

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lessons 35 & 36

I Thessalonians – Parts One & Two

I. BACKGROUND

First Thessalonians is one of two New Testament letters the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica. The other is Second Thessalonians. While we have them titled “First” and “Second,” some scholars dispute which letter was actually written first. Paul himself did not title or date the letters, so we have no firsthand evidence of which is first. Our Bibles follow early church tradition in the way the two are ordered; although, many suspect that the ordering of Paul’s epistles to the churches is based on descending length (longest to shortest).¹

Like Galatians previously studied, First Thessalonians follows the basic form of most any letter in the New Testament time period. Referencing the handout on the Galatian letter will remind us of the basics of first century correspondence.

This letter was written toward the end of Paul’s second missionary journey detailed in Acts. On this journey, Paul, Silas, and likely Timothy (Acts is unclear on whether Timothy was there) started the church in Thessalonica as narrated in Acts 17:1-10. Paul and Silas spent their first three weeks in Thessalonica at the synagogue reasoning about the Messiah with the Jews. The full time spent there is not given in the Acts narrative.

We do learn that a Jewish mob sought Paul and Silas; however, the mob was unable to find them, so Jason (a convert) and other new Christians were dragged before the city officials. Paul and Silas were rushed out of Thessalonica in the night and sent on to Berea where they ministered until Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and also incited those Jews to take action against Paul.

Paul went on to Athens for apparently a short time and then to Corinth where he stayed a year and a half. Paul had sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the church, and Timothy brought a report to Paul in Corinth (3:6). Paul indicated in 3:6 that he was writing with Timothy

¹ It is clear that Paul’s epistles are NOT ordered by date of authorship. A major reason for inverting the order of writing the Thessalonian letters is the reference in 2 Thess. 1:4f to the Thessalonians currently enduring persecution for their faith, while in 1 Thess. 1:6 and 2:14, the persecution is mentioned in the past tense.

having “just now” arrived with the report. So, it was in Corinth that Paul wrote back to the Thessalonians in the letters we have in the Bible. The letter itself is from all three missionaries, “Paul, Silas, and Timothy” (1:1).

Unlike most of Paul’s letters, I Thessalonians is not easily divisible into two parts: doctrine and application. Instead, Paul weaves in personal messages, sound living instruction, and doctrine.

II. STRUCTURE

Paul structures the letter around three main emphases: thanksgiving for the Thessalonians (Chapter 1), Paul’s interactions with the Thessalonians (Chapters 2 and 3), and Paul’s instructions for living (Chapters 4 and 5).

A. *Thanksgiving (Chapter 1)*

Paul’s letter begins by telling the Thessalonians his thankfulness to God for them. Speaking of prayer, Paul weaves significant theology and doctrine into simple statements. In 1:3, Paul writes:

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

This statement is profound on several levels. Paul’s prayer recognizes that the work Christians do that is worthy of praise is that work “produced by faith.” Paul constantly emphasizes this theme in other writings (Eph. 2:8-10 “by grace you have been saved through faith...not by works...for we are created in Christ Jesus to do good works”). Works are the fruit; faith makes the tree.

Paul repeats this theme in almost a Hebraic poetic fashion when he adds, “your labor prompted by love.” As John would write later, “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (I John 5:3). John was echoing the words of Jesus (John 14:15) where Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”

Paul consummates this wonderful sentence, noting their “endurance inspired by our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Indeed, it is our confidence in who the Lord is, as well as our confident expectation of what he holds in the future, that moves and sustains us daily.

As Paul is noting, endurance should not come from confidence in a religion or a church. It does not gain strength from one's own righteousness. Paul speaks of the endurance that grows from a confident expectation of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Paul personalizes this in his second letter to Timothy writing, "I know WHOM I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (I Tim. 1:12).

This prayer section is similarly laced with theologically important references to the work of the Holy Spirit (1:5, 6) and the return of Jesus (1:10).

Finally, we see that Paul rejoices as the Thessalonian's faith has shown throughout Macedonia and Greece (Achaia). He notes the church as a model for others to follow (1:7-10).

B. Paul's Interactions (Chapters 2 and 3)

Chapter two gives us additional glimpses into Paul's time in Thessalonica beyond the brief recording by Luke in Acts. Paul explains the previous suffering he and others sustained in Philippi before Thessalonica (2:1). No doubt Paul is referencing the harrowing events culminating in the conversion of the Philippians jailor detail in Acts. That Paul and Silas continued in their message in spite of such fierce opposition Paul cites as a credible reason to believe Paul. Paul's teaching was never constructed around pleasing men. It was simply the message of God – plain and simple. Whether it enraged men or set them free, it was the message Paul believed and taught (2:2-6).

Paul goes even further, noting that Paul and his band worked not only as missionaries proclaiming the word of God, but also in actual labor making money night and day so that the Thessalonians would not have to support them (2:6-12). This was not out of poverty of the church itself. From Acts, we know that some of the converts to Christianity were women from well-to-do households.

