

1-2 THESSALONIANS – Waiting faithfully

Hello. I'm Janet Crawshaw and I'm introducing the KYB study to First and Second Thessalonians. I've been associated with KYB for more than thirty-five years. Several years ago, my KYB leader encouraged me to write my first summary for the current unit we were studying. Since then, I've discovered I love to write and to share the lessons God teaches me, especially about the relationship we may enjoy with the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm a wife, a mother, a grandmother, and a music teacher. I lead a KYB group for some wonderful ladies who meet each week during the school term. If you're anything like me, you may love to delve into the past and discover how people thought and what they experienced. How did they live and deal with the issues of life?

Most of us wonder what the future will bring. The letters to the Thessalonians reveal a multicultural church who wanted to understand and deepen their faith. I've wondered what life was like for them. Did these biblical letters help them to face their present circumstances as well as the future? What did the letters reveal about the writer and his message? Can I find something in them which will help me live today? I set out to find answers.

As I began my journey, I discovered some paradoxes. Then but now, letters but books, the lesser but greater, persecution but persistent love, waiting but working. How can I reconcile these differences? What will I discover if I delve deeper?

What was the world like when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians?

About eighteen years after the resurrection of Jesus, and before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Apostle Paul visited Thessalonica in Northern Greece where today the modern-day city of Thessaloniki continues to thrive. In Paul's time, Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia, situated on the western coast of the Aegean Sea. While he was in Troas the Spirit of Jesus prevented Paul, Timothy, and Silas, known by some as Silvanus, from entering Bithynia. Not long afterwards, Paul received a vision in which a man of Macedonia begged him to come and help the Macedonians. God was opening a new door and Paul's second missionary journey was about to begin. He travelled to Philippi and on to Thessalonica. We can read about these journeys in the Acts of the Apostles, and specifically, the visit to Thessalonica in Acts 17.

What do we know about the city from which the Gospel would be launched into the East?

In 315 BC the Greek general, Cassander who later became the king of Macedonia, named the city after his wife, who was the half-sister of Alexander the Great. In 168 BC the Romans conquered it.

Thessalonica was strategically placed. It was situated on a fine harbour at the head of the Thematic Gulf, a city where major trade routes converged and from where military campaigns could be launched. The Via Egnatia, the Roman highway to the East, passed through its centre. Travelers and traders from all over the known world knew of it and traveled this ancient highway.

When Paul visited Thessalonica in about 50 AD, it was a free city since Rome had granted it some degree of self-governance and had proclaimed it the capital city of Macedonia. It was a mission field ripe for harvesting and for taking the Gospel to the rest of the known world. The population included Romans, Greeks, and Jews. Paul preached in the synagogue to Jews and God-fearing Greeks, and many received the Good News. However, the majority of the city worshipped a plethora of gods such as Caribus, their patron god, or Zeus, or Dionysus along with the emperor Caesar, their supreme ruler. When Paul preached that Jesus was the Messiah, some of the Jews were jealous and mistook his words as insurrection against Caesar. They caused a great riot, blaming Paul, and persecuting the local Christians. The believers sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, but the gospel had been sown on good ground and was bearing excellent fruit. Paul was escorted to Athens and later went on to Corinth, in the south. Silas and Timothy met him there. The hasty departure from Thessalonica left Paul feeling deeply anxious about the welfare of the fledgling church.

What do we know about the writer of these letters?

Who was Paul and why did God send this man to be his missionary? Many call him a great teacher, pastor, and missionary. He called himself the least of the apostles.

Paul was well educated, a Jew from Tarsus, a Turkish city. Raised from boyhood in the Torah and the Prophets under the teaching of Gamaliel who was an esteemed master of Jewish law; Paul was eminently placed to be used by God. He spoke several languages. He was passionate and zealous. But he was willing to kill and destroy anyone who dared to defy his Pharisaical religion. Yet, right at the height of his deadly campaign to kill every Christian on whom he could lay his hands, Jesus captured Paul, blinding him with heavenly light, while he travelled on the Damascus Road. For three days, Paul would sit without food or drink, blind, alone, in darkness, in that great city and confront the stark reality of his sin. Jesus, whom he had persecuted, whose brothers he had assumed responsibility to martyr, now commissioned Paul to be the missionary of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. All Paul had mistakenly prized and sought God stripped away, and the love, deep forgiveness and grace of Jesus Christ flooded his soul. God transformed his murderous zeal of hate and destruction into love for Jesus Christ, his Messiah, and made him the recipient of the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Of all the writers of the New Testament, Paul would become the most prolific, and most likely, the most travelled. He is the author of more than a third of the New Testament. He led three missionary journeys and took the Gospel to all the known world. Down through the centuries his writings have made an indelible stamp on the doctrines of the Christian church. Paul's writings explain the gospel message and the Christian life to both Jew and Gentile and reveal the deep meaning and context on which Christ would lay the timeless foundations of his church.

