

*The Thessalonian Letters***PREFACE**

In the spring of 2016, as I was organizing and preparing this class, it never occurred to me that a study of these two, relatively brief letters would take sixteen months. But time and again, as I approached the next passage I had originally sectioned off, I realized I could not do it justice in just one session. So, looking at just the numbers, the file of my original notes now stands at 54 sessions, 234 pages containing slightly more than 102,000 words.

But the study of the Bible is not about the numbers; it is about acquiring a deeper, more solid understanding of what God has entrusted to us in His word. And my philosophy has always been, *If we are going to study it, then we're going to be as thorough as is practical, no matter how long it takes.* And I am most grateful that my immediate boss, our senior pastor, fully supports this approach. May his tribe increase (which, I understand, it is). Posterity will decide if this class has been a monument to thoroughness—or simply a monument to my verbosity.

The remaining three verses of the second letter, consisting of a closing benediction and Paul's personal authentication, are a little thin for even me to fill our time with. So what I want to do is commit most of this session to reminding ourselves what we have learned in these two letters.

Writing from Corinth, with Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy alongside, Paul wrote the first letter just a few months after leaving Thessalonica, and the second letter a few months after that; these are the earliest known letters written to any church by Paul.

how the Thessalonians accepted the gospel

Speaking personally, perhaps what has had the most profound impact on me was how enthusiastically and immediately the Thessalonians embraced the good news of Christ and shared that good news with their neighbors. We have read the passage from the first chapter so many times, we should have it memorized by now.

First Paul speaks from his perspective:

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5.

Then in Chapter Two he testifies to their acceptance of his gospel:

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

After they heard and accepted the gospel of Christ, the Thessalonians immediately began spreading this gospel themselves, becoming "imitators" of the evangelists.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8.

And as a result of their eagerness to spread the gospel, they began to suffer the same persecution as the older churches in Judea.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14.

This testimony is convicting. Many of us as well, in the beginning, were eager for our new faith in Christ. Our lives were changed, and we wanted to tell the world about this fresh joy. But as the years wore on this fresh faith of ours may have become a bit stale, a bit tired and worn. It became... comfortable.

Many years ago, in another place and time, though I was, my friends at the time had no idea I was a Christian—my closest friend and colleague did not know I was a Christian. Do yours? The Thessalonians could not wait to share their new faith with everyone in their region. And that faith spread, perhaps in no small part because of their witness. Would that that would be the result of *our* witness.

a selfless ministry

Christ and His gospel must always come first. One of the easiest ways to spot a charlatan is how they promote themselves, how they glean personal wealth from the flock, how they seek more glory for themselves than Christ. Paul did not do this when he came to Thessalonica. We have just finished studying how he and his men worked night and day so as to pay their own way while there. This was, at least, for the purpose of a positive witness to the idle layabouts in the church. But along with their manual labor, they presented themselves to these people with honesty, transparency, and seeking only Glory for the Lord.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:3-8.

This is especially remarkable considering where they had been and what they had experienced just before coming to Thessalonica. Publicly accused and beaten, then thrown into prison, Paul and Silvanus could not have been blamed if they had not looked for some compassionate pampering at their next stop. After their experience in Philippi, who could have blamed them for wanting an easier work load, generous and indulgent treatment. But they looked for none of this; instead, they placed an even *harder* burden on themselves for one reason: the cause of Christ.

the authority of God's word

Let's revisit v13 in Chapter Two. Even this week, after all this, as I began making these notes on this verse, I first thought this verse referred to the Bible. So I headlined this section, "the authority of Scripture." But God's *written* word is not what Paul is speaking of.

Read v13.

Paul writes "the word of God which you heard from us"—literally, "the word of hearing" (*logon akoēs*). What Paul is saying—literally, because this, as most of his letters, were dictated to an amanuensis—is that when he and his fellows were standing in front of the Thessalonians, they were speaking to them *ex cathedra*—literally, "from the chair," but means speaking accurately, infallibly for God. They were not *reading* the word of God to them, as they would today, but were *speaking* the word of God.

But of course, what was spoken to the Thessalonians has been written for us. Both are true: Paul *spoke* the word of God, and then some of what he spoke was *written* as the word of God. But what I would like us to dwell on is the Thessalonian's *response* to this word—hence ours. And I can do no better than to reprise what Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote.

Spurgeon: The Word is twice mentioned in our version. “When you received the Word of God which you heard of us, you received it.” In the Greek those are two different words altogether. The second, “received,” might, perhaps, better be read, “accepted.” I do not think that I should be straining a point if I read it, “You welcomed it.” They first received it by eagerly hearing it. They wanted to know what it was all about. They were attentive to it and wanted to understand it. When they had heard it, they rejoiced, and said, “Oh, yes, yes, yes, this is the very thing we need!” They embraced it. That word will do—they embraced it! They put their arms around it and would not let it go. They were hospitable to the Gospel and said, “Come in, you blessed of the Lord. Come and live in our hearts!”

