

1 Thessalonians – Lesson 8

The Report from Thessalonica – Part 2

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

1. Review 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5. Why does Paul remind the Thessalonian believers of the *reason* for sending Timothy back to them? How should this *encourage* them in their future struggles?

Paul reminds his friends and co-followers of Christ in Thessalonica that the reason he sent Timothy back to them was to exhort and encourage them to remain faithful in the midst of opposition and persecution, which they had been *destined* to encounter. Coming to faith in Christ puts one at odds with the world; the reprobate *hate* the message of the gospel because it convicts them of their judgment before a holy God. Thus, they oppose those who embrace the truth of Christ. This is what God has *purposed* in the world; to be a Christian requires that you “take up the cross” of Christ and follow him on the path of obedience and suffering towards the goal of glory. There is no escaping the reaction of the world. So, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they were told this at the outset, and they need to remember that what is happening to them *now* is precisely what they were told would happen. This is an *encouragement* because it means they have believed the *right message*; by embracing faith in Christ, they are hated by the world, which implies *they have put their trust in the right thing*.

2. (a) What *four* things does Timothy report to Paul about the Thessalonian believers in 3:6?

Timothy has reported the following things about the Thessalonian believers: 1) they have faith, 2) they love each other, 3) they remember Paul and his team kindly, and 4) they long to see the missionary team again. First, they continue to trust in Christ, walking by faith and believing the message of the gospel. Second, they love one another; their faith in Christ has its outward expression of love towards others as a result of their love for God (and his love for them). Third, they remember Paul fondly, and are grateful to him for being the means that God used to bring them to Christ (see 2b below). And, finally, they long to see Paul again, to rekindle that close family relationship that exists between Christians and to continue the discipleship that was so abruptly ended.

- (b) What does Paul mean that the Thessalonian believers “*always remember us kindly?*” Why would this be *important* to him?

As Paul has already noted in 2:17-20, the relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians changed dramatically once they embraced the truth of the gospel he was presenting to them: they became brothers and sisters in the family of God in Christ. Thus, the Thessalonians were no longer just “fellow countrymen” or even “fellow believers,” but now were *siblings* in an eternal family that created a connection between them far greater than any normal human-to-human relationship. Paul was family to this church, and this was deeply important to Paul because it meant that they *fully understood* what it means to be a follower of Christ.

3. (a) Scan Acts 17:10-18:17. List any incidents of *persecution* that Paul and the team experienced between the time they left Thessalonica and the time this letter was written.

A quick scan of Acts 17 and 18 reveals that, after Paul and his team left Thessalonica, they did not experience any significant persecution before this letter was written. At Berea, the town was (again!) thrown into chaos by Jews riling it up, but Paul left peaceably (Timothy and Silas remained behind). In Athens, Paul reasoned with the philosophers on Mars Hill while waiting for Timothy and Silas to arrive behind him, but there is no record of any persecution of Paul before he leaves town to go south to Corinth. At Corinth, Paul reasoned with the Jews, and they opposed and reviled him, but there was no significant persecution against him (or other believers). In fact, while at the house of Titius Justus (next-door to the synagogue), Paul received a vision directly from the Lord revealing to him that he would not be attacked, which he was not for the next 18 months. It is undoubtedly during this time that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians; therefore, there was no persecution leveled against Paul before this letter was written. True, some came up later (see Acts 18:12ff), but not before this letter was written.

- (b) Based on your answer above, what “*distress and affliction*” is Paul *likely* referring to in 3:7?

Some of the distress that Paul is referring to could be related to how he was *received* in the various places between Thessalonica and Corinth; at each location, he was opposed by the Jews (and others), and so his distress would be partly due to the fact that everywhere he went, people *rejected* his message. However, the more *likely* explanation is what he writes earlier (see 2:17f): his distress being the deep concern he had for the continuing faith of the Thessalonians, the questioning in his heart and mind of whether they had remained true to the message they had heard and believed from him. In other words, this distress and affliction was a combination of being rejected time and again, and then wondering if the Thessalonians had also, albeit later, rejected his message too.

- (c) So, how is Paul feeling *now*, after hearing the Timothy's report? *Why* is he feeling this way?

Paul says he now feels “*comforted*,” hearing from Timothy that the church in Thessalonica is still thriving in faith and love. The fact that Timothy reports them “*standing fast in the Lord*” gives Paul a great sense of assurance, and he can breathe a sigh of relief.

- (d) How would you *rate* the continuing faith of the Thessalonians, based on Paul's statement in 3:6-8? Does this imply that Paul's *concern* for them has abated, or does it show a *different* concern?

