

1st Thessalonians

"Growing Pains"

(1st Thessalonians 2:13-20)

Some Context: Two major subjects dominated Paul's missionary messages as he went from place to place and established churches, including a church in Thessalonica. First, he preached that Christ died on the cross for our sins and rose again and that individuals can be saved only by trusting in him as their Savior. He then announced, even to young Christians, that this same Jesus who came once is coming again. When he comes, he will take believers out of the world and take them to heaven. This is uniformly presented in the Bible as an immediate event, and no passage in the Bible predicts that any event need be fulfilled before the Rapture. Thus, believers in Thessalonica who heard his message were looking each day for the return of Christ.

Walvoord

Definition of "Rapture": Means "Caught Up" as in 1st Thessalonians 4:17, referring to Christ's return in the air (not to earth) and the sudden catching up of the church to be with him. ENNS

The Text: ¹³ And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last! ¹⁷ But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy. (ESV)

The Purposes of writing 1st Thessalonians: We have already seen that Paul had at least two purposes for writing 1st Thessalonians:

1. Paul commended the Thessalonians for their exemplary living under persecution.
2. Paul defended his conduct in Thessalonica against criticism that had developed in his absence.

It was a third purpose of Paul's to explain his absence from them. Evidently some in Thessalonica were criticizing Paul because he had not returned to them, and Paul wanted to explain to them about his activities. Bottom line, it was not safe for Paul to be there. There was persecution and opposition all around. However, Paul desperately wanted to go back to the Thessalonians, and he is not speaking of returning to them as a passing whim. He tried over and over to no avail. Ironically, Paul expresses great joy in the very people that he is likely being accused of abandoning.

Analysis: Warren Wiersbe indicates that Paul identifies three resources that believers have in times of suffering: (1) God's word within us (2:13), (2) God's people around us (2:14-16) and (3) and God's glory before us (2:17-20):

God's Word Within Us (2:13): Paul had preached the gospel to them, and they appreciated, appropriated and applied the word. They received and accepted the word. The idea was that the word that Paul preached to them was not only heard but welcomed. They embraced it enthusiastically. When Paul is referring to the word of God that they had received and accepted, he was speaking about the gospel message that he and his companions had preached to them. Remember that much of the New Testament was not written yet. They meditated on the word. Meditation is to the spiritual life as what digestion is to the physical life. They made the word part of their lives. They applied and practiced the word. Paul credited the changes in the lives of the Thessalonians to the fact that they believed this spoken word. The truth of God is powerful as long as people continue to believe it.

God's People Around Us (2:14-16): A lonely saint is very vulnerable to the attacks of Satan. We need one another in the battles of life. Sometimes we may think that our situation is grim, and no one knows what it's like to be us. Paul was attempting to show the Thessalonians that not only had they become imitators of Paul and Jesus (1:6), but they also had become imitators of the churches in Judea. They certainly were persecuted, yet the entirety of the Christian world sprang from the church in Jerusalem. Paul is not saying that the Thessalonians looked at the believers in Judea and copied what they did. They didn't know these people. However, what Paul is referring to is that they were treated by those who stood in opposition to them in their own city as the believers in Jerusalem had been treated by the Jews; poorly. The early believers saw persecution as inevitable. Paul points out that there is always a certain number of people that will oppose the workings of God in life's circumstances, and that these people will do this to the point of murder. The Jews didn't technically kill Jesus, the Romans did. However, the Romans would have done nothing to Jesus if not instigated by powerful Jewish men who oppose God and always have. The worst thing about opposition is not that it eternally separates the opposer from God but that it prohibits others from hearing the truth as well. There are those that do not believe and end it there. However, there are those that do not believe and go out of their way to make sure that no one else does either. Paul was this type of unbeliever before he met Jesus Christ face-to-face on the road to Damascus. The Jews in Thessalonica were like this as well (Acts 17:5 & 13). These types of unbelievers will suffer the wrath of God. In other words, God will judge them. Paul says that there is a limit, a full measure, to personal sin beyond which God will judge. This limit is known only to God.

God's Glory Before Us (2:17-20): Paul lived in the future tense as well as in the present. His present actions were governed by what God would do in the future. He knew that Jesus Christ would return and reward him for his faithful ministry. Paul recognized that they were separated from one another in an abrupt manner that was difficult to deal with. This made him desire to be with them more and more. Regardless of his repeated efforts, Satan had stopped him from coming. Whether this was the direct hand of Satan or the force behind the one preventing him, Paul attributed to the work of Satan, showing that he was fully aware of spiritual forces at work that were opposed to God. Paul indicated that when he stood before the judgment seat of Christ, which every believer would do, he saw the changed lives of the Thessalonians as his victory crown of glory. To him, the well-being of his young converts was paramount. "Don't give up," Paul would say, lay hold of your special resources, the word of God, the people of God and the glory of God.

Next Week: "Take a Stand! (1st Thessalonians 3:1-13)"