

SESSION 2: Thessalonians

Four main points

1. Background
2. Theme
3. Issues
4. Application

1. Background

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:16

2. Theme

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-4:12

3. Issues

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:28

4. Application

Reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12; 2:13-3:18

Discussion questions:

The Thessalonians were a church dedicated to the gospel – can the same be said of us?

Should the doctrine of the Parousia be considered an emphasis or an embarrassment today?

1. Background

Thessalonica was the capital city of Macedonia, a Roman province of Northern Greece. It was on the main highway from Rome to the East (Byzantium, Istanbul) and was also a prosperous port on the Aegean Sea, across the bay from Mount Olympus. Paul visited the city on his second missionary journey. Silas and probably Timothy accompanied him. They had just left Philippi where Paul and Silas had suffered for their faith and had been imprisoned (Acts 16:22-24; 1 Thessalonians 2:2). Their mission in Thessalonica was an immediate success and many believed. Among these were some Jews, probably merchants, who had settled there and had a well-established synagogue (Acts 17:1), as well as devout Greeks (or God-fearers) and not a few important women.

Paul often began preaching the gospel in the synagogue, proclaiming Jesus as the promised Messiah (Christ) and explaining that Jesus had to suffer and rise from the dead. According to Acts 17:2 Paul spent three Sabbaths preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica and, in addition, it is likely that Paul taught the Christians on weekdays as well as on the Sabbath. Later there was a riot, though whether this was immediately after the third Sabbath is not clear. It seems that Paul was in the city for more than two or three weeks because he was engaged in gainful employment there (1 Thessalonians 2:9), received at least two special gifts from Philippi and had a considerable number of Gentile converts (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

The Jews had more than likely stirred up the mob violence because they were unhappy that so many of their proselytes were now embracing Christianity. Their hypocrisy is similar to the chief priests who rejected Jesus as their king, out of feigned loyalty to Caesar (John 19:15). A street-corner gang was goaded to attack Jason's house where Paul was staying. However, Paul was out. Jason was bound over and then released.

In order not to bring any further trouble upon Jason and the other believers (Acts 17:10), Paul moved on through Berea to Athens but persecution of the Christians in Thessalonica continued. When Timothy rejoined Paul in Athens, Paul was very anxious to know news from Thessalonica and sent Timothy back to the city so that he could encourage the Thessalonian Christians in their time of persecution (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5) and return with a report.

Paul preached in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) but his ministry was not especially fruitful. He, therefore, journeyed from Athens to Corinth. When Timothy joined Paul at Corinth his report was so encouraging that Paul wrote this letter, 1 Thessalonians, almost immediately. In this letter, Paul answers questions that had arisen and repeats his teaching on matters where the church was weak.

Acts 18:11-18 makes reference to Gallio. Secular evidence, such as inscriptions, helps us to put a date on this letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. Considerable support is given to a date of A.D. 50 but the letter was almost certainly written between A.D. 50 and A.D. 52.

Paul's interest in the Thessalonians did not end with his first letter. Their continued discipleship was important to him. It is likely that while Paul was still in Corinth a further report of the church at Thessalonica came to him and this news was sufficiently important to prompt him to write the second letter, in which he gives further encouragement to the believers in their continuing difficulties, requests their prayers and gives general counsel. Paul must have written this second letter before his visit to Macedonia (Acts 20:1) as it is hard to think that Paul would have needed to write such a letter after having had the opportunity to deal with these issues in person, or at least without making reference to any visit.

2. Theme

The news from Timothy prompts Paul to write about a number of practical things. He touches briefly on a number of themes of which the most important, in this letter, is the theme of eschatology (the doctrine of what happens at the end of the world).

