

STUDY 1 - 2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-12

As we begin our studies in 2 Thessalonians it is worth remembering the situation the church in Thessalonica was in. It was a church planted by Paul after a fleeting visit (you can read about it in Acts 17), and it consisted of converts from Judaism and paganistic polytheism. The church was under great pressure – Paul had to flee because of the opposition from the Jews. Being a young church they were also vulnerable to false teaching.

Paul's second letter follows up on themes he began to write about in 1 Thessalonians. In particular the whole of this letter continues the theme of Christ's return which was how Paul concluded 1 Thessalonians. As with most of his letters Paul begins 2 Thessalonians with a prayer which he reports in the letter to encourage them.

Praising God For Persevering Faith (1:1-4)

The opening verses of 2 Thessalonians are very similar to the previous letter – Paul reminds the church about who they are (that they find their identity in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ), and that they are first of all recipients of our God's grace and peace.

The thanks he gives to God for the Thessalonians is at first glance very similar to 1 Thessalonians 1:2 and 3. The familiar pairing of "faith" and love" is there, and "hope" is there by implication as he speaks of the fact that they are persevering. However it would be wrong just to skate over these verses thinking that Paul is just repeating himself.

We need to ask the question "why is Paul praising God?" As we read the verses carefully we see there's more to it than the fact that the Thessalonians are showing more faith, hope and love. He draws attention to their growth in faith (in God), and love (to other Christians) but that is so exciting because they give evidence that something even more important is present – God given perseverance.

Paul is praising God for the fact that God is giving them the strength to keep on going, even despite strong and violent opposition. But true perseverance is not

seen by simply “hanging on” – it is shown by growth in faith and love. If you are not growing you are not keeping on going. Faith and love are not static things.

Paul also “boasts” about this perseverance of the Thessalonians. We must not misunderstand him here. Don’t think of Paul speaking at a conference talking about this church to get crowds to think “what a great apostle to have planted such a growing church”. This boast is a boast in God’s work – the only reason the Thessalonians are growing is because of what He is doing.

Trusting God For Just Judgement (1:5-10)

Sandwiched in between two reported prayers in this chapter are these words of pastoral teaching from the apostle to the Thessalonians. After all, they probably are not too thrilled with their situation as they face threats and violence day after day. So Paul assures them that they are not forgotten and that God is just and there is a coming day when all things will be put right.

This is a paragraph which we may struggle with but it is worth thinking about why that may be. We do not face the persecution which the Thessalonian church faced and we need to remember this before we dismiss these words as “too harsh”. If we were at the receiving end of violent persecution, such as the kind of thing our brothers and sisters in Nigeria and India are facing then these words would be a comfort. Linked to that we are influenced by our culture which denies any kind of coming judgement.

What is the “evidence that God’s judgement is right and that they will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God”? It could refer back to their sufferings or their perseverance in those sufferings. It probably refers back to both. In Philippians 1:27-30 Paul wrote that the sufferings believers face is a sign that they belong to God.

Yet even knowing that is not enough when you are going through the heat of persecution. It must be tempting to ask whether you have been abandoned by God, and if he cares about sin and suffering. God is just, and will act justly (verse 6) – giving people the just punishment that fits their sin, and giving relief to his people. This may not happen now, but it will happen.

It will happen ultimately when Jesus returns, when he is “revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels”. This draws from the language of the Old Testament prophets, and the image of Jesus being “revealed” shows that one day he will be seen to be who he already is.

There is an absolute division in verses 8 to 10 which we cannot ignore or water down. This day will be a great day for the church. Notice how we are described – “his holy people” – his set apart people who “believe” and we will “marvel” at him and on that day Christ will be “glorified in” us .

However those who “do not know God” and “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” will be “punished with eternal destruction” (note the penal nature of what will happen, and for how long it will happen – it is a punishment and will be for ever), and they will be “shut out from the presence of the Lord and the majesty of his power”.

The coming judgement is Christ centred. It is not about have you lived well or badly, it is about do you know and glorify Christ? The punishment and glory is Christ centred – it is being glorified by him, or shut out from his presence in punishment. We were created to glorify God.

Therefore those who now show their hatred of Christ by actively persecuting Christ’s people will not get away with it.

Asking God For Powerful Effectiveness (1:11-12)

Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians is a prayer “with this in mind” – with the coming judgement in mind. We do not live for today – we live and pray in the light of Christ’s return.

So what do we and Thessalonians most need? There are two requests both for one great purpose. We need God to “count us worthy of our calling”, which in the context seems to refer back to verses 3-4, that they/we will continue to grow in faith and love demonstrating our perseverance. Our calling is to be the church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 2) and we live that out by active trust in him and loving others.

Paul does not pray that they would have an easy life or that the persecution would stop, but that they would continue to grow as God gives them good purposes and the power to act on them – that they would continue to grow.

Why does he pray that? For the glory of Jesus Christ. That he may be glorified in his church on earth, and that when he returns we would be glorified in him (see verse 10). Despite suffering Jesus is glorified when his church keeps going, trusting, obeying and loving – and if we reach the end we will be glorified as our true identity is revealed when his is.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Why does Paul give thanks for this church?

What evidence does he give that is the case?

Are “faith” and “love” things which you either have or you don’t? What do these verses say about the importance of these things growing in us?

Why can Paul “boast” of the Thessalonians when he visits other churches? Is he just trying to make himself look good?

Why might the Thessalonians think that at the moment God’s judgement is not right? How does Paul reverse this? (See also Philippians 1:27-30)

How and when will God be seen to be just?

There are two groups of people described in verses 8-10. How are each described, and what will happen to each of them?

If we are uncomfortable about these verses, why is that? What does our discomfort tell us about

- Our view of the gospel?
- Our view of Christ?
- Our present experience?
- The influence of our culture of our thinking?

Why does Paul pray for what he does in verses 11 and 12?

How would you think/expect the request of verse 11 to be answered?