

The Perfect Imperfect Church

1 & 2 Thessalonians Overview

(preached Pine Grove 7/10/16; Sunday PM)

Introduction

Letter writing is thing of the past.

Though I learned the proper way to write a letter in school, I don't think I have actually written more than two or three formal letters in my life.

Though it is nice gesture to give and get a handwritten note, our society simply moves too fast to wait even a few days on a letter.

Now, you can pick up a phone or send a text or an email and communicate with someone almost immediately...

Communication that used to take weeks, now takes minutes..

However, in the first century, letter writing was the way to communicate over long distances...

It was one of the ways God used to communicate truth to his churches..

In most cases, churches only received one letter from the Lord by the hand of Paul..

But two churches, the Corinthian church, and the Thessalonians church, received two letters..

However, some churches required more than one letter...

The Corinthian church let too much of their evil culture in and they simply didn't know how to do church, so God gave them 2 letters...

The Thessalonians church was a little different...

Though they were surrounded by a evil culture, they didn't let it in like the Corinthians...

Instead, they let it bring them down.

So, God inspired Paul to write them 2 letters not to correct them (even though there it correction in them) but to comfort them...

Look, I think we can relate to the Thessalonians.

The culture in which we live can really depress us if we let it...

Suffering children, injustice, attacks on Christ and his church are enough to want to make us crawl in a hole and wait to die.

Yet, we are not called to do that at all...

We are called to live out our faith in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

But what motivates us to do that?

One thing that God is going to use to encourage the Thessalonians in both letters is this...

We work and live knowing that the world will not continue this way forever...

We work and live looking forward to the return of Christ for church...

What can keep you going when the world is depressing and dragging you down?

Knowing that your King is coming to rescue you at any time and set the world in order is a great encouragement to keep going when the going gets tough...

And that thought of the return of Christ is a thought that is found in both letters to the Thessalonians..

We are going to look at both books tonight, and we continue our journey through the entire Bible book by book...

Let's begin with Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians..

Now, the city of Thessalonica was huge in its day with a population of over 200,000 people..

It was located on the Aegean Sea, and was the capital of Macedonia, which is modern day Greece..

A major east west trade road passed through Thessalonica, so there was a Jewish population there in Paul's day.

Paul passed through the city on his second missionary journey in 50 AD, and as was his custom, he stopped in the Jewish synagogue and began to preach Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah..

Some folks were saved and a church was established in Thessalonica.

Now, the Jewish officials never took too kindly to people leaving the synagogue and being converted to Christ, so they quickly ran Paul out of town....

Paul went to the next town, which was Berea and did the same thing again...

They threw him out of town as well, and Paul left Berea as well to head south to Athens..

Do you get the picture?

Go preach Christ to the Jews. See some saved by God.
Establish a church there and move on...

But Paul never forgot about these churches and he often revisited them..

In the Thessalonians case, Paul sent Timothy back to them to check on them...

Timothy comes back to Paul and all of Paul's team meets up again in Corinth....

And while he is in Corinth, Timothy gives Paul a report of what he saw in Thessalonica...

And then maybe a year later in 51 BC, God inspires Paul to write a letter to the Thessalonians based on Timothy's report....

This first letter is 1 Thessalonians, and it really has a very warm feel to it...

If your remember from this morning, the letter to the Galatians was cold and straight to the point, but this letter to the Thessalonians is just the opposite...

It is encouraging and helpful...

Now, what is the difference?

Well, the Galatians were getting the gospel wrong, which must always be met with the strongest rebuke..

The Thessalonians were simply immature and frightened and persecuted...

They didn't need a slap in the face; they needed a pat on the back...

And Paul sets down to do that through this letter...

It is 5 chapters long, but I outlined in in 3 sections, that you can see on the screen..

Let's begin in chapter 1 as Paul opens his letter expressing....

I. Thanksgivings for the Thessalonians (1)

Look with me at verses 1-4 of chapter 1...

***1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.
2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making
mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in
mind your work of faith and labor of love and
[a]steadfastness of hope [b]in our Lord Jesus Christ in
the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing,
brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;***

Paul begins the letter in such a gentle way by thanking God for the Thessalonians church..

And telling them that he has been praying for them, which he most certainly had...

Paul didn't throw around that phrase like we do...

He had been praying for the Thessalonians church, and he was truly thankful for them...

