

*“Gospelizing” the Faithfulness of Christ*

*Among the Gentiles:*

*A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians*

Diocese of West Texas

Spring & Fall 2010

Study and Reflection Session 8:

1 Thessalonians 2:1-20

Being Entrusted with the Gospel

*A Translation for Study, with Commentary*

*Translation of 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8*

**1 Thessalonians 2:1** You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain. **2** But though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we took courage in our God to speak the gospel of God to you, in spite of a great struggle. **3** For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or guile, **4** but just as we have been proven by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who proves our hearts. **5** As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a motive of greed; **6** nor did we seek glory from human beings, whether from you or from others, **7** though, as apostles of Christ, we might have made demands. But we were gentle<sup>1</sup> among you, like a nursing mother tenderly caring for her own children. **8** So deeply do we care for you that it seems good to

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<sup>1</sup> For an alternative reading of this verse, see Furnish, pp.56-60. He makes a good argument for a textual variant. We have retained the NRSV translation here for simplicity.

**us to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own souls, because you have become beloved to us.**

*Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8*

**Behind Paul's words, can we hear the accusations of those who are trying to oppose his missionary work in Thessalonica?** Paul speaks here of a "great struggle," and in the introduction to the letters to the Thessalonians, we spoke of the evidence that the members of the church there are under attack from their Gentile neighbors, on account of their conversion into this strange, new religion.

- From Paul's defense, it would appear that he has been accused of attracting people by appealing to their love of flattery; of saying whatever will please people, just to bring them into the fold; of seeking to make money off of the Thessalonian believers.
- To counter these accusations, and to strengthen the community's resolve, Paul emphasizes his selfless love for the Thessalonians ("like a nursing mother"), his courage in the face of opposition (2:2), and the quality of the relationship he has built with them (2:8).

**Paul's gospel is a gospel of God.** What Paul has brought to the Thessalonians is not merely a collection of his own teachings, but the "gospel of God" (2:2,4,8).

- This "gospel" is not composed of words alone (though many translations will make it seem so), but is rather a powerful complex of both word and deed.
- This gospel streams forth from the God who is always creating and re-creating life from chaos and death.
- To "believe" in this gospel, then, is to put all of one's actions into paths that are life-giving, that are characterized by the same love that God has toward the whole creation.

- Paul speaks several times of his having been “proven” as a mediator of this gospel. What do you think he counts as “proof” of his genuineness?

*Translation of 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12*

**2:9 For you remember our labor, brothers and sisters, and our hardship. Working night and day, so that we might not burden any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. 11 As you know, we were to each one of you as a father to his own children, 12 urging you and encouraging and witnessing for you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.**

*Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12*

**Paul continues his defense.** Paul calls upon the memories of the Thessalonians as part of his defense.

- Surely they remember how hard he worked when he was with them, supporting himself rather than expecting them to provide his financial support.
- And again, he emphasizes a familial connection. Just as a parent gives to his or her children constantly, without expecting anything in return, Paul gave of himself to this congregation.
- By choosing the metaphor of the father here, he moves from emphasizing the self-giving love of the mother (as above), to an emphasis on the role of the father in the ancient family: to model a worthy way of life.
- The literal Greek translation of verse 12 is, “for you to *walk worthily* of God.” “Walking” was a characteristic Jewish expression for how a person conducts his or her life in its

totality. There is no standing still in life; we are walking, either worthily or unworthily of our calling into God's kingdom and glory.

*Translation of 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16*

**2:13 We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work among you believers.**

**14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and severely persecuted us; they displease God and oppose everyone 16 by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them at the last.**

*Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16*

**The Word of God at work.** The "word of God," which is "at work" among the Thessalonians (2:13) is, like the gospel of God, more than words alone, but an active power, shaping the whole course of their lives.

- Truly to "hear" such a word means to receive it completely.
- Paul's repeated counsels to the community to live in love, holiness, faith, and hope are, in essence, repeated calls to live as a people in whom the word of God is at work; for all *human* love, holiness, faith, and hope are grounded in *God's* love, holiness, faith and hope.

**Can the Jewish Paul really be saying what I think he's saying about the Jews?** Commentators have been asking this question for a long time. The arguments for and against Paul's authorship of 1 Thess 2:15-16 is well summarized in the commentary by Furnish that we recommended in the introduction (Furnish, pp.64-67). But for the moment, let's accept them as part of this letter, and see what they can lend to our understanding.

**Paul's apocalyptic worldview.** One of the important aspects of Paul's thought raised in verses 15-16 is his apocalyptic view of his historical situation.

