

Acts 17.1-15

In Thessalonica

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 4 September 2022

1 & 2 Thessalonians: Walking Worthily [1]

Series introduction

The church in Thessalonica had an explosive start – it’s a miracle it survived, which helps explain the depth of Paul’s affection for it. He warned them of persecution, but I doubt even he expected it to come so quickly. Because it did, in these letters Paul lays bare his pastoral heart: a twin commitment to God’s Word and God’s people.

They had responded quickly to the gospel, yet their faith wasn’t shallow but genuine and life-changing. The adversity they faced from the beginning produced in them such love for one another that Paul can’t stop talking about it. The tone of these letters suggests to me Paul wished he could have spent longer with them.

Look out for how Paul urges them to keep doing ‘more and more’ what they are already doing, to continue in what they’ve started.

For Paul the Christian life means learning to walk in a way that pleases God and is worthy of his call; it means growing in holiness. The Thessalonians had made a good start in difficult circumstances – but would they keep going?

Let's back up and look in more detail at how it all started.

Paul's second missionary journey

Please open your Bibles to Acts 17 (it's on page 1113 of the church Bibles). As you can see from those pages, Paul's visit to Thessalonica was not an isolated trip; he was in the middle of one of his missionary journeys. I've got a  map of the whole journey here. He started in Antioch in the East, and headed West across Asia Minor, visiting and strengthening the churches he and Barnabas had planted on their first missionary journey (16.5).

While he and his companions were in  Troas, **Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'** (16.9). Over they went, and planted the first church in Europe in Philippi, in the house of a wealthy lady called Lydia. They got into trouble and ended up being flogged and put in prison – but that night the jailer and his whole household became believers and were baptised (16.13-34).

The authorities asked Paul and Silas to leave (16.38-39) – which set the pattern for the rest of their journey. They would arrive somewhere, preach the gospel, see people become believers, plant a church – then others would oppose them and force them to leave town. But all that did was give Paul and his companions the excuse to take the gospel message into more and more places, planting more and more churches.

Sharing the gospel (1-4, 10-12)

One of those places was Thessalonica. Paul and his companions travelled there from Philippi along the Egnatian Way (which was a bit like the M69 – running East to West). They went **through Amphipolis and Apollonia**, and **came to Thessalonica** because as the capital city of the region, it had **a Jewish synagogue** (1).

We know from chapter 16 in Philippi and chapter 18 in Corinth that Paul would stay with a local family. In Thessalonica they stayed with a man named **Jason** (7) who unlike Lydia in chapter 16 and Priscilla and Aquila in chapter 18 is not introduced at all – which suggests Luke knew his audience would know who Jason was. The Bible is not only *about* real people: much of it, especially the New Testament, was written *to* real people as well.

So Paul and Silas (and presumably Timothy, who pops up in verse 14) were staying with Jason. They lived among the people, but simply being there wasn't enough: they also shared the gospel.

We don't know how long they were in Thessalonica but Luke tells us **Paul went into the synagogue on three separate Sabbath days** (2) and shared the gospel – 'God loves you,' he told them.

Except as you can see from your Bibles, that's not what he said.

One of the important things in Acts is to notice how the apostles shared the gospel. Not once do they mention love – in fact the word doesn't appear in the whole book. Of course we don't have everything they said, but each time Luke reports someone sharing the gospel he mentions Jesus but not love – isn't that interesting?

Of course it is true that God loves us – that's why he chose his people, it's why he sent Jesus. But Acts suggests to me that people don't need to hear God loves them – they need to hear that Jesus suffered and died and rose again, that Jesus is the Saviour, that in Jesus and in Jesus alone we can be forgiven and receive new life.

I've made people cross before saying this – but we need to listen to the Bible. And when *it* tells us what the gospel is, it doesn't say 'love', it talks about the risen Jesus, repentance, and faith.

Here, Paul **reasoned with** his hearers **from the Scriptures** (2) – using what we call the Old Testament. Luke doesn't tell us which passages he used, but it could have been some of the Psalms – 2, 16, 110 – maybe Isaiah 53. More likely Paul didn't rely on proof texts but retold the whole story of God with his people.

From slavery in Egypt and rescue through Moses, to David fleeing his son Absalom and being restored, to the whole nation being taken into exile and then being brought back and rebuilt, and so much in between – the history of God and his people tells us God brings restoration *through* suffering and life *through* death.

When we stop reading the Old Testament we lose sight of the fact Jesus **had to suffer and rise from the dead** (3). *Of course* God's Messiah, his chosen one, his own Son, the one who brings us life, does it *through* suffering and death. That's how God works.

And that is the gospel. We cannot understand it without the Old Testament – after all, *that's* what Paul used to persuade people Jesus is the Messiah. **Some of the Jews**, and **a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women** became believers because of Paul's arguments (4). In Berea it happened again (11): **with great eagerness** they **examined the Scriptures every day to see if** Paul was right – and decided he was (12).