Let me remind, us...

If we say that we will pray for someone, do it..

And if we tell people that we have prayed for them,
make sure you have....

Then skip down to verses 8-10...

8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a [d]reception we had [e]with you, and how you turned to God from [f]idols to serve [g]a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from [h]heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

Pau tells the church there that they have reputation in the world that is all over the area....

The report about the Thessalonians church is this...

They are the real deal.

They turned from their idols and turned to God.

And that what true salvation always is..

It is a man or woman turning from the worship of idol, - (whether that is self worship or career worship or pleasure worship),- to the worship of God alone..

The Thessalonians had done that and everyone was talking about so much that Paul even heard about it...

And that must have encouraged him...

But please notice what the summary of the Christian life...

True believers are those who turn from idols but then do two things...

Number one is....they serve the Lord, and then look at verse 10....

True believers are not just servers, they are also waiters....

The Thessalonians are to wait for Jesus to rescue them from the wrath to come...

One of the reasons I support a pre-tribulation rapture are verses like this...

The Thessalonians need encouragement...

They are surrounded by people who worship idols and practice all sorts of evil..

And the purpose of this letter is to call to press on, to keep going...

And what is a great encouragement to keep going in an evil culture...

Keep your head up; Jesus is going to rescue us before it gets real bad...

People who hold to a rapture of the church at the middle of tribulation or who even think that we will go through all seen years of the tribulation...

They are looking and preparing for the wrath of God to begin on this earth..

They aren't looking for Christ...

And if you aren't looking for a rescue, there isn't much encouragement...

Instead, you are digging a hole to hide in until the tribulation is over...

You don't have a blessed hope; you have a blessed pessimism...

The Thessalonians were discouraged and down, and Paul tells them...

Get out and serve and the Lord and wait for Jesus...

He is going to rescue you from the wrath that is coming...

And since you will be out of here before it all gets real bad, give it all you got to the Lord today...

And so, that is chapter 1...

Which is mainly Paul's expression of thanksgiving and encouragement to the church at Thessalonica..

In chapter 2, we move from thanksgiving to Paul's spirit inspired...

II. Thoughts for the Thessalonians (2-3)

In these 2 chapters, Paul simply recalls the past events in the life of the Thessalonians church...

He reminds them of how he came to them and how they responded to the gospel in chapter 2...

And look, the past can be a great source of encouragement in times when you struggle....

When you are discouraged, take a quick inventory of what God has already done for you..

And Paul simply tells them, look I came to you with no ulterior motive...

I came, I worked, I preached, and you responded to God's words spoken through me...

And so I care for you and I wish I was with it...

Then he moves from those reminders to some concerns he has for the church in chapter 3...

He knows that they are being persecuted of their faith, but he tells them that is to be expected...

And he encourages them once once in chapter 3 by saying that he is pleased to hear that they have endured...

Then the letter takes a different direction in chapters 4-5 as Paul offers some....

III. Teaching for the Thessalonians (4-5)

We will just touch a few of Paul's instructions to the church because they all come to us as well..

In the first 8 verses of chapter 4, Paul simply calls the Thessalonians to sexual purity, commanding them to abstain from lustful passions outside of marriage...

In verses 9-12, Paul calls the believers at Thessalonica to love and quiet life...

Look at verse 9....

9 Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; 10 for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, 11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, 12 so that you will [i]behave properly toward outsiders and [j]not be in any need.

Please take note of a couple things here...

God honors those who live a quiet life...

Folks who are trouble makers or drama queens or busybodies or gossips...

Christians should not be known as people who stir the pot...

We are called to be peacemakers and live quietly...

And then take note of how to be in need in this world....

Work with your hands...

We are going to see this in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, but many in the church there didn't work...

They even took advantage of the church's generosity by living off their giving...

Paul says it here and he will say in stronger later, but the secret to having your needs met is not reaching out a hands but using your hands to do work...

I never encourage anyone to be selfish...

God is not selfish and His children should not be selfish...

But I never encourage anyone to be foolish either...

God is wisdom and His people must be wise...

Sometimes your generosity doesn't help people at all; it enslaves them by making them think that they don't have to work to support their family.

The best way to have your needs met is to work...

Paul will go on to say in 2 Thessalonians, "if you don't work, you don't eat."

