

1 and 2 Thessalonians

The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica

Lesson #2 for July 14, 2012

Scriptures: Acts 17:5-9,10-15,16-34; 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10.

1. This lesson will focus on what the letters we call Thessalonians tell us about Paul's relationship with the people there after he was forced to leave them. According to Acts 17:2, Paul was only able to stay with them for about three weeks. He was concerned that this period of time might not have been long enough to really have established a good relationship with them.
2. Read Acts 17:5-9. How did the Jews from the synagogue in Thessalonica respond to Paul? How did the other citizens of Thessalonica respond? Why were some of them called jealous? Were they jealous of the influence that Paul had in such a short time among them?
3. It is a very well-known phenomenon that when a new preacher arrives in town and begins to speak of new religious ideas, the current church leaders often become jealous and vigorously oppose the new preacher.
4. Historically, it is well-documented that Emperor Claudius became very concerned about what was happening among the Jews in Rome in the year A.D. 49. Suetonius said there was a real conflict arising in the Jewish community over someone called "Chrestus." As a result, Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. (Acts 18:2) It is quite likely that some of those expelled Jews established themselves in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians wanted to be sure that something similar did not happen in their city.
5. Being a major city, Thessalonica had managed to maintain semi-independence from Rome. It was ruled by a group of five or six "mayors" who collectively decided city issues. Fortunately, those political leaders gave a fairly evenhanded response to the accusations made against Paul. Contrast what happened in Philippi. (Acts 16:22-40) Nevertheless, the leaders in Thessalonica required the Christians to put up some kind of a bond as security against any future disturbances. It is clear that jealousy can be a very serious threat to the spread of the gospel. What can we do to try to avoid such things in our day? Does it help to carefully study the audience with which you are working?
6. On some occasions, the actions of new church members or even of the church leadership trying to evangelize others can be at least partially responsible for trouble arising. (1 Peter 3:13-16; 4:12-16) Considering some of the irrational things that the Thessalonian believers were doing following Paul's visit, it is quite likely that their behavior had something to do with the problems. Is it possible that those new converts had stopped their regular jobs and were spending all their time going around really making religious nuisances of themselves?
7. Read Acts 17:10-15. Why do you think the response in Berea was so much different from what it had been in Thessalonica? Was it just the Jews in Berea that searched the Scriptures, or were there also Gentiles who were studying the Jewish Scriptures? We have been told repeatedly in the New Testament to "test everything." (1 Thessalonians 5:21,22; 1 John 4:1) Do we test even God's Word?
8. When approached with some new truth, do we respond more like the Thessalonians? Or, more like the Bereans? Have we carefully tested the validity of everything that we believe by comparing Scripture with Scripture? How well have Adventists done that? Are we good at it? How well did we do in 1844? In 1888? Today? Do we believe anything for which we do not have adequate evidence?

God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant.—Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 105.2
9. It is important to be open to new ideas. But, it is also very important to test those ideas to make sure that they are valid and true and consistent with the rest of our beliefs. Which is a greater problem for Adventists today: 1) Being too open to new ideas? Or, 2) Not taking the time and effort to test what we really believe? Do we test what the Sabbath school teacher says? What the pastor says? Are we sure that they are telling us the truth?

But as real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God's word, and discourage any further investigation of the Scriptures. They become conservative, and seek to avoid discussion.

The fact that there is no controversy or agitation among God's people, should not be regarded as conclusive evidence that they are holding fast to sound doctrine. There is reason to fear that they may not be clearly discriminating between truth and error. When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves, to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition, and worship they know not what.

I have been shown that many who profess to have a knowledge of present truth, know not what they believe. They do not understand the evidences of their faith. They have no just appreciation of the work for the present time. When the time of trial shall come, there are men now preaching to others, who will find, upon examining the positions they hold, that there are many things for which they can give no satisfactory reason. Until thus tested, they knew not their great ignorance. {*Counsels to Writers and Editors* 38.3-39.2}

