

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians

(SB_1Thess_Lsn3_Chap2)

In chapter 1, Paul explains why he and his colleagues were thankful (1:2-10). In chapters 2-3, Paul deals with one of his main purposes for writing the epistle – vindication of the missionaries’ character and ministry.

Paul’s Conduct With the Thessalonian Believers (2:1-12)

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2 but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition. 3 For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts.

Verse	Phrase	Notes
1	“...our coming to you was not in vain...”	<p>Paul urges the Thessalonians to remember the effect of Paul’s visit. Though they may have since forgotten or had their spiritual appreciation dulled in the interim, Paul reminds them that his visit was not void, vain, or empty. Every pastor is motivated and driven by the sincere desire that he be used of the Lord (i.e. be a vehicle or mechanism) to assist others in the discovery of the riches of Truth (i.e. see the captives set free).</p> <p>Note: Like the Thessalonians, we too need to remember God’s working in our lives by reflecting upon the many occasions where He has delivered us, provided for us or worked through a situation to effect change in us.</p>
2	“...we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi...”	<p>Prior to arriving in Thessalonica, Paul and his companions had visited Philippi. Paul’s visit to Philippi is memorable for several things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lydia, the seller of purple, was saved (Acts 16:1-15) • Paul was beaten by the magistrate and the next day, Paul humbled the magistrate when he revealed his Roman citizenship (Acts 16:16-24, 35-40) • An earthquake opened the doors of the jail and the Philippian jailer was saved (Acts 16:25-34)
2	“...we had the boldness in our God to speak to you...amid much opposition.”	<p>In spite of being accused of treason (Acts 17:7), Paul and his companions were bold to speak with the believers of Thessalonica.</p> <p>In Philippi, they had also been insulted by being arrested unjustly, stripped of their clothes, and treated like dangerous fugitives. Their Roman citizenship had been violated, and for this Paul demanded restitution (Acts 16:22-24, 37). Still staggering from these injuries and indignities, the two came to Thessalonica. Under such conditions, most people would have refrained from repeating a message that had led to such violent treatment, but not these men. With God’s help, they mustered sufficient courage to declare in Thessalonica their gospel from God.</p>

		<p>The Greek word that is translated “opposition” is <i>agoni</i> (Gr. ἀγωνί). This Greek word pictured an athlete’s struggle to gain first place in a race or contest. Paul’s struggle was inward (cf. Col 2:1) and it resulted from outward persecutions and dangers – persecutions and dangers that originated from his Jewish opponents (cf. Phil 1:30). Even though Luke does not directly mention “strong opposition” in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-10), it is clear from the Epistle to the Thessalonians that such opposition did come. However, because Paul was empowered by the Spirit of God (vs. power of the cosmos), Paul was encouraged in the midst of such persecution to continue proclaiming the gospel.</p>
3	“...our exhortation...”	<p>This is the Greek word <i>paraklesis</i> (Gr. παρακλησις) and could be translated “appeal.” This word provides us with some insight into Paul’s method of working with new believers. The word refers to persuasive discourse, admonition, and encouragement.¹</p>
3	“...does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit...”	<p>The continued opposition to Paul’s ministry by unbelieving Jews and Gentiles in Thessalonica, in the interim, had caused some of the Thessalonian believers to begin to question Paul’s motives. Paul still had cordial relations with the Thessalonian believers (3:6), so he wanted to leverage those relations in the effort to nip the effect of the opposition in the bud.</p> <p>To understand the full impact of Paul’s statement here and the perceptions against which he defended his ministry, we must reflect upon the historical context. The Gentile (Greek) mindset or paradigm of “religion” was one in which the worship of a god was intertwined with immorality, idols and sensuality. When an unbeliever’s mind is darkened to the Truth through reversionism (reverse process), Truth is presented as the lie and the lie is presented as Truth. The unbeliever opposition to Paul’s message was of such a nature that it had misrepresented the Truth that Paul preached as the lie with deceitful motives.</p> <p>The world of Paul’s time was filled with wandering philosophers, prophets of other religions, magicians, false prophets, and others seeking not only financial gain, but also the prestige of a good reputation.²</p>
4	“...not as pleasing men but God...”	<p>Implicit in Paul’s argument that he begins to present in these verses is the underlying question – Why would Paul and his companions endure such opposition if they were only interested in pleasing men? A man of integrity will stand for that in which he believes in spite of the opposition. This is not characteristic of those who are only interested in making money, motivated by approbation and power lust, or who waiver in their position based upon expediency. People who are so motivated (those who are seeking approval or financial gain) would simply leave to find a more profitable venue.</p> <p>The flip side of the coin of these principles is that we should not allow ourselves to be deceived into believing that the</p>

¹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1931), volume IV, 16.

