



1 & 2 Thessalonians

Pleasing to God, Not to Men

At the heart of Paul's message to the Thessalonians is a call to maintain their focus on pleasing God rather than men. The church in Thessalonica was passionate in their zeal for the Lord, however they were easily swayed by external intimidation and internal confusion. The challenges may have stemmed from the way they were founded as a congregation.

The story of the beginnings of the church is found in Acts 17:1-15. Thessalonica was the second missionary outpost Paul sought to start in Macedonia (modern day Greece). Once he was driven out of Philippi, he passed through two cities and focused on Thessalonica. Paul's missionary strategy was to find cities which could serve as a missionary outpost to reach other towns and cities in a given region. Thessalonica was an ideal city for such a purpose as the capital city of the region of Macedonia with a population of approximately 100,000 souls. The city was well accessible by major roads, the east-west Egnatian Way, a north-south trade route and a natural sea port to the Aegean Sea.

As was his custom Paul preached first to the Jews in the city's local synagogue and then also to the gentiles of the city. He made a few converts of the Jews, but then had tremendous missionary inroads with the Gentile god-fearing community, including some of the leading women of the city (Acts 17:4) This did not sit well with the Jewish leadership. They incited a riot and attacked the members of the new church, specifically a man named Jason, looking for Paul and his leadership team.

But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. --Acts 17:5-8

Needless to say, Paul's time in Thessalonica was cut short. Once Jason and the young believers were bailed out of their incarceration, they urged Paul to flee to safety in Berea. It appears that he was in the city for less than a month.

Considering that Paul had taught in Ephesus for almost three years, this was much less time than he would have liked. The Jews of Thessalonica continued to zealously pursue Paul and his companions followed Paul to Berea and stirred up riots there as well.

However, in spite of its fiery trials and beginnings, the church which was started in Thessalonica flourished in faith, but the pressures on the young congregation continued. For this reason, Paul sent



Timothy back to minister to them while he continued on alone to Athens and then to Corinth. Timothy's return report back to Paul occasioned the first letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul primarily encouraged them to fear God more than men and seek to please God rather than men. The pressure of persecution was on, but God has his own pressure to apply in a day of ultimate judgment of the wicked. The two letters address the concerns that Paul had for the young congregation and helped clarify theological questions related to the afterlife and the second coming of the Lord.

By the time of his second letter, minor issues and problems had developed into more major concerns. The three main concerns centered on the continuing persecution, continued questions and misunderstandings about the second coming and the practical idleness of some members within the community of the church.

Literary Outlines

1 Thessalonians		Chapters 1-5
I.	The Call to Please God, Not Men	(1:1-3:13)
a.	Turning to God	(1:2-10)
b.	Pressures from Men	(2:1-16)
c.	The Test of Faith	(2:17—3:13)
II.	The Charge to Walk Pleasing to God	(4:1—5:24)
a.	Holiness and Love	(4:1-12)
b.	The Christian Hope: The Day of the Lord	(4:13-5:11)
c.	Corporate and Individual Exhortations	5:12-28

2 Thessalonians		Chapters 1-3
I.	Concerns about Persecution	(1:1-10).
II.	Concerns about the Day of the Lord	(2:1-12)
III.	Concerns about Idleness	(3:1-18)



The Call to Please God, Not Men (1 Thessalonians 1:1-3:13)

The letter is addressed from Paul, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, the missionary team who first brought the gospel to the Thessalonians. In the first three chapters of the letter, Paul reveals his concerns and assurances that the young church in Thessalonica remains focused on pleasing God rather than men.

Because of Paul's untimely retreat to Berea (see Acts 17) due to the hostile reception of the Jews in Thessalonica, he did not know whether the seeds of faith which were planted had continued to bear fruit. His fear was that Satan's attacks would continue on the church and that they would fall.

For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. --1 Thessalonians 3:5

Timothy was dispatched, his return report greatly encouraged Paul.

Turning to God (1:1-10)

Paul begins his letter by giving thanks to God for the steadfastness of the church's faithfulness in the Gospel, their character of love and their hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a testimony that they are indeed chosen by God (1:2-4).

The church has not only embraced the word of the Gospel in the "midst of much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1:6), they have multiplied that faith by their strong witness to the Christian life and their preaching in the entire region of Macedonia and Achaia. They had indeed become the missionary hub that Paul was hoping and praying for by the sheer power of God and the truth of his word.

Pressures from Men (2:1-16)

The overarching concern for Paul, is that the Thessalonians would cave into the pressure and persecution from their fellow citizens. He first lifts up his own example of perseverance in declaring the Gospel in the "midst of much conflict" and shameful treatment both in Philippi and in Thessalonica. Paul gives the key to his strength of character in the truth of the Gospel:

For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. --1 Thessalonians 2:3-4

Paul's own motivations in preaching the gospel to them flow out of a deep singular desire to please God alone. The new believers in Thessalonica embraced the message of the Gospel through the apostle Paul "not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God." So they have become "imitators" of Paul and all faithful Christians in Judea who seek to please God even in the face of human pressure from their "own countrymen". Their persecutors are compared to the unbelieving Jews who "displease God" and oppose all mankind (by their opposition to apostolic mission to the Gentiles). They are the ones who killed both the Lord Jesus Christ and the prophets, and drove out the apostles out of Judea. (2:15-16)



The Test of Faith (2:17-3:13)

Paul now reveals this concern that the Thessalonians would have caved under this human peer pressure and persecution. He was “torn away from them” and yet his heart was invested in seeing them grow in their faith. But Satan hindered his return to them. Paul is likely referring to the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica who continued to pursue him and stir up violence against them in Berea thus forcing him to depart by sea to Athens and then Corinth (See Acts 17:13 cf. Rev. 2:9; 3:9).

