

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 17

1 Thessalonians

Have you ever been to a reunion? I graduated from Coronado High School in 1978. This summer, we are having our 30-year reunion. This should be fun – a chance to see many friends and acquaintances that I have lost touch with over the years. I cannot wait to see what has happened to them, how their lives have turned out, and what they are up to. Even more, it will be terrific just to enjoy each other's company.

Reunions are not a new concept. Separations and reunions have been around for eons! As we studied Paul's second missionary journey, we read of Paul being torn away unexpectedly and abruptly from the Thessalonians. He longed for a reunion with them, especially in light of several significant events that happened in the Thessalonians' church in a short time. One such event was the death of some church members. This raised concerns among the new Christians over whether those who had died would share in the second coming of Christ. This was one of several reasons why Paul decided to write the first letter to the Thessalonian church while he was in Corinth. That letter is our focus today.

THE CONTEXT¹

Even though we have already covered the New Testament account of Paul evangelizing Thessalonica, we renew our consideration of some of that material as background to our study of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Paul came into Thessalonica after his efforts in Philippi resulted in his jailing, and once released from jail, in his eviction. Paul then walked 70 miles to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was a cosmopolitan town placed at a key port along the road that ran West-East connecting the strength of the Roman Empire with outlying Eastern areas. This road, the Via Egnatia, was a principal thoroughfare that made Thessalonica a major trading point and a commercial center. Thessalonica was also the Roman administrative center for the region of Macedonia.²

The Jewish presence was strong in Thessalonica, but so were a number of cults that worshiped various deities. At the time of Paul, the chief city cult was that of

¹ We covered Paul's missionary efforts in Thessalonica in Paul Lesson 15, available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

² Charles Wanamaker, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary – The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Eerdmans 1990) at 4.

Cabirus. The notables in Thessalonica threw the community support behind this cult and the ceremonies that went with it. This was a bonding tie that sought to create community allegiance and continuity. A second important cult was the Caesar cult. Also called the Imperial Cult, this religion fostered worship of the Roman Emperor as a god. Anything contrary to the community cult or the imperial cult was, no doubt, deemed destructive for the community. Certain other religions had official sanction that allowed them to exist anyway. Among these allowed faiths was the Jewish faith.

Once in Thessalonica, Paul went to the synagogue “as was his custom” (Acts 17:2). For three weeks in a row, Paul went. As you will recall from Lesson 11³, Paul’s incredible credentials (having studied under the premier Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem) put him in an authoritative position every Sabbath when he was given a chance to teach on the Torah and Prophet readings at the synagogue services. Each time he went, Paul worked from the Old Testament explaining and showing why the Messiah (“Christ” in Greek) had to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. Paul told the Jews of Jesus, proclaiming him as the Messiah. Some of the Jews “were persuaded” as were a great many Greeks.

As we have seen in other places, the success of God’s work incited jealousy among disbelieving Jews who worked up the crowd. Thinking Paul was in the house of one named Jason, a mob descended upon the house. When Paul was not found there, the mob grabbed Jason and some other converts and took them before the city authorities. Arguing that the Christians were traitors who had a king (named Jesus) in the place of Caesar, the mob convinced the authorities to arrest the believers. After posting bond, Jason and the others were released.

The term Luke uses for the security Jason posted indicates that money was paid and Jason also gave assurance that Paul and Silas would leave the city.⁴ Evidently, Timothy was exempt from this requirement, which would explain why Timothy soon came back to the city (1 Thes. 3:2). After posting this security, the church sent Paul and Silas away from Thessalonica by night.

Paul went to Athens, then to Corinth. While at Corinth, Paul wrote back to the Thessalonians. Scholars are uncertain whether the letter we call 1 Thessalonians or 2 Thessalonians was written first. Of course, Paul did not title the letters themselves; and no one seems to think that Paul’s letters are grouped in the Bible based on date written. So, the only way to know the date is to study the letters

³ Downloadable at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 509. See also Paul’s reference to being torn away, in spite of his desire to stay in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-18 and the comment in reference thereto in Bock at 553.

themselves to see what makes most sense. We are not going into detail in the discussion of the order written, but will treat the letters in the order they are in the Bible, starting with 1 Thessalonians.

As we look at 1 Thessalonians, we should remember that it was a letter to be read in a single setting to the church. While Paul no doubt knew they would re-read the letter and discuss it in its various parts and thoughts, we should never fail to realize the power of considering the letter as a whole as well. Our approach will first center on understanding the whole letter. We will then journey back through the letter to set up a few comments and points for home.

THE 1 THESSALONIANS LETTER

Chapter 1

Paul begins his letter writing on behalf of himself as well as his co-missionaries Silvanus and Timothy. We read in Acts that the two accompanied Paul on his trip to Thessalonica, although Luke used the shortened name of “Silas” for “Silvanus.”