The word *apocalypse* means, literally, the pulling back of a veil. What it means when we use it to refer to Paul's thought is his understanding that the world—under its current systems of power, exploitation, and injustice—has departed radically from God's will.

- Everyone who participates in such unjust systems will come under the judgment of God.
- In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has decisively entered this world, in order to bring about God's will for the salvation of all people.
- For Paul, those who resist the gospel are essentially resisting the will of God; and to resist the will of God is to be involved in chaos and destruction.
- Apparently, Paul sees a commonality between the Gentiles who are opposing the believers at Thessalonica and the Jews who opposed him in Judea, and he seeks to encourage the Thessalonians to stand firm despite their opposition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paul employs a traditional Jewish interpretation that the prophets of God were killed by the unfaithful within Israel, but adds to it the accusation that unfaithful Jews also killed "the Lord Jesus." It is this phrase and the final summation, that "the wrath has overtaken them at last" that sound the most anachronistic to interpreters, as the destruction of the Temple was at least twenty years in the future at the time Paul wrote this letter, and Paul clearly knew the historical circumstances of Jesus' death at the hands of the *Roman government*.

- From our study of Galatians, we should be somewhat familiar with the tensions between the traditional Jewish community and Paul's non-Torah-observant practices in his Gentile churches.

**Final wrath?** Paul quotes from the biblical tradition with his phrase, "filling up the measure of their sins" (see for example Genesis 15:16). For Paul, Sin is generally a singular power over people, not a list of particular sins in the plural.

- The sense of the final clause might be more clearly translated, "*wrath has begun to come upon them to the very end.*"
- Very frequently, translators add "the wrath of God," although no Greek manuscripts include the words "of God."
- The addition of the words "of God" in English might appear to exaggerate God's role, whereas the sense of the original is more of a natural connection between willful human unfaithfulness and its destructive consequences.
- For modern Christian readers, who tend to assume that "faithfulness" is about mental assent to beliefs about Christ, it is important to ground our understanding in Paul's assumption that belief is necessarily attested by actions of justice and love, manifestations of the will of God being carried out through us.

*Translation of 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20*

**2:17 But we, brothers and sisters, having been orphaned from you for a short time (in person, not in heart) were even more eager and greatly desirous to see you face to face. 18 For that reason, we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again – but Satan blocked our way. 19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 Yes, you are our glory and joy!**

## *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20*

**Paul's care for the Thessalonians.** Once again, Paul uses tender, familial language to express his love for the Thessalonian church.

- Most poignantly, he speaks of his separation from them as being “orphaned,” though he can never be orphaned from them in his heart.
- His work among them, the work he has poured his life into, will be the evidence of his faithfulness before Christ “at his coming.”

## *Questions for Reflection*

1. We have spoken a number of times about the familial language Paul uses to speak of his relationships with the Thessalonians. How would you describe your relationships with the Christians in your community? Some people have had bad experiences with the members of their actual families, and so familial language is not helpful to them. How would you speak to such a person about the love that Christians have for one another? Earlier in the letter, Paul spoke of the “labor” of love. Within a Christian community, what sorts of actions comprise the “labor” of love? Within a family, what sorts of actions comprise the “labor” of love? Within a civic community, what sorts of actions comprise the “labor” of love?
2. In 2:4, Paul says that he and Silvanus and Timothy have been “proven by God to be entrusted with the gospel.” What sorts of things might be “proof” to God that Paul could be entrusted with the gospel? Has your own church community experienced any sort of testing?

3. In 2:7, Paul describes his life among the Thessalonians as somehow like the relationship between a nursing mother and her child; and then in 2:11-12, he describes himself as like a father, “urging, encouraging, and witnessing,” so that they “might live a life worthy of God, who calls [them] into his own kingdom and glory.” Have you ever known someone in your Christian community, especially a leader, who cared for others like this? Can you tell a story about someone who has had this kind of relationship with you? What would it mean to follow that person’s example?
4. In 2:13, Paul talks about “God’s word, which is at work among you believers.” What would be the evidence that God’s word was at work in a Christian community? What would be the evidence that God’s word was at work in your own life?
5. In 2:14-16, Paul speaks of significant opposition to his own work, and to the Thessalonians’ life of faith. Have you ever experienced real opposition to your life of faith? In what settings is it hardest for you to be a faithful follower of Jesus? In what ways does Christ call you to live differently from the world around you? Where do you find the most significant support for living a life of justice and holiness?