² Frank E. Gaebelin, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary – New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1989-1998), electronic version.

		approbation of man equates to approval from God. The two can be (and most frequently are) misaligned or out of synch.
4	"...who examines our hearts."	"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. " (Heb 4:12)

5 For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness – 6 nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. 7 But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. 8 Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. 9 For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; 11 just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, 12 so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Verse	Phrase	Notes
6	"...even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority."	<p>The word "apostles" is used here in a non-technical sense. Obviously, among Paul's party, only Paul was technically one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ – an Apostle to the Gentiles. The word "apostle" is used on several occasions in Acts and other New Testament literature to simply refer to one who was sent with a message (e.g. 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25 are examples).</p> <p>When combined with Paul's use of the word "exhortation" to describe his method and approach to dealing with the Thessalonians, we gain further insight into Paul's <u>gentle</u> (v. 7) approach with new believers. Unlike religious legalists, Paul did not impose demands upon them and make a big issue of his position and status. He persuaded them with the Truth and allowed the Holy Spirit to engage in His convincing ministry in their lives. Paul addressed them on equal footing – as "brethren" (2:1).</p> <p>The person with the spiritual gift of exhortation (OR the person who exercises that function) will never have impact if he or she does so with an authoritarian hammer. Such an approach is contrary to the very essence of the gift – "encouragement." The "para" in <i>paraklesis</i> (Gr. παρακλησις) is a Greek preposition that means "beside." The believer who encourages (exhorts) another believer can be pictured as being beside the person to be encouraged. It is just common sense that people who have a need of any type in life do not respond well to the person who does not identify with them or who simply gives them impersonalized information. The believer who exhorts in the proper fashion is the believer who has internalized applicable Truth and fought the same or similar battles.</p>
8	"...we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives..."	Paul's affection for these new believers was so strong that he considered them to be his children – even though they had become children of God through faith in Christ.

		<p>There is perhaps no stronger bond in all of nature than the bond that exists between a nursing mother and her infant. A true mother will give her life for her infant child.</p> <p>"Lives" (<i>psychas</i>) conveys more than just their physical lives; in the depths of their being they cared "because [the Thessalonians] had become so dear" to them. An even stronger relationship of love developed as the ministry continued--a relationship like that of a nursing mother with her child.³</p>
9	<p>"For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God."</p>	<p>As in 2 Thessalonians 3:8, Paul describes the apostles' efforts at providing their own upkeep, an example much needed by some to whom they were writing (1 Thess 4:11, 12; 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6-15). They worked at night as well as during the day while proclaiming the gospel (2:9b). Paul's work was probably tentmaking (Acts 18:3) or perhaps the production of tent material from animal hair or skins – an interesting skill since according to the Mosaic Law, anyone who had come into contact with a dead animal would need to undergo purification rites before participating in sacrifices or other traditional rituals.</p> <p>Part of a Jewish child's upbringing was learning a trade, and Paul was no exception to this. He received some financial help from the Philippian church while he was in Thessalonica (Phil 4:15, 16), but not enough to permit him to stop working. Apparently his wages were so low that he needed gifts to enable him to take some time off for preaching (Acts 18:5).</p> <p>Though missionary service includes the right to support from others (1 Cor 9:3 ff.), Paul does not seem to have used that right in Thessalonica, Corinth (1 Cor 4:12; 2 Cor 11:8), Ephesus (Acts 20:34, 35), and elsewhere. This too is consistent with Paul's argument that he did not exercise the authority of his position in an overbearing manner.</p>
11	<p>"...as a father would his own children."</p>	<p>Here Paul changes the analogy. The good father loves his children and takes an active interest in their upbringing. He teaches and guides them in love. Jesus used the example of the good father in his teaching. This is why Jesus frequently referred to the heavenly Father as "Abba" which can be loosely translated into English as "Daddy." This type of reference to the heavenly Father was considered blasphemous by the religious types of Jesus' day. Why?</p> <p>Religious types desire to control others. Religious types seek personal approbation from men (perhaps unawares, but they still seek it). Religious types are inclined toward abuse of authority and they interpret God from such a paradigm. They will use guilt and shame to motivate others – not love. Obviously, Jesus and Paul did not fit their mold.</p> <p>Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt 7:9-11)</p>
12	<p>"...so that you may walk in a</p>	<p>If there was ever a passage that highlights the God-</p>

³ Gaebelein, *Expositor's Commentary*.

