

1 Thessalonians – Lesson 7

The Report from Thessalonica – Part 1

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

1. Reviewing 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16, what does Paul insist the Thessalonians *had embraced*? Why is this *crucial* in the context of the letter as a whole?

The Thessalonians had embraced his message as “*the word of God*” (rather than the “*word of men*”), meaning that they had been radically transformed by the message such that it changed their very existence from end to end. They were not just believing another “philosophy” that came to their ears, but they were believing a *divine message* that, when believed, would radically alter their existence in the face of opposition and persecution. In other words, the message was *more than just a set of beliefs*; it was a *life-changing* set of truths that forced their entire lives to be different. Paul tells them this because he wants to remind them that *further* information related to this gospel that he gives to them in the letter is simply a *continuation* of that initial message, and they can trust what Paul is writing to them *now* as more of the same.

2. (a) What does it mean that Paul and his team were “*torn away*” from the Thessalonians (2:17)? Where is Paul at the time *this letter* is written?

Torn away certainly contains the implication that Paul and his team were *forcibly* ejected from the city. Obviously, when the crowds went looking for the missionaries and were unable to find them, and the believers in town suggested that they better hurry away, Paul would have considered that a “forcible” ejection. However, the term is also about something deeper: Paul was not just being ejected from the city, he was being ripped away from people that he had come to love. The Thessalonians were more than just friends; they were (now) fellow-believers in the gospel, with a similar future awaiting them in the glorious plans of Christ. To have to flee the city *without getting to say “good-bye”* would have been a bitter pill, and it would seem to Paul as though he was *literally* torn away from them. Paul writes back, then, to his friends there in Thessalonica from Corinth, and not too long after leaving Macedonia.

- (b) What is the implication of the phrase “*for a short time*?” What does this tell you about the *plans* of Paul and his team going forward?

The phrase “*for a short time*” implies that Paul fully intended to return to the city, and pick up where he left off, both in his teaching ministry and his relationship to the new believers.

- (c) List some of the ways that Satan may have “*hindered*” Paul from returning to Thessalonica.

Satan may have been allowed to hinder Paul from returning: 1) by keeping up the opposition in Thessalonica against the believers there, such that Paul’s return would have been dangerous; or 2) by using other circumstances since Paul’s departure that would have made it difficult to return (i.e., financial issues needing to be addressed, lack of funds to travel back, etc.). However, it could also be true that *the Lord* kept him from returning by focusing his energy and attention on the work in Corinth; by having a “successful” ministry in Corinth (and dealing with oppositions there), the Lord may have “hindered” him by giving him a new ministry.

3. From 2:19, how are the Thessalonians, for Paul, a “*crown of boasting*” before the Lord? How are they Paul’s “*glory and joy*?”

The use of the word “*boasting*” gives us pause, for we often assume it (biblically) to be a sinful attitude (i.e., pride over things that we have accomplished). However, in this context, Paul is using the phrase “*a crown of boasting*” to imply something that is extremely valuable to him personally; something great that has been accomplished, whether or not the accomplishment is truly his. The Thessalonians are a “*crown of boasting*” because they represent the “*success*” of Paul’s preaching of the gospel; the believers in Thessalonica are a true “*success story*” in having heard the word, believing it, and then continuing to believe it even when others try to drive out their new faith. They are Paul’s “*glory and joy*” because they represent, *in a tangible way*, the whole reason for Paul traveling to Macedonia with the gospel: they are the *living embodiment* of why Paul preached, for his message did not fall on deaf ears. God had used his preaching to convert sinners and bring them to faith in Christ. That would have been a tremendous source of “*pride*” to Paul, not in the selfish sense of something *he* had accomplished, but the sense of great joy in knowing that his work (and opposition) had not been in vain.

4. (a) According to 3:1-2, what does Paul do *instead* of returning to Thessalonica himself? Why?

Paul decided, at some point while in Athens, south of Macedonia, that he needed to send Timothy back to get a report on the faithfulness of the church in Thessalonica (see 4b below). Obviously, Paul was deeply concerned about the church there, and was deeply “*worried*” that the faith of the Thessalonians was being tested, possibly to the point of being broken. But, instead of returning himself, he sent back Timothy. There is no real reason given in the text for Paul to send Timothy rather than to go back himself. However, there might be several reasons that Paul would send Timothy: 1) perhaps Paul believed that the danger to his own life was too great to return; 2) perhaps Paul was being *specifically* pulled further south, away from Athens into Achaia and Corinth; or 3) perhaps Paul simply trusted Timothy so intimately that he felt that a visit by Timothy would be just as effective as going himself (see 4c below).

