

XII. Progress in the Faith

March 23/24, 2011

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

Aim: To introduce Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians.

A. Introduction to 2 Thessalonians

1. Timing

The second letter to the Christians in Thessalonica followed hard on the heels of the first. It is probable that Paul wrote the second epistle only a matter of weeks or at the longest, a few months after the first, while he was still in Corinth with Timothy and Silas.

2. Themes

2 Thessalonians, like its earlier companion letter, is intensely pastoral and practical in nature. There is one obvious point of difference between the two letters. In 2 Thessalonians Paul has nothing to say in defense of his character and conduct. We can safely assume that the lengthy treatment which he had given this matter in the first epistle silenced his critics.

Apparently, the person who delivered 1 Thessalonians returned and informed Paul of many good things about the Thessalonian church, but also a few negatives. On the positive side, Paul is still thankful for, and delighted by, the church. Also he no longer had to defend his apostleship.

Paul was generally pleased with their progress (1:3-4), yet there were still some issues that needed to be resolved. The contents of the letter itself show that at least three issues were troubling the church. The first was ongoing (and perhaps intensified) persecution (1:3-10). The second was a troublesome rumor supposedly originating from Paul himself alleging that the day of the Lord had already come (2:1-2). And the third was the continuing irritation caused by a section of the church that refused to work.

a) Persecution

The first letter contained references to the fact that the church in Thessalonica had experienced persecution. In fact, the church in Thessalonica had its birth in suffering. The missionaries themselves had been harassed and were eventually forced to leave the city (Acts 17:5-9), and the new converts had experienced opposition as they turned from idols to serve the true God (1 Th. 1:6-9). At times this had been very severe. Concern over this had caused deep anguish for Paul and his helpers during their enforced absence from the church (1 Th. 3:3-5).

Conditions had not improved in the time between the two letters. If anything, it had worsened. The Thessalonian Christians were forced to live out their new faith in a climate of stiff persecution and trial (1:3). They were evidently doing this with great patience and courage.

However, unrelieved suffering often promotes despair, or at least perplexity. Young Christians can be confused when God allows them to suffer. It would seem that word had got back to Paul that this opposition had provoked a bout of heart-searching. Why did God allow it? It raises questions and doubts about His goodness and faithfulness, and even about their own relationship to Him. Perhaps some of the believers in Thessalonica were struggling in this way.

Thessalonians – Lesson 12

Throughout the twenty centuries of the Christian era, the sufferings of the godly have led them to question the justice of God. Paul's concern in the first section of the epistle (1:3-12) was to address this very issue. In chapter 1, he encouraged the Thessalonians to stand firm and remain faithful to the Lord despite their suffering. They need not be perplexed about God's purpose in what they are suffering, because the time will come when His justice will be made clear to everyone. They need to wait patiently for God Himself to right wrongs and deliver them from trouble.

b) Rumors

A second reason for writing had to do with rumors about the Day of the Lord, or the *parousia*. The believers in Thessalonica still faced nagging fears about the last things. They were in danger of being deceived (2:3). Somehow a report or forged letter had reached the Thessalonians that Paul was saying that the Day of the Lord had already come (2:2). This would naturally have alarmed the faint-hearted members of the congregation. They had been concerned enough about what would happen to those who had already died in the Lord, and they were anxious about their own readiness to meet the Lord Jesus when He returned. How would they respond to claims that He had already come? This explains why the second main section of the epistle (2:1-12) is devoted to further teaching 'on the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together with Him' (2:1). Thus, Paul wrote chapter 2 to calm the Thessalonians' fears, clarify his teaching, and thus reassure them that the Day of the Lord had not arrived.

c) Rebellion

Paul also returned to another matter which had occupied him during the first epistle, with the group of people previously described as idlers (1 Th. 5:14). A section of the church membership in Thessalonica had been causing concern because of their idleness, probably justifying their refusal to work by appealing to the nearness of Christ's return. The apostle had spelt out their duty in the first letter. They were to aim to live quiet and productive lives (1 Th. 4:11-12), taking care not to become dependent upon anybody. This should have been sufficient to settle the disorder.

Apparently, however, it was not. It would seem that things had not improved, but rather that the problem had escalated, for in his third main section of this second letter (3:6-15), Paul spoke even more forcefully than he had the first time around. The tone of some of his remarks suggests that the problem was so deep-rooted that he was contemplating the grim possibility of church discipline. Paul had no time for loafing fanatics. The church is told how to deal with them and authorized to take measured that at least approach excommunication. Unruliness of this sort had to be stopped. The apostle sternly deals with those idle loafers and the related issue of church discipline in chapter 3.

