**LESSON THIRTEEN - 1 & 2 Thessalonians**

**Background:**

Paul visited Thessalonica (now part of Greece) on his Second Missionary Journey. He comes in response to his vision of the man of Macedonia, after his attempts to go to Asia Minor are thwarted (Acts 16:6-10). After being run out of Philippi, Paul (accompanied by Silas, Timothy and Luke, and maybe others) head for Thessalonica, passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia without preaching in either place it seems.

Thessalonica was largest, most important city in Macedonia and capitol of the province, a prosperous seaport, and at the intersection of two major highways. All traffic from the east heading to Rome would pass through here. Paul, the great missionary strategist, must have seen that from no other center could Macedonia be permeated with the gospel so effectively as from Thessalonica ([1 Thes 1:8](http://bible.cc/1_thessalonians/1-8.htm)).

There was consistency among the cities he chose to evangelize:

1. Centres of Roman administration

2. Centres of Hellenistic culture

3. Centres of Jewish influence

Paul was the first missionary to preach in Europe. It was clearly central to God’s purposes to set the course of Christianity westward. Eventually Europe would become Christian. For Paul, Macedonia was just another Roman province.

**Question: What outcomes can you see taking place as a result of this change of direction (from Asia to Europe) in the greater purposes of God?**

**Read Acts 17:1-9** Paul began as usual in the synagogue and was strikingly successful: "Some" Jews, "a great multitude of devout Greeks," and "not a few" of the chief women became followers of “The Way.” The largest group were Gentiles who had attached themselves to the synagogue, probably disillusioned with the moral laxity and intellectual absurdity of polytheism. In searching for something better they had turned to Judaism. This became primarily a Gentile church.

Christianity would appeal to them with its:

* monotheism
* high morality without the legalism and ritual requirements, or the nationalism of Judaism

Paul was so successful the Jews were furious and raised so much trouble Paul had to be smuggled out by night to escape with his life. He was taken to a small, out of the way town Berea), but the Jews found him there, and he had to flee once again.

It appears Paul’s stay was brief (3 Sabbath days), *(but some scholars suggest that it probably extended from December, 50 AD to May, 51 AD).*

**Question: If it was only 3 weeks, what are the implications for the spread of the gospel?**

A major question for Paul must have been: "Can Christianity be planted in such a short time in a way that it would not be uprooted or destroyed?"

Implications:

* If so, the Roman Empire, even the world might be won for Christ…
* Or did one have to settle down and work for months, even years, before transformation took place? If so, then one couldn't even dimly foresee when Christianity would spread all over the world. Thessalonica was a test case. Paul obviously was anxious enough about it to send Timothy back to check.

What news did he bring back? The answer is in 1&2 Thessalonians

**1 Thessalonians**

1. Good News (1:6-10)

* The church has not only survived, it is strong and growing
* Affection for Timothy and Paul was as strong as ever (3:6)
* They were standing fast in the faith in spite of persecution (2:14; 3:4-5, 8)

2. Worrying News

* Some were slandering Paul saying he preached the gospel for what he could get out of it (2:5,9)
* Ever present danger that they would lapse into immorality (hard to break away from their previous pagan beliefs and lifestyle) (4:3-8)
* Tendency to despise authority (5:12-14)
* News of Jesus’ second coming had produced a situation in which people stopped working and abandoned all their ordinary pursuits to await his arrival (3:11-13)
* They were worried about what would happen to those who died before Christ's return (4:13-18)
* There was some division in the church.

These problems we deduce from the content of Paul's letter. They show that human nature hasn't changed so much!

**Paul's Response** to these problems:

1. **Paul’s defense** He spends considerable time defending himself. Remember Paul had a prison record, was a criminal on the run, also a devout Jew who had turned away from Judaism. Could you trust such a man?
2. **The Charges:**

* *“Paul's teaching is a delusion.”* When you follow Christ you become a misfit in society, can be considered "having gone off the deep end" (2:1,2,3,13).
* That he was *teaching from impure motives: personal gain, prestige* (2:5,6,9)
* That he was *not only deluded but also deluding others*. Seeking to tickle men's ears by emphasizing the freedom of grace as opposed to the bondage of the law. (2:4,5,13)

1. **Paul's defense (2:7-12):**

* Reminds them of the spirit in which they came - sacrificial love, affection, encouragement, as a mother or father for children, sharing not only the gospel, but themselves as well. Is that the spirit of a charlaton?
* Their motive for coming had been to proclaim God's will and nothing more (2:2)
* They had been careful to not be a burden, and had earned their way (2:9)

Paul is describing the attitude any pastor/teacher/apostle should have when they respond to God’s call to be a shepherd to His people.

**2. Issue of morality (4:3-8)**

Seneca said of that era "Women were married to be divorced, divorced to be remarried." Fashionable ladies identified years by the names of their husbands. Morality was dead.

