

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul preached the gospel on 3 sabbaths in the synagogue at Thessalonica. His audience was made up of Jews and God fearing Gentiles. The reference in v9 to people turning from idols would suggest he also spent time evangelising the pagan population. Among both these groups people responded to the message.

Paul writes to encourage this young church.

They may live in this location where there is a lot of opposition to the gospel. Their lives though are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1)

Paul informs them that he not only remembers them with affection but he prays for them. Its good to pray for people, even better to let them know you pray for them. (2)

He wants them to know they have been chosen by God. All the rich benefits of being among Gods chosen people flow to this little church. The evidence of Gods choice is seen in the reception they gave to the gospel. *Our gospel came to you not only with words but with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.* Like the crowd on the day of Pentecost they were *cut to the heart*. And they resembled the man Jesus spoke of who found buried treasure and with joy sold all he had to buy the field. The Thessalonians embraced the gospel with joy despite the suffering it brought. Pray that when the gospel is preached it would come not simply with words but with the power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. (4-6)

He highlights the way their faith shows itself in their evangelism. *The Lord's message rang out from you....your faith in God has become known everywhere.* (8)

He points them to their sure future. They are waiting for the return of the Son of God from heaven -Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath. (10)

- The swift progress of this church, made up of Jews and God fearing Gentiles, emphasises the value of teaching the Bible. These are people familiar with the Scriptures and when the Spirit opens their eyes to the identity of their Messiah the foundations are well and truly laid. Its no futile activity to persevere in teaching people the bible even though they don't immediately respond.
- Practice the kind of encouragement Paul provides for these young Christians.
- Keep the Lord's return central to your faith.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-7

It is significant how often in his letters Paul is forced to defend his ministry. The first twelve verses of this chapter read like such a defence. Its unclear what the issue is. Paul may be responding to real accusations or providing the Thessalonians with grounds for confidence in the apostles work.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. (1:5)

This section is an extension of that statement. Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica having been severely beaten in Philippi. The last time they preached the gospel they paid an extremely high price. Yet *they dared to tell you (Gods) gospel in the face of strong opposition.*

Their motives in preaching were not selfish. They were not endeavouring to trick anyone nor did they use flattery. In fact the very opposite. As Paul states in 3:4 *we kept telling you that we would be persecuted and it turned out that way.* This was no prosperity gospel pitch. As Jesus did not conceal the cost neither must those who represent him. Paul

motivation was not praise from people but rather to be pleasing to God. The God who tests hearts. (4)

Paul describes his behaviour in all this as comparable to a mother gently caring for her small children. The gospel may be words but its communicated by more than our mouths. Paul lived the gospel looking to God for his approval and conveying his love for people through his gentle concern for their well being. He is a challenge to us all.

- Does the phrase '*dared to tell you his gospel*' challenge us in any way?
- Can we keep Gods approval before ourselves rather than fretting over what other people might be thinking?
- Is there anything of the 'nursing mother' about the way we relate to others?

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12

The Apostle Paul could be described as a travelling evangelist but that description is open to misunderstanding. This is not a man who is preoccupied with meetings and sermons and numbers. He is not someone marketing a product and concerned with sales figures. He loves people. *Because we loved you so much we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.* (8)

The 'model' that shapes his ministry is not 'the leader' or the motivator but that of a father. (11) His parental concern for his spiritual children is expressed in the way he shoulders the burden rather than leaving it to them. ... *we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.* (9) Self sacrifice goes through all of Christian ministry. It forms a stark contrast to our day with its preoccupation with rights and adequate rewards.

This fatherly behaviour is modelled for him in the behaviour of God the Father. This is what Paul himself has experienced since becoming a Christian. The transformation from Saul of Tarsus to Paul the Apostle is impressive. The impression we have of Saul was of someone who lived on a very narrow emotional band. The gospel has brought great change to his affections. He loves people and is ready to serve and suffer for them because this is precisely what he has encountered in the life of his God revealed in Jesus Christ.

He describes his behaviour as holy and righteous and blameless. (10) Holy is set apart for Gods purpose. Righteous is conforming to Gods idea of right and wrong. Blameless is above reproach. It comprises the life that is worthy of God referred to in v12. This is the kind of life Paul encourages and comforts and urges his spiritual family towards. And if we are to move in this direction albeit unsteadily we will need much encouragement (to see that this is a good goal to have) comfort (because we will regularly get it wrong and need reassurance) and urging (because our resolve is weak)

- Thank God for such a great example of authentic Christian ministry.
- Are we somewhat prone to complain about our responsibilities or content to bear the burden so others can prosper?
- Do we need encouragement, comfort and urging to live a life that is worthy of God?