B. Introduction of 2 Thessalonians (2 Th. 1:1-4)

1. Grace in Greeting (1:1-2)

The opening words of this second letter are almost identical to those of the first.

a) From (1:1)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy...

Thessalonians – Lesson 12

The writers are the same three men, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, and they are introduced in the same simple, unqualified way. As they had been when the church was founded (Acts 17:4; cp. 16:1-3), the three were evidently still together when Paul dictated this letter, probably still in Corinth. This seems to confirm that 2 Thessalonians was written shortly after 1 Thessalonians. Though the letter is from the three members of the evangelism team, Paul was the sole authorship of the epistle. Paul's authorship is confirmed not only in 1:1, but also in 3:17.

Only in the Thessalonian epistles does Paul fail to add a title (such as 'apostle' or 'bond-servant') to his name. This absence of the usual formal title gives the introduction a more endearing and intimate tone, which is fitting for this encouraging letter.

Silvanus, known in Acts as Silas, was Paul's faithful partner in ministry. Like the apostle, he was a Jew who held Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37); so also like Paul he had both a Jewish (Aramaic) name, Silas, and a Roman name, Silvanus. Acts 15:32 notes that he was a prophet, hence a preacher of the gospel. He became Paul's missionary partner after the apostle split with Barnabas over John Mark (Acts 15:40). Later he became Peter's amanuensis and likely carried 1 Peter to its readers (1 Pe. 5:12).

Timothy was Paul's protégé and beloved son in the faith (2 Tim. 1:2; cp. 1 Tim. 1:8). A native of Lystra, a city in Asia Minor, Timothy was the son and grandson of believing Jewish women (2 Tim. 1:5) but had a Gentile father (Acts 16:1). Paul met Timothy on his second missionary journey and was impressed enough with him to add him to his missionary team (Acts 16:1-3).

b) To (1:1b)

...to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Thessalonica was a city of a quarter of a million people and the capital of Macedonia (the northern portion of Greece). A bustling seaport located along the important Roman highway known as the Egnatian Way, the city was a busy center of trade and commerce.

Paul and his companions founded the church on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-9). Their success in evangelizing the city (Acts 17:4) enraged the unbelieving Jews, and the ensuing uproar forced the missionary team to leave (Acts 17:10, 14). After stops in Berea and Athens, Paul eventually made his way to Corinth, from which he wrote the first letter. A few months later, Paul penned this letter, prompted by a further report about the situation in Thessalonica.

Paul's simply greeting identifies the church as a regenerate church. His opening salutation is almost word for word the same as the one which marks the beginning of the previous epistle. The only difference is that the church in Thessalonica is described as being 'in God our Father' rather than 'in God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' In this instance Paul is thinking of God as the Father of believers rather than of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through faith his readers have become sons of God along with all other believers. The emphasis is not only on the fact that believers have been adopted into the family of God, but also, by his use of the word 'our,' that Paul associated himself completely with his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica. The truth that Christians are in personal, spiritual, and eternal union with God is unique to Christianity.

c) Greeting (1:2)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace, as we saw in the first letter, are the sum of God's spiritual blessings for his people. 'Grace' (*χάρις*, *charis*) refers to God's unmerited favor toward sinners, and 'peace'

Thessalonians – Lesson 12

(*εἰρήνη, eirēnē*) is the result of that favor. That the Father and Son are linked as the source of spiritual blessing to the church points once more to the high view the apostles had of the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is clearly affirming here Christ's deity and His equality with the Father.

With these familiar words Paul re-establishes contact with his much-loved converts in Thessalonica. He is still vitally interested in their welfare.

2. Grateful for Growth (1:3-4)

As in most of Paul's letter, the thanksgiving section follows the opening. As in all of Paul's thanksgivings, the churches are encouraged by the knowledge that Paul is praying for them and also that their good works are noticed.

In these verses, Paul gave heartfelt thanks to God for all that His grace had achieved in his friends. Imperfect though the church in Thessalonica may have been, Paul still begins his letter on a note of thanksgiving. There are errors to correct and people to rebuke, but these can wait. Pastoral wisdom and genuine affection both dictate that he begin with an outburst of gratitude.

