

Books of the Bible Series

I Thessalonians

Russ Lewis

July 7, 2024

The story of the Thessalonians (Acts 16 and 17): Paul was driven from Philippi and went to Thessalonica and in 3 weeks built a community of believers there. He then headed to Berea and onto Athens. While in Athens, he wondered how the young believers in Thessalonica were doing. He wanted to go back but he was blocked so instead he sent Timothy on a secret mission to find out how they were doing. Timothy came back and gave him a glowing report but also found that their inexperience came with some confusion and worries.

So Paul wrote them a letter to clarify some of these issues. This was one of Paul's earliest letters although we aren't sure of the date. In this letter, I observe that he has four issues to defend three ways he wants to encourage the believers at Thessalonica.

Four Defenses

Chapter 1-3: These defenses are against accusations against the Thessalonians from the devil meant to drive them from their faith. Think about what might be issues for you today, no matter where you are in your faith. Look for things Paul might be saying to you today!

- **Life Change**

I Thes 1:4-6

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, **5** because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. **6** You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel came to them with power and they demonstrated these changes in the face of suffering. Paul was being chased by these same people who were harassing the new believers as well. Paul was even hearing about these amazing stories of faith and transformation from other churches in that region.

- **Love and Service**

I Thes 2:3-7

3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. **4** On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. **5** You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. **6** We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. **7** Instead, we were like young children^[a] among you.

People questioned Paul's motives so he asked them to think about how he personally lived. He was pleasing God and didn't flatter them: instead he was honest with them. He compared himself to a child and yet a nursing mother: he viewed them as children in the Lord and was tender towards them and wanted to know how to encourage them. He toiled so he wasn't a burden to them: Paul's regular practice was to work as a tentmaker when he arrived in a new city so no one would accuse him of being a free-loader. Sometimes he had external support (money sent from others outside a city), but he didn't take money from the people he was ministering to. He also says he was a father to the Thessalonians. Even though there are imperfect fathers, a father should be using his strength to take care of his family.

I Thes 2:11-12

11 For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, **12** encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Paul was like a father and encouraged them and comforted them to help them thrive and grow. He never abused or dominated them.

- **Love and Service Truth and Suffering**

I Thes 2:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. **14** For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews **15** who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone

Paul asks them to be witnesses to the Word's truth, that this truth was not invented by men. These people agreed that this was the Word of God; Paul doesn't want their belief to slip away. They proved their belief when they encountered suffering from their own people, similar to the way

- **Relationship**

I Thes 2:17-18

17 But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. **18** For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way.

There is no logical basis for this and Paul spends one and a half chapters on this topic. Paul wants them to know he is desperately trying to return to them.

Which of these fits with your experiences?

Three Encouragements

Chapters 4-5: Paul transitions to practical questions about how to live and what to believe. I chose three of these:

- **Agape**

I Thes 4:3-5

3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; **4** that each of you should learn to control your own body] in a way that is holy and honorable, **5** not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God;

There are varying perspectives on what God has called us to. Today I want to unpack how “sanctified” you are. I used to think holiness was like running down a road and periodically God might put a fence in the road for you.

There are 3 responses to running up against a fence:

- I can be a glorious athlete who doesn't cross the fence: I see it and stop running.
- I try to get rid of the fence and be liberated from it. However, **you still have a chain pulling you** even if you are no longer choking or meeting up with fences.
- I can choose to pursue another type of fence in its place: Sanctification is being full of so much of God's properties, the chain has no power over you any longer. You are full of something which makes the chain powerless: you can stand in the road freely and enjoy the grassy area beside it. You have a choice to be a slave to EROS or be something else. Michael said last year that Eros follows along behind another love: **Eros will take you to bad places if you allow it to be your master.** But if you organize your life around a different kind of love for a person, Eros will do what it's supposed to do. I cannot tell you what God's purpose for sex is, but I know that he has one. **If we serve our spouses with other kinds of love, we can freely enjoy Eros without it being a chain around our neck.**

● Calling

I Thes 4:11-12

11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, **12** so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Work is not bad! We were made to work in the Garden. The fall made us resist work yet God calls us to be in the midst of labor. We always labor as unto God: our actual boss is Jesus, not our employer. If you are playing video games on the job, your boss knows!

If you have a job you hate, it's still worship to do it well. If you can find something better, great. But you can still worship. If you have a job the world doesn't value, know that the last shall be first. Do it as unto God.

However, there are some people in this community who cannot hold down an ordinary job due to mental illness, disability, old age, and other struggles. These people are still workers as unto God. If all you can do is barely keep your life together, do it as unto God. You are still a glorious worker in the Lord's economy.

The most important job out there is motherhood, full of wiping noses and butts. Jesus washed feet at the last supper: he says if you want to be a leader in God's kingdom, you must be a servant. The last in our economy are usually homemakers. In God's economy, you are at the top of the hierarchy. Everyone wants to be a teacher, changing children. But the best children to teach are those who were raised well

● Rapture

I Thes 4:13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

There is much speculation about the rapture in many of today's churches: When will it be? What will it be like? However, this passage was written to the Thessalonians for the purposes of encouragement. Some of the Thessalonians were not working because they were so focused on the kingdom to come. When they encountered the death of someone, they misunderstood and thought that the person somehow missed out. They thought the Messiah would come back and set the world right, and Paul doesn't want them to be uninformed about these topics.

14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. **15** According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. **16** For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command,

with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

These people didn't miss out but instead have received places at the front of the parade. Furthermore, Paul talks about the promise that God would come and set things right to wipe the earth clean of sin. We aren't stuck in the current situation: There will come a time when all evil will be wiped away. Yet, even today I have friends who don't "fit." People want to be saved from corruption yet they don't see that this corruption is also deep inside of them! When I see this in myself, more than ever, I pray "who will rescue me from myself?" But there's more: if Paul had stopped here, you might wonder if the people who died will be with Jesus but maybe wonder if you will be counted among those.

17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. **18** Therefore encourage one another with these words.

People believed then that Jesus would return in a generation but now it's been 100 generations. Bottom line: we all face either our death the rapture: both destinations are the same. All the darkness and corruption in me will be gone in both situations.

Questions:

1. Work with your hands: what does this mean if I do work that is not with my hands? A: I think this is symbolic: he is speaking to Greeks, where there was a chasm between the rich and the poor. He wants people who think they are above it all should also work. He is also elevating the work that slaves do. The CEO's email, the doctor who writes a prescription, the ditch digger, the mother, or even the one who is bed but praying: all are working.
2. Comment: people's hand strength has weakened in today's world because of technology's efficiency. Now we have gyms where we purposely lift things for no reason other than to say I lifted more than last week.
3. I have enjoyed this idiom of getting our hands dirty and the apostles' commitment to working with their hands. A: I sometimes work with TAs to grade papers and I take the hardest questions; this is God's economy.
4. This ties to Eph 2:10 where God calls us and enables us to do things.