1 Thessalonians 2: 13-16

There is a big and important claim being made in v13. Paul describes what the Thessalonians heard from him as 'the Word of God'. This is how they regarded Paul's ministry and consequently this message was effectively at work in them. In other words, the message came from God through the apostle to the Thessalonians and was changing them. Its easy to become used to this kind of language but the test comes in the way we

relate to Bible teaching. When someone stands up to open the Scriptures to us do we image ourselves being addressed by God?

The work that it does in them is promote the same response to opposition as found in the Judean churches. The early chapters of Acts reveal a church undeterred by ferocious persecution. The apostles rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer disgrace for his name. Stephen prays graciously for his murderers. Those who are scattered preach the gospel wherever they go. The church prays earnestly for the imprisoned Peter. This steadiness under fire is a consequence of receiving the word of God as it actually is. It informs them of who they are (the much loved children of a loving Father) it teaches them what to expect (Jesus said: a servant is not greater than his master, if they persecuted me they will persecute you also) and it discloses to them where they are going (Death has been defeated and the Father's house prepared)

The section ends with Paul commenting on Jewish opposition to the gospel. Not only do they bear significant human responsibility for the death of Christ but they act as an obstacle preventing the Gentiles hearing the good news. These are serious things that attract God's wrath. Jesus had strong things to say about 'blind guides' (Matt 15:14) about those who cause little ones to stumble (Matt 18:6) and those who having received mercy refuse to behave mercifully towards others (Matt 18:35)

- Think about the reception we give to the Word of God. (13)
- Pray that it would be 'at work' in us producing godly change especially to opposition.
- Check that we are a channel for rather than an obstacle to the gospel.

1 Thessalonians 2:17 - 3:5

Relationships matter and the relationship between a pastor and his people matter a great deal. Ephesians describes Satan seeking to gain a foothold (Eph.4:27). There is nowhere more strategic for the devil to gain influence than in this area. It is not inconceivable that those Jews who opposed the apostle's ministry by force when he was present now seek to undermine it by rumour and innuendo in his absence. "He doesn't care about you. He is just recruiting 'followers'. If he was bothered about you he wouldn't have run away as he did." Paul is alive to this threat and goes to great lengths to defend himself from the charge of indifference.

He describes the separation from the Thessalonian Christians in terms of bereavement. *But brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned from you..(17)* This has been no inconsequential detail. It has left him mourning the loss.

He experienced an 'intense longing' to see his friends again. (17). He is not content with letters and other forms of communication. He longs for face to face interaction. Time and again he has 'made every effort' to come to them. Despite the difficulties of travel in the first century world Paul challenges our readiness to settle for fairly impersonal virtual communication.

He puts his finger on the problem: *Satan blocked our way. (18)* Although to Paul's mind Satan is always subject to God's ultimate authority by expressing it in this way he makes clear that coming to the Thessalonians is not something God disapproves of or wants to prevent.

He regards the Thessalonians as his hope, his joy and the crown in which he will glory in the presence of the Lord Jesus. These are expressions that reveal his intense pride in these people. As well as being extremely dear to him they authenticate his ministry and reveal that he has not laboured in vain (3:5)

He sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them as well as find out how life is functioning in the Thessalonian church. The choice of Timothy, someone Paul rates extremely highly and whose companionship he cherishes, also emphasises how much the apostle values this church.

- Satan is keen to disrupt the relationship between pastors and their people. How is your relationship with those who teach you the word of God?
- Are there relationships that are in need of some servicing?
- God is bringing us into relationship through the gospel that will survive death and flourish in the new heaven and the new earth. Are we investing in these opportunities.

1 Thessalonians 3:6 - 13

Paul was not a 'professional' someone who concerned himself with his status and the finer points of preaching and teaching God's word. Paul's passion was people. This letter is a response to the arrival of Timothy with the news that the Thessalonian Christians are 'standing firm' in their faith and eager to see Paul their church planter again.

There is no doubt Paul faced immense difficulties throughout his life. He was no stranger to prison. He had been flogged on several occasions. He had been stoned and shipwrecked. He was the target of murderous Jewish plots. But here we are given a little insight into what kept this man going in all this. *Therefore brothers and sisters in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord. (7,8)*

Paul is clear about his mission. Back in 2:2 he wrote: *we dared to tell you the gospel in the face of strong opposition.* He knows what determines whether there is any response. 1:4 *We know brothers and sisters ... that God has chosen you.* But he can't detach himself emotionally from the plight of these people. He is not a professional.