	<p>manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.”</p>	<p>sanctioned focus and desire for an appropriate phase 2 experiential walk of the believer, this would be it (or at least one of them). Certainly, God desires that all people be saved. That (the salvation gospel) was the tip of the spear of Paul’s missionary efforts. However, note the fact that the bulk of his letters are addressing issues relating to the believer’s subsequent walk. If God were not interested in the phase 2 experience of the believer and if the totality of God’s purpose for the believer is accomplished at salvation, then we must ask why all this devotion on the part of the Apostle Paul (and his companions) to the post-salvation walk and faith of the believer?</p> <p>Note also in this passage that Paul connects the concept of the “kingdom” to the believer of the present dispensation.</p>
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Paul Recalls Their Conversion (2:13-16)

13 And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. 14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, 15 who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

In this passage, Paul recounts their receptiveness when first presented with the gospel message that Paul taught them. In a sort of logical counter move, Paul reminds them that even the Jews who had become believers in Judea endured opposition that arose from their fellow, unbelieving Jews. The implication – the Thessalonian Jew and Gentile believers should expect no less. The unbelieving Jews in Judea had killed the Messiah and rejected Paul’s message to the Gentiles. The Thessalonians should view the opposition to Paul and his message in that light and see the equation or correlation between opposition to Jesus and opposition to Paul.

Why the harsh language against the unbelieving Jewish opposition in the midst of such tender language toward the Thessalonians? Consider the following.

The writer had been chased out of Damascus ([Acts 9:23-25](#)) and Jerusalem ([Acts 9:29, 30](#)) by his own people not very long after his conversion. His message was rejected and his party driven out of Pisidian Antioch by them ([Acts 13:45, 46, 50](#)). At Iconium the Jews poisoned people’s minds against Paul and Barnabas and ultimately forced them out ([Acts 14:2, 5, 6](#)). They made a special journey to Lystra to instigate an uprising that produced Paul’s stoning and being left for dead ([Acts 14:19](#)). Jewish opposition continued to hound the missionary band into the second journey, specifically at Thessalonica, again producing Paul’s exit ([Acts 17:5, 10](#)). Even now as Paul pens these words from Corinth, a united attack has been mounted against him by the city’s Jewish residents ([Acts 18:6, 12, 13](#)). Couple with this the present plight of the Thessalonian Christians ([1 Thess 3:3](#)), ultimately traceable to Jewish opponents, and it is no wonder that Paul uses the occasion to recount their consistent opposition to the Lord Jesus.⁴

⁴ Gaebelein, *Expositor’s Commentary*.

Paul indicates that the unbelieving Jews (a.k.a. elsewhere as the Judaizers) were doing nothing but tipping the scales of God's justice heavily against them. The phrase in verse 16 that "wrath has come upon them to the utmost" is best interpreted in view of the concept of the immanency of the Rapture given the greater eschatological context of much of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. If the Rapture were to have occurred within Paul's day or within the time of the lives of these unbelievers, they would be the subjects of the judgments to be poured out against unbelievers during that period.

Why does Paul use the aorist tense here so as to seem to indicate that the wrath has already come – past tense? I refer to a good explanation provided by the *Expositor's Commentary*.

If the wrath is yet future, why does Paul speak of it as happening in the past (*ephthasen*, "has come")? The best explanation of the aorist tense of the verb comes from comparing the only other NT combinations of *phano epi* ("come upon")-- [Matt 12:28](#); [Luke 11:20](#)--where Jesus speaks of the kingdom's arrival in comparable terminology. The unique force of this verb connotes "arrival upon the threshold of fulfillment and accessible experience, not the entrance into that experience."⁵

Paul Longs to See The Thessalonian Believers (2:17-20)

17 But we, brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while – in person, not in spirit – were all the more eager with great desire to see you face. 18 for we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, more than once – and yet Satan thwarted us. 19 for who is our hope or joy or crown or exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

Paul's reference to being "thwarted by Satan" in his desire to see them is designed to be a general reference to all of the various complications imposed upon his desire to spend time with new believers everywhere that he had led to Christ. The various complications were a combination of religious opposition, battles for the Truth and against the error of the Judaizers everywhere he had traveled that continued to consume his energy daily, logistical complications, etc. – all of which ultimately had their origin in Satan's desire to counter God's plan to bring Gentiles to faith.

The Thessalonians' persecution lasted a long time, and so did their steadfastness. Six years later Paul will speak of the churches of Macedonia (not least, the church of Thessalonica) as enduring 'a severe test of affliction' and continuing to give evidence of the reality of their faith in that 'their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality' (2 Cor 8:1, 2).

The 'extreme poverty' to which Paul referred might well have been the result of mob violence and looting. This is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament when members of another Christian group are reminded how, in the early days of their faith, they 'joyfully accepted' the plundering of their property in addition to other forms of brutal maltreatment (Heb 10:32-34)."

⁵ Gaebelein, *Expositor's Commentary*.