

**NOTE:**

For the past two years I have summarized the International Sunday school lesson. It is amazing how quickly those two years passed. The month of August will conclude my ministry in this area. The Lord has called me to serve in a different way. I pray my exploration of the lessons have been helpful to you in your study and spiritual growth. Please pray for me as I assume my new assignment.

*Ethel Williams*

## The Fellowship of Encouragement

Lesson for August 4, 2024

### Unit III: Eternal Hope

#### Adult Topic: Hope in Christian Fellowship

**Scriptural Background:** 1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

**Printed Text:** 1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

**Key verse:** *“Therefore, we never stop thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn’t think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.”* (1 Thessalonians 2:13, NLT)

In the fall of the year, Linda, a young woman, was traveling alone up the rutted and rugged highway from Alberta to the Yukon. Linda didn't know you don't travel to Whitehorse alone in a rundown Honda Civic, so she set off where only four-wheel drives normally venture. The first evening she found a room in the mountains near a summit and asked for a 5 A.M. wakeup call so she could get an early start. She couldn't understand why the clerk looked surprised at that request, but as she awoke to early-morning fog shrouding the mountain tops, she understood. Not wanting to look foolish, she got up and went to breakfast. Two truckers invited Linda to join them, and since the place was so small, she felt obliged. “Where are you headed?” one of the truckers asked. ‘Whitehorse’

“In that little Civic? No way! This pass is dangerous in weather like this.” “Well, I'm determined to try,” was Linda's gutsy, if not very informed, response. “Then I guess we're just going to have to hug you,” the trucker suggested. Linda drew back. “There's no way I'm going to let you touch me!”

“Not like THAT!” the truckers chuckled. “We'll put one truck in front of you and one in the rear. In that way, we'll get you through the mountains.” All that foggy morning Linda followed the two red dots in front of her and had the reassurance of a big escort behind her as they made their way safely through the mountains. Caught in the fog in our dangerous passage through life, we need to be “hugged.” With fellow Christians who know the way and can lead safely ahead of us, and with others behind, gently encouraging us along, we, too, can pass safely.

*Don Graham*

### Unifying Principle

People may become discouraged when long distances separate them from friends or family. What can relieve loneliness during long seasons of separation? When Paul could not visit the Thessalonians, he sent Timothy to visit them and to encourage their steadfastness as they awaited Christ's return. (*Sunday School Commentary, 2023-2024*, Townsend Press, p. 426)

Notes collected and developed by Ethel Williams

## Key Terms

1. **Accepted** (2:13) – Kindly received; regarded; agreed to; understood; received as a bill of exchange.
2. **Believe** (2:13) – To have a firm persuasion of anything. In some cases, to have full persuasion, approaching to certainty; in others, more doubt is implied. In theology, to believe sometimes expresses a mere assent of the understanding to the truths of the gospel. The word implies, with this assent of the mind, a yielding of the will and affections, accompanied with a humble reliance on Christ for salvation.
3. **Desire** (2:17) – An emotion or excitement of the mind, directed to the attainment or possession of an object from which pleasure, sensual, intellectual or spiritual, is expected. To express a wish to obtain; to ask; to request; to petition.
4. **Imitators** (2:14) – In the New Testament, followers of Christ emulating a God-approved example.
5. **Suffered** (2:14) – To endure; to support; to sustain; not to sink under.
6. **Thank** (2:13) – To express gratitude for a favor; to make acknowledgments to one for kindness bestowed.

## Lesson Background

1 Thessalonians was written by the Apostle Paul to the church he founded in the city of Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1–9). Though he lived among these people only a short time, he shows great love for these Gentile believers in this, his first of two letters to them. The Thessalonians likely faced severe persecution, and had sent many questions to Paul, which he addresses throughout the letter.