10. Despite the fact that troublemakers from Thessalonica had arrived in Berea, the believers there were not shaken. However, considering what had happened in Thessalonica, the Christians thought it best to ask Paul to leave Berea. But, Silas and Timothy were allowed to remain to strengthen the people in Berea. However great the disagreement, we must be respectful of others.
11. Has the Christian church ever made mistakes? Do we as individuals need to do our own research to be sure that what we believe is true? Have there been times when the Christian churches made significant mistakes? What about the time when the early believers in Jerusalem asked Paul to prove he was a real Jew. (*Acts of the Apostles* 405) What about switching from Sabbath to Sunday as a day of worship? Or, persecuting the Waldenses and other similar groups during the Dark Ages? And what about the Crusades? How about accepting pagan ideas about the immortality of the soul? Did the Adventist Church respond correctly to the message presented in 1888? Has the Adventist Church always responded respectfully, even reverently, to Ellen White?
12. Look now at Paul's approach to the large city of Athens. There were many pagan philosophers and debaters located there. Read Acts 17:2,3;16-34. It is clear that Paul took a different approach when dealing with Jews than he did with people not familiar with the Jewish faith. When entering Athens, Paul spent some time walking around the city talking to people to get familiar with their ideas. He talked to the Jews in the synagogue. When entering any new area, is it important for us to listen and learn about the ideas and beliefs of the people we are trying to reach? One good place to get ideas about people's beliefs is in the marketplace. There was a large marketplace very close to the Areopagus or Mars' Hill in Athens. As Paul asked questions, he attracted the attention and curiosity of some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. They invited him to address the intellectuals of Athens at the Areopagus.
13. Paul began his discussion with those philosophers talking about creation. Both he and they were interested in that subject. Paul quoted from their own philosophers and poets. (Acts 17:27,28) Why do you think the Athenians were worshipping an unknown god?
14. There were many altars to unknown gods in Athens. Six hundreds years before this a terrible pestilence had fallen on the city which nothing could halt. A Cretan poet, Epimenides, had come forward with a plan. A flock of black and white sheep were let loose throughout the city from the Areopagus. Wherever each lay down it was sacrificed to the nearest god; and if a sheep lay down near the shrine of no known god it was sacrificed to "The Unknown God." From this situation Paul takes his starting point. There are a series of steps in his sermon.
 - (i) God is not the made but the maker; and He who made all things cannot be

worshiped by anything made by the hands of man. It is all too true that men often worship what their hands have made. If a man's God be that to which he gives all his time, thought and energy, many are clearly engaged in worshiping man-made things.

(ii) God has guided history. He was behind the rise and fall of nations in the days gone by; His hand is on the helm of things now.

(iii) God has made man in such a way that instinctively he longs for God and gropes after Him in the darkness.

(iv) The days of groping and ignorance are past. So long as men had to search in the shadows they could not know God and he excused their follies and their mistakes; but now in Christ the full blaze of the knowledge of God has come and the day of excuses is past.

(v) The day of judgment is coming. Life is neither a progress to extinction, as it was to the Epicureans, nor a pathway to absorption to God, as it was to the Stoics; it is a journey to the judgment seat of God where Jesus Christ is Judge.

(vi) The proof of the pre-eminence of Christ is the resurrection. It is no unknown God but a Risen Christ with whom we have to deal. (William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible*, article on Acts 17:22-31)

15. It is possible to precisely date the events in the ministry of Paul noted in Acts 18:1-18 by their intersection with certain events in history that can be clearly dated. Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome occurred in A.D. 49. The proconsul Gallio ruled in Corinth in A.D. 50-51. While critical scholars and unbelievers often try to claim that the biblical record is unreliable, these are two events which clearly nail down the historicity of Paul's ministry on his second missionary tour. Is that important?
16. Despite his best efforts, the response in Athens to Paul was apparently not very good. There were some prominent citizens who became Christians. However, when Paul moved on to Corinth, he decided to take a different approach. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:2. Paul did not consider his time getting familiar with the people in Athens a waste. He recognized the essential process of getting to know where people are and then meeting them there. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23) Meeting people where they are is certainly not a precise science. It requires careful attention and effort on our part. Therefore, Paul took a different approach in each city to which he went; he considered the circumstances in each city.
17. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10. Paul had very strong beliefs. He was absolutely committed to those beliefs. (Galatians 1:6-9; 2:11-14; 3:1-4; 4:9-11) We might get the idea from these passages that Paul cared little about the feelings of the people with whom he was working. The passage in 1 Thessalonians shows otherwise. He felt very deeply for those believers from Thessalonica. He could "no longer endure" not knowing how they were doing. He was delighted (1 Thessalonians 3:6) at Timothy's report that the Thessalonian believers felt the same about him as he felt about them. This good report made a huge difference in Paul's ministry. It reaffirmed his sense of personal worth. It probably strengthened his desire to see them again. So, Paul sent Timothy back twice to carry letters from him to those new believers. How well do we do at following Paul's example when dealing with new believers?

