

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 13 – 1 Thessalonians

On his second missionary journey Paul crossed over into Europe, and, having first established a church in Philippi, he then went on to do the same in Thessalonica. When he first entered the city, though, he did what was his common practice, namely, he preached the gospel in the local synagogue, showing from the Old Testament how the promised Messiah was to suffer and die, then rise from the dead, and how it is therefore that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed this Messiah.

Several people were converted as a result of this, including both Jews and Gentile proselytes, and, over time, an even larger number of Gentiles who had no connection with the synagogue but lived in that city. The success of Paul's ministry aroused the envy of the unbelieving Jews, however, and they stormed the house of Jason where the missionaries had been staying. Not finding them there, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the local magistrates, charging them with giving hospitality to men who were disturbing the peace and claiming allegiance to some king other than Caesar.

Paul and Silas then travelled to Berea, and their ministry prospered there, too, until this same group of Jews from Thessalonica caught up with them and again stirred up trouble for them. It would be some years before the apostle was able to return and visit these Thessalonian Christians, but he treasured his fellowship with them and that is witnessed by the two letters he would send them.

From Berea, Paul went to Athens, and later to Corinth, where again he preached in the synagogue, and again his ministry was bitterly opposed by the Jews. Timothy visited him from Thessalonica, and what this young friend conveyed to him became the occasion for this letter to that congregation. This longer than usual introduction helps us to understand what was going on among them.

The Thessalonians had remained loyal to Paul, but the unbelieving Jews who had pursued the apostle were still relentless in their opposition, now not only to Paul himself but to his followers as well, threatening both their life and property. These Thessalonian Christians had suffered persecution, and their consistency of character was widely reported, but they urgently needed help and godly counsel.

In chapter 1 Paul commends them for their faith, for their having turned from idols to serve the living and true God. In chapter 2 he reminds them how he had laboured among them with the gentleness of a nursing mother and the careful instruction of a loving father; he tells them of how he had wanted to visit them time and again since then but had been prevented from doing so. All this is important because the enemies of Paul were telling a different story, insisting that his failure to return was evidence that he did not truly care for them.

In chapter 3 the apostle writes of having sent Timothy to visit and encourage the Thessalonians in his absence, and that despite the trials and hardships which Paul, too, has had to endure, he also has been encouraged and comforted now in hearing from Timothy regarding them. He prays that he might see them soon, therefore, and that the Lord might establish their hearts blameless in holiness.

Many of the Thessalonian believers are Gentiles from a pagan background. Even though they now possess a saving faith in Christ, the temptations of their former life continue to pull on them and to draw them away from the paths of righteousness which they have committed themselves to follow. This is particularly difficult for them, as Paul well understands, because sexual immorality can become deeply entrenched, and, along with that, it is what they see all around them and so many of their former friends are still into that way of life. In 4:1-8, therefore, Paul exhorts them to walk in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord, and reminds them that a failure to do so is to reject God Himself.

This practical counsel is most helpful for us all to consider. If you are an unbeliever, my friend, you need to know that every sin you commit, every evil way you pursue, increases your debt to your Maker, binds you even tighter to the world and its ways, and draws you ever closer to the eternal torments of hell. If, on the other hand, you are a believer, you need to know and to remind yourself repeatedly that those worldly ways and immoral thoughts which you once learned, and have become such a part of you, can still be very difficult to overcome, even now as a Christian, and, as a result, they can be far harder to set aside than many other things which, for you at least, are not as entrenched. Living the Christian life is looking to Christ and seeking, with His help and for His sake, to pursue holiness, to replace the bad habits with good ones, and to stay on track, not veering to the right or to the left of the way everlasting.

Paul had taught that Christ could come again at any time, that He would do so when least expected, and that men needed therefore to be ready for His coming. Some in Thessalonica, it seems, had thought He would come back almost immediately, at least in their lifetime, and so they stopped working in order to prepare for that great event. With nothing to do, they became an annoyance and little more than a nuisance to other people. In 4:9-12 the apostle tells them to aspire to a quiet life, to mind their own business, and to work with their own hands.

It is good, of course, for believers to await the second coming of Christ, to live in expectation of the grand consummation of the present order of things, but the way to do that is not by sitting around and being a problem to others, but by serving the Lord diligently and being found faithful to our calling when He comes (Matthew 24:45,46). From the human perspective, believer, our work is never finished; from the divine perspective, on the other hand, it is finished when God Himself says it is and not until then.

There was also another problem related to this faulty thinking on our Lord's second coming. Those who thought that Christ was to come again almost immediately, and questioned why He did not, wondered what was to happen to those in their number who had already died. What was to become of them? In 4:13-18 Paul makes it clear that, while it is appropriate to grieve, Christians are not to grieve the loss of other believers as unbelievers who have no hope.

When Jesus comes again, after all, He will bring with Him those who have already been received up into heaven, and, when He does, their bodies will be raised first. After that, we who are still alive will be caught up with the Lord in the air, our spirits also will be reunited with our bodies, and so shall we always be with the Lord. Is this not a great comfort, dear Christian? The Lord will not leave any of His own behind, and, if it gives us such joy and peace to think on such things, let us also comfort one another with these same words of abiding hope!

We are not given any specific date for our Lord's return, nor should we project any, but it will happen when the Lord Himself descends from heaven "with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God." Notice, this will not happen in secret, but openly, publicly, and for every eye to see Him (Revelation 1:7).

In chapter 5, finally, the apostle continues to address the coming Day of the Lord, acknowledging that there is no need to speak of times and seasons, for the Lord will come as a thief in the night, which is to say when least expected (5:1-11). An actual thief, mind you, comes to steal property, and so one needs to be (and by some means) standing guard against him day and night. The Lord Jesus will not come to *take* from His people, however, but rather to *give* – eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered the mind of man even to conceive what He has prepared for those who love Him – He will come as the Bridegroom to give His bride, the Church, the home He has made ready for her; He will come as the Firstborn, our Elder Brother, to give us, those whom He has made His siblings in the family of God, our eternal inheritance. Having loved His own, He will love us to the end, and with such security surrounding us He will never let us go. So, then, whether we wake or sleep, beloved, we shall live together with Him!

It would seem that there were some in the Thessalonian church who did not respect the office-bearers as they should have done, so Paul reprimands them for that and gives the brethren every encouragement to edify one another (5:12-15). If they want to know the will of God for them on any and every occasion, here it is: let them rejoice, let them pray, and let them give thanks. If God is working all things together for our good, believer, even the most unpleasant afflictions, then there is nothing for which we should not be profoundly grateful; we may just have to learn the painstaking lesson of what is so good about it (5:16-18).

One more exhortation we should note before concluding our study of this letter is that Christians everywhere are called to test all things – that is, we are to measure everything by the standard of God's own Word – if it holds up to the test and is consistent with it, let us embrace it firmly and appreciate what it proves itself to be. If, though, it falls short of the mark, or demonstrates that it is contrary to this revealed standard, let us hold back and flee from it (5:19-22). What God gives His people is always good; what others give us, or we seek out on our own to attain, may be profoundly evil and destructive.

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