

A Study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians

(NIV 1984)

“To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thess. 1:1b and 2 Thess. 1:1b)

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13-16

These verses form a section that we might title: “The Thessalonians’ Endurance of Persecution.”

Having recounted his own actions in Thessalonica, Paul returns his focus to the lives of the Thessalonian Christians themselves. The genuineness of his own life, as demonstrated in preaching the Gospel in Thessalonica, can now be seen in the lives of his converts, the readers of this epistle. Having previously offered thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ faithful labor for the Lord (1:2ff), Paul now offers specific thanksgiving for their endurance of persecution, coupled with a vigorous condemnation of the persecutors.

Previously (1:2-10), Paul had given thanks for the Thessalonians’ genuine reception of the Gospel as displayed in their behavior. The same themes are sounded here, but the focus on their behavior is narrowed to their endurance of persecution. This, Paul says, indicates the genuineness of their faith, since their experience of suffering is the same as that of the very first Christians in Jerusalem, the Old Testament prophets, Paul, and even the Lord Jesus Himself. By aligning the experience of the Thessalonians with that of God’s people in the present and past, Paul counters any fears that the Thessalonians might have had concerning the meaning of their suffering. For those who mistakenly understood that becoming a Christian meant suffering would vanish and the end-time blessings of God would be experienced immediately in their fullness, Paul insists that until the Lord’s return, Christians will be persecuted for their faith. Indeed, such an experience does not indicate that the promises of the Gospel are untrue or that the sufferer does not actually belong to the Lord. Rather, persecution is a sign of the genuineness of one’s faith, for it is the common experience of God’s people at all times, including the Lord Jesus Himself. Hence, Paul can offer thanks for the Thessalonians’ suffering because it is another sign that they have truly received the genuine Word of God.

But Paul’s point is not that the suffering of Christians will never end. This section closes with a solemn pronouncement that the persecutors will be judged for their stubborn opposition to the Gospel. As he did at the close of the first thanksgiving (1:10), and with the section preceding this one (2:12), Paul concludes this section with a statement about the consummation of God’s work at Christ’s return. Having spoken before of the Christian’s deliverance from God’s wrath, Paul reminds the readers that God’s wrath is imminent for those who oppose his Gospel and His people. For the Thessalonian Christians that statement served as a reminder that they could look forward not only to the end of their sufferings but also to their vindication before their enemies when the Lord returns.

1) Note v.13. How often did Paul say that they thanked God because the Thessalonians had accepted the Word of God?

2) Note v.13. From whom had the Thessalonians heard the Word of God?

3) Note v.13. They did not accept it as what? But as it actually is what?

In the epistle to the Galatians, Paul deals with those who argued that his message was merely his own and not God's (Gal. 1:19-2:21). Similar issues will be dealt with by Paul in the Corinthian epistles (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16; 2 Cor. 11:1-12:21). Here in Thessalonians, his insistence on his faithful transmission of the Gospel and on its Divine origin seem not so much to answer the objections of critics as to reassure the readers whose suffering has caused them to doubt the truth of their belief. Lest they conclude that their suffering means that their faith is false, Paul reminds them of their initial response of faith to the Gospel and of what the Gospel has produced in their lives since. This provides the basis for his reflection on their persecution in the verses following.

- 4) Note v.13. Where is the Word of God at work?
- 5) Note v.14. What word showing relationship is used? The Thessalonians became what? Which are in Whom?
- 6) Note v.14. The Thessalonians had suffered from whom?
- 7) Note v.14. The churches in Judea suffered from whom?
- 8) Note v.15. They killed Whom? And who else?
- 9) Note v.15. Who did they drive out? They displeased Whom? And what were they to all men?
- 10) Note v.16. What was the Jewish persecutors' motivation in doing these things?

The reference to efforts to prevent Paul's preaching to Gentiles reflects the actions of his opponents in forcing him to flee from the cities in Macedonia. Indeed, several times in the Book of Acts, Paul's Jewish persecutors are violently motivated by his offer of salvation to Gentiles (Acts 13:45-50; 14:2, 19; 17:5-9, 13; 18:12).

- 11) Note v.16. What did the Jewish persecutors heap up to the limit?
- 12) Note v.16. What has come upon the Jewish persecutors at last?

1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-20

Having recounted at length his conduct among the Thessalonians and having alluded to their recent experience of persecution, Paul now brings his discussion to a crucial point. Apparently some in Thessalonica had misinterpreted Paul's absence during their persecution as an indication that he had no real devotion to them. So here Paul will stress that his love for the readers is no less real in his absence than it was while he was present. This he demonstrates by making several points about his behavior: 1) he had made a sincere effort to visit them; 2) he was prevented from visiting not by his lack of desire but by Satan; 3) he sent Timothy to the church both to strengthen them and to report back to him; and, 4) he has rejoiced to hear that they stood firm in the faith, Here especially, we see that the Paul, the apostle, was man for whom the Gospel was no mere abstraction but a matter of profound emotional intensity and commitment. The church for which Christ died was the church for which Paul lived.

In the course of these personal notes, Paul also emphasizes two crucial concepts: 1) the focus of his labor as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and his source of joy before the Lord are steadfast, faithful, mature converts; and 2) persecution, though it can be a dangerous test, is the common and inevitable experience of every

Christian. These ideas will come into play later in the letter as Paul discusses Christ's return (4:16-5:11). That event will bring an end to the suffering characteristic of this present age, for then the effects of death itself will be reversed as the dead in Christ arise to be reunited with the living. In the meantime, the believers must maintain their steadfast watchfulness through their trials.

1) Note v.17. What relationship term is again used? How does Paul say the missionaries were taken away from them?

“torn away” – in its literal sense refers to either a parent's loss of a child or a child's being orphaned

2) Note v.17. Torn away for how long?

“short time” – literally means “for a time of an hour” – a metaphor for a relatively brief period

For Paul that period may be short, not simply because he expects at some point to return to Thessalonica, but because he is absolutely confident of the eternal reunion at the Lord's return, as 1 Thess. 4:13-18 will make clear (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:17),

3) Note v.17. This absence was in what? Not in what?

“in person” – literally means “in presence” or “in face”

“in thought” – literally means “in heart” (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:3; Colossians 2:5)

4) Note v.17. Out of what kind of longing? We did what?

5) Note v.18. We wanted to do what?

6) Note v.18. How often did they seek to do this?

“again and again” – literally means “once or twice”

It is an idiom emphasizing repeated action.

7) Note v.18. Who stopped the missionaries from coming to the Thessalonians?

Compare 1 Thessalonians 2:18 with 1 Thessalonians 3:5. Observations?

8) Note v.19. What 3 things are the Thessalonians to the missionaries?

9) Note v.19. When will these 3 things have their highest fulfillment?

10) Note v.20. What word adds strength to what Paul had just written?

11) Note v.20. Indeed, they are what 2 for the missionaries?