This is the cost of Christian ministry. Paul know both sides of the equation. He wrote in a later letter: *You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me including Phygelus and Hermogenes.* He describes Epaphroditus's recovery from illness as God sparing him from sorrow upon sorrow. He described part of his suffering as facing daily *the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Cor 11:28)*

The chapter ends with a record of the prayer Paul prayed. These prayers have been preserved to teach us how to pray and what to pray for. Earlier (2:18) he informed them that Satan had blocked their attempts to come. Now he prays that God would enable his arrival. He prays that their love would increase and overflow. He keeps before them the return of Christ and asks that God would strengthen their affections for godly things so that they would be blameless and holy on that day.

- Pray for those who serve God in situations where there seems to be very little response to the gospel.
- Pray for good relationships to be preserved between those who proclaim the gospel and those who respond to it.
- Pray Paul's prayer for yourself. Is there someone we should be endeavouring to connect personally with?

1 Thessalonians 4: 1-12

At this point in the letter the emphasis shifts from encouragement and assurance to challenge. Although relatively brief Paul's ministry at Thessalonica did not confine itself to

Christian doctrine (what we are to believe) it included Christian ethics (how we are to behave).

In the first two verses he reminds them that *we instructed you how to live* and it then goes on to say *you know what instructions we gave you*. These instructions are not Paul's personal views but come rather by the *authority of the Lord Jesus*. Paul is doing what Jesus told his disciples to do at his ascension: *teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you (Matt 28:20)* The NT contains clear ethical teaching that is not time limited or in need of revision as each generation comes along.

Understanding and obeying this is crucial to living a life that pleases God. It is a wonderful thing to think we can please our Heavenly Father. For sure all our obedience is enabled and without his help we can do nothing. But the implication behind Paul's words is we can enjoy progress in our Christian lives as we *do these things more and more*.

Fake Love (3-8)

This section deals with sexual immorality. Paul spoke into a Graeco-Roman culture that was preoccupied with sex. In our 21st century Western world we have gone full circle and found ourselves back where we started.

Self control is commended. Lust is a powerful force. It has that ability to drive our lives in a particular direction. Jesus spoke of the need to deal ruthlessly with the sources of temptation that stir up lust. (Matt 5:27-30) The gospel offers us a better attraction to set our attention on.

Sexual immorality is concerned with self gratification. Ultimately it is about personal enjoyment and feeling good about ourselves. We are instructed here *'no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister'* (6) There is a long list of children, young people and the vulnerable who have been taken advantage of for the sake of others people's sexual gratification.

True Love (9-12)

Real love is modelled by God. In our heavenly Father we see that which is outgoing and far reaching In the life of the Lord Jesus we view an involvement with people that far from using them gives up everything for them. And in the ministry of the Holy Spirit these things are impressed upon us and brought to bear on our lives.

The Thessalonians have begun to learn these things and now they are urged to do so more and more. (10) Part of loving others will involve being in a position to support one another practically and so there is a reference here to *'minding their own business and working with their hands'* For whatever reason they are not to voluntarily give up their daily work and make themselves dependent on one another.

- Are we clear not only on what we are to believe but how we are to behave? The NT is not vague on sexual ethics.
- Are we aiming to live lives that please God more and more? Progress is possible.
- Are we being shaped by 'love' as revealed by God; indiscriminate, sacrificial and practical?

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

This young church had a problem with death. Believers were dying and it was leaving them desolate. The gospel Paul had brought to them was news of the defeat of death and the offer of eternal life. At the heart of this message stood the resurrection and the promise of immortality through union with Jesus Christ. But church members were dying. And when

they occupied a place at the local mortuary they looked no different from their unbelieving neighbours.

Paul writes to reassure those troubled by such matters. He describes those who have died as having '*fallen asleep in him*'. Jesus Christ disarms death. For those who have entrusted themselves to him he renders it no more dangerous than sleep. Prior to the return of Christ death for the Christian means the body sleeps and the spirit is present with Christ. In another of his letters Paul writes; *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord...We would prefer to be away from the body and present with the Lord.* (2 Cor 5:6-8)

And those who have died will not lose out. At the return of Christ the dead in Christ will rise first. They will be the vanguard in this great reunion of the Lords people who not only meet him but one another. (17)

Death is a formidable enemy. It brings sorrow and distress to people's lives be they Christians or unbelievers. We are not to try to be too triumphal. We may not grieve as the rest of mankind but grieve we will. The Bible gives us permission to weep and mourn at the departure of those we love.