In the first major section Paul congratulates the Thessalonians on their conversion and progress in the Christian life. Their faithfulness even in persecution was proving to be an example to other Christians in Macedonia and Greece (Achaia). Important lessons about Christian evangelism and how the church spreads the gospel can be learned from this section. In the middle of this section Paul reminds his readers of the kind of ministry that he exercised among them. It could be that Paul is defending himself against slanderous accusations but just as likely is the idea that he is glad that his labours were not in vain. In any event important teaching about the Christian ministry and how pastors serve the gospel and the church is given.

The second major section is a list of exhortations to Christian behaviour. This includes teaching not only against immoral behaviour but also to increased mutual love, to comfort and watchfulness in view of the Lord's return, and to a variety of practical matters. Paul's concern is that the Christians at Thessalonica should continue making progress in the gospel.

An important issue in the life of the church was the teaching about the Lord's return, which is all the more understandable in a period of persecution. The Thessalonians seem to have been sorrowing over their brothers and sisters who had died, apparently because they did not realise that their fellow Christians who had died would share in the joy of the return of the Lord Jesus. They may even have thought that death before the 'Parousia' (the future coming of the Lord in glory, sometimes called 'second coming') was a chastisement for sin, or even an indication of loss of salvation. In this context Paul gives a message of Christian hope and reassures his readers by explaining that Christians who have died will be resurrected before the rapture so that they may be taken up along with Christians who are still alive on earth. Towards the end of the letter the emphasis shifts from comfort to warning. Christians must watch for the day of the Lord so that it does not take them by surprise. Watchfulness does not mean mental awareness alone but obedience and service. Most of all, they are called to be a Christian community, a church dedicated to the gospel.

Most of the 'second letters' in the New Testament stand very much in the shadow of the 'first letters' and 2 Thessalonians is no exception to this. It is a much shorter letter than Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica. The letter's opening greeting is followed by repeated thanks to God for the spiritual progress of the Thessalonian believers and for their patient endurance in persecution.

In the second letter, Paul describes the Lord's coming in glory (Second Coming / Second Advent / Parousia) when persecutors will be judged and the persecuted relieved of their sufferings. Paul's purpose in this is to encourage the Thessalonians to continued endurance by looking ahead to the time when the order will be reversed by Christ's return. Looking to the return of the Lord does not mean that normal living should cease. The Thessalonians should not be deceived by false prophecy.

Paul urged the Thessalonians to persevere a little longer by describing the reward and retribution issuing from the future judgment of God (2 Thessalonians 1:3-10). Some Thessalonians had wrongly concluded that the Lord had already come. Paul corrects this but clarifying prominent events belonging to the day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). Concerned that some of the Thessalonians will take much notice of his warnings, Paul gives instructions as to how the church should treat the disobedient (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15).

3. Issues

Paul commends the Thessalonians for from them the gospel message has rung out so that it is heard 'everywhere'. Paul had preached the character of God, with the effect that people turned to him in faith from the worship of idols (1 Thessalonians 1:8-10). This was not simply an abstract belief but one that was demonstrated in service and anticipation of the Lord's return. God alone is worthy for he alone is living, in contrast to lifeless idols, and true, in contrast to the false representations of the divine being. Paul had preached of about Jesus, God's Son, who died to deliver mankind from judgment. He had also preached about the resurrection and the return of the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven. The promise of the Lord's return is especially precious to those who suffer. Had Jesus not been raised from the dead, appeared and ascended, he could never return (1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:2; 5:23). It is Jesus who will return to rescue his people from the coming wrath. (To desire to flee from the coming wrath was the essence of membership among the early Methodists.) Christians look to this time with hope because it is a time of rescue and not of doom.

The standards to which Christians are called to live are different. Paul commends the Thessalonians for the life they are living now rather than condemning them for the life they led before. 'Brotherly love' here relates to love within the family of God, under his fatherhood. If we bear in mind that even the most loving families have their differences, we can understand Paul's urging the Thessalonians to love all the brothers 'more and more'. The Greeks may have despised manual labour but Christians must not make the Lord's return an excuse for opting out of hard work.

