

“The Word of God”

Lesson Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5 **Background Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5

Devotional Reading: Psalm 121

1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5 (NIV)

¹³ For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. ¹⁴ For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are ^[d] contrary to all men, ¹⁶ forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

¹⁷ But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. ¹⁸ Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, ² and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, ³ that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. ⁴ For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To summarize Paul’s concerns regarding the believers in Thessalonica.
- **Biblical Principle:** To compare and contrast the Jews and Gentiles as Paul describes them in the lesson text.
- **Daily Application:** To commit to offering Christian encouragement to a fellow believer in the week ahead.

INTRODUCTION

The Power of Encouragement

When I was a sophomore in high school, I qualified for the state championship in swimming. Two days before the swim meet, my father became ill and ended up in the hospital. We quickly realized that he would not be able to come to the meet, and I was distraught. My father had never missed a meet since I started swimming at 8 years old. Now he would miss the biggest competition of my career.

On the morning of the meet, my mother came with a letter my father had written for me. The letter was filled with encouragement. He shared words of faith in me and my abilities. I was so touched by his letter that I swam my fastest times. I even placed in the finals. Even though my father was absent, he still encouraged me through my mother and his letter.

LESSON CONTEXT

Because it was written around A.D. 51, the epistle we call 1 Thessalonians was probably the first of the New Testament’s 27 books to be written. Although the four Gospels detail earlier events, most research agrees that those four were not written until the A.D. 60s and later.

Thessalonica was (and is) a Macedonian port city where Paul founded a church during his second missionary journey. His visit was quite controversial (Acts 17:1–9). The commotion Paul stirred was so intense that he had to escape by night (17:10). That was not the first time he had had to do so (9:23–25), nor would it be the last (23:31).

The city was on an important trade route and prospered as a result. Those of Greek, Roman, and Jewish heritage constituted its population. Paul and Silas had entered the synagogue in Thessalonica and argued from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. They ultimately persuaded some Jews and many Gentiles (Acts 17:1–4). Other Jews in the city became envious of Paul and Silas' success. They persuaded the governing authorities to persecute the residents who believed in Christ. While the church in Thessalonica grew, it continued to face challenges in the form of persecution (1 Thessalonians 2:14; 3:3–4). Paul wrote this letter to comfort and encourage the Thessalonian believers in their trials.

Thanksgiving: 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16)

The phrase *because* introduces the reason for Paul's thankfulness: the Thessalonians' receptiveness to the word of God as being just that. Today we rightly identify the Bible as the Word of God, which acknowledges its divine origin and character. The same was true in the first century A.D. (Mark 7:13; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 14:37). But when Paul began his missionary journeys, none of the 27 books of the New Testament had yet been written (see Lesson Context). Therefore the Word of God they heard was Paul's oral testimony to them. In Galatians 1:11–12, he explains why his preaching was to be taken as divinely authoritative: "the gospel I preached is not of human origin [but] by revelation from Jesus Christ." Vital to their salvation and sanctification was their response of "belief in the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul's original readers recognized the supernatural origin of Paul's message and responded fittingly. For a "sharper" description of how the Word of God is *indeed at work*, see Hebrews 4:12.

1. What was the Apostle Paul thankful for? (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

What Do You Think?

Considering that the Bible is the Word of God, how do you approach your study of the Bible?

Digging Deeper

When you encounter difficult or challenging passages in the Bible, how do you respond? Who can you turn to for help with those passages?

The conjunction *for* links this verse closely with the preceding one. It also alerts the reader that what follows is the evidence that the Word of God is working daily in their lives. To be imitators of someone else's example is sometimes a good thing (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1) and sometimes a bad thing (Hebrews 4:11). Paul has already acknowledged the readers' wise choice in this regard (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

Paul is saying here that the Thessalonian believers are undergoing the same kind of persecution as are God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus. The Thessalonians had not chosen to be persecuted; rather, persecution has been inflicted on them. Paul doesn't minimize this fact (see 2 Thessalonians 1:4). Instead, this seems to be his way of providing assurance, comfort, and encouragement by telling his readers that they are not alone.