If we would humble ourselves before God, and be kind and courteous and tenderhearted and pitiful, there would be **one hundred conversions to the truth where now there is only one**. But, though professing to be converted, **we carry around with us a bundle of self** that we regard as altogether too precious to be given up. It is our privilege to lay this burden at the feet of Christ and in its place take the character and similitude of Christ. The Saviour is waiting for us to do this.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, pp. 189, 190

18. What is implied by the idea that self is a barrier to both a more powerful outreach and more conversions from among the lost? How does self prevent us from evangelizing more effectively? In what sense do Christians in 2012 need to die to self? How can we accomplish that? What factors keep us from speaking to acquaintances and friends about the gospel? What part of what we

believe may seem strange to those who do not fully understand our message? How do others respond when we talk to them about the great controversy?

19. Becoming true Christians requires a complete shift in behavior and thinking for the new Christian. Every aspect of his life—physical, mental, and emotional—needs to be involved. How can we help one make that transition? We need to stay close to him/her as s/he works his/her way through those new issues. If we abandon people once they are baptized, we are almost assuring the fact that, sooner or later, they will leave. Are we prepared to make that kind of commitment to new believers? How do we go about that? How do we balance our time and energy to include this kind of ministry? Should we leave our jobs to start preaching like Paul did? What would happen if we did? Or, should we, like Paul, sometimes work all night so we can preach during the day?
20. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:7-11. Despite spending only three weeks with the Thessalonians, Paul felt like he was a mother and father to them. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5. Look at Paul's words: We miss you. We want to see you. We want to come back to you. Satan would not let us. You are "our hope, our joy, and our reason for boasting of our victory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes. Indeed, you are our pride and our joy!" (1 Thessalonians 2:19,20, GNB) He could bear it no longer. He sent Timothy to strengthen and help them. Timothy would find out about their faith. What do these statements suggest to us about Paul's feelings toward the Thessalonians?
21. We need to constantly keep in mind the fact that bringing new members into the church means that we bring them into our circle of friends and into our lives as well. We need to find ways to close the back door of the church! Often, those who leave do so not because they have stopped believing what they learned but rather because they do not really feel a part of the church. They may be intellectual Adventists, but they are not relational Adventists. Read Acts 17:1-4. It is important to notice that a wide variety of people in Thessalonica accepted Paul's message. Christianity is supposed to appeal to all groups. Jason was apparently a fairly well-to-do Greek-speaking Jew. Aristarchus and Secundus (see Acts 20:4) were so committed to the message of the gospel that they actually joined Paul on his journey to Jerusalem, bearing the gifts from the Thessalonian church to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Aristarchus was a Jewish Christian. (Colossians 4:10-11) He eventually accompanied Paul in his travels and even shared in his imprisonment. (Acts 19:29; 27:2; Philemon 24)
22. Who were the people who chased Paul out of Thessalonica? Apparently, some of the unbelieving Jews raised up "some rabble" to stir up trouble. The Greek expression means literally "men of the marketplace." They were unemployed ruffians who hung out in the marketplace looking for something to do! What a contrast they presented to the faithful believers in Thessalonica and Berea. Those unbelieving Jews and the group of ruffians attacked the home of Jason, forcing their way in as they were looking for Paul and Silas. They accused Paul of being an itinerant troublemaker and talked about the problems which had arisen in Philippi. Of course, the bigger claim was that Paul was teaching that Jesus, not Caesar, was King. The leaders of the city took those charges seriously.
23. How often does what we say to potential new members upset the status quo?
24. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17. The word referring to their separation from the Thessalonians can be translated "torn away" or literally "to make an orphan" of someone. Paul felt like his children had been torn away from him. Did Paul and Silas ever doubt that their call to Macedonia was a valid one? (Acts 16:9,10)
25. In this lesson we have noted that evangelizing new members involves a lot of change not only for the new members but also for us. Are we prepared to make the commitments necessary? Do we know how to do it with love and compassion?

© 2012, Kenneth Hart, MD, MA, MPH. Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials, and we might even want to share good ideas with others. So, let us know. Info@theox.org

Last Modified: June 14, 2012

Z:\My Documents\WPI\SSTG-Hart\Thessalonians\SS-2-Thess-2012_07_14-Fin+.wpd