

The Word of God

Devotional Reading: Psalm 121

Background Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5

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13 For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

14 For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews:

15 Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men:

16 Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.

17 But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire.

18 Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us.

19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?

20 For ye are our glory and joy.

1 Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone;

2 And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith:

3 That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.

4 For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.

5 For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.

Key Text

For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe. —1 Thessalonians 2:13

Hope in the Lord

Unit III: Eternal Hope

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Paul's concerns regarding the believers in Thessalonica.
2. Compare and contrast the Jews and Gentiles as Paul describes them in the lesson text.
3. Commit to offering Christian encouragement to a fellow believer in the week ahead.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Power of Encouragement
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 2:13–16)**
 - A. Accepting God's Word (v. 13)
Reacting to the Word
 - B. Imitating God's Churches (v. 14)
 - C. Seeing God's Justice (vv. 15–16)
- II. Encouragement (1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:5)**
 - A. Paul's Desire to Return (v. 17)
 - B. Desire Thwarted (v. 18)
 - C. Paul's Joy in Them (vv. 19–20)
 - D. Paul Sends Timothy (vv. 1–5)
Love Letter

Conclusion

- A. Encouraging One Another
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Berea *Buh-ree-uh*.

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

Maccabean *Mack-uh-be-un*.

Macedonian *Mass-eh-doe-nee-un*.

Silas *Sigh-luss*.

Introduction

A. 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.

B. Lesson Context

Because it was written around AD 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 AD 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.

I. Thanksgiving

(1 Thessalonians 2:13–16)

A. Accepting God's Word (v. 13)

13. For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

The phrase *this cause* 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 AD (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 which was preached of me is not after man.... but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." Vital to their salvation and sanctification was their response of "belief of 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 *effectually worketh*, see Hebrews 4:12.

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?

Reacting to the Word

As a child, I enjoyed Sunday night services at my small-town church. People wore their regular street clothes, not the dresses and suits they wore on Sunday mornings. It felt like a gathering of good friends having fun together. Not only that, but if special speakers visited, they usually took center stage on Sunday evenings.

My favorite of these services happened when missionaries visited. They told stories of people in far-off places, people who spoke different languages and had different traditions. They brought trays of slides for the overhead projector to illustrate their presentations. Sometimes they wore traditional clothes from the country where they ministered.

Even though the missionaries were admired, the real focus was on the people who heard and accepted the Word of God. Their eternities were changed because they believed the gospel message the missionaries brought to them. The new Christians realized that what they heard did not originate with men but was from God. They applied it to their culture, honoring God in the process.

It's all too easy to become "ho-hum" about the Bible. Those who live in Western democracies have unlimited access to it in its numerous translations, sizes, and bindings. You probably have several Bibles around your house right now and one or more Bible apps installed on your smartphone. What lesson(s) can we learn from the first-century Thessalonians about not taking the Word of God lightly?

—L. M. W.

B. Imitating God's Churches (v. 14)

14. For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews.

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 active *followers* 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). We might call that "active imitation."

But active imitation doesn't seem to be the sense of the verse before us. Paul here seems to have in view more of a "passive imitation" in that the Thessalonian believers are undergoing the same kind of persecution as are *the churches of God which in Judaea 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 parallel between *your own countrymen* and *the Jews* is interesting for comparing and contrasting the sources and nature of the persecutions. We may wonder to which group or groups the word *countrymen* refers exactly, since Romans, Greeks, and Jews all inhabited the area in significant numbers (see Lesson Context). The answer lies in Acts 17:5; the instigators of the persecution in Thessalonica are "the Jews which believed not." The mindset of those who inflicted the *like things* is the subject of the following verse.

C. Seeing God's Justice (vv. 15–16)

15. Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men.

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 *all men* who opposed their agenda—an agenda seen in our next verse.

16a. Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins always.

The general hostility of Jews toward *the Gentiles* of the time is well known. Such hostility reaches back into the approximately 400 years between the Old and New Testaments. The literature of that time tells of the periodic desecration of the temple and Jerusalem by Gentiles. Those transgressions eventually resulted in the Maccabean revolt of about 167–160 BC. The animosity between Jews and Gentiles is detectable in various places in the New Testament (examples: Luke 21:24; Acts 10:28).

The Thessalonians had personally witnessed persecution against Paul and Silas (Acts 17:5–9). Paul's criticism of his persecutors here echoes Jesus' pushback on the scribes and Pharisees in His final week (Matthew 23:13).

16b. For the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.

The divine *wrath* that *is come upon* the Jewish leaders may include a future punishment, but the main idea is that of the present at the time Paul writes. The word translated *uttermost*

can take at least eight meanings, depending on how it is used in a given context. A reasonable conclusion here is that *uttermost* is to be understood in the sense of “completely.”

Luke 18:5 is another case that shares this same likelihood: “Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.” The phrasing at issue is the translated word *continual*. The sense of “continuing to pester me until I’m completely worn out” is a very reasonable interpretation.