At the very beginning, Paul tells the Thessalonians that he constantly prays for them, with thankfulness as he remembers the work that their faith produces, the labor that comes from their love, and the steadfastness that flows from their confidence⁵ in the return of Christ.

Paul emphasizes that it was clear God had chosen the Thessalonians because when Paul preached, they did not merely hear the word. The word came into them with conviction, with power, and with the Holy Spirit. As such, the Thessalonians became Christian examples known throughout all of Macedonia. This fits with Thessalonica being the leading city and capital of Macedonia. Paul adds, though, that the reputation of the church in Thessalonica extended even to Achaia (modern Greece).

How was the reputation so noteworthy? The Thessalonians had ceased worshiping dead idols! Instead they were serving the living and true God while awaiting the promised return of Jesus, who will bring salvation from the wrath to come.

Chapter 2

Paul explains the value of his visit to Thessalonica. While it came on the heels of his suffering and poor treatment in Philippi, it was a valuable visit anyway. Paul came into Thessalonica boldly declaring the gospel. He did so, even though Thessalonica also had its share of conflict. Paul never tried to flatter the Thessalonians, never used his message to line his pockets, nor did Paul seek to exalt himself in his preaching. Paul’s desire was not for Paul, but for the

⁵ Our translators use the word “hope” to express the meaning of the Greek *elpis* (ἐλπίς). See our lesson on Paul’s time in Philippi for a fuller explanation of the Greek meaning of the word. It is downloadable at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. (Lesson 14, footnote 10).

Thessalonians. Like a mother nurses her child, Paul felt tenderly toward the church there.

That is why Paul would work day and night, using his tent maker craft to support himself while he evangelized the unsaved. It did not end there, either. After the unsaved found faith, Paul continued to teach, exhort, encourage, and edify the church like a father does his children, so that they might walk worthy of their calling!

Paul writes special appreciation that the Thessalonians never thought of themselves as receiving simply Paul's words. They understood God was behind the message. They were willing to suffer just as the mother church had in Judea.

Paul expresses concern about his rapid departure from Thessalonica ("we were torn away from you" 2:17). He tells the Thessalonians he continually wanted to come back and visit them, but was hindered from doing so by Satan. Paul was willing to be left without Timothy in Athens, so that Timothy could at least go back to Thessalonica to minister to the church there. Paul was also worried about how the church was faring and how the church held up to Satan's temptations.

Timothy made the journey, and Paul tells the church about the great comfort and thankfulness he had once Timothy returned and reported on the church's faith and steadfastness. Paul prays that the church's love and holiness would increase more and more until the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

Paul then encourages the Thessalonians to continue to grow in holiness and sanctification, to walk in ways that please God, more and more. Paul reiterates that God's will is for them to stay away from the sexual immorality of their day, being careful to control their lusts. God never wanted his people controlled by their baser desires. God wants his people above that. God wants them holy. Holiness pleases God, not impurity.

Paul writes of brotherly love also, but not because the Thessalonians lacked it! Paul emphasizes that such love is one of the Thessalonians' strengths. Even still, Paul exhorts them to grow in love more and more!

Paul also urges them to walk properly before the unbelievers. This meant for the Thessalonians to "live quietly," to "mind their own affairs," and to "work with their hands." Paul wanted them to live without relying and depending on the unbelievers for their sustenance. Paul was teaching them to be a light on a hill, an example, to those without faith.

Paul uses the letter to answer some apparent questions the Thessalonians had about the second coming of Christ. Evidently, there was a worry that some had died after becoming Christians and the Thessalonians had concerns about whether

those people would miss out! Paul assured the Thessalonians that death would not prevent anyone from sharing in Jesus' second coming. Jesus himself died and was resurrected. God will likewise raise others who have "fallen asleep."

Paul explained that the second coming will happen with Jesus descending from heaven "with a cry of command" (authority), "with the voice of an archangel," and "with the sound of a trumpet." The dead in Christ will actually rise first! Then, those who are still alive will be "caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." For eternity, we shall all together be with the Lord. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians with these words and urged them similarly to encourage each other.

Chapter 5

Before Paul quit writing on the second coming, he addressed the question of "when" it might occur. Paul reminds the Thessalonians what they already knew, that man did not know when the second coming was going to occur. "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Some ignorant people might think a day is peaceful and secure, yet that might be their day of destruction. But the day should not surprise the church because the church should live every day sober and watchful. Knowing we are destined for salvation through Christ rather than destruction of the world, the church is to live each day with a breastplate of faith and love and a helmet of confidence in our salvation. Again, Paul emphasizes, the church should understand this teaching as encouraging and use it accordingly.

As Paul brings this letter to a close, he urges the church to respect their overseers in the church. The church should have peace within its ranks. The idle should be admonished to work, the fainthearted should be encouraged, and the weak should be helped. Over all, the church should let patience reign. The church should be a worker of good, even to those who are evil and undeserving. The church should rejoice always, pray non-stop, and be ever thankful, whatever the circumstances. The church should be careful not to quench the Spirit or despise prophecies. Neither should the church accept everything at face value. Rather by testing everything, the church should adhere to the good and abstain from the evil.

