

Thessalonians
Week 2: Watch and Wait

I. Today we're going to be in 1 Thessalonians 2 if you'd like to turn there or you can follow along below. Very quickly, we mentioned that Thessaloniki was an important city in the 1st Century when Paul made his visit there. It still is a major city in Greece today. Three things made the city stand out in Paul's day. One, it was on the Via Egnatia which was the major East-West Highway of the Roman Empire. Two, it had the best harbor in the Aegean Sea (northern Mediterranean). And three, it was a:

Free City

A. The city threw their support behind Octavian who would become Caesar Augustus after the Roman Civil War of the 1st Century B.C., just before the birth of Christ. Thessaloniki was a privileged city with the freedom to operate autonomously as long as they behaved and demonstrated loyalty to Rome. We must understand this context in order to grasp the events surrounding Paul's missionary work and subsequent letters to Thessaloniki. We went into a bit more background last week and looked at Acts 17 which is a parallel text. You can go back and listen to the Tab Podcast if you'd like more.

B. There's a similar structure to Paul's letters that he generally employs. Whether it's his prayer life or a letter, Paul is going to start the conversation with:

Praise

1. What a great lesson that is! Paul had a difficult life, and he had a joy-filled life. Our overall perspective on life is about 90% from where we choose to look! It's not that we live in denial, but we've become so entitled as a society that these little synthetic worlds that we've manipulated around us are reality. When life throws us something we can't manipulate, we go bonkers in our society. We need to be challenged to exercise our gratitude muscle.

2. What Paul is most thankful for is the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these Thessalonian believers. Here's how Paul sums it up:

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 – 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception we had from you: how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

They have responded to the word of God by stepping out of the socially expected practices of their culture by declaring allegiance to the One True God through His Son Jesus Christ! Life is all good when we're going with the flow but step out and start swimming upstream. That's when the resistance hits! Paul was writing this letter from Corinth in the south of Greece because he had been forced out. The situation had not improved for those Christians still in Thessaloniki. When we live our lives against the grain, some around us will not like the friction that produces. The citizens of Thessaloniki outside the church didn't like the actions of these new believers because it had the potential to disrupt the "free city" status of Thessaloniki. When the external social pressure didn't work, they went on an all-out campaign to discredit their leader, Paul, even though he was leading from a distance.

C. 1 Thessalonians 2 is an:

Autobiographical Account

of Paul's ministry while present in Thessaloniki. The outside citizens have accused Paul (and team) of being a "preacher for profit." Paul's message was said to have been a new spin on an age-old tactic of leveraging religious insight for financial gain. Those are the wounds that sting the greatest as a leader. When your character is defamed, or people assume motives, it's so painful. Fighting fire with fire is never a good route to go and not effective. But that's the desire of the flesh.

1. Rather than going defensive, Paul takes the opportunity to reflect on the nature of his ministry in Thessaloniki.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-6 – 1 For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our visit with you was not without result. 2 On the contrary, after we had previously suffered and were treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel of God to you in spite of great opposition. 3 For our exhortation didn't come from error or impurity or an intent to deceive. 4 Instead, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please people, but rather God, who examines our

hearts. 5 For we never used flattering speech, as you know, or had greedy motives- God is our witness- 6 and we didn't seek glory from people, either from you or from others.

2. Paul didn't refute the negative things being said about him. He didn't fight fire with fire. Instead, he brought forth facts regarding them (Paul and team) that those in Thessaloniki witnessed. Paul came into town beaten and broken and he left town no better. Paul certainly had a motive in what he shared but it wasn't greed or the approval of people. It was to please:

1 Thessalonians 2:4 - God, who examines our hearts.

3. We often underrate the most valuable thing we have apart from salvation:

Our Character or Integrity

My dad would often remind me that your name, and the integrity associated with it, is your most important asset. It takes years to build and moments to burn. Time has a way of sifting out actions from mere words. Paul says to look at his words and deeds. Paul has a clean conscience before God which is the heart of integrity. He doesn't go into the gutter with his opposition but reminds those in Thessaloniki to examine the content of his life and ministry. They watched him live out his ministry before them!