What would we have seen if we could have visited the church in Thessalonica?

Despite the brevity of their stay, Paul, Silas, and Timothy had forged strong bonds with these new Christians. Paul would describe his relationship with them as being like that of a father

or mother, of one who gently nurtures, protects, and guides their children. Even in the few short weeks before they had been forced to leave, Paul had witnessed how quickly they had become a model for all believers. They had responded with eager joy to Paul's preaching. Now reports of strong persecution had reached him. He wondered how they were. Had they become discouraged in their faith? Had they succumbed to the intense pressure of persecution and returned to paganism? We can find the answer in the Thessalonian letters.

What is the background to the First Letter to the Thessalonians?

Scholars believe First Thessalonians is the earliest letter which Paul wrote. Early historians and Christians such as Polycarp and Ignatius provide supportive evidence of Paul as the chief author. The style is consistent with other Pauline vocabulary. For example, Paul expressed the same love and concern in similar terms in all his letters to the churches he planted. Paul's personal greeting opens the letter and refers to actual events in the Acts of the Apostles.

How does Paul's first letter begin and what did he write to them?

Paul, Silas, and Timothy begin with a greeting. Whilst Paul is the chief author, Silas and Timothy are included and we can safely assume they supported the message. Knowing these dear believers were suffering, Paul affirmed them and reminded them that the Holy Spirit had both compelled and empowered them to receive the gospel which Paul had preached. Reports from other regions of Achaia and Macedonia had reached him. These reports marveled at their transformation from idol worshippers to servants of the true and living God.

Paul reminded them that his team had lived and worked among them with love and integrity. He had humbly pastored them, seeking only to live and serve the Lord Jesus. He prayed for them and thanked God for them. He acknowledged how much they had suffered from the Jews and from their fellow countrymen, just as Jesus had been crucified by the people of his own nation.

What hope did the future hold for Paul and how could he help them to remain strong? He had given his whole heart to them, and they were his hope, joy, crown, and glory. Had his toil borne lasting fruit? He sent Timothy on the treacherous journey north, all the while, praying both day and night. Paul felt his labour wasn't in vain, but he longed to hear about them.

Timothy returned to Athens to find Paul and deliver his report. Paul was overwhelmed with thankfulness. The Thessalonians were standing firm in the Lord, and, in fact they were thriving, and were just as keen to see Paul and Silas again as Paul and Silas were to see them.

Paul now turned his attention to teaching them Christlike qualities for Christians living in a pagan world. He reminded them to love one another, to live quiet orderly lives and to work hard so that they could win respect and honour God.

Finally, in this first letter, Paul addressed the future. Some were ignorant about the judgment of the world, the second coming of Christ and the eternal security of those who had already died. Paul assured them that no matter whether they lived in the present, or, like their departed loved ones who had died before the Lord's return, all believers will always be with

Jesus. In fact, they were to be expectant and always anticipating the Lord's return at any moment while remaining alert and sober. The Lord would come unexpectedly, as a thief in the night, but this would mean Jesus would rescue them from the trials of life and give them an eternal bright future in his presence. They could look forward with hope.

There were those among them who were weak, some who tended to be idle, or who felt timid. Paul closed this letter by encouraging them to support each other lovingly and patiently and to stay close to God through prayer. He prayed that God's peace would fill them in their trials. God would preserve the good work he had done in them because God is always faithful to his promises.

Why then, did Paul write the Second Letter to the Thessalonians?

Later, when Timothy had returned to Paul and Silas, they all moved south to Corinth. Silas was a well-known prophet and Timothy was the son of a Jewess, a believer in Jesus Christ, and of a Greek father. Elsewhere Paul called Timothy a dear son in the faith. Together they formed a strong missionary team and shared authorship with Silas in this second letter to the Thessalonian church.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy felt deeply for the Thessalonian Christians because Paul and Silas had also suffered hardship and imprisonment for the sake of the Gospel; and Timothy had witnessed their suffering firsthand when he'd visited them.

