

Lesson 1: Week of May 18-24

The Gospel Comes with Power

Acts 17:1-9, 1 Thess. 1:1-10

Introduction: 1 and 2 Thessalonians are probably the first NT documents written. They are not in most people's "top five" NT books (or maybe even their top twenty). Perhaps the short 1 Thess. 5:17 ("Pray without ceasing") is the best-known passage from these letters, and the difficult references to the "man of lawlessness" in 2 Thess. 2 are the most notorious. Yet these letters offer wonderful insights into Paul's pastoral care of a young congregation. Paul opens up his heart to the Thessalonians, offering himself as a model for faith and discipleship, giving them important teaching regarding discipleship, and clearing up a few doctrinal issues.

Background: Unfortunately, Paul was not able to stay in Thessalonica as long as he would have liked when he founded the congregation. After only a few weeks or months, he was run out of town by unbelievers, leaving this fledgling congregation on their own far too early. Not only that—the people who pressured Paul to leave were also persecuting these new believers. Paul therefore sends Timothy to them to make up for his absence. It is right after he sees Timothy again that he writes 1 Thessalonians in order to teach and encourage them.

Acts 17: After being imprisoned and asked to leave in Philippi, Paul had traveled down the road to Thessalonica, where he went to the synagogue as usual. Of course, he spoke primarily to Jews in the synagogue, but he also found there some Greeks who accepted and worshiped the God of the Jews, even though they did not keep the food laws, circumcision, and holy days. Paul convinced some of the Jews and a number of the Greeks to become disciples of Jesus. This led to great jealousy on the part of the Jews who did not accept Jesus, and they created a riot. Unable to find Paul, they seized a new convert named Jason in whose house Paul had been staying, and they accused him and all the new Christians of being disloyal to the emperor (since they proclaimed Jesus as king). Paul was urged by the Christians there to leave town, and so he went to the next town, Berea. Things were going well there until the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica heard about it and followed him there. Paul had to leave again, eventually landing in Corinth, where he had a much longer stay. It is from there that he wrote to the Thessalonians.

1 Thess. 1:1-10: After an abbreviated greeting (v. 1) Paul follows his usual pattern of beginning his letters with a prayer of thanksgiving. Even though we often rush through these prayers in order to get to the meat of the letter, there is actually a great deal to learn from this section. Paul first tells his readers how often he, Silas, and Timothy thank God for them because of the good start they have made. They not only have faith, hope, and love, they also show its effects: work, labor, and endurance (1:2-3).

He then reminds them that they have been chosen by God and can be assured of their salvation. How can they be so sure? They have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, giving them deep conviction (1:4-5). Paul next reminds these Christians of the example he set while he was with them (1:5b—a theme he will return to in chapter 2). He then commends them for following his example of faithfulness in the face of suffering so that they too have become a model for Christians in that part of the world (1:6-9).

It appears that the majority of the Thessalonian Christians were of Greek (Gentile) background, because Paul writes that they "turned from idols to serve the living and true God." He then ends this short section reminding them that their perseverance will be rewarded when Jesus returns from heaven to "rescue us from the coming wrath."

The whole section can perhaps be summarized as follows: "We thank God who through His Spirit has given you such deep faith, imitating that which you saw in us. Even in the face of persecution, you have remained true to your new belief in the one God, who will one day send His resurrected Son back to save you from eternal destruction."

Discussion Questions

1. In Acts 17:5, why were the unbelieving Jews so upset? We are simply told that it was “jealousy.” What made them jealous? Is this understandable or excusable or simply contemptible? Do we face this, or are we sometimes even guilty of this? What makes people jealous of the success of other religious groups?

2. Acts 17 tells of Paul leaving Thessalonica and Berea because of persecution. Later on, Paul will go to Jerusalem, knowing full well that he will be persecuted and perhaps even killed. When did Paul (and when should we) avoid persecution, and when did he (and when should we) face it head on?

3. In 1 Thess. 1:1-10, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians. Why does he tell the Thessalonians that he prays for them? How might that impact them? Do we thank God for others? Do we tell people that we thank God continually for them? How might this impact others and our relationships with them?

4. The phrase “work of faith” in 1 Thess. 1:3 (“work produced by faith” in some translations) is interesting. What does this imply about the relationship between faith and work?

5. In 1 Thess. 1:5 Paul writes of the gospel coming not only with words but also with the power of the Holy Spirit? What do you think he was talking about? (There is no clearly right answer to this.) Do you think it included special gifts such as tongue-speaking, or might it have been “simply” their changed lives and deep conviction? Do we have any experience of the Spirit that seems to confirm our salvation?

6. Paul mentions the persecution and suffering of the Thessalonians in 1:6-9. How does suffering affect faith? How might Paul’s commendation have affected them? And how might the knowledge of their faith have affected other Christians in the area? Why do we need models in order to remain faithful?

7. Paul refers to the Thessalonians giving up the worldview of their entire previous lives when they quit believing in idols to turn to the one living God (1:9). What a remarkable transformation—hard for us even to fathom! Why do you think he mentions the fact that Jesus is coming again to rescue them from the coming wrath (1:10)? In other words, how does the promise of an afterlife help us remain faithful in this life?