The mindset of those who inflicted the persecution is the subject of the following verse.

2. What did Paul mean by be "imitators of God's churches" (1 Thessalonians 2:14)?

A small group of Jewish leaders had ensured the judicial murder of the Lord Jesus (compare John 11:45–53; 18:28–31; Acts 2:23; 13:28; etc.). This was entirely consistent with how the prophets in the Old Testament had been rejected and condemned (Luke 11:47–48; Acts 7:52; example: Jeremiah 26:20–23).

In such context, Paul noted the Jewish leaders' culpability in continuing this pattern of opposition not only to God but to everyone who opposed their agenda. Their agenda was not only to persecute Paul and his companions at Thessalonica, but time after time in his life they have tried to prevent him from preaching to the Gentiles, thus hindering them from

being saved. Jesus has strongly condemned those who would hinder people from believing and being saved (Mark 9:42), and Paul now reinforces that condemnation (see v. 16 of today's lesson).

These persecutors were filling up the measure of divine *wrath* to be heaped on their heads. However, the churches in Judea had not been exterminated by suffering; if anything, they had been purified and increased. Saints have been saved to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25), but sinners will experience wrath to the uttermost (1 Thes. 2:16).

3. Who were those inflicting punishment on the Christians? What were they trying to accomplish? (1 Thessalonians 2:15-16)

Encouragement: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

Paul was not ashamed to state his affection for the Thessalonian Christians. He felt as though he had been "orphaned" from them (1 Thes. 2:17) since he was their spiritual mother and father (1 Thes. 2:7, 11). After spending at least 15 days in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), mob violence had resulted in Paul's hasty exit from the city under cover of darkness (17:5–10). The phrasing *being separated from you* indicates a departure that was less than voluntary.

But Paul quickly reassured his readers that he wanted to remain there longer to help ground them in the faith, but the enemy drove him out. However, his absence was only physical; he was still with them in heart (see Phil. 1:7).

Paul made every effort possible to return to them, though Satan was "breaking up the road and putting up obstacles" (literal meaning of "blocked" in 1 Thes. 2:18). Paul had the same kind of deep desire to be with them as Jesus had to be with His disciples before His death (Luke 22:15).

4. What did Paul mean by he was "separated from" the Thessalonian church? (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18)

What Do You Think?

How do you handle situations when your plans or desires are thwarted or delayed? Consider James 4:13–17 as you think about your answer.

Digging Deeper

How does James 4:13–17 inform your answer?

Old Testament prophets sometimes received no assurance that their ministries would result in changed hearts and changed behavior. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah was told that his prophetic ministry would not succeed (Jeremiah 7:27–28; 18:11–12)! No wonder Jeremiah is called "the weeping prophet." To be assigned a task predicted to fail would strain anyone's emotions to the maximum.

Paul's ministry was not like that of Jeremiah's, however. Paul did have opposition, but he also had a successful harvest of souls that was evidence of a God-given ministry (compare 1 Corinthians 9:1). And Paul does not take this for granted. Rather, he communicates its results loud and clear with the rhetorical question: "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory" The answer comes also by the rhetorical question, *Is it not you?* As affirming as this harvest is, Paul knows that it's not all due to his efforts (see 3:6–9). An apt summary of all this is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:4a.

The mention of *our Lord Jesus when he comes* sets another event-context for the text before us. It refers to Jesus' future advent when He returns to earth. It's the same day referred to in Philippians 1:6, 10; 2:16. Paul thinks so highly of his Thessalonian readers that he can count them as already on the right side when that event comes to pass.

5. What was Paul's joy? (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20)

What Do You Think?

How do you find hope and joy in the midst of difficult circumstances?

