

Yale Bible Study

1 and 2 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonian 3: A Messenger and His Message

Paul's Emissary (3:1-4)

At the end of what we now number as chapter 2, Paul told the Thessalonians that he was eager to visit them, his “glory and joy,” but was prevented from doing so by “Satan.” He suggests that the hostile power of the ultimate adversary is behind whatever his practical problem may have been. He now tells the Thessalonians that he has sent Timothy, his “brother and co-worker” to them. We have already seen how important a collaborator Timothy was in Paul’s missionary activity in the late 40’s and early 50’s, the period of the “second missionary journey.” This section of the letter confirms the importance of Timothy’s role and specifies what it was that he was supposed to do, “to strengthen and encourage” the Thessalonians “for the sake of your faith” (v 2). The work is that of a pastor, and the word “encourage” is from the same root (*parakleo*) used to describe a homily, the kind that Paul preached in a synagogue (Acts 13:15) or delivered in the form of a letter (Hebrews 13:22). Timothy was indeed Paul’s partner in mission.

Paul also indicates that the occasion for this mission was “persecution” (v 3). Apparently, the negative reaction to Paul’s preaching recorded in Acts 16 and 17 did not abate after he left Macedonia. The new movement of believers in Jesus continued to cause controversy. This was caused by their rejection of traditional worship or their expectation of an imminent day of judgment, the “wrath to come” (1:10), or perhaps the sense that with their proclamation of the “kingdom of God,” they were inimical to the established order of the Roman empire. The problem that Paul addresses was not unique

to the Macedonian area. References to “persecution” are frequent in the New Testament and many authors insist, as Paul does here, that persecution was to be expected, it was “what we are destined for.”

Paul had certainly experienced negative reactions to his preaching on numerous occasions as he himself reports (2 Corinthians 1:8–11; 11:23–29). He reminds the Thessalonians that he had warned them that persecution was coming. He was hardly alone in doing so. Other early Christian sources provide examples of similar warnings. These include the prediction of persecution of disciples just after the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:11–12); the statement by Jesus in the Farewell discourse of the Fourth Gospel that the world would “hate” his disciples (John 15:18–25); the advice in the First Epistle of Peter not to consider tribulation strange, but to share in Christ’s sufferings (1 Peter 4:13); the advice of Hebrews to an audience that had experienced oppression (Hebrews 10:32–34) to view suffering as the chastisement of a caring Father (Hebrews 12:4–11) and to imitate Christ in accepting shame (Hebrews 13:13).

While many contemporaries in the Roman world reacted negatively to the first Christians, there was not a systematic and official, empire-wide persecution of Christians until the third century. Hostility was common and authorities often intervened, as the emperor Trajan famously recommended to his governor Pliny, when, in the early second century, the latter asked for advice on how to deal with the phenomenon of Christians. There were examples too of Christians being used as scapegoats for catastrophic events, such as the fire in Rome in 64 CE under the emperor Nero. Though sporadic and

arbitrary, opposition, sometimes violent, was a fact of life for many early Christians, and it apparently was so for the Thessalonians.

Paul admits that he was worried about the Thessalonians (v 5) and concerned that his labor had been in vain. The description of his concern, that the “tempter had tempted” his congregation, may reflect an early Christian expression such as the Lord’s prayer (Matthew 6:13 and Luke 11:4). While the language may be conventional, Paul’s concern was no doubt real.

Timothy’s Report (3:6–13)

Paul reports to the Thessalonians the good news that he heard from Timothy. In naming their “faith and love” Paul echoes two elements of the triad that marked his initial prayer of thanksgiving (1:3). That he does not mention the “hope” of the Thessalonians may be because he will soon address an issue raised about their expectations.

Paul continues the warm, personal language that has characterized this letter from the start. Timothy had reported that the Thessalonians “remember him kindly” and “long to see” him. He responds with the same “longing” (v 6).

Continuing to reinforce the positive quality of his relationship with the Thessalonians, Paul explains how important is the good news that he has received about them. The firm faith of the Thessalonians has been an encouragement to him in his distress and persecution (v 7). The brief mention of Paul’s situation reinforces the solidarity with the Thessalonians that he has evoked throughout the letter. If they are suffering persecution, so is he. But their firmness in the faith is a ground on which he can stand (v 8).

Continuing the positive reinforcement, Paul celebrates the “joy” that the good news of the Thessalonians’ fidelity has brought him (v 9). Paul had previously insisted that the faith of his community was a source of his “joy” (2:19–20). This brief comment is worth attention. We sometimes may be tempted to think of Paul as a serious theologian and pastor, but it is useful to remember how he insists on “joy” as a hallmark of the Christian life. He defines the reign of God in Romans 14:17 as characterized by “righteousness, peace and joy” and prays that that congregation may be filled with joy and peace (Romans 15:13). He is full of joy when he reconciles with the Corinthian community (2 Corinthians 2:3; 7:4). Joy is one of the “fruits of the spirit” (Galatians 5:22). That believers are a source of his joy is something he will say to the Philippian congregation (Philippians 2:2; 4:1) and to individuals like Philemon (Philemon 1:7). For Paul the life of a disciple of Christ, whatever trials and tribulations it may have involved, was always one of joy, grounded in the communal relationship with other people of faith.

Paul concludes this section with two references to prayer. He first tells the Thessalonians that he prays for them “night and day” (v 10), yearning to see them again and be of service to them. He then actually prays, offering three petitions, acting out the report about his prayer that he has just given. The first petition is for God to guide him back to Thessalonica (v 11). The second asks that love may abound in the community (v 12). In crafting the third petition (v 13) Paul is aware of what he wants to say next and provides a transition to chapter 4. He prays that the Thessalonians may be strong “in holiness” to “be blameless.” His next comments (4:1–12) will remind his addressees about what holiness involves for him, a life lived according to ethical principles familiar from the Torah and common to early Christian communities. The condition of being

blameless and holy is one that is particularly important because of what is soon to take place: “the coming of the Lord with all his saints.” Here Paul anticipates his instruction about eschatological hope (4:13–18). Paul’s tone is prayerful and his wishes supportive, but he has some important advice that he wants to give his beloved Thessalonians.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Abraham Malherbe, “Ethics in Context: the Thessalonians and their Neighbors,”

Restoration Quarterly 54 (2012) 201–18.

Karl Paul Donfried, “Was Timothy in Athens? Some Exegetical Reflections on 1 Thess

3.1–3,” in idem, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans, 2002) 209–20.

Questions for Discussion

1. The experience of persecution, not familiar to most of us in the United States, is a fact of life for many Christians today. Are there, nonetheless, ways in which contemporary Christians in the US face persecution? On the other hand, do some claim to be persecuted for questionable reasons?
2. Do Paul’s reflections on persecution say anything to us about how we should relate to persecuted Christians throughout the globe?
3. How important in your understanding of the Christian life is the experience of “joy”? Is it compatible with suffering? Is it something that can be cultivated or just accepted?

4. Are the prayers that Paul offers for the Thessalonians good examples of what we should pray for? What kind of practice of prayer do you pursue?