

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Thessalonica was not an easy place to be a Christian. The church was born out of conflict (Acts 17: 1-9) and it's clear from Paul's correspondence that they have gone on experiencing opposition. Such difficulties inevitably raise questions about the justice of God and the worth of following Christ. This first chapter looks to bolster and strengthen any whose faith may have been flagging because of their struggles. It consequently provides encouragement for us in the trials our faith may face.

It would not have been difficult for the believers at Thessalonica to feel themselves distant and remote from the life of the Church. They were located in Macedonia on the edge of the church's mission, a long way from Antioch where the work was directed from. Paul encourages them to appreciate their spiritual location. They are the church of the Thessalonians *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. (1) To be united to the life of the Father and the Son was to be in a secure place.

Times of pressure give scope for negative voices. When progress seems slow and difficulties multiply we are open to criticism. But the apostle provides a different perspective. He encourages them to see that through these trials their faith is growing and their love for one another is increasing. (3,4) In God's order of things, faith and love rate more highly than some other more visible qualities.

In vs 5-10 Paul sets their difficulties down in the light of Christ's return. It is on that day that they will see how just God is. (6) *he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled*. It is then that they will appreciate the power of the gospel that can protect and safeguard their lives when *the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire and with his powerful angels*. We are often tempted to regard the gospel, this message of a crucified Saviour as containing little power. It is on that last day when through the work of Christ we are safely brought into the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might that we will appreciate just how potent this message is. Keep this end in view.

The chapter ends with a prayer. (11,12) These prayers have been recorded so that we will pray them for one another. Paul prays that God would fulfil every good, faith prompted purpose that the Thessalonians have. That would be a good prayer to pray for one another.

- The passage invites us to look out for an opportunity to encourage a struggling Christian.
- It highlights the 2 areas that matter: faith and love. Faith grows as we become increasingly convinced of the faithfulness of God.
- Ask God to instil some good faith prompted purposes in our minds.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

The NT lets us see that young churches were particularly vulnerable to false teaching. Word has come, reputedly from Paul, that the 'day of the Lord' has already taken place. Notice the way he authenticates this correspondence by adding his own signature (3:17) perhaps indicating the problem had arisen through a counterfeit letter.

'Remembering' is crucial to faith. It is a repeated theme of Deuteronomy summed up in the words: *remember well what the Lord your God did to Egypt (Deut 7:18)* It is the disciples failure to remember both the words of the prophets and the teaching of Jesus that gives them such problems over the death and resurrection of their leader. And here again Paul asks: *Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? (5)*

There were 2 strands to his teaching on the Lord's return. First it would be preceded by a time of 'rebellion' (3) and secondly it would involve 'the man of lawlessness'. (elsewhere referred to as the Antichrist). This figure will combine totalitarian politics and false religion. He is previewed in the person of Antiochus Epiphanes (Dan 11:36,37) and described in Revelation 13.

The Bible describes him as presently being restrained but the time will come for him to be revealed. His coming will be accompanied by '*displays of power through sins and wonders*' (9) Miracles are not the hallmark of authenticity. The Bible is consistent: *If a prophet... appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place and the prophet says, 'Let us follow other gods... you must not listen to the words of that prophet. (Deut 13:1-3)*

The issue centres on truth and lies. Satan is the father of lies. He lies to Adam and Eve in the garden encouraging them to adopt a hard view of God. Here he allures people to devote themselves to the 'man of Lawlessness'. And because of humanities aversion to the true God we are disposed to believe and serve Satan's lie.

So this becomes the issue: *They perish because they refused to love the truth and be saved. (10)* We have a sure word from God in his gospel. It reveals to us his steadfast love towards us. It promises the victory of the Lord Jesus over every form of evil. We are to 'love' it and hold to it.

- Pray for any 'young churches' known to you. Pray that they will be protected from false teaching and not deceived by counterfeit miracles.
- Work at remembering Gods word. *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. (Psalm 119:11)*
- Determine that you are going to 'love the truth' and that you will endeavour to encourage others to do the same.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

In the previous section the possibility of this church becoming '*easily unsettled and alarmed*' (2:2) has been raised. Although the cause of that alarm was the allegation that the '*day of the Lord has already come*' (2:2) its not hard to see how Paul's teaching on the future (2:5-12) could lead to some dismay. And which of us has not felt unsettled by the prospect of what may await us around the next corner?