That doesn't mean that we don't help the poor, but sometimes the best help is a No and not a Yes.

The teaching then continues in verses 13-18 with Paul's instruction about the events of the end...

The Thessalonians were grieving over Christians that had died in their church...

They were wondering if they would ever see them again..

Here is what Paul writes in verses 13-18....

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep [k]in Jesus.

15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive [l]and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a [m]shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive [n]and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Though this is the greatest instruction about a rapture of the church...

The idea of the church being caught up together to meet the Lord in air is where we get the word rapture...

Though this is very valuable information on that, the point here is this...

You will see your loved ones again if you are saved...

If you are living when the Lord returns to rapture the church, he will bring the souls of believers with him...

They will hang in the air with the Lord, their bodies will rise from graves all over the world...

Their bodies will be changed into eternal bodies...

They will reunite with their souls...

And then those of us who may still be alive will then get our new bodies in an instant, and we will rise in the air, meet with out Lord and our loved ones...

And be whipped back to heaven where we will be with the Lord...

The great truth here is that there is never a good bye between Christians...

It is always,...

“I will see you later..”

Great truth there church, right?

The final chapter of 1 Thessalonians also includes a little more instruction from Paul as he talks in verses 1-11 of chapter 5 about more end times events...

Books have been written about these verses, so I don't have time to go through every part...

Let me hit the highlights though...

In verses 1-8, the point is this...

The end will come without warning...

I think the rapture of the church could happen at any moment...

It is what is called a signless event..

Some events of the end times are preceded by signs and warning...

The rapture doesn't need a sign or a warning...

All of human history is the sign and warning...

The only sign will be a trumpet blast, and then it will happen in an instant and be too late for millions...

But in verses 9-11, we read this in relation to the attitude of the church toward the end times...

Verse 9...

9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. 11 Therefore [h]encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

Once again, I think verse 9 is further support for a pretribulational rapture...

The church is not defined for the wrath that will come upon the whole world at the 7 year tribulation period...

We are destined to be saved out of it by Christ according to verse 9, which to me is clearly the rapture of the church before the wrath begins in the tribulation...

And then notice this which I think is very important in verse 11....

Encourage one another and build one another up with this knowledge of the end times...

Let me simply say this...

There is no encouragement to the church if we are preparing to go through the tribulation...

There is no reason to be upbeat or built up with that knowledge...

That knowledge would depress me and tear me down...

However, if I know that a rescue is coming before the tribulation and if I know that I will be reunited with loved ones at that rescue...

I have every reasons to be encouraged by that teaching...

And I would add this...

When I got saved, I had much anxiety and asked many question about the events of the end...

As God would have it, I was discipled by a man who didn't believe in a rapture of the church...

He thought the church would live through the tribulation and then Jesus would return...

I used to hammer him with questions about what to expect and who to be prepared for such tragic circumstances of the tribulation...

And he dodged my questions and told me to mature in my faith before I thought about all that...

You know why he told me that?

Because there is no encouragement if you believe you will live through the 7 worst years this planet has ever seen..

There is no joy if that is what you think you may see and lead your family through...

However, you can obey verse 11 and you can encourage one another if you know that Jesus is coming to rescue you from the wrath that is coming...

The Thessalonians were living in difficult days...

And they needed encouragement...

So Paul taught them about the end times to encourage them...

And the only view of the end times that gives encouragement is the view that we are destined for wrath as church....

But we are looking for deliverance....

Paul then ends the chapter with a hodge-podge of more commands for them to follow in verses 12-22 before closing his letter in verses 23-28...

Now, let's flip the page to 2 Thessalonians and cover it real briefly tonight since you are familiar with the setting and the people of the church there....

From what we can piece together, it seems that Paul probably sent that first letter to the Thessalonians by a messenger in AD 51...

And from what we assume, that messenger delivered that letter, probably stayed with that church for a while, and then brought Paul another report from Thessalonica...

It may have been based on the messengers report that Paul immediately sat down and wrote another letter....

Maybe he told Paul, "Oh it much worse there now that you thought..the people are being attacked by everyone for their faith.."

You need to do something...

It is possible that Paul wrote the first letter in the spring and the second letter a few months later in the summer...

All we know is this...

The second letter came pretty close after the first letter because Paul follows up with similar information...

This second letter can also be divided into 3 parts...