Paul began by addressing the issues, but not before he had applauded their love and growing faith in the face of unrelenting persecution. As strange as this may seem, their pain and suffering had strengthened them. True, God hadn't prevented their suffering, but they had learnt to depend on God, and God counted them worthy of his Kingdom. As for justice, God would repay their oppressors. Paul and his team promised to pray for them and were confident God would fulfil every good purpose he had planned for them.

But false teaching had crept in, and it was confusing them. False teachers were saying that judgement day had already arrived, in contradiction to Paul's earlier teaching. Was their present suffering actually the end times of which Jesus had taught? Paul wrote to assure them that God would control evil until the end of the world's history. What they were seeing, and suffering, was certainly the signs of the evil one's handiwork, but they shouldn't mistake this for the wrath which is yet to come. God has decided that day, and no-one knows the exact hour. Jesus said this in Matthew 24:36. The Thessalonians were to live in expectation of the Lord's return but not to fear it and whatever they understood about the future shouldn't cause them anxiety. Instead, they could place their trust in God and the Lord would sustain them, while they lived by faith. Hebrews 11:1 tells us, *"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."* This is the same truth and faith which Paul was emphasizing. He reminded them to cling to the Gospel and not be swayed by new teaching which could not be verified by the scriptures.

Yet another problem had emerged. Some were saying that if the day of the Lord was near, there was no point in working or building a future on this earth. Paul commanded them to avoid such ideas. Paul, Silas and Timothy had set a strong example by working to support

themselves while they lived in Thessalonica. These Christians were not to place a burden on each other by expecting others to support them if they thought they had reason to be idle. Instead, out of love for Christ, Paul told them to encourage these people to evaluate their idleness and to understand they should follow the pattern he had set. As brothers in the Lord, gentle reproof was needed.

Paul closed the letter. Due to the dissension among them, he prayed for peace and for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to be with them.

Where and why do we find these letters in the Canon of the Bible?

God is sovereign. Ephesians 1:11 tells us that God laid his plans before the foundation of the world. In the Old Testament, God spoke through his patriarchs, priests, kings, and prophets, showing that the Messiah would come the first time to save his people from their sins. They eagerly waited and watched for him. In the New Testament Paul's letters develop the tenets of our faith as laid down in the Gospels and Acts and they anticipate Christ's second coming.

How are the letters to the Thessalonians relevant to us today?

The Thessalonian letters can allay our fears about the future. We live in uncertain times as did the Thessalonians, but the past, present, and future belongs to God. Just as Paul assured the Thessalonians, we believe the Lord Jesus will return. If we belong to him, we will be with him. We can look forward with great expectation and joy.

Paul planted this Thessalonian church. When he was forced to leave them, the Holy Spirit kept them steadfast to the Lord Jesus Christ. Are we inspired by their love, perseverance, and faith?

- *What can we learn from Paul's motivation to write these letters?* Paul and his team loved the Lord Jesus Christ and were willing to give everything in his service, preaching the gospel, ministering, and encouraging the churches. Whatever role in life God has given to us, we are to live for the Lord Jesus. Colossians 3:17 tells us this.
- *What about the coming of the Lord?* One day Jesus will come again, and all believers will be with the Lord forever. This is certain and 1 Corinthians 15:23 confirms it. Jesus Christ could come today, tonight, or any time.
- *How are Christians to live while waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ?* Paul taught us to provide for ourselves and to live godly, loving, quiet and fruitful lives. Jesus told us the same message in a parable in Luke 19:13 which explained the need to be "occupied until he comes."
- *How do we guard against damaging cultural practices and false doctrine?* We should study the scriptures daily and pray and stay in close relationship with Christ through the direction of the Holy Spirit.

As we open the letters to the Thessalonians, we can be reassured of God's love and care for believers in every era of history. Our Lord Jesus Christ came the first time to live, die, and rise again. He will return. Paul's assurances to the Thessalonians are just as relevant to us today.

Let's pray together: Dear Heavenly Father, we praise you for your great love and care of your children. As we begin our study of Thessalonians, we ask your Spirit for understanding. Please guide us to a deeper knowledge of your Word and grant us a genuine desire to serve you while we wait for the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. AMEN.

Thank you for listening. I'm Janet Crawshaw and this KYB introduction is copyright © CWCI Australia.