I would challenge every one of us, no matter our advanced years, to every day embrace God’s word with this same unabashed exuberance.

So many today are of the mindset that once one has “accepted Christ,” that’s it. Done. Full stop. I’m good. But it is the exact opposite. Accepting Christ—accepting the truth of the gospel, as did the Thessalonians—is not the end; it is the beginning! It is the open door to a relationship with God, and the open door to understanding His written word. Love it. Embrace it. Don’t let it slip out of your life.

the sequence of the end times

Perhaps the area in which we learned more of what we didn’t know before, was in the subject of the end times and the *parousia*—the return of Christ Jesus to judge the earth.

Paul began addressing the topic near the end of the first letter, where he wanted to reassure the Thessalonians that those who had previously died would not be left out of the Rapture.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Not only will the dead in Christ be included, they will be the *first* to meet the Lord in the air.

The common interpretation of this among pretribulational premillennialists is that this event—the Rapture of the church—will be instantaneous and precede all other events of the end times. That is, believers who are alive now will not be on earth for the Tribulation. This church’s *Articles of Faith* spells out the details and Scripture references to substantiate this position. Here are the essentials. In order,

1. Jesus returns to remove His church (without touching down on earth).
2. This is followed by the seven-year Tribulation.
3. At the end of the Tribulation Jesus returns to earth (His “second coming”) with the saints.
4. There follows a one-thousand-year period with Christ and the saints reigning and Israel exalted (Christ’s millennial reign).
5. Finally, a new heaven and new earth are established, Satan is defeated, and believers now in eternal state.

Making this more personal, if you are a Christian right now, here is the outline of your future:

1. Whether alive or dead at His return, at some point in the future you will meet Christ Jesus in the air and go with Him back to heaven.
2. For seven years you will be in heaven with Christ.
3. Then you will return to earth with Christ when He will judge the earth and reign on earth for one thousand years.
4. At the end of the Millennium there will be a new heaven and new earth, and you will dwell with the Godhead on a new earth in the Eternal State.

It is only fair to mention that historically the church has not subscribed to this interpretation of Scripture. According to Wayne Grudem, the classic, majority position of the church has been *premillennial* but not *pretribulational*—that is, Christ returns to take up the church before the Millennium, but *not* before the Tribulation. In this interpretation there is no pretribulation Rapture; Christ returns only once, in judgment, at the end of the Tribulation—at which time, according to this interpretation, the church is taken up, and immediately returns with Christ to rule during the Millennium.

After learning about the events of the Tribulation in Chapter Two of the second letter, it is my earnest prayer that we are correct. No one alive today will want to pass through this terrible time. No Christian wants to live under the thumb of the Antichrist, who will be in charge of things for at least the last half of the Tribulation.

A CLOSING BENEDICTION

Now let us close out this study with more encouraging news: Paul's authentication of the letter and his benediction upon the Thessalonians.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18.

Remember that earlier in this letter Paul had made a passing reference to forgeries.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3a.

As a way to authenticate his *real* letters Paul would close the letter—the bulk of which had been dictated to an amanuensis—by taking the stylus and appending something in his own hand.

Read v17.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance.

Christ did not come to bring peace to the world; in Matthew 10 Jesus explicitly states that He did not come to bring peace between individuals, but a sword. The peace He *did* bring is our peace with God the Father. Paul states in his letter to the Colossians,

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.
(Colossians 1:19-20)

But this is still not the peace of which Paul speaks. His prayer for the Thessalonians is perhaps one of *our* most common prayers for each other. Based on the word translated "circumstance" or "way" (*tropos*), we could paraphrase this, "May Christ give you peace at every turn in your life."

The Lord be with you all!

And how does He accomplish this? He is *with* us.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

It is that classic choral benediction most of us grew up with, based on Numbers 6:24-26.

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord lift His countenance upon You,
And give you peace;
The Lord make His face to shine upon you,
And be gracious;
The Lord be gracious, gracious unto you.*

The apostle Paul's departing prayer for this church is that they would remember and claim the promise that their gracious Lord Jesus Christ is always with them. No matter where they are, no matter their circumstances, they need never be without the peace that comes from their relationship with God the Father through Christ Jesus.

Oh, that we would all remember this! No matter what we are going through, we are already in possession of a supernatural peace that will see us through any trial, any obstacle. All we need do is tap into it! It's already there.

Let's close with the promise Christ Jesus gave His disciples shortly before He was arrested and crucified.

Read John 16:33.