As was the case in 1 Thessalonians, the thanksgiving section of this letter has a clear beginning but no easily recognizable end. In fact, in the Greek text, verses 3-10 form a single unbroken sentence. What begins as a thanksgiving report merges into comment, encouragement, and instruction on themes connected with it. The main point is that Paul gives thanks and boasts about the Thessalonians' perseverance amidst persecution (1:3-4). This main point concerning perseverance in the face of persecution prompts a secondary discussion concerning the justice of God at the Second Coming in relation to the final end of both believers and unbelievers (1:5-10). The thanksgiving then ends with a second sentence (1:11-12), which relates back to the previous one. This consists of a report of Paul's prayers that the Thessalonians may persevere until they meet God and receive His blessings.

a) *Compelled Thanksgiving (1:3)*

We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting...

When the apostle speaks of being obliged to thank God for his readers, he is not implying that he is reluctant or feels forced against his will to do so. He is simply stating a fact. It may also indicate how his thanksgiving in his first letter had been received. If the Thessalonian Christians had protested against what they regarded as the excessive commendation expressed in the earlier letter, the writers might well have replied, 'It is only fitting that we should thank God for you; it is indeed our bounden duty.'

He and his fellow workers recognized that all the spiritual progress that has been made in the church in Thessalonica, all the many good virtues that abound in them, are the result of God's work in their hearts. They have not come about through their own skill or ingenuity, but through God's grace. Consequently, Paul, Silas, and Timothy know that they ought always to thank God for them. It was only right for them to do so.

The word 'bound' or 'ought' (*ὀφείλομεν, ophēilōmen*) refers to a deep obligation, debt, or responsibility. It suggests that they were under compulsion, as though the Lord had done something so notable in the lives of these Christians that it would be churlish not to give thanks. The second expression, 'as it is fitting,' suggests that this gratitude was no more and no less than was due. By using these terms, Paul is especially emphasizing that it is necessary for him to

Thessalonians – Lesson 12

thank God on account of the progress made by the Thessalonians, which in turn is an additional source of encouragement to them.

Three things stood out: their faith, love, and hope (perseverance amidst persecution)

(1) Growing Faith (1:3b)

...because your faith grows exceedingly...

Paul had been concerned about the faith of the Thessalonian Christians. It was not that they lacked faith altogether (1 Th. 1:3), but their faith in the gospel had been put on trial (1 Th. 3:5) and was apparently defective at points (1 Th. 3:10). He desperately wanted to visit the church again, that he might supply what was lacking in this respect.

What made Paul the most grateful was not the size of the Thessalonians' congregation, buildings, budget, or popularity. The apostle praised God most of all because their faith (*πιστις, pistis*) was greatly enlarged. Somehow news had reached him that their faith was growing more and more. Like lush foliage of a healthy and vigorous plant, it kept growing, presumably both in depth and in strength. This was indeed reason for thanks.

If time had elapsed since the sending of 1 Thessalonians to allow further news to reach the writers about the recipients' spiritual health, this could account for superlative language here. The earlier report was encouraging; the latest news was even more encouraging.

The word 'exceedingly' (*ὑπεραυάνω, hyperauxanō*) is an intense compound word not found elsewhere in the New Testament, and it should have its full weight. It could be translated 'increased beyond measure,' or 'grown beyond what could be expected.' Paul meant to convey the idea that growth had been outstanding. Their faith, when put to the test, had found that God could be trusted. This in turn encouraged them to rely on Him all the more. Such a spectacular improvement must have encouraged the apostle, for in the earlier letter he had expressed a desire to help in making up what was lacking in their faith (1 Th. 3:10). Paul's prayer was being answered.

The Thessalonians' faith had grown not only despite the persecution they were undergoing but also because of it. Persecution destroys false faith. True faith, on the other hand, is indestructible, because the Lord Jesus Christ will not allow it to be destroyed. Persecution strengthens believers' faith by driving them to God. The Thessalonians' increasing faith in the face of persecution affirmed their genuine conversion.

(2) Abounding Love (1:3c)

...and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other...

Similarly, their love (*ἀγάπη, agapē*) toward each other was increasing, too. The congregation had been taught by God to love (1 Th. 4:9), but Paul had wanted them to love more and more (1 Th. 3:12; 4:10). This had been happening. Each of the members had been growing in love toward all the others.

The mutual love of these Macedonian Christians was impressive. Love, not as fuzzy sentimentality or emotional feeling but as eager, sacrificial service, marks true believers. Love was evident throughout the whole fellowship. They had the kind of love that should mark a Christian church. This love will unite people who would otherwise have little in common.

Thessalonians – Lesson 12

Paul thanked God because he could see something happening in Thessalonica that amounted to a miracle. The gospel had brought people together who would normally have avoided one another. It is vital that Christians pray that love of this kind would permeate our churches to an increasing measure, for when love begins to diminish, friction increases and churches fall apart.

b) Resultant Boasting (1:4)

Faith and love lie at the core of the Christian life. Faith brings us into fellowship with God and results in acts of love both to Him and to other people (cp. Gal. 5:6). With these two spiritual graces in such good heart, the foundations of the church were strong.