Instead of returning to them in person, he sacrificially traveled on alone leaving Silas in Berea and sending Timothy back to Thessalonica to establish these two new churches (3:1). Paul’s deep concern for the church is that they would be assaulted by Satan as well, and that the labor for the Gospel would be in vain (3:5). The powers that lurk behind the human persecutions and temptations are Satan and the spiritual forces of evil (cf. Ephesians 6:10-12).

The return report from Timothy when he rejoined Paul in Corinth greatly encouraged Paul.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. 1 Thessalonians 3:6-8

The Charge to Walk Pleasing to God (4:1-5:24)

Having been reassured that the Thessalonian church is focused properly on pleasing the Lord and not buckling under the pressures of human and Satanic temptation and violence, Paul now focuses on strengthening that posture with theological and practical encouragement on how to “walk and to please God, just as you are doing that you do so more and more” (4:1).

Holiness and Love (4:1-12)

The Christian walk is summarized as a life of increasing and abundant “love for one another and for all” and “blameless hearts of holiness before God”. Holiness for the Thessalonians primarily is in keeping their hearts from sexual immorality. Like our own culture, much of the Gentile culture was focused on sexual license and lust. For Paul, sexual impurity not only is a transgression against God but against Christian brothers. Sexual promiscuity is personal and spiritual adultery.

Paul really had no concerns about their mutual love for one another. He does make a minor mention of some who were not “minding their own affairs” and not “working with their own hands” but rather living “dependent on others”(4:11-12). This will develop into a full fledged concern for Paul which he will address in detail in 2 Thessalonians 3:1-18.



The Christian Hope: The Day of the Lord (4:13-5:11)

The main theological concept to motivate the Thessalonians is the Christian Hope of ultimate victory in Christ at his Second coming. This “word from the Lord” is a powerful motivation and encouraging truth. Just as the Old Covenant prophets wrote, there is a coming “Day of the Lord” (5:2; cf. Zech 14:5).

This day will bring ultimate restoration for those who are living to please the Lord. The day will also be a day of destruction and wrath for those who have rebelled against the Lord and have rejected his salvation in Jesus Christ (5:3, 9).

Timothy had likely reported their interest about this teaching to Paul particularly related to those who had died prior to the coming of the Day of the Lord. Paul explains that whether one has died or is still alive when the day comes, it will be a day of restoration and resurrection for the righteous (4:16). He describes a great meeting of the Lord Jesus in the air as he descends in a triumphal military victory march to the earth to establish eternal reign of God.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 1 Thes. 5:15-17

The Christian hope of a glorious future, should motivate and encourage (5:11) the believer to present faithfulness and diligent labor in preparation for the day. Unfortunately, if a person hyper-focuses on the future they can become idle in the present. In the last section of the letter, Paul encourages the right balance in light of the Lord’s coming. (5:12-23)

Concerns about Persecution (2 Thessalonians 1:1-12)

Paul has to return to the themes of persecution, Christian hope and idleness in his second letter. Misunderstandings related to the second coming and how to live in light of it take root in the young congregation. The difficulties of establishing their faith in sound teaching and practice is compounded by the continuing persecutions.

Paul is grateful to God and commends them for their “steadfast faith” in “all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring” (2 Thes. 1:4). Their knowledge and their hope in the Day of the Lord continues to strengthen them in the assurance of their promised relief from affliction and their coming vindication as God will judge those who “do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (1:8). They will suffer “eternal punishment” away from the presence of the Lord. The saints will be “glorified”. The key for all people is to be found “worthy of his calling” in that day (2 Thes 1:11-12)—this is Paul’s prayer for them.



The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power,¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thes. 1:11-12

Concerns about the Day of the Lord (2:1-16)

Clearly, the Day of the Lord was a precious doctrine to the Thessalonians Christians—it was a driving hope! However, someone had introduced a teaching that the day had already happened and that they had somehow missed it (2:1). Paul is not sure how they had received this teaching but he purposes to set them straight in their understanding.

The key sign that he gives them is the advent of the “man of lawlessness” and the “mystery of lawlessness”. This is a person who will proclaim himself to be God and will seek to draw all unbelievers to himself. This will have the purpose in the divine economy of revealing human corruption for the fullness of evil that it is—that it may be ultimately and finally condemned (2:9-12). Paul reassures that this has not yet happened.

The key is to remain firm in their faith now.

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵ 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 Thes. 2:13-15

Concerns about Idleness (3:1-18)

The hyper concern about the day of the Lord had produced an idleness among some of the members. They were so heavenly minded, that they were no earthly good. That is not the Christian life that leads to salvation. It was not what Paul taught them or modeled for them.

Paul gives a strong warning against idleness and then practical advice on how to deal with it. The concept is simple: “no work, no food”. (2 Thes. 3:10)

These two letters are a real encouragement to any church or individual struggling with trials in this life. They also can be a powerful warning against idle Christianity which is so prevalent among comfortable Christians in times of ease and plenty.

The day of the Lord is not an idle promise.