Paul seems to indicate that he is *greatly pleased* with the continuing faith of the Thessalonians. He knows the opposition they were (are) facing in that city, and to hear this good report from Timothy *implies* to him that they are going strong. However, this does *not* imply that Paul's concern for them has abated; in fact, the whole reason for writing this letter is to continue encouraging them in the faith by answering some of their questions. His concern is (now) not so much about them staying *in* the faith, but them *growing* in the faith, maturing in discipleship, persevering in that faith in every aspect of their lives.

4. (a) What does Paul mean by the phrase “*what thanksgiving can we return to God for you*” in 3:9?

This *rhetorical* question is simply Paul asking: is there anything that we could possibly give to God out of gratitude for what *he* has accomplished in you? It is an admission by Paul that the continuing faithfulness of the Thessalonians (their perseverance) *is entirely by God's grace over them*. He knows that he and his team were unable to stay in that place and “hold” the Thessalonian Christians faithful; they were *impotent* to actually accomplish the preservation of the church. So, Paul is *forced* to give the credit to the Lord (something he relishes) for the preserving work of the Spirit to hold the believers in the faith; his reaction to Timothy's report is to be grateful to God that *he* did a miraculous work, and there is nothing that Paul and his team can do but be thankful.

(b) What does Paul pray for “*night and day*” (3:10) concerning his relationship to the Thessalonians?

Paul begs the Lord, in his prayers, for an opportunity to return to Thessalonica and *finish* the work of discipleship needed in them. Obviously, the Thessalonians are new to the faith, and their understandings of the breadth and depth of the gospel is severely limited. True, God has held them in that “novice” faith, but Paul desires to return to the city and teach them more and more of what God has revealed about Christ. For now, this letter will have to do.

(c) How would *you* describe the content of 3:11-13? How does it *fit* with 3:10?

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 is a *prayer*: it is Paul’s prayer to the Lord to answer his desire expressed in v. 10 (see 4b above). It has several parts: 1) a prayer that God would direct him and his team *back* to Thessalonica to complete the work of discipleship there; 2) a prayer that the Thessalonians (even while he is away) will continue to grow up in that faith, to abound in love for one another as the *proper* expression of a trust in Christ and a knowledge of his love for them, and 3) a prayer that they would reach the goal of holiness *at the heart of the gospel* (see 5a below).

5. (a) What does it mean for the Lord to “*establish*” the hearts of the Thessalonians “*blameless in holiness?*” How is this related to Paul’s view of *sanctification* (see 2 Corinthians 7:1)?

The heart is the control center of a man; it is the central agency of the *immortal* nature of man, from which flow all of his thoughts, words, and deeds. Reprobate men have spiritually dead hearts, and from it flow every imaginable form of rebellion against God, in thought, word, and deed. The regenerate man, however, possesses a new heart, born anew in him by the Spirit of God, with a nature that desires to love God and his Son in obedience, in thought, word, and deed. However, even with that new heart, the follower of Christ still struggles with elements of the “old man” within him; his *concupiscence* of the flesh means that he will struggle with sin brought out of his fleshly nature in contrast to the desires of his heart (see Romans 7:7-25). So, Paul’s prayer, here, is for God to “*establish*” the hearts of the Thessalonians such that the nature of their new heart finds its way out into every aspect of their lives; that they might live *outwardly* what they are *inwardly*, that the holiness which marks their *justified* souls might be *visible* in every thought, word, and deed. In other words, Paul prays for their *sanctification*: that they might learn how to overcome sin in their lives by knowing more and more of the work of the Spirit, establishing them as fully holy, both inwardly and outwardly.

(b) *When* will this state of holiness be *most* essential (see 3:13)? *Why* (compare Hebrews 9:14)?

The writer of Hebrews argues that it is impossible to stand before a holy God as an unholy creature; without holiness it is impossible to please God, and (therefore) the unholy must be cast away from the presence of God. Holiness is what is *required* to come “through” the judgment, the “*coming of our Lord*”; no one will be able to withstand the judgment of Christ without holiness. Saints are *positionally* holy by virtue of being justified by faith; trusting in the promises of God as expressed in the work of Christ causes God to look upon the saint as holy in his sight. However, that holiness must also extend into the *practical* realm; we must also pursue holiness *in life*. Thus, the work of the Spirit, in sanctification, is to bring that *inward* sense of holiness to bear on every aspect of us *outwardly*, such that every part of our nature is seen as holy by God. True, this work can never be fully completed in this life, *but it is to be our aim and goal*, an aim and goal flowing out of a new heart that *desires it*. Therefore, the message of the gospel contains the *clearly defined* objective of not only saving the *immortal* nature of the believer, but the expressed goal of saving his *mortal nature too*, something that is begun in the process of sanctification, and completed at the resurrection in glorification. Christians are to have, as their central objective, the pursuit of holiness in all of life; to persevere in life is to continue to trust the promises of God and strive to eradicate all sin in our thoughts, words, and deeds.