First Thessalonians consists of five chapters that comprise two major sections. The first section addresses Paul's personal thoughts concerning the church. He expresses much thanks for the way the Thessalonians live (1 Thessalonians 1:2–10), describing them as positive examples for the churches. Chapter 2 retells some of Paul's ministry to this young church (1 Thessalonians 2:1–16). He concludes the chapter with a longing to see them again to bring him glory and joy (1 Thessalonians 2:17–20). Though Paul is concerned regarding the status of the church (1 Thessalonians 3:1–5), Timothy had recently returned with good news of their faith and love.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1–8, Paul recalls his ministry at Thessalonica. He had been maltreated at Philippi, but his suffering did not deter him from moving on to Thessalonica and declaring the gospel there. His willingness to suffer in order to share the gospel showed he wasn't motivated by money or self-glory. God had entrusted him with the gospel, and he had been true to that trust. His message was truly from God. His motives for preaching the gospel were pure. And his ministry was genuine. He testifies that the Thessalonian Christians had become “very dear to us”.

Just as a mother gently cares for her children, Paul was gentle among the Thessalonian believers. He would not be a burden to them, but provided for his own needs. Most likely, Paul did this by working part-time as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), much as many modern evangelists need to work in some kind of secular field in order to support their ministry work. The Thessalonians could see that Paul was a righteous servant of God, and just as a responsible father encourages and instructs his children, so Paul acted as a father on behalf of the believers at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:9–12).

## Lesson in Depth

### I. Fellowship in Suffering (1 Thessalonians 2:13-16)

**For this reason we also thank God without ceasing:** Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians, because they had responded positively to the Word of God, and the Word had produced fruit in their lives.

**When you received the word of God:** Paul earnestly believed and taught others that God had spoken to man and that we have recorded this **word of God**. Paul believed in a voice that speaks to mankind with the authority of eternity, and speaks above mere human opinion. Since we do have this **word of God**, we have a true voice of authority.

Some people like to say that there is a **word of God**, but that we can't be sure of what He says. When we appeal to the Bible, they like to reply, "That's just your interpretation." There are certainly some places where the **word of God** is hard to precisely interpret, but there are not many such places. If we cannot know what God has spoken, then He may as well not have spoken at all.

**You welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God:** The Thessalonians received the **word of God** as **it is in truth**. Paul presented it **not as the word of men**, and the Thessalonians received it as **the word of God**.

Not everyone receives this message as **the word of God**. Yet when they do not receive it, it reflects upon *them*, not upon the message. "That you have not perceived spiritual things is true; but it is no proof that there are none to perceive. The whole case is like that of the Irishman who tried to upset evidence by non-evidence. Four witnesses saw him commit a murder. He pleaded that he was not guilty, and wished to establish his innocence by producing forty persons who did not see him do it. Of what use would that have been? So, if forty people declare that there is no power of the Holy Ghost going with the word, this only proves that the forty people do not know what others do know." (Spurgeon)

**Which also effectively works in you who believe:** Paul's confidence in the word of God wasn't a matter of wishful thinking or blind faith. He could see that it effectively works in those who believe. God's Word works, it doesn't only bring information or produce feelings. There is power in the word of God to change lives.

**For you, brethren, became imitators:** As the Thessalonians imitated the apostles in their commitment to the Lord (1:6), they also imitated the Judean churches, since they also suffered at the hands of their own people.

Not only were the Thessalonians imitators of Paul and the Lord, but also of the churches in Judea, in the sense that they both were persecuted for Christ's sake (Acts 4:1-4; 5:26; 8:1). They drank Christ's cup of suffering (Matthew 26:39) and walked in the way of the Old Testament prophets (Matthew 21:33-46; Luke 13:34).

To proclaim you were a Christian brought great persecution. In Judea, the persecution of the Christians came from the Jews. Here in Thessalonica it came from all those who did not believe. The church at Thessalonica was a Gentile church.

**For you also suffered the same things:** When the Thessalonians responded to the Gospel, they became the targets of persecution. As they did, they were not alone, because those among **the churches of God** have often suffered persecution. The Thessalonian Christians became **imitators** of those who had suffered before