II. Encouragement **(1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:5)**

A. Paul’s Desire to Return (v. 17)

17. But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire.

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 taken from you* indicates a departure that was less than voluntary. This fact undoubtedly was a key factor in Paul’s intense desire to return.

But Paul quickly reassured his readers that “out of sight, out of mind” was not his method of operation. The phrase of being absent *in presence, not in heart* indicates quite the opposite (similar are 1 Corinthians 5:3 and Colossians 2:5). In other cities, Paul spent months teaching and preaching the truths of the gospel (Acts 18:11; 19:8); he undoubtedly realized that his having been in Thessalonica for less than a month was inadequate. His hasty, secretive departure had necessarily left work undone, as witnessed by 1 Thessalonians 3:10.

B. Desire Thwarted (v. 18)

18. Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us.

Paul’s inability to make a return visit was not due to a lack of desire on his part. *Satan* was to blame, although the text does not tell us what specific method he used. Some propose that it was an illness (as also possible in 2 Corinthians 12:7). Others theorize that the city leaders of Thessalonica may have forbidden his return, given the disturbance his work in the city caused (Acts 17:5–9).

Both options are merely guesses. Neither should distract us from the main point: Satan, the enemy and accuser of God’s people (Revelation 12:10b), was responsible for Paul’s extended absence. He may have been responsible for other travel hindrances, but some cases involved Paul’s juggling his ministry priorities (Romans 1:13; 15:22).

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?

C. Paul's Joy in Them (vv. 19–20)

19–20. For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy.

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, or joy, or crown of rejoicing?* The answer comes by the declaration, *For ye are our glory and joy.* 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 Christ at his coming* 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.

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?

D. Paul Sends Timothy (vv. 1–5)

1–2. Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; and sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith.

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). They would have made that trek in three days if they had maintained an average walking pace of two miles per hour, eight hours per day (17:10).

But Paul was soon forced out of that town as well, making his way south to *Athens* under escort (Acts 17:13–16). As he dismissed his escort, their task having been completed, he sent instructions back to Berea with them for “Silas and Timotheus ... to come to him with all speed” (17:15).

There is some debate regarding whether that reunion took place in Athens or happened later in Corinth (compare Acts 18:5). The latter seems more likely, as there is no hint of Timothy’s coming to Athens. Research indicates that Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians while in Corinth, perhaps in AD 51 (see Lesson Context).

The phrase *we could no longer forbear* indicates that Paul was on pins and needles, wondering how the new Christians in Thessalonica were doing. He knew their need for him and

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.

After Timothy's conversion in Acts 16:1–3, Paul often trusted him with special tasks. This involved travel that was unaccompanied by Paul himself (Acts 19:22; 1 Corinthians 4:17).

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?

Love Letter

I opened the large envelope and pulled out the old photos my mom had given me. Among the family pictures was a letter written in 1948, even before my mother was born. My grandfather had gone to the city for a hospital stay, and while he was there, he wrote to my grandmother back home with the children. My grandparents were young at the time, in their twenties, and they had only been married a few years. His love for her was evident. He called her "honey" and his "little lump of sugar," and he told her how much he missed her cooking. He penned greetings to the children and admonished them to be good for their mom while he was away. He assured them he would return soon.

I smiled as I read the words exchanged between the two people who started our family as I know it. I read it to my children, and we laughed at how he asked her to send a few toothpicks in her next letter since "they don't seem to have any here."

Just as I cherished the letter and shared it with my children, the Thessalonians must have cherished the letters from Paul, their spiritual father in the faith (1 Thessalonians 2:11–12; compare 1 Timothy 1:2).

If challenged to pick five words to describe your attitude toward the Bible, would the word *cherish* be a candidate for one of those five?

—L. M. W.

3. That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.

In speaking of *afflictions* as they intersect the Christian life, a more modern way to say what Paul says here might be, "The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress" (Frederick Douglass, 1818–1895). The Bible itself has much more to say about oppression. Consider Jesus' words in John 15:18: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you." Paul used to be one of the haters (Acts 8:3), and he's been on the receiving end of hatred as well (16:22–23). So he knows what he's talking about when he says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

4. For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.

Having been forewarned, the Thessalonians should not have been surprised when the predictions of *tribulation* came true (*even as it came to pass*). This theme of “don’t be surprised” is echoed by the other apostles as well (compare 1 Peter 4:12; 1 John 3:13). In fact, Paul later argues that suffering with Christ is linked to eventual glory with Him (Romans 8:17). 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).

5. For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.

At the same time, Paul was concerned about the state of the Thessalonians’ faith. He had been with them such a short time! Now having received the left foot of fellowship from Thessalonica, he feared the worst. Since Satan had been hindering Paul from visiting them (1 Thessalonians 2:18), what harm might he be doing in Thessalonica?

When 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.

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?

Conclusion

A. 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.

B. Prayer

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.

C. Thought to Remember

Encouragement is a defense against despair.