paul now "*urge and exhort*" the Thessalonians?
5. a. What will be Paul's subject?

b. Give phrases that show Paul had talked to the Thessalonians about this previously.

c. Give phrases (with chapter and verse) from Chapters 1-3 that give evidence Paul had talked about this when he was with them.
6. Using the following Scripture passages, along with any others which come to mind, what does it mean to "*please God*"? 1 Thessalonians 2:4, 15; Colossians 1:10; Hebrews 11:6, 13:16.

DAY THREE: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8.

7. a. Define "*sanctification*". Use a dictionary or other Scripture passages if you like.

b. ? (Thought Question) Why is sanctification "*the will of God*" for believers?
8. a. What is Paul's main subject in verses 3-8?

b. List the important points Paul makes concerning this subject.

9. Who does Paul say the Thessalonians should not imitate? Why?

10. a. According to verse 7, to what are Christians called?

b. What does Paul say about those who reject this way of life?

11. a. What gift has God given to Christians to enable them to please Him?

b. From the following Scripture passages, how is this gift helpful in living for God?
Romans 8:9 and 13

Romans 15:16

1 Corinthians 2:12

Titus 3:5

DAY FOUR: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12.

12. a. What is Paul's subject in verses 9 and 10?

b. What praise does Paul give the Thessalonians concerning this?

c. What exhortation does he give?

13. a. Who teaches believers to love one another?

b. ? (Thought Question) In what ways does He do this? (For one way, see Romans 5:5.)

14. a. To what manner of life should the Thessalonians aspire? See verses 11-12.

b. What reason does Paul give for living in this way?

c. How would you apply this to Christian living today?

DAY FIVE: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14.

15. a. What does Paul mean by “*fallen asleep*”? See Matthew 27:52 and 1 Corinthians 15:20.

b. Why did Paul bring up this subject in his letter?

16. a. Who are “*those who have no hope*”?

b. ? (Thought Question) Why do they have no hope?

17. a. What is the hope of all believers concerning their loved ones who have died?

b. What must a person believe to have this hope?

c. ♥ (Heart Question) Do you have this hope? Explain your answer.

DAY SIX: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18.

18. a. What encouragement does Paul give concerning believers who have died?

b. Where did he get this information?

19. a. What glorious event does Paul describe in this passage?

b. Try to put Paul’s description into your own words.

c. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1 and Matthew 24:30-31. What additional information do you find?

20. a. What do you find to be the greatest comfort in this passage?

b. How will you obey Paul’s exhortation in verse 18?

21. In reviewing Chapter 4, what has been most helpful for your day to day life? How will you apply it?