

1 Thessalonians 2

1 Thessalonians 2 (NRSV)

² You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, ² but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. ³ For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵ As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; ⁶ nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, ⁷ though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. ⁸ So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

⁹ You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. ¹¹ As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, ¹² **urging** and **encouraging** you and **pleading** that you *lead a life worthy of God*, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

¹³ *We also constantly give thanks to God for this*, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, **God's word**, which is also at **work in you** believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers and sisters, became **imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus** that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

¹⁷ As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we **were made orphans** by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great **eagerness** to see you face to face. ¹⁸ For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way. ¹⁹ For what is **our hope or joy or crown of boasting** before our **Lord Jesus at his coming**? Is it not you? ²⁰ Yes, you are our glory and joy!

- the “great opposition” that is mentioned is literally the “great contest,” which is an *athletic* challenge (i.e., a metaphor) and also used in the intellectual arena of the Cynic and Stoic philosophers of the day. And mention of their difficulties in Philippi (2:2, Acts 16) and of the

word “courage” draws on the coinage of the Cynic philosophers’ tradition of suffering. But unlike the Cynics and Stoics, the source of Paul's courage lies *in God* - not in the individual.

- Paul notes that the churches reception of “the word” was in spite of the persecution. the gospel was successful because it came with *full conviction*. And the sufficiency was not in the individual, nor the orator, but in God.
- Paul goes on to distinguish himself from other kinds of leaders, from the charlatans and hucksters who abused the wise and noble practice of oratory in Paul’s day. This was no sham act, seeking money and self importance. Paul never says that he's been accused of improper motives, goals, methods, or actions. But it may have been a critique buy those who opposed this new teaching and caused the expulsion of Paul and Silas from Thessalonica.
- In 2:7 it is noted that Paul did not come with a heavy-handed approach but was “gentle.”
- Paul initially writes about the nurse-children relationship. Nurses in that society were cherished for the affection that they showed to children, and the idea that a nurse cares for her own children intensifies that affection. Paul uses that to also speak of the nursing to maturity of the Thessalonian believers. (Paul then shifts his metaphor from nurse to father.)
- Paul and Silas were hardworking (2:9-12) and Paul emphasizes their financial self-sufficiency.
- These are foundational descriptions that he desires amongst the Thessalonians’ themselves as we will see in 3: 13 and 5: 23. Paul wants their maturation (in the faith) to continue.
- In 2:11-12 Paul talks about how he is there “*urging, encouraging*” and “*pleading*” with them; powerful words that needs to be added on to the considerable fondness that he has of them.
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- Consider the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus* and you will get a sense of the value of a teacher on their pupils. In the Greek world they also knew the values of good teachers. Plato depicts Socrates as one who shared his knowledge, not for pay but out of a passionate commitment to teaching the truth. This teacher-pupil relationship therefore resonated well with both Jewish (rabbi and their followers) and Greek culture.
- One of the images in this section is that of “*walking*.” We are walking in response to the call of God and worthy of being included in God’s family. This walk is not governed by the values of a polite society or to receive social prestige. Paul keeps talking about pleasing God, not people, in 2: 4. His idea of walking reappears in 2: 12.
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- **2: 13-16**
- In 1: 2 Paul writes that “we always thank God for you mentioning you continually in our prayers.” That theme seems to be picked up in 2:13 because he then says, “We also thank God continually because when you receive the word of God you recognize it as having a divine origin.”
- Although this “word” was communicated through human beings it was the “word of God.” And that word has *power* because it's even at *still at work* amongst that community of faith. (God's word was powerful, think of the *words* of creation in Genesis 1. And it could not be stopped just because Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica.

- 2:14-16 have been the subject of some controversy. Some see this as being anti Jewish.
 - Paul is making a comparison between the inhospitable treatment that they experienced in Philippi and how that did not end their work amongst non-Jews.
 - Some have suggested that verses 14-16 are not Paul's at all but an addition by a later scribe.¹ There are, however, no grounds to support that claim. Note: This statement is not directed towards *all* Jews, just *some* (i.e., Judeans, or the Jewish religious leaders).
 - It's *not* wise to try and pinpoint God's wrath's being directed against *all* the Jews at all! (After all, Paul is Jewish!) Alas, some interpreters think that God's wrath was behind the expulsion of Jews from Rome in AD 49 or the destruction of the temple in AD 70.
 - Note too that "in-house" Jewish debate was both vigorous and active in the 1st century.
 - Perhaps we tend to forget that there was a Jewish relentlessness on their opposition to Paul's mission and the Christian Church, and stirred up trouble for them (e.g., Philippi).
 - There is also a connection with the *apocalyptic* hope in verse 16. This connects with the language of Daniel 12:1; Matthew 24: 9-14; Mark 13: 19, 24.
 - But remember that it also speaks about the survival of this church *despite* this constant opposition. And even with the loss of their leaders (Paul), this church of God survived.
- That is a lot for Paul to give thanks for!
- So, rather than focusing on anti-Semitism, recognize that just as there was both Jewish and non-Jewish opposition, this does *not* dismiss the whole race or culture.
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- **2: 17-20.**
- (Note the inconsistency: according Acts 17:1-4, the Thessalonian converts included Jews *and* gentiles, but only non-Jews according to 1 Thessalonians 1: 9- 10; 2:14-16.)
- We were made "orphans" in 2:17 is augmented in the NRSV by the phrase by "being separated from you," although those words are not actually part of the Greek text. But it does indicate a sense of deep grief caused by the separation. That feeling of longing is that made more personalized by Paul's expressing his earnest desire in verse 18.
- Exactly what blocked his way is unknown; some suggest that it could have been a physical sickness, others suggest it may have been some kind of legal embargo, but Paul links this to Satan. (Paul seems to have this battle between good and evil in the back of his mind.)
- In 2:19 it talks about our joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus *at his coming*. "At his coming" is *parousia* in Greek. This word has two essential meanings: one is *presence* and the other is *arrival*. They both are indicative of the arrival of an important, highly honored figure. It is commonly associated with the return of a triumphant conqueror or (royal) coronation.
- The imagery of the crown comes from the laurel wreath won by an athletic champion. And Paul is claiming that the church will be his crown of boasting/glory, or his reward for service.
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- Paul clearly has a tremendous amount of *joy* on hearing the news of this church.

¹ They seem more at home in Luke's Acts (cf. Acts 2:23; 3:14-15; 13:27-29) or in Matthew's gospel (Matt 27:25).