1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 – 7 Although we could have been a burden as Christ's apostles, instead we were gentle among you, as a nurse nurtures her own children. 8 We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.

4. Some of you know I had the opportunity to speak at my dad's church in Louisiana for his 20th Anniversary.

This is the verse I preached from because my parents have modeled a lifestyle of ministry for me. They've lived a life of ministry. It's never been about a job for them. I've learned so much from them. In a day when pastors and leaders are working so hard to build their platforms, I've seen from my parents that ministry is always about building up people first. Whatever God chooses to place a light on is His prerogative, but building up people, not a platform, is the call. Dr. Kurnia and Lian Foe are two in our midst that fully display this verse and they are an example we should watch and learn from as well.

1 Thessalonians 2:9-12 – 9 For you remember our labor and hardship, brothers and sisters. Working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God's gospel to you. 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, of how devoutly, righteously, and blamelessly we conducted ourselves with you believers. 11 As you know, like a father with his own children 12 we encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to live worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

5. We probably think about Paul as we would a vocational minister like I am today, but that's projecting our form of church and ministry onto Paul. He was likely a tentmaker by trade. Was there a bunch of granola Gen Z's around in the 1st Century? I don't think so. Why the tents then? I'm so glad you asked!!

6. The emphasis of my master's research was on Paul's utilization of athletic metaphors to describe the sanctification process. If you track Paul's missionary journeys, many of these large cities were host to the panhellenic games. Think Olympic Games today. These games would draw massive crowds and drive up temporary shelter needs. Paul would leverage both for the sake of the gospel!

7. Paul would set up a temporary workshop in the cities he ministered to. Sure, he preached the gospel in religious settings like we think of, but more often, he preached the gospel to a smaller group of people as he sewed fabric together to form a tent. Working night and day was not a figure of speech for Paul. The word went forth as he worked! What a lesson! We often think that if we don't have a certain position, we can't accomplish anything for the God. That's just not true. The most influential person ever for the Christian faith never had a "ministry position."

a. When Bethany and I moved to Dallas for seminary, I needed a job, and I wanted a ministry job. I got a job as a high school ministry intern. I'm a young man in my late 20's at the time but my previous career was managing a high-end retail furniture store that generated over \$2 million in annual sales. I was the guy telling people what to do. Do you know what I did as the high school ministry intern? I set up lots of chairs and I ordered a lot of pizza. It was humbling and I needed to be humbled.

b. Another "job" I had was to build relationships with the students and a go-to meeting place was the Jack-In-The-Box next to the church. I learned a lesson at the Jack-In-The-Box that I never could in seminary. There was an older lady who worked behind the counter, and she'd worked there for years. Probably still does if she's living. All the latch key kids from the nearby school would descend on the

restaurant about 3:00 and she knew all their names. These kids would be showing her their test scores and she would be challenging them in love to do their best. She was a God-fearing woman, and this was her ministry! God humbled me through the dedication of this lady who used serving fast-food as a ministry to teenagers. She's a modern-day Paul!

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 – 13 This is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the word of God, which also works effectively in you who believe. 14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, since you have also suffered the same things from people of your own country, just as they did from the Jews 15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and persecuted us. They displease God and are hostile to everyone, 16 by keeping us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. As a result, they are constantly filling up their sins to the limit, and wrath has overtaken them at last.

D. In verse 13, Paul shifts gears from his autobiographical account of ministry in Thessaloniki to the evidence of God's work in those who received the word. Again, Paul is refuting these accusations by not jumping in the gutter but by imploring them to remember the way they watched Paul go about ministry and by observing the clear evidence of God's work in their lives!