Paul closes the letter with a benediction proclaiming God's blessing to sanctify and keep the body, soul, and spirit of the Thessalonians blameless. Paul then seeks the prayers of the church and asks that his letter be read to all the Christians.

THE ANALYSIS AND POINTS FOR HOME

1 Thessalonians gives us good insight into Paul's missionary efforts. From it, we get solid glimpses into the things Paul taught during the month or so he was in Thessalonica.

1. "Works of faith and labors of love" (1:3).

Even in this very early writing of Paul, we see the groundwork of his theology that pervades the whole body of his works. Consider the early passage where Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians' "work of faith and labor of love." Paul always saw faith as an active and life changing force that brought about works for the Master. The idea of a dead faith was foreign to Paul. By the same token, Paul never confused the source of what made a "good work" good! It was a work produced by faith, a labor prompted by love.

If we use the analogy of works being fruit produced on a tree, we see Paul was concerned not because of the importance of the fruit, but because fruit showed the condition of the tree. The fruit showed these wonderful people had truly "turned to God from idols" (1:9).

We should all soberly look at our lives. Do we work for our Master and Lord because of our convictions of who he is and what he has done for us? Does his love for us, and our returning love of him move us to labor for him? If so, may we grow more and more in faith and love. If not, we have a serious problem – a problem of faith and love. That problem demands attention, for there is nothing more serious.

2. "Turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1:9).

Paul knew the cultic traditions and practices of Thessalonica. He had spent a month or so there. Paul affirms the truth of the Christian faith as central and real truth – not an option, but the answer. Paul contrasts the old worship in idols to the faith and service of *the* living and true God. The clear implication is that any other religion was one of a dead and false god. Neither Caesar nor the cult of the day was worthy of the worship and adoration of the Thessalonians.

Paul preached the true service of God, but he also lived it! Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he did his work out of faith and love as well. Paul never sought money from the Thessalonians; nor did he seek their praise. Paul was discharging his service to the same God that the Thessalonians were called to serve. Paul was practicing before their very eyes what he preached.

Who or what do we worship? Maybe the question gets a more honest answer if we break apart the word, "worship." Who or what do we ascribe worth to? What do we value? Who do we idolize? Do we understand that *no one* and *nothing* is worthy of our praise, adoration, worship, or value save the living and true God? Everything else is dead (or will be soon!). Our eternal God alone is worthy of our worship!

3. “We wanted to come to you” (2:18).

Paul knew that the Thessalonians were concerned over his wellbeing, and it was important to him that they knew he was also concerned for theirs as well. Paul worked not just as a missionary, but also as a pastor. As Morris wrote:

Here we see Paul...concerned for the welfare of his converts, scolding them, praising them, guiding them, exhorting them, teaching them; thrilled with their progress, disappointed with their slowness.⁶

So, Paul gives pastoral advice, “live quietly, work with your hands...walk properly before outsiders” (4:11-12). Let us thank God for our earthly ministers and shepherds who seek to encourage us to specific good works and deeds of holiness. We should never get so caught up in the global concepts of “faith and works” or “worship” that we forget the every day minute-by-minute translation of what those ideas mean. We must remember to focus on our choices we make each step of life. Let us make the steps that would make our heavenly Father smile!

4. “We will always be with the Lord” (4:17).

Paul’s comments about the second coming of Christ echo the very words of Jesus saved for us by Matthew. Ben Witherington III set up a chart indicating the parallels in language and explanation⁷:

	<u>1 Thess.</u>	<u>Matthew</u>
Christ returns	4:16	24:30
From heaven	4.16	24.30
Accompanied by angels	4.16	24:31
With a trumpet of God	4:16	24:31
Believers are gathered to Christ	4:17	24.31, 40-41
In clouds	4:17	24:30

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians, An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale 1956) at 9.

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 2006) at 136.

At a time unknown	5:1-2	24:36
Coming like a thief in the night	5:2, 4	24:43
Unbelievers are unaware of coming judgment	5:3	24:37-39
Judgment is like a mother's birth-pangs	5:3	24:8
Believers are not to be deceived	5:4-5	24:43
And are to be watchful	5:6	24:37-39
Warning against drunkenness	5:7	24:49

Paul lets the Thessalonians know that while no one knows when Jesus will return, he will return nevertheless. What a time of rejoicing that will be! The grand reunion! The reunion will be not only with our Lord, but also with all our loved ones who have already died in Christ.

We should never get so caught up in trying to figure out *when* Jesus is coming such that we forget to use the fact of his coming as encouragement to all in the church. This confidence is our joy in life as well as death. As for when Jesus is returning, Paul would have enjoyed the reported saying of Leon McBeth, "Fellas, let's just let the Lord catch us being busy about His business!" Amen!