Paul has mentioned faith and love, but not the third quality of the familiar triad, namely hope. Does this mean that the Thessalonian Christians were losing confidence in their future destiny? To say so is to read too much into this omission. Importantly, in the very next verse Paul commends their perseverance. Since perseverance is the outcome of hope (1 Th. 1:3), it seems clear that hope was not fading in the church. Further, Paul's discussion in verse 5-10 assumes that the Thessalonians accept the reality of the Second Coming, showing that his is not worried about their 'hope.'

(1) Christian Boasting (1:4a)

...so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God...

As a rule, Paul was careful about boasting. He was especially careful that credit never be given to man when it was due to God (1 Cor. 1:31; 4:6-7). Yet he recognized that there was a place for speaking to others about the great things God had done in the lives of people.

Paul took great encouragement from the way that his friends bore up under 'persecutions and tribulations.' He was so impressed by their steadfastness that he talked about it approvingly among the other churches. The word 'boast' (*ἐγκανχάσθαι, egkauchasthai*) does not mean that he claimed the credit for their achievements ('Look what a great church I've planted!'). It was more that he felt that this quality of patience in adversity was solid proof that God was at work in their lives.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy – three of the leading figures in the early church – were greatly encouraged by the Thessalonians' spiritual growth and the absence of significant problems in the congregation. Ironically, Paul wrote proudly of the Thessalonians from Corinth, site of the most troubled, spiritually immature of all Paul's churches.

What is said here is consistent with 1 Thessalonians 1:8 (there is no need to say anything about the Thessalonians' faith and witness, because the facts speak for themselves); there might indeed be no *need* for the writers to say anything, but they said it nonetheless. They could not keep silence about men and women who were their 'glory and joy' (1 Th. 2:20).

Paul's boasting took place 'among the churches of God,' especially here those in Achaia. We have an explicit example of this. Later, in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, Paul boasts about the Macedonian churches – of which the Thessalonian church was one – to the church at Corinth. Note that Paul enhances the establishment of connections between churches by informing them of each other's activities. Churches should have an attitude of 'connectionalism.' No matter what view of church government a particular local church has, she should want to be connected at some level to other Bible-believing churches. An individual Christian can demonstrate connectionalism by truly caring for, and being interested in, other churches in his or her area.

Thessalonians – Lesson 12

How wonderful and encouraging it is to hear that other Christians boast about the good works that God has done through us!

(2) Christian Endurance (1:4b)

...for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure.

From the outset the Thessalonian church had suffered fierce opposition, yet in spite of that and the inevitable troubles it produced, they were showing unwavering loyalty to Christ. God's grace was propping them up, as it were. 'Patience' or 'perseverance' (*ὑπομονή*, *hupomonēs*) is not resigned, stoic acquiescence but patient, courageous enduring of trouble. The word literally speaks of 'remaining under,' or sustaining hope under difficulty. It is not a grim waiting but a joyful hoping. 'Faith' (*πίστις*, *pistis*) has the sense of 'faithfulness.'

'Persecutions' (*διωγμοίς*, *diōgmois*) signifies hostility from enemies of the gospel, while 'tribulations' (*θλίψεω*, *thlipsisō*) points to sufferings resulting from persecution. Apparently the persecutions which the Thessalonian church was suffering when Paul wrote his first letter (cp. 1 Th. 1:6; 2:14; 3:3-5, 7) had not ended.

Paul prized Christians who could hold up when the going got rough because they knew that suffering was not a sign that the Lord had abandoned them, but proof positive that they were following in the steps the Master trod (cp. Jn. 15:20). They refused to renounce their faith, let their love grow cold, or abandon their hope.

What is the best way to encourage a Christian? The last thing we want to do is pander to a believer's pride. Paul's intention was not to make them big-headed. On the other hand, if we say nothing at all, might this not have the equally unhappy effect of leaving them feeling unappreciated? Paul's method has much to commend it. He thanked God for his friend's growth and Christian maturity. This avoided the danger, on the one hand, of their feeling that their efforts counted for nothing, and, on the other hand, of encouraging them to think that they had a right to claim the credit for the work of God in their lives.

On this note of encouragement, then, Paul launches his second to the letter to the Thessalonians. Assured of his good will toward them, they will be the more ready to listen not only to his instruction, but to his correction.

For next time: Read 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12.