Digging Deeper

How can you be a source of hope and joy for others, especially for those who are struggling or in need?

Having escaped from Thessalonica by night, Paul and Silas then traveled 45 miles to the west to preach the gospel in Berea (Acts 17:10–12). But the troublemakers from Thessalonica followed them and stirred up opposition. Soon Paul was forced out of that town as well, making his way south to Athens under decoy escort, waiting for Silas and Timothy to follow (Acts 17:13–16).

Paul, Silas, and Timothy were on pins and needles wondering how the new Christians in Thessalonica were doing (“we could stand it no longer”). In 1 Thessalonians 2:17 he said that he felt “separated” from his friends in Thessalonica. It was because of this love that Paul could not abandon them when they needed spiritual help. Paul was not only an evangelist; he was also a pastor. He knew that soul-winning was but one part of the commission God gave him. These new believers must also be taught and established in the faith. Paul did his best to plan for a return visit. But his best wasn’t good enough, and he seemed nearly to have reached a breaking point. Ultimately, Paul made what undoubtedly seemed to him a “second best” decision: if the apostle couldn’t go back to Thessalonica personally, he would send Timothy instead. Thus Timothy could carry Paul’s correspondence to the Thessalonians.

6. What was Paul's concern regarding the Thessalonian Christians? (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2)

What Do You Think?

What situations of frustration or weariness have you recently experienced in your own life?

Digging Deeper

How can you broaden and deepen a network of true friends who will encourage you in difficult times?

Paul knew that the *trials* and testings that come to our lives as Christians are not accidents—they are appointments. We must expect to “suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29). Persecution is not foreign to the believer (1 Peter 4:12), but a normal part of the Christian life. “In fact,” Paul had repeatedly told them he “would be persecuted” while he was with them (v. 4 of today’s lesson). “And it turned out that way.”

At the same time, Paul was concerned about the state of the Thessalonians’ faith. *For this reason* (v. 5 of today’s lesson) Paul wrote that he feared *the tempter had tempted* them, he probably was not referring to the common temptations to sin. Paul knew that such temptations were part of earthly life (1 Corinthians 10:13). What concerned Paul was the temptation to reject Christ to escape suffering. If that happened, Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica might turn out to be *in vain* (compare Philippians 2:16). The antidote for the tempter’s poison was encouragement, so Paul sent his trusted “son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2) to bring that encouragement to the Thessalonians.

7. How did Paul encourage the Thessalonians concerning his trials? (1 Thessalonians 3:3-5)

What Do You Think?

How can you resist temptations that would draw you away from Christ?

Digging Deeper

Why is it important to encourage and support other believers who are also facing temptations?

We must warn new believers that the way is not easy as they seek to live for Christ; otherwise, when trials come, these babes in Christ will be discouraged and defeated. Suffering was (and is) unavoidable; it is a key part of the way that God makes us into Jesus’ image. Hardship can result in distinguishing between those of deep and shallow faith (Matthew 13:5–6, 20–21). It’s an issue of counting the cost of becoming a disciple (Luke 14:26–27).

CONCLUSION

Encouraging One Another

Suffering is part of the Christian life. But sometimes, we fall into the habit of dealing with suffering alone. We think we need to just grit our teeth and bear it. While God does call us to endure suffering, He does not ask us to suffer alone. Paul talks more about suffering for Christ than anyone else in the New Testament. Yet his solution was not telling people to buck up but encouraging them. Because the church is Christ's body, we share in each other's sufferings (1 Corinthians 12:26). By encouraging one another, we can help bear the burdens of our brothers and sisters in Christ (Galatians 6:2). We will also keep sufferings from becoming temptations, leading one another away from following Christ.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, help us to seek and comfort the discouraged in our midst. Let their burdens be ours as well. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Encouragement is a defense against despair.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is called "The Love of God" where we will learn as God's children, how to love Him and seek lives of righteousness. Study 1 John 3:1-10.