

MINES OF DIFFICULTY

A COMMENTARY ON
FIRST AND SECOND
THESSALONIANS



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To Ethan Oldham,
who creates the kind of editorial difficulties
that keep me out of difficulties.

1 THESSALONIANS

INTRODUCTION



Thessalonica was a principal city in Macedonia, the region that was the home of Philip and the great Alexander. This letter was written around AD 50, which would make it, with the exception of Galatians, the earliest record of Paul's writing. While the Jews in Berea were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica (Acts 17:11), the *church* in Thessalonica was in many respects one of Paul's success stories. The Christians there were noble.

The three great emphases of 1 Thessalonians are *chastity* in sexual matters, *diligence* in work, and intelligent fervency in eschatological *hope*. Overarching everything else in both of these letters are the questions of a surrounding eschatology, and we can see that however fervent Paul was in his eschatological hope, he was unbending in his

understanding that such hope had ethical corollaries: do *not* be unchaste and do *not* be lazy.

He concludes the letter with a benediction, calling upon the God of peace to sanctify the Thessalonians entirely. He prays that this sanctification unto blamelessness would be extensive in their persons (spirit, soul, body), which would include their sexual behavior, and also extensive in time (until the *parousia* of the Lord Jesus).

The church at Thessalonica was a thriving one, but like many busy places there were a number of free riders. This letter and the next letter to the Thessalonians both address the problem of shiftlessness. Slackers and sponges had to be dealt with firmly.

Paul began his work in Thessalonica by setting a good example: “For ye remember, brethren, our *labour and travail: for labouring night and day*, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God” (2:9).

He also established leaders in the church who would continue with that same good example: “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them *which labour among you*, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love *for their work’s sake*. And be at peace among yourselves” (5:12–13).

In that context, he now delivers a command: “We beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing” (4:10–12).

Paul's exhortation regarding chastity is also hard-hitting:

For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. (4:3–8)

There are at least three things to be taken away from this. First, Paul is not offering Christian sexlessness over against pagan sexuality. He says that Christians must learn how to possess their own bodies in *this* way, not in *that* way. The way we are to avoid is the sexuality of atheism.

Second, we need to know what we are rejecting: the passion of lust as exhibited by those who do not know God. The world's approach to sex is demented, but it is a demented caricature of certain creational realities. Men and women are convex and concave in their desires. Men want to possess and women want to be possessed. Men want to want and women want to be wanted. We reject the world's approach to sex by embracing God's approach.

Third, to reject God's pattern here is not to despise men, but rather to despise God. You might *defraud* your brother in this, but it is *God* you are despising.

And as we come to consider the apocalyptic component to all this, we need to divide the subject in two. The Bible teaches that there is a general resurrection at the end of the world—which is what we see described in chapter 4:13–18. Whenever you see the resurrection of the dead being discussed, that is a strong indicator that we are talking about the end of the world. This is the last day that Martha referred to when talking with Jesus about Lazarus (John 11:24).

Take for example chapter three, verse thirteen: “To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.” Or chapter four, verse fourteen: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.”

We are plainly not talking about the destruction of Jerusalem here—it is way too noisy. One verse pretty much sums it up: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (4:16).

But this does not mean that the destruction of Jerusalem is not discussed in this letter. No, it is: “And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1:10). In chapter 2, Paul compares the persecution that the Thessalonian Christians received to the treatment that the Christians in Judea received, and then he says this: “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” (2:16). That wrath is just around the

corner—the day of the Lord, which should be distinguished from the *parousia*.

And so what does this mean? It means that we must return to our text. We pray to God that we would be made *holy and blameless*, being fashioned after the image of Jesus Christ.

1 THESSALONIANS 1



MUCH ASSURANCE IN TROUBLE

The Thessalonians had been called to go through “much affliction” while they were still very young Christians. It is Paul’s purpose in this section to remind them of how well they had done, and to explain to them how the grace that had been given to them was a great source of encouragement to saints elsewhere. Paul exults in this because the grace of such courage is contagious.

Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come. (1 Thess. 1:1–10)

Paul begins with his standard greeting of grace and peace, but in this he is joined by Timothy and Silvanus, who is most likely Silas (v. 1). The church of the Thessalonians was located in God the Father, and in the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 1). Paul always gave thanks to God for them in his prayers (v. 2), never forgetting what a hard-working bunch of Christians they were in the sight of God (v. 3). They were characterized by the work of faith, the labor of love, and

the patience of hope. Paul was confident of their election by God (v. 4). Not only did he know their work, he was confident that they also knew *his* work. They knew what kind of men made up Paul's entourage. The gospel came to them, not just in words, but in power, in the Spirit, and *in much assurance* (v. 5). They decided to follow Paul's band, and the Lord also, having received the word in much affliction (v. 6). Notice that the same word is used to describe *much* assurance and *much* affliction. The two go together. This is part of God's routine. What the devil wants to use to unsettle us, God uses to settle us.

The Thessalonians also received the word in the joy of the Holy Spirit, which is fitting (v. 6). They were good examples to all believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia (v. 7), which were northern and southern Greece respectively. Word about their faith had spread even past Greece to regions beyond (v. 8). As a result, Paul did not need to say anything—other people were telling the story of how the Thessalonians received him, and how they turned from idols to the living God (v. 9). The Thessalonians had also been taught to wait for the Son from heaven, the same one whom God raised from the dead, and who delivered us all from the wrath to come (v. 10). Remember there is a connection here—much assurance and coming wrath.

When Paul and Silas first came to Thessalonica, they had gone to the synagogue of the Jews, and Paul had reasoned with the Jews there for three consecutive sabbath days. He reasoned with them from the Scriptures, showing how it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead, and that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact that

same Christ. Some of the Jews had believed, and a lot of the Greeks, and more than a few of the leading women in the city. So *these* were the people that Paul is writing to in our letter (Acts 17:1–4).

But the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica were moved with envy, and so they got some unsavory fellows from Rent-a-Mob, and soon set the whole city in an uproar. Hard to believe, I know, but whole towns can get in a churn. They hauled Jason and some other brothers in front of the rulers of the city. They made some jumbled accusations, enough to trouble the city rulers. The officials took some sort of security from Jason and the others and let them go, after which the brothers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea by night (Acts 17:5–10).

The kind of assurance spoken of here is a kind of knowledge—and knowledge is a gift.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: But fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:7)

For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord. (Prov. 1:29)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding. (Prov. 9:10)

The first stair step of knowing anything rightly is to know God rightly, and to fear Him. To hate knowledge is the same thing as not choosing the fear of the Lord. And knowledge of the holy is the foundation of all understanding.

Our knowledge of things is not *our* attainment. A baby is born knowing how to suck—did *he* figure that out? Knowledge is a *grace*. And Proverbs shows that knowledge is also a moral activity, and denial of given knowledge an immoral one.

When the gospel comes in power, it brings *much* assurance (v. 5). But it is also true that when the gospel comes in power it disrupts the status quo—and if there is one thing we know about the status quo, it is how much it dislikes being disrupted. The status quo *hates* that.

Philosophers call one branch of their discipline epistemology. This is the branch of philosophy that seeks to answer the question of how we know what we know, and then, how do we know that we know *that*? For philosophers it is a matter of figuring out an intellectual problem—which is a big part of their problem. To say it again, knowledge is a grace. It is a gift. Knowledge is the kindness of God. Knowledge is not something we attain; knowledge is bestowed. Given how the Almighty is going to judge us at the last day, we need to come to grips with the fact that we all know more than we think we do.

Remember how the church at Thessalonica was planted. Paul came to town and preached the gospel for three successive sabbaths. And what was accomplished in the course of those three weeks? They were delivered from the wrath to come. The Thessalonians *received* the word, with *much* assurance, in the *midst* of much affliction.

A biblical epistemology has little or nothing to do with sitting quietly in a library somewhere, thinking great and lofty thoughts, with lots of time for calm reflection. Paul did

reason from the Scriptures with the Thessalonians; there was study and research involved (Acts 17:2). But then there came a time—and it was a very, very brief time—when he rolled up the scroll and asked them what they thought of Christ. Did the Christ have to suffer and rise? And this Jesus of Nazareth: was He this Christ?

The train is leaving now, and if you stay here the wrath of God remains on you (John 3:36). Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts. And so, friend, what do we make of this Christ?