

Route Sixty-Six

Part Fifty-Two

1 Thessalonians

Excel Still More

(Romans 1:1-3a; 1 Thessalonians 4:1, 2)

With Study Questions

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Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³ concerning his Son (Romans 1:1-3a).

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to ‘walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. 2 For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority of the Lord Jesus* (1 Thessalonians 4:1, 2 NASB).

Introduction

One obvious advantage of today’s information superhighway is the ability for those, who no longer live near, to communicate regularly and rapidly. Many former members of our church, who have moved away, will weigh in on a regular basis on what is taking place in their former church. It is encouraging and heartwarming.

Previous leaders in our church will communicate and encourage me as I seek to continue to minister in their former local church family. At some credible level, this reveals a ministerial authenticity. They loved their church family and the idea of not, at some level, keeping up to date is not an option for them. They still desire to know and continue to desire to help.

This was the nature of the Apostle Paul’s relationship with the church of the Thessalonians. Satan had somehow hindered Paul from enjoying face to face ministry with this church so, when he “**could no longer endure it**” (1 Thessalonians 3:5) he sent Timothy to establish these Christians and encourage them concerning their faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

It was with a pastoral heart that Paul desired that in their walk with Christ, they “**excel still more**” (1 Thessalonians 4:1). Paul compares his

own heart toward them as affectionate nursing mother, and an instructional father (1 Thessalonians 2:7, 8, 11). Finally, he offers guidance on how they might comfort one another at the loss of loved one (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11).

He is not merely seeking to comfort them. He wants them to learn how to fill that responsibility. We see, more than once, a phrase along the lines of, **“comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11, 14).**

Survey of 1 Thessalonians

The epistle begins with words of encouragement. Mostly new believers would be uplifted by the words of Paul due to their faith and the good example they provided for others. Their hearts would be lifted to hear that they had become...

...examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. ⁸ 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 (1 Thessalonians 1:7, 8).

Never underestimate the need we have to encourage one another in this manner. Discern vulnerabilities in your spiritual siblings and be ready to animate with words of invigoration. You might say to yourself, ‘ah, but that person is grumpy and anti-social.’ My friend, that may be the very person who needs to hear it most.

Early in this epistle Paul introduces the thorny topic of election. Why would he do such a thing? Why throw such a loaded grenade into the campfire of these spiritual neophytes? Election can be such a source of controversy. Was Paul hoping this rhubarb would sharpen their debate skills? I think not.

Paul nestles this in the midst of words designed to uplift. The doctrine of election is to produce peace and assurance in the believer’s heart? See where he places it. Paul was remembering their...

...work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father,

⁴ knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God (1 Thessalonians 1:3, 4).

But if election is God choosing us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), how do we know we are in that number? Paul answers that in the next verse.

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

He will later state it more thoroughly.

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 Thessalonians 2:13).

If the word of God resonates true in your heart, it is an indication that God is your Father. His Spirit bearing witness with ours that we belong to Him (Romans 8:16). Conversely, those who claim Christ while rejecting His word remain on the weak and shifting sands (Matthew 7:24-27).

Why would such a doctrine as election provide such solace? Among other things it is because we recognize that our inclusion among those who can enjoy the peace of God and riches of heaven is not contingent upon something as fickle and fragile as mere human decision-making. That any decision I made to believe and follow Jesus found its origins in the antecedent decision of Almighty God in the hidden chambers of eternity.

Years ago, I competed in the Pan Pacific Conference Games in New Zealand. I wasn't part of the United States National Team. I was already in New Zealand and had an international competition permit. I would have liked to have competed for the U.S. but was not selected to be on the team. Nonetheless, I competed independently and had a nice finish; even better than some of the U.S. team members.

Afterwards, some of the team suggested I get in the photo with the American team. They even provided a shirt that looked a bit like the team uniform. I was insecure about such an action. I wasn't actually on the

team. There was a meeting where the team was selected, and I was not included. Even though my performance was adequate, I wasn't really part of it. I opted out.

At a level that is infinitely higher, we can be assured of a place in the family of God, not because we have an adequate performance or finagle a uniform. It is much deeper, richer and substantial. God has chosen us to be His own. We know this is true of us because we believe. We have been given the gift of faith.