That Paul worked to support himself while teaching the Thessalonian church allows us to consider several interesting conclusions. We can surmise that Paul brings it up in this letter because there may have been suggestions by some (unbelieving spouses of the wealthy women converts?) that Paul and crew brought this novel unsubstantiated teaching about this resurrected

man in an effort to get money. In 2:3-5, Paul says his preaching was not an effort “to trick you” or “a mask to cover up greed.” Paul’s use of these phrases indicates that Timothy’s report to Paul of the Thessalonians well doing might have contained those very phrases as being used against the believers to discredit Paul.

Paul urged the Thessalonians to realize that the word preached to them was not just some thoughts, ideas, or beliefs of a group of people. The words were actually words of God; words of God that burrow into the very soul of the believers and work in them to change whom they are and how they live. Paul sees this in the way the Thessalonian Christians reacted to their suffering on account of their faith just as the saints in the Jerusalem church had (2:13-16).

Echoing Luke’s account of Paul and Silas leaving Thessalonica in the middle of the night to quell the unrest being generated by jealous Jews, Paul explains, “when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you” (2:17).

Paul saw the Thessalonians as his “glory and joy” (2:20). That love and longing caused Paul to send Timothy back to the church from Athens to strengthen the believers in the faith. Knowing the persecution and fearing that Satan had turned them from their foundations, Timothy went to reinforce and encourage what Paul had taught (3:1-6).

Timothy’s report back to Paul was good news. The persecution had not turned the faithful from God. Instead, the faithful were standing strong with fond memories of Paul and a desire to see him again. This news brought Paul back to his knees in earnest prayer that he might journey back at some point to see them more (3:6-13).

C. Instructions for Living (Chapters 4 and 5)

Paul begins his instructions on holy living in a gentle, positive, and affirming manner. Paul affirms that the Thessalonians are following his earlier teachings on how to please God; however, Paul adds that he wants them to live so even more. Therefore, Paul adds some additional matters for the Thessalonians to put into practice. Paul also affirms some earlier teachings, noting that they are important for the believers.

Invoking the authority of Jesus, Paul strongly asks the Thessalonians to be attentive to sexual morality. Our bodies are for holy and honorable service to God, not for unsanctified, passionate lust. This is a way that God sets us apart from the heathen of the world who neither know nor regard him (4:1-8).

Paul reaffirms the love that the Thessalonians have for the other Christians. But, Paul urges them to let that love grow even more and more. Typical of Paul's teaching, he does not see holiness and virtue as traits immediately in place as one becomes a Christian. Rather, as Paul will write later to the Corinthian church, Paul see us as growing daily in the holiness of Christ. It is a process, not an accomplished feat, for those of us on earth (4:9-10).

The Thessalonians are to live quiet lives, minding their own business and working in such a way as to win the respect of unbelievers. If Paul were using 21st century-speak, Paul might say, "make your life a sermon, it may be the only one unbelievers hear." Paul was acutely aware that unbelievers watch Christian's actions carefully. Our actions are important for what they say about us, our faith, and our God (4:11-12).

It was clear that the Thessalonians had concerns about some who had died since becoming Christians. Evidently fearing that these might miss the second coming of Christ (which the Thessalonians must have thought was imminent), Paul teaches them that the dead would not miss Jesus's coming again. Rather, the dead themselves will rise first when the Lord descends with a loud command and the trumpet of God sounds. It is then that we will all, dead and undead, commence to be with the Lord forever. Paul wanted the Thessalonians to comfort one another with these words (4:13-18).

Paul adds that the Thessalonians should not be looking for a date certain for the Lord to return. Paul reiterates his earlier teaching that the day of his coming will be like a thief in the night. The timing is not broadcast for folks to anticipate the moment. Instead, Christians are to live as if it may occur at any moment. In this regard, we are to daily put on our self-control, love, faith, and hope as we put on gear for battle. Faith, hope, love, and self-control are attire that keeps us ready for the Lord to return at any moment (5:1-11).

Paul ends his letter with some final instructions about daily life. Paul wants the leaders honored, the idle working, and the timid and weak nurtured. People are to treat each other with kindness and forgiveness. Joy is to abound, as is prayer with thanks to God whatever the circumstances (5:12-18).

In church matters, people are to let the Spirit work, honor prophetic words, test matters to make sure of their authenticity, and hold onto the good while avoiding the evil (5:19-22).

Paul offers a final prayer that is good for all of us to pray for those we cherish in the Lord. Paul prays

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is Paul's prayer of conviction because Paul knows that God "is faithful" and will in fact do the very things Paul is praying (5:23-24).

Paul then closes the letter asking for prayer and instructing that the letter be read "to all the brothers."

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Work from Faith
2. Labor from Love
3. Watch your Living Testimony
4. Holiness is not an Afterthought
5. Pray Bible Prayers