

STUDY 2 – 1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-16

After begin his letter praising God for the good report Timothy has brought back of the Thessalonian church, Paul continues his letter with an autobiographical section where he reminds the church of how he lived in the short time he was with them.

Why does Paul do this here? It is not simply so we have a “how to” manual for ministry (although we learn a lot as he does it). It is not that Paul is proud and wanting to boast of his hard work. No, this section is here so build the Thessalonians faith in God and in the gospel Paul preached to them.

Remember that back in Acts 17 we are told that the Jews were jealous of Paul and the work he had done with the Thessalonians, and he had to leave the city in a rush because of their hostility. It is likely that those Jewish leaders were now engaging in a character assassination of Paul and his team, with the intention of drawing back the Thessalonians to the synagogue. This section in the letter is a defence that Paul makes of himself and his conduct – not because he is bothered about how he is perceived by his enemies, but so the Thessalonians will remain holding on to the Christ he preached. Paul knows that his message and his character go together. Remember what he said in 1:5-6. The Thessalonians heard Paul’s gospel and saw how Paul lived, and therefore became imitators both of Paul and the Lord.

Verses 1-6 of this section are therefore a refutation of some of the criticisms made of Paul by his opponents. Verse 1 sets the paragraph up. It is likely that the opponents were saying “Paul was a failure, look how he disappeared so quickly, where is he now?” But the very opposite is true. The Thessalonian mission was a great success. But notice how Paul defines success. He is not mainly concerned about numbers following him (which is ironic, as the Jewish opponents were the ones jealous of this, for them numbers were everything), his motives were not “impure” (verse 3). If that had been the case, Paul could have preached in other ways to get a large crowd. He could have made things up or tricked people into believing (verse 3). He could have told people what they wanted to hear, so he could gain money or prestige from them (verse 5).

No. For Paul, success meant pleasing one master – God. He had been approved by him and given something very precious (the gospel) to pass on to the world. The gospel did not belong to him, he had to serve his master faithfully with it. It was God’s praise he was after, not any human praise (verse 6). For Paul, a successful gospel mission was one where he had dared to tell people the gospel (verse 2). If Paul had wanted an easy life he would never have been a missionary. His life up to this point had been hard, full of suffering and insulting (verse 2).

This implication of these verses are that for Paul, the numbers that were converted were God’s business. Paul was called to speak and pass on the gospel. And he had done this in Thessalonica, so his visit was a success. God had then chosen to bless that speaking and drawn the Thessalonians away from idols to himself (remember chapter 1 was a prayer, not a boast from Paul about how well he had done).

In verses 7 to 12 Paul moves on to speak more positively about how he had acted when he was in Thessalonica. These verses, along with the rest of the chapter, are a reminder. The Thessalonians know all this – but they need to hold on to their memories in the light of the opposition and slander against Paul.

There are two pictures Paul uses of what his relationship was like with this new church. He acted like a nursing mother (verse 7), caring, sharing everything he had with them. Contrary to the suggestions of his opponents, he was not someone who flew in and flew out, preaching the gospel quickly but having no time for his hearers. No – he shared his life and the message (verse 8), working hard so the Thessalonians did not have to support him financially. We know from elsewhere that Paul made tents – hard, physical activity, the kind of manual menial labour that was despised in the ancient world.

Paul also acted like an encouraging father (verse 11), urging the Thessalonians on in their walk with the Lord. The words “comfort” and “encourage” and “urge” are stronger than we imagine – they emphasise calling people back into the thick of the battle, coming alongside someone to help and put strength into them, and to charge/command someone. The reason Paul did this was not for

the sake of his own reputation, but because God had called the Thessalonians into his own kingdom and glory. So they must not give up!

In verses 13-16 Paul returns to his theme of chapter 1. The ongoing response of the Thessalonians gives Paul great joy because it is proving his opponents wrong, and showing in a very real way the power of God. Verse 13 is a commentary on what Paul has already said in 1:6 about how the Thessalonians heard the gospel. A sign of the reality of their conversion was the suffering they faced and kept going through. Paul faced opposition from the Jewish leaders when he preached the gospel, now they too are facing that same opposition. This opposition is part of a long process of hostility against God, which reached it's climax in the death of Jesus Christ. Their hostility is not just a misunderstanding, it flows from a deep seated hostility to God and hatred for his way of salvation, which is to be preached to all. This is the hostility that the church in all ages faces as it is opposed by those who hate God and his gospel.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Look back to Acts 17:1-10. Who might want to suggest that Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians was a failure?

Read verses 1-6 and see how Paul refutes criticisms of his ministry:

- If Paul had just wanted a successful ministry with lots of people following him, what might he have done? Can you imagine how it is tempting to do that as a church today?
- Why did Paul not do that? How does he define success?
- Who's praise is he looking for? Why?
- How does this definition of success differ from the world's definition of success? Or even the church's definition of success?

Read verses 7 to 12 and see how Paul talks about how he lived when he was with the Thessalonians.

- What two images does Paul use to describe how he acted when he was in Thessalonica? What do they tell us about Paul's ministry? Why is important that Christian ministers are was both?
- How does Paul refute the charge that he did not care about the Thessalonians, and just came in and out preaching but did not care for those he preached to?

Read Verses 13 to 16 to see the God given results to the work in Thessalonica

- How did the Thessalonians respond to the message?
- In what way did they imitate the other churches around?
- Why do they (and Christians) suffer at the hands of opponents?