1. They received the word as coming from God which resulted in their turning from idols to God. They have made the difficult choice to go against the grain of their culture and the surrounding culture has responded how? Are they being celebrated? Are they getting moved up in line for promotion? Are they being brought into the political assembly? No! The result:

Persecution

a. Suffering isn't a sign that God has abandoned us. Suffering is a sign that we've refused to compromise! Jesus + Everything else the world has to offer is gladly accepted by our culture. Jesus the good moral teacher or Jesus the buddy who helps us out in our time of need is great! Jesus the Lord and Master isn't accepted quite as much! Paul reminds them that opposition is evidence that God's word has taken root!

b. As those in Thessaloniki have watched Paul's life, they have also imitated his life along with the surrounding community of faithful Christ followers. As they watch they also wait. We easily get lulled into a temporal mindset and forget that eternity is a long time.

2. In just two chapters Paul has already mentioned God's wrath twice. People are working so hard to turn God into a universalist, but the challenge is how then do you navigate 1 Thessalonians and multiple other texts?

a. Paul is speaking about God's wrath in the proleptic or futuristic aorist tense. Meaning, Paul views God's wrath as a completed event that is yet to happen in the future. The aorist tense is an important Greek tense because it speaks of things as happening without giving any specifics to the internal workings of how those things happen. We can't comprehend the wrath of God, but here's what the wrath of God isn't for sure:

Removed from His love.

(1) Why? Because God is love. When we think about wrath, we think about uncontrolled, sporadic rage and that isn't an accurate depiction of God's wrath. The wrath of God is patient and its purposeful. And it will never be incurred by those who are in Christ! Jesus has taken the full wrath of God upon Himself for us! But those who reject God will experience the wrath of God. That should bring us to tears. That should grieve us for the lost world and make us hungry to share the good news of the gospel!

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 – 17 But as for us, brothers and sisters, after we were forced to leave you for a short time (in person, not in heart), we greatly desired and made every effort to return and see you face to face. 18 So we wanted to come to you- even I, Paul, time and again- but Satan hindered us. 19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at this coming? Is it not you? 20 Indeed you are our glory and joy!

3. Paul reiterates that even though those in Thessaloniki are out of sight they are far from being out of mind. He describes his departure from Thessaloniki in the most heart wrenching way possible. The translation "forced to leave you" is in the Greek "orphaned by you." He's covered every angle of the emotional spectrum. He's compared himself to a mother nursing a child, like a father who encourages, comforts, and

implores his children. Now, Paul says he feels like a child who has been forcibly torn from his parents. Paul fully opens his heart up to those he ministers to.

4. In the suffering of the Thessalonians, Paul longs to be physically present with them to suffer alongside.

Something is preventing Paul from returning. We know it isn't the possibility of beatings or scourges because that never prevents Paul otherwise. There is something that Paul attributes to Satan that is preventing his return.

E. Their suffering isn't in vain, and they shouldn't lose heart in the waiting. This begins to pick up a major theme to the Thessalonians:

The Lord's Return!

1. The Lord's return will fully establish His Kingdom on earth, and He will return as the Anointed King. Paul uses the term "Parousia" which would be a common term in the first century. Paul likely got into some serious heat for using it. What does it mean?

Royal Visit

a. One day Jesus will break through the heavens and return to earth as King. There will be wrath for those who have rejected Jesus and there will be reward indescribable for those who have been loyal to Jesus Christ! Do you see how this comes to life in view of its Roman context? One day soon Jesus will make His royal visit and there will be a reward for those who have named Christ. Paul is so in love with Jesus and those fellow believers from Thessaloniki that he says this:

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 – 19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 Indeed you are our glory and joy!

2. Paul is so caught up in the things of God that his focus through his suffering isn't about himself or what he's going to get in the future. If that had been Paul's mindset that wouldn't have been a bad thing. But for Paul, the passion of His heart is for those he loves to be prepared for the Parousia! He's getting excited about standing with the Thessalonians before the Lord and that's the reward Paul is most excited about. The man had a passion for people and seeing them know Jesus! He's going to spend the rest of the letter challenging them to be ready and prepared. Jesus as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords has the right to come unannounced.