



1 THESSALONIANS 1-4 PAUL DEFENDS HIS MINISTRY; ON SEXUAL PURITY

Paul now visits Thessalonica, a Greek city, after he had founded the first Greek church in Philippi. He then traveled some 100 miles southwest from Philippi to this great coastal city, named after Alexander the Great's stepsister, Thessalonike.

According to Acts 17:1-4, Paul spent the first three Sabbaths there, attending and preaching at a synagogue, which resulted in many conversions. Yet, some unbelieving Jews later stirred up a mob against them and they had to flee the city. So this is Paul's first epistle to them, penned around A.D. 50, and probably from Corinth.

Paul begins, "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, 'To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ': Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God" (1 Thes. 1:1-4).

It is interesting that while "Saul" is his biblical name in Hebrew, meaning, "asked for," his Roman name, Paul, means, "little," which is typical of Paul's modesty, as he considered himself "the least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9) and "the least of the saints" (Eph. 3:8). He was accompanied by two faithful ministers, Silas and Timothy.

In his greeting, he combines the Greek greetings of "grace" or "may you have favor," with the Hebrew salutation of "shalom" or "may you have peace." Notice there are only *two* divine Persons mentioned who are "in" or spiritually linked, to the Thessalonians--God the Father and Jesus Christ, and no "Holy Spirit" is included as a Person.

Paul goes on, "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your

faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1:5-10).

Notice Paul talks about the gospel going out in power, in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance--these phrases are *not* dealing with Persons, but with *the ways* it went out. A major theme which Paul will emphasize in this epistle is to prepare for the return of Jesus Christ and how He will rescue us from the wrath to come (in the end times).

Paul continues, "For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict. For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit. But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God" (1 Thes. 2:1-9).

Here, Paul has to defend himself from some slander and rumors. These were probably from some of the Jews who had sent accusations from Philippi, but there could have been some brethren that were thinking this way. He has to assert their coming had not been a failure and that it had taken great sacrifice. They were not preaching to make them believe heresies or to sexually exploit or deceive them. Neither were they trying to please or flatter them to take advantage of them or their

money. Nor did they seek to be glorified by them or require financial support, although he said as ministers, they had the right to do so.

Instead, as ministers should, they treated them with the gentleness of a nursing mother and were willing to give up their lives for them. Paul and his companions even did manual labor so it would not seem they were preaching for financial gain.

Paul says, "You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe" (1 Thes. 2:10-13).

Again, Paul reminds them, to discredit the false rumors, of their impeccable conduct and tender care, now compared to that of a loving father. Notice Paul says they must "walk worthy" of their calling if they are to enter the kingdom of God, for salvation was *not* a given. He compliments them for receiving their preaching as the word of God.

Paul says, "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy" (1 Thes. 2:14-20).

Notice there wasn't a "division" between the Gentile-majority churches and the Jewish Christian

churches of Judea. In fact, the Thessalonians became "imitators" of the churches of God in Judea and were following their example of being faithful through all the persecutions, especially of the Jews.

He then says how much he wanted to visit them but that Satan had hindered him in some way. He lets them know that they are his crown and joy -- and his fervent desire is for them to make it to the Kingdom and be part of the 1st resurrection.

Paul adds, "Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith? Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints" (3:1-13).

Paul mentions how concerned he had been about them and had sent Timothy. When Timothy returned saying the brethren were firm and didn't believe the rumors about him but truly cared for him, he was elated. We also see God the Father is mentioned first and then Jesus Christ, working

together with the called out ones--‘the saints,’ who meet Jesus in the air as He returns to this earth.

Paul then says, “Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit. But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing” (1 Thes. 4:1-12).

He now gets practical and exhorts them to keep God’s commandments as magnified by Jesus Christ, especially the Seventh Commandment, about avoiding sexual immorality, and of being faithful and loving to their wives--not like the Gentiles who normally lived very loose lives.

As Barclay brings out, “It may seem strange that Paul should go to such lengths to inculcate sexual purity in a Christian congregation; but two things have to be remembered. First, the Thessalonians had only newly come into the Christian faith and they had come from a society in which chastity (sexual purity) was an unknown virtue; they were still in the midst of such a society and the infection of it was playing upon them all the time. It would be exceedingly difficult for them to unlearn what they had for all their lives accepted as natural.

Second, there never was an age in history when marriage vows were so disregarded and divorce so

disastrously easy. Amongst the Jews marriage was theoretically held in the highest esteem. It was said that a Jew must die rather than commit murder, idolatry or adultery. But, in fact, divorce was tragically easy. The Deuteronomic law laid it down that a man could divorce his wife if he found ‘some uncleanness’ or ‘some matter of shame’ in her. The difficulty was in defining what was a ‘matter of shame.’ The stricter Rabbis confined that to adultery alone; but there was a laxer teaching which widened its scope to include matters like spoiling the dinner by putting too much salt in the food; going about in public with her head uncovered; talking with men in the streets; speaking disrespectfully of her husband’s parents in his presence; being a brawling woman (which was defined as a woman whose voice could be heard in the next house). It was only to be expected that the laxer view prevailed.

“In Rome...divorce was a matter of caprice. As Seneca said, ‘Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married.’...Juvenal quotes an instance of a woman who had eight husbands in five years. Morality was dead.

“In Greece, immorality had always been quite blatant. Long ago Demosthenes had written: ‘We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.’ So long as a man supported his wife and family there was no shame whatsoever in extra-marital relationships.

“It was to men and women who had come out of a society like that that Paul wrote this paragraph. What may seem to many the merest commonplace of Christian living was to them startlingly new. One thing Christianity did was to lay down a completely new code in regard to the relationship of men and women; it is the champion of purity and the guardian of the home. This can’t be affirmed too plainly in our own day which again has seen a pronounced shift in standards of sexual behavior. The new morality is only the old immorality brought up-to-date” (note on 1 Thes. 4:4). And Barclay wrote this comment in 1975-- how much worse has it gotten now!