I. Comfort for the Thessalonians (1)

Once again, Paul starts this second letter with encouragement and comforting words for the Thessalonians....

Verse 3...

3 We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; 4 therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your [a]perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. 5 This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

Long story short, Paul is encouraged that the Thessalonians are enduring under persecution...

Paul says that he speaks proudly of them in his travels to various churches..

But then we get a great reminder of why we are often persecuted as believers in verse 5...

Persecution and our ability to endure it is a clear reminder that our faith is real and our destination is to be with the Lord...

Phony churches and Christians head for the hills when attacks come...

They fold their tent and head home, but those who are truly saved will make it to the end...

The Thessalonians should be grateful for their persecution because it is proving that their Christianity is real...

Though my prayer is that persecution of churches would never happen in this country, if it does, you will 1000s of churches close their doors....

And it isn't because they are trying to be nice, it will simply occur because they aren't real churches...

Persecution purifies the church and trims off the fat of people who are just playing church..

The Thessalonians were the real deal, and how do you know?

Because they took a licking and kept on ticking...

And Paul simply says in chapter 1, I am proud of you so keep it up..

The people who afflict you will eventually be afflicted by God Himself...

Then in chapter 2, Paul moves from offering comfort to offering correction....

II. Correction for the Thessalonians (2)

Teaching about the events of the end times often generates more questions than answers...

That was certainly true for the Thessalonians...

So, in chapter 2, Paul sets out to correct and offer a little more information about the end times...

We don't have time to get into all the details of these verses tonight, but here was the problem...

The Thessalonians were confused...

They expected to be raptured before the wrath to come, but with all the persecution they were enduring, they thought that maybe they had been left out of the rapture...

And were now in the tribulation period...

But Paul tells them in these verses...

Now the tribulation hasn't started yet...

The Anti-christ hasn't even been revealed yet...

You aren't in the tribulation even though it may seem that way...

You are simply being persecuted....

Besides, you are to be looking for a rescue, not looking for the Antichrist...

Stop listening to lies, remember I taught this on another occasion...

And then he ends this section with this in verses 15-16...

15 So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter [s]from us.

16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, 17 comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.

There you go again....

A correct understanding and holding to what the Scriptures teach about the end times is a source of comfort and not anxiety...

The Thessalonians misunderstanding of the end times had made them anxious thinking that they were going through the tribulation...

And that is true for everyone who misunderstands the events of the end times...

Let me tell you something, I have no anxiety about the end times...

And let me tell you why...

I have turned over every passage about the end and held it up and examined it...

And the more I arrive at a biblical view of the end will occur, the less anxiety I have...

The Thessalonians needed to hold to what God had inspired Paul to teach them and not wander off into the speculation of men..

III. Concern for the Thessalonians (3)

The final chapter of 2 Thessalonians is a call for the church there to do two things...

Number 1 is found in verses 1-5, and it is this...

Pray for their brothers and sisters in the Lord..

And then the second command was a restatement of the end of 1 Thessalonians...

To work and not to be lazy...

In fact, Paul calls the church to discipline those who were not working and even remove them from fellowship if necessary...

Let me read this section as it is a good reminder to us even today...

Verse 6....

6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you [f]keep away from every brother who [g]leads an [h]unruly life and not according to the tradition which [i]you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to [j]follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 8 nor did we eat [k]anyone's bread [l]without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; 9 not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would [m]follow our example. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their

own bread. 13 But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

14 If anyone does not obey our [n]instruction [o]in this letter, take special note of that person [p]and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.

15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but [q]admonish him as a brother.

That is pretty straightforward...

Work and eat your own bread and if a Christian refuses to do that..

Do not associate with him in order to shame him...

Paul then signs off in verses 16-18....

Conclusion

Since we are over, let me make a closing comment and quick application of these letters to us tonight...

The Thessalonians are the model church of the NT in many ways...

Filled with love, enduring hardships, staying the course, but even they weren't without problems...

People were lazy, people needed to grow in their knowledge of the Scriptures...

And the truth is this...

There are no perfect churches in a fallen world...

Because all of them are filled with imperfect people...

However, that is not an excuse to just throw our hands in the air and not care...

Rather, it is a call to live out our faith in an evil world and keep our eyes on the sky knowing that Christ is ready to come rescue us in the twinkling of eye...

Let us pray..