Demosthenes: "We keep prostitutes for pleasure, mistresses for the day to day needs of the body, wives for the begetting of children and to be the guardians of the home."

Today’s ‘new morality’ is simply the old morality re-visited. Casual sexual relationships are not acceptable for Christians.

Paul gives three reasons to lead a pure life:

* + If we are promiscuous, we shall not escape the consequences (4:6b).

God deems it sin, and still judges sin.

* + When we become Christians we pledge our whole being to God (v.7)
  + Sexual purity is not a man-made rule, but the will of God (v.8)

**3. Division in the Church (5:12-14)**

The attitude of not wanting to be under authority, undermining those who work hardest among you, jealousy of those in leadership is common to humanity.

* Paul exhorts them to treat leaders with respect, remembering their leaders were not yet spiritually mature,
* Paul exhorts them to give people room to grow and develop their gifts. Paul didn't appoint leaders in new churches. They were chosen by the church, had to prove their capabilities, maturity. In this case, the process led to some internal strife. Jews would have the biblical knowledge and background but tended towards legalism; the Gentiles were the dominant group in the church.

**4. Questions re: Christ’s second coming**

* Early Christians had the understandable expectation that Christ's return was imminent. See Jn. 21:22, Acts 1:11).
* Because of this belief, the Thessalonian Christians had stopped working. Not only was this irresponsible, it was also a poor testimony to the world, and they became a burden to the rest of the body.

**Question: How does the belief that Jesus’ second coming is imminent affect believers today? How should we be living if we really believe this is true?** -

Paul's response is more general in his first letter:

* He addresses the issue of continuing to **work responsibly** (4:11, 5:14)
* He tells them generally to **“Be ready.”** Christ’s coming will be a surprise, like a thief who comes in the night. Being ready involves watching and praying, living in the light - moral and spiritual sensitivity to the issues confronting us, putting on the righteousness of God (i.e. self-control, faith, love, hope of salvation (5:4-11)
* **What about those who died before Christ’s return?**

The Thessalonians believed Christ's coming was imminent, that Christ would come and take them all to His glorious kingdom - then some of them died. What now?

1. Paul comforts those who are concerned about the believers who have died before Jesus’ return (4:13-18), giving a brief description of the Lord’s return: those who have died will rise first, and join the living who will be caught up in the air, meeting Jesus on his way down, accompanied by trumpets and angels heralding his return.
2. Paul paints a word picture (4:16-18). He is not laying out a theology of the second coming - no mention of where they have been in the meantime, provision of bodies for the dead, or how the living are transformed, judgement, or what happens to the non-Christians.
3. He conveys his message in traditional imagery (trumpets, and glory – see Ex. 19:16-17, Joel 2:1, Zech. 14:4-5), the awe inspiring final event of history: God's glory in Christ disclosed to all of creation!!

Paul’s main concern is to comfort those who have lost loved ones and are fearful of their future.

**2 Thessalonians** begins with encouragement of the believers who are standing firm in the face of fierce opposition/persecution. God will reward them.

1. Why the second letter? It was probably written shortly after the first, as they are very much like each other in content.
   1. The second letter was written mainly to **clear up a misconception about the second coming**. In his first letter, Paul had said that Jesus would come the second time like a thief in the night and to be watchful (5:1-6). Consequently men did nothing but watch and wait. In the second letter he explains what must precede the second coming. They had gotten the teaching out of balance and proportion.
   2. Often a teacher will be misunderstood, misinterpreted, certain phrases taken out of context, over-emphasized; a passing comment may be developed by listener into a doctrine. Paul's second letter seeks **to put things back in perspective.** He takes the opportunity in the second letter **to re-emphasize the advice and rebuke** given in the first letter, but his main aim is **to calm their hysteria and encourage them to wait, not in idleness, but working with diligence** on the tasks God gives them to finish until Christ returns.
   3. In addition, Paul clarifies further the details surrounding Christ’s return. In order to help them realize Jesus had not already come, and that his return might *not* be imminent, Paul describes a couple of things that must happen first: (2 Thes 2:1-2).

* A period of rebellion, or falling away from God (2:3).
* The man of lawlessness appears (2:3-4) prophesied by Daniel (Dan. 7:25), probably identified with the beast, the anti-Christ of Revelation, who claims to be God.

While we don’t understand fully what these things will look like, we trust the Lord will give his people discernment and prepare us for the trials these things will entail. When you see these things the Kingdom of God is about to come in fullness (2 Thes 2:8-12), and evil will be blown away with the breath of Christ.

For centuries the city remained one of the chief strongholds of Christianity, and it won for itself the title of "The Orthodox City," not only by the tenacity and vigor of its resistance to the successive attacks of various barbarous races, but also by being largely responsible for their conversion to Christianity.