Paul had taught that the Lord would return but some had died between Paul's stay in Thessalonica and the writing of his letter. Paul reassures the Thessalonians that those who have died will not lose out. The expression, 'those who sleep', points to the temporary nature of death. They will be raised first when Christ comes in glory and the living will join in the Lord's triumph and enjoy his presence. Christians are not immune from sorrow (Philippians 2:27), but they do not mourn without hope. This hope is based on history – Jesus died and rose again. Paul does not refer to Jesus' death as 'sleep'. Jesus suffered real separation from God for the world's sins – but because of his real death a Christian's death has been transformed into sleep. The Christian's ultimate expectation is not simply of being raised but of being with Jesus forever.

In the opening chapter of the second letter (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10), we find an answer to the question 'why doesn't God do something?' about the injustices and suffering in the world. God is already at work and will continue to be so. God's judgment is already in operation and will be made complete at the end of time. The Christians at Thessalonica will be counted worthy on this day of reckoning. This worthiness is not self-earned but graciously given by God through faith in the Lord Jesus, who himself earned the believer's forgiveness of sins and eternal life by dying a sacrificial death (1 Thessalonians 5:10). Those who persecute the Christians can only expect God's judgment against them.

Paul's concept of what the future holds for the lost is bleak. It is a day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God. Being shut out from the presence of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1:9) is the exact opposite of being with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

An important but complicated debate concerns whether the Parousia is a single event or whether it has a longer duration. In either case, Paul's assurance of God's righteous judgment is the basis for his imparting further information. It will take place at the Parousia (official visit) of Christ. Jesus Christ will return in person. He will punish those who refuse to recognise God and will not obey the gospel. The solemn words have the sense of separation from the presence of God.

4. Application

The first letter to the Thessalonians gives us a good insight into a newly planted church. We discover how it came into being, what the apostle taught in it, its strengths and weaknesses, its theological and moral problems, and how it was spreading the gospel. The key points to note are how the church developed in New Testament times and how the issue of those who had died before the Lord's coming in glory is addressed.

Despite our structures it is important to understand that in the authentic Christian church the gospel creates the church and the church spreads the gospel. The gospel shapes the church as the church seeks to live a life that is worthy of the gospel. This means that it is more than permissible to question the way we do things or have always done things. It is vital that we do so.

The Christian church has seriously neglected the Lord's future in glory and Christian teaching about eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) has been very patchy. Despite some of the difficulties in presenting the Bible's teaching systematically, Christians need reminding of the glorious hope that Christ will come again in glory, that those who are asleep in him will be with him and those who are alive and waiting expectantly will join with them in worship. John Stott suggests the following outline for the letter:

It may be said in short that 2 Thessalonians offers a Christian perspective on history. In the context of unjust persecution, Paul writes about the righteous judgment of God. In the face of error, Paul proceeds to expound the truth and explain that such falsehood is to be expected. Indeed the Parousia cannot take place until such things have happened.

Some have used their beliefs to justify an inappropriate life-style. They claim to be waiting for the Lord's coming in glory but in reality they are idle busybodies. Discipline in the New Testament church was clearly taken seriously. The good of the whole church as well as of the individual rested on such matters.

It has been said that, "The question of meaning in history has become meaningless" (Bultmann). Christians who look to Scripture as their authority profoundly disagree with such gloomy assessments. For the God of the Bible is the God of history. He has entitled himself "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". He chose Israel out of the nations to be his covenant people and took about two thousand years to prepare them for the fulfilment of his promise to Abraham in the coming of their Messiah. Above all, he came to us in Jesus Christ when Augustus was Emperor of Rome, and "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried". Then on the third day he rose again and, having sent his Spirit, has for two further millennia been pushing his church out into the world to take the good news to its furthest extremities.

One day (known only to the Father), when the gospel has been "preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations", the end will come. For Christ will return in glory, terminate the historical process and perfect his reign'

(Stott: *1 & 2 Thessalonians* BST).