In the light of this we are to encourage one another (18) The church family is to support and care for those who mourn. At the appropriate moment we can speak the truths of this passage into one another's grieving hearts.

The return of Christ was a present reality for these people. Paul wrote as someone who expected to be alive at the second coming. He clearly encouraged this young church to think in these terms.

- Is Christ's return a vague and distant idea or a real possibility that we factor into our thinking. *So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour you do not expect him.* (Matt 24:37-39)
- Are there those who have experienced bereavement who we could encourage?

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

As the final verse of this section (11) makes clear the theme of encouragement continues into the next chapter. And the source of this encouragement continues to be the coming of the Lord Jesus.

There is encouragement in the arrival of the unexpected and inescapable Day of the Lord (1,2) This day will come like the visit of the thief - when no one is expecting it. And it will be as unavoidable as the birth of a child once labour has begun. Imagine yourself speaking to someone demoralised by the prosperity of the wicked and the absence of any sign of Gods intervention. These words offer solid hope for a better future.

The encouragement of these verses isn't always of the comfortable sort. There is an edge to what Paul writes here. We are not in the 'dark'. We know what is coming. Consequently we should not be behaving like those who are unaware of this future. *So then let us not be like others who are asleep but let us be awake and sober...* (6) We are to be spiritually alert to our responsibilities and opportunities. We are to be alive to the spiritual battle, engaged in the hard work of prayer and looking to speak Gods word helpfully into the lives of others. When I am tempted to opt out and settle for the role of spectator on the spiritual war I need this kind of robust encouragement.

No doubt there were those at Thessalonica who retained an unhealthy fear of God from their pagan days. They found it hard to leave behind their dread of his judgment. In the final verses (9-11) Paul encourages them to realise that God has not appointed them to

suffer wrath. And the clearest evidence of this is seen in Christ's death for them. He has died for them so that they may be united to him whether they live or die.

- Take some time to consider the certainty of the return of Christ.
- Check your behaviour. Are we alive to our spiritual responsibilities towards others? (Husbands for wives, parents for children, neighbours for those they live among, elders for 'their sheep' etc)
- Look for an opportunity to encourage someone with the truths listed here.

1 Thessalonians 5: 12-28

The letter finishes with a series of instructions on a variety of subjects.

Leaders (12,13)

The members of the church are to relate appropriately to their leaders. But the characteristic of these people is not their status but their work. Paul is indirectly challenging those who head the church up to be those who follow his example. He didn't assert his apostolic authority over them (2:6) but rather *worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone*. (2:9) There has been a hint in this letter (4:11) that some in the church are dropping out of the world of work to wait for the return of Christ. This will become more pronounced in his second letter (3:6-10). If you are a Christian leader check that you are known as someone who works hard.

Pastoral Care (14,15)

We tend to think of pastoral care as the responsibility of the leadership. He makes it a matter for all of us. Church families are made up of different needs. Some need to be warned (note again the emphasis on activity) others encouraged and still others helped practically. Take a few moments to consider the people you meet up with at church. What sort of 'care' do they need? Ask God to help you speak his word into their lives in a constructive and beneficial way.

Gods will (16-18)

This could seem an impossible ideal. Life for many doesn't run smoothly and sometimes we face very difficult situations. Paul though knows all about opposition and suffering. He arrived in Thessalonica having '*previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi*'. (2:2) It's surely significant that *pray continually* sits at the centre of these three instructions. Prayer brings an eternal perspective to our struggles and prayer accesses God's grace to enable us to remain grateful in tough places.

Handle with care (19-22)

Prophets had an important part to play in the early church. They conveyed Gods mind on practical matters. Not treating prophecies with contempt and not quenching the Spirit belong together. There are lessons here as we read our Bibles and as we listen to it being taught.

The Lord's Coming (23,24)

The letter ends on a hugely positive note. He prays for their sanctification and blamelessness at Christ's return. But adds: *The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it*.

- Check your attitude to the church's leaders. In what regard do you hold them?
- Have you considered that pastoral care is the responsibility of all of us?

- Write out v16-18 on a card and have it with you next week. This really is Gods will for you.
- Check your reception of God's word.