Friends, the gospel – the *actual* gospel – makes sense. It is logical and reasonable – if we would only read the Bible to see what it actually says, and how it *all* fits together. Often what it says is hard – to understand or to put into practice – but it is *all* true and it is *all* used by God to speak to us by his Spirit. (*His Story??*)

I hope we receive and examine and listen to God’s Word with the **great eagerness** of the people in Berea (11). I love verse 11 because it shows Paul invited people to see for themselves. That’s why I encourage you to bring a Bible or use one of the church Bibles during sermons – so we can all see and examine the Scriptures for ourselves. The truth isn’t in here *tap head*, or in here *tap heart*: it’s in here *tap Bible*.

The most important thing in this building is not the walls or the ceiling – though they are useful in this country – it’s not the chairs – though they help us be comfortable – nor is it the tech, the kitchen, the cupboards, or even the toilets – it’s this *tap Bible*.]

At her coronation, wearing royal robes and holding the crown jewels, the Queen was handed a Bible with these words: ‘We present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords.’ Paul knew that. Some of the Thessalonians and Bereans came to realise that. Do we believe that?

Suffering for the gospel (5-9, 12-15)

So far so good: like in Philippi Paul and Silas had shared the gospel and made a **large number** of converts (4). But then, like in Philippi, the tide started to turn. There it was the Romans and Greeks who opposed Paul and Silas because they challenged their lifestyle – in Thessalonica it was the Jews who opposed them.

[Some of the] Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the market-place, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.'

Acts 17.5-7 (NIV)

It's ironic that in their jealousy the Jews whipped up a rent-a-mob and then accused Paul and the other believers of causing trouble...

The **bad characters from the market-place** (5) were men who didn't have any work, waiting for something to do – or trouble to make. I suspect many of them didn't really know what was going on but were carried along by the mob.

The plan backfired: Paul and Silas weren't at home. So poor old **Jason** and **some other believers** were **dragged before the city officials** instead (6). That probably saved their lives – had they been left to the mob things could have turned really ugly.

The NIV puts the charge like this: **'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here'** (6). The King James puts it rather more poetically: **These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.**

They were charged with being trouble-makers – in a sense they were! They weren't deliberately trying to cause riots wherever they went, but the gospel, the truth about Jesus, really does turn the world upside-down – or rather, the right way up. Paul and the other apostles preached the gospel so powerfully that people were driven to repent or to riot.

Friends, the gospel is offensive because it tells us we are not the centre of the universe, we are not in command of our destiny.

The gospel is offensive because how can *God* be born as a baby, grow up, suffer, and be killed?

The gospel is offensive because it demands exclusivity: Jesus is **the** way, **the** truth, and **the** life; no-one comes to the Father **except through him** (Jesus said that himself, in John 14.6).

The gospel is offensive because it tells us we are wrong, full of pride and sin, and need to repent and believe in order to live.

The gospel is offensive because it demands we put Jesus before anything or anyone else, including our deepest desires.

No wonder they rioted.

Friends let's not kid ourselves that the gospel is an old-fashioned Disney film. It's hard, it's challenging – but **that's why it's good news: it isn't make-believe, it's real.** Like yours my life is not a bed of roses. It has ups, downs, joys, pains, love, hardship – but the gospel is that God meets me in *all* those places, and calls me to lose myself – and so find who I *truly* am – in Jesus.

The gospel message is wonderfully true, real, and life-giving – but it's also challenging, which is why sharing the gospel comes with suffering. In 2 Corinthians 6 Paul lists his many sufferings. You wouldn't put that passage in an advert for mission workers.

Walking worthily

And yet Paul stayed faithful, to Jesus, to his calling, to the gospel. He didn't stop, and he didn't water down or change the message to make it easier for people to hear. He preached the gospel of Jesus in Philippi, in Thessalonica, in Berea, in Athens, in Corinth, in Ephesus – wherever he went, no matter what the cost.

Some may have rioted, but many responded to the gospel with repentance and faith – including the believers in Thessalonica – and so they discovered joy in suffering. When he had a bit of a breather in Corinth a few months after today's reading, Paul wrote to them (in 1 Thessalonians 1.6): **you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.**

The Christians in Thessalonica faced significant challenges, but were doing ok. They had turned away from their former way of life. They were growing in holiness. They were becoming known for their great love for one another. And so Paul told them: what you are doing, do it more and more; keep the faith, live the life; stay focused on Jesus; keep growing in love and in holiness with the Spirit's help: **∫ live lives worthy of God** (1 Thessalonians 2.12), **∫ live in order to please God** (1 Thessalonians 4.1).

The word Paul uses is ‘walk’ not ‘live’: **‘walk’ in order to please God**. The Christian life is not a sprint. It’s not even a marathon. It’s a long, steady, walk into holiness.

So I’ve called this series ‘Walking Worthily’. The gospel calls us to give up much, but promises so much more as we learn to live God’s best life, the life God made and calls us to walk with him.

My prayer is that through this series we will together examine the Scriptures eagerly, and all of us respond to the gospel in a new, a fresh, or a deeper way than ever before.

Let’s pray.

Loving heavenly Father, we thank you that Jesus knows the suffering we face – and rose again in victory over sin and shame and death.

We thank you for Paul’s faithfulness, sharing the good news about Jesus despite the persecution he faced.

We thank you for the way the Thessalonians discovered the joy of the Spirit even in great suffering.

Send your Holy Spirit upon us we pray, and help us respond to Jesus: examining the Scriptures eagerly, turning away from our old life, growing in holiness and love: walking worthily with you and one another.