In v13,14 the Bible invites us to see ourselves, not at the mercy of the power of lawlessness but as the objects of God's love. This love is expressed in the sovereign choice of the Father and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. It is brought to bear on our lives through the powerful work of the gospel and it enables us to look forward to sharing in the glory of the Lord Jesus.

It is in the light of this that we are encouraged to 'stand firm' rather than allow ourselves to be unsettled and alarmed. Standing firm is explained as holding fast to the apostles teaching. (15) This has a strong person edge to it. Paul's ministry was attacked in a highly personal manner. *For some say, 'His letters are weighty and forceful but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing. (2 Cor 10:10)* This continues to be the pattern. He is accused of hating women, complicating the 'simple gospel' and being too dogmatic. In his first letter 'standing firm' (3:8) was expressed as the Thessalonian Christian 'having pleasant memories of us and longing to see us as we also long to see you' (3:6) This remains the test. Standing firm on the gospel means standing firm with Paul.

The chapter ends with a prayer that the God who has given them eternal encouragement will provide encouragement and strength for every day. Encouragement and strength

would come pretty high on our list of desirable qualities. Because God knows what our needs it follows that we will look to him to resource our lives. And if we are following Paul's example we will be praying for others to enjoy this provision.

- Take some time to see yourself from God's perspective. Here is what it means to be a Christian.
- Check that you are standing firm. Ask yourself how you listen to the Apostle Paul's teaching.
- Remind yourself that the God of the Bible is a God of encouragement. Look for the encouragement that comes through the gospel and pray this prayer (16,17) for others.

2 Thessalonians 3: 1-5

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us.... There is no hint of independence about the ministry of the Apostle Paul. He relies on the prayers of others. There is no Christian ministry, no mission partner, no evangelistic endeavour that can succeed without the prayerful support of others. When William Carey went to India at the end of the 18th century, he said to his friends in England, "I will go down the well but you must hold the rope." Paul looked to the Thessalonians to bear the strain before God on his behalf.

- Who might be looking to us to do that?

Specifically he urged them to pray for the steady advance of the gospel and his protection from 'wicked and evil people'. Paul didn't court opposition. He didn't fatalistically regard it as inevitable. In his first letter to Timothy he urged prayer for those in authority so that we might live peaceful and quiet lives.

- Who could we be praying for who are facing threats and danger through their involvement with the gospel?

V4 emphasises *the things we command*. The commands appear in the following section (v6,12). It's easy to feel resentful when the Bible addresses us so directly. But notice how this statement sits between two verses full of encouragement. First (3) we are reminded of God's faithful care and second (5) God's love and Christ's perseverance are set before us. Satan would seek to persuade us that God's commands are an unreasonable imposition placed on us by an uncaring deity. Paul would emphasise that these are the words of an extravagantly gracious God whose plans for us are thoroughly good. Living by God's commands is both safe and wise.

- Whose word carries ultimate authority in our lives?

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

The letter ends with a call for church discipline. As much as churches are to be places of acceptance and grace they are also to be places of order. One description of the church refers to it as God's household. There are requirements that go with belonging to this 'family'. *If I am delayed you will know how people are to conduct themselves in God's household which is the church of the living God. (1 Tim 3:15)*

We are not surprised to find immorality and false teaching attracting God's discipline. But what of idleness? The language is strong: *we command you to keep away from every brother who is idle and disruptive. (6)* Some at Thessalonica were dropping out of work (perhaps to wait for the Lord's coming) and living off the generosity of others. V10 refers to those who are *unwilling to work*. We are not to choose not to work.

He sees these things as being dangerous to the health of the church. Idleness is coupled with disruption. V11 describes these people as busybodies, those who spend their time commenting on the behaviour of others.

In his first letter Paul urged the community to *warn those who are idle and disruptive (5:14)* Here he goes a step further and commands them to dissociate themselves from such people. They are not to get drawn into this life of idleness. Rather they are *to never tire of doing what is good. (13)* This reflects what they have witnessed in Paul's example (7-9) and in the behaviour of their own leaders (1 Thess 5:12) The aim of this is to arouse shame and lead people to repentance.

Both letters have a strong emphasis on the return of the Lord Jesus. One of the implications of his coming is our work will be assessed. Jesus reserved strong words of condemnation for the servant who excused his inactivity on the grounds of his master's harshness. He described him as *a wicked lazy servant (Matt 25:26)* and consigned him a place outside. *Never tire of doing what is good* would be a good slogan to have fixed in our minds.

- Are we reconciled to the need for the church to be governed and disciplined?
- Are we too tolerant of behaviour we ought to stand apart from?
- Are we happily committed to the liberating service of God?