- (b) *Where* was Paul at the time he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica? Why did he do it *then*?

Paul indicates that the missionary team was in Athens at the time he sent Timothy back into Macedonia. The confrontation that Paul had had with the philosophers on Mars Hill may have increased the burden he felt for the northern Christians, and was compelled to check on them. Or, maybe, some reports were “*leaking*” out of Macedonia that the believers in Thessalonica were having some serious difficulties, and this compelled Paul to send his young protégé back to see what was going on.

- (c) List some reasons why Timothy was such a *good choice* to return to Thessalonica.

Timothy was a very close friend to Paul, and a confidant that Paul would use in a number of places as an extension of his own authority and ministry (including Ephesus; see 4d below). Paul had brought Timothy to faith in Christ on his first missionary journey, and had (undoubtedly) put a good deal of effort into training and discipling the young man. At this point, Paul must have felt that Timothy could represent him in Thessalonica, and bring back a faithful report on the condition of the church there, without being intertwined in whatever opposition stood against the believers in the city. Timothy may have been a good choice because he was *not* the leader of the missionary team, and his arrival back in the city would not cause much consternation amongst those opposed specifically to Paul and Silas.

(d) Compare this mission to 1 Timothy 1:3 and 2 Timothy 1:6. What *relationship* does Timothy have to the Apostle, and what does that mean for Timothy to “*establish and exhort*” the Thessalonians?

Timothy was clearly an *extension* of the authority of Paul. Paul had left him at Ephesus to continue the work that Paul himself had started, and Timothy was to carry on as though he possessed the full authority of the Apostle in the city. The church was to listen to him and follow his instructions as though he were Paul; the apostolic authority that Paul had was being “channeled” through Timothy. Thus, Timothy was to “*establish and exhort*” the Thessalonians under the same *extended* authority. True, Timothy was not an apostle (only Paul could claim that title in the team), and the team was *clearly* being led by Paul *with a message from Paul*. However, Paul can certainly *delegate* his authority to someone he deeply trusts, and Timothy can go back to the Thessalonian church and speak *authoritatively* on all matters of faith and practice.

5. (a) In 3:3, what does Paul mean that he was “*destined for this?*” For *what* was he destined?

Paul was *destined* to suffer as a part of delivering the message of Christ throughout the Roman empire; Christ *himself* had warned Paul (through Ananias) that he would experience much suffering in preaching the gospel (see Acts 9:16). Persecution for evangelizing would be the *normal* expectation for Paul, since Christ Jesus had purposed that to be the means by which many would be saved from among the Gentiles. It was no different in Thessalonica than anywhere else: being beaten and imprisoned for speaking the message of Christ was exactly what God had purposed for him.

- (b) From 3:4, what did Paul tell the Thessalonians would happen *in advance*? *Why* tell them this?

Paul had, apparently, told the Thessalonians that they would suffer opposition and persecution in coming to faith in Christ; it was a *central tenet* of his gospel message. Paul had probably *warned* the Jews in the synagogues, as a part of his presentation, that the *natural response* from those who *rejected* the message would be to hate those who *embraced* the message. In a sense, Paul had preached the gospel with the same warning that Jesus had: to become a disciple of Christ implies that you will need to take up his cross of suffering and shame, and to follow him in obedience and submission. Paul had undoubtedly warned the people he preached to that coming to Christ would be a *costly* choice, not an easy one. For to believe that Jesus was the true Messiah of Israel, and to follow him in radical obedience, would be to be forsaken by many for the light of the truth. The most *honest* presentation of Christ always includes this revelation of the reality to follow, and it is a warning not to come to Christ hastily or “easily.”

- (c) What is Paul *most concerned* about in Thessalonica, according to 3:5? How might the “*tempter*” go about destroying the work Paul had done in the city?

Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians might have abandoned the faith (apostatized). The “*tempter*” (i.e., the devil) would use circumstances to “pound” that faith of the new believers and try to use circumstances to drive that new faith out of them. After all, if believing in Jesus requires this much pain and suffering, then why bother? So, Paul sent back Timothy to see what had become of his new converts in the city because he knew that (sometimes) opposition *works* and causes some to quit.