This weaves nicely into the second chapter. It is in this chapter that Paul likens himself to a nursing mother and instructive father. Since the faithful response to the true word of God is an indicator of being in God's favor, there may be no greater act of paternal/maternal love and affection than to make every effort to deliver that word. In chapter two these young Christians are reminded of this very thing. It was not an easy task for the apostle. In the midst of great conflict Paul proved trustworthy to deliver, not his own message, but God's message.

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. ⁵ For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness— God is witness (1 Thessalonians 2:4, 5).

Many are the temptations to somehow better the word of God, to improve the gospel-as if such a thing can happen! History is rife with those who thought they could somehow ameliorate what God has determined to be words of life and redemption. Keep in mind that chapter one doesn't happen in this epistle apart from chapter two. Faithful Christians come through the instrument of a faithful heralding of biblical truth.

But it is not a matter of putting together an effective, accurate message then moving on. As mentioned earlier, Paul would hear of this church and seek to have them established. In chapter three he mentions sending Timothy to this end.

Having recently taken a bit ill, I would watch those who fill the pulpit in our own church. I felt they did a fine job. I sought to worship and not critique, but it is unavoidable that I consider how those for whom I am accountable to God might be fed.

A story is told of the great British preacher, Martin Lloyd Jones being ill and unable to preach. He was well enough, though, to sit and listen to others preach in his stead. When asked his assessment of his substitutes, he responded.

I can forgive a man for a bad sermon, I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me the sense that, though he is inadequate himself, he is handling something which is very great and very glorious, if he gives me some dim glimpse of the majesty and the glory of God, the love of Christ my Saviour, and the magnificence of the Gospel. If he does that I am his debtor, and I am profoundly grateful to him.

It is through faithful preaching that God brings in His children. It is also through faithful preaching and interaction within the congregation that we are established in the faith.

We are introduced with this call to purity as we move into chapter four. Paul will exhort us to abstain from sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Sexual immorality is a very selfish act. It harms the other individual and can be a source of heartache for an entire community.

...that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵ not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter (1 Thessalonians 4:4-6).

Lest we forget in our rapidly changing society, human sexual passions are beautifully and exclusively designed to be enjoyed by husbands and wives. It should come as no surprise that both biblically and historically, the fall of cultures and the nations they form, are almost always accompanied by some form of sexual licentiousness.

Toward the end of chapter four we begin to learn of the final resurrection as a level of depth we don't often see in the epistles. It's almost as if these young believers needed to be catechized on their eternal hope. Simply put, on the day of judgment, those who have died will be

rise first then those who are alive will be **“caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).**

This hope of a final resurrection and entrance into eternal glory is the Christian’s hope.

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14).

Death in Christ is entirely unlike the way the world faces death. Hence the word **“sleep.”** The seventeenth century Reformed pastor, Richard Baxter once offered the words:

I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.

If our ministry does not address this inevitability, it is no ministry at all. Many a funeral within our small community I have been confronted with the reality that I face a gathering of souls who may very well still dead in their sins. You want them to know of a God in heaven who loves sinners and lovingly provides all that is necessary for eternal peace.

Paul spoke of the former lives of Christians in this manner. They were **“strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).** But things became different. May these words ring true of all of us!

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13).

The design of these are comfort. Chapter four ends with the words:

Therefore comfort one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

We are to be comforted at the prospect of our own death and the death of the ones we love who are in Christ.

The final chapter of 1 Thessalonians concerns times and seasons and may be understood to address events soon to happen then proleptically toward the final judgment. We haven't time to plumb this in one brief sermon.

Enough to say that we are exhorted to recognize and highly esteem those who God has placed to watch over our souls. This would include elders and deacons. We are called to warn the unruly, comfort the fainthearted and display patience. We are to be loving, prayerful, wise and self-controlled.

The epistle concludes with a wonderful benediction. Let us conclude with this as well.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you *is faithful*, who also will do *it* (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24).

Questions for Study

1. To what extent should we concern ourselves with our brothers and sisters in Christ, once/if we have moved away (pages 2, 3)?
2. In what ways did the Apostle Paul seek to encourage the church of the Thessalonians? Have you found yourself encouraged by others? How? How do you seek to encourage (page 3)?
3. How is the doctrine of election a source of assurance and solace (pages 3-5)?
4. Why is sexual purity so critical? In what ways can sexual immorality be destructive (page 6)?
5. Paul teaches of Judgment Day in chapter four. Review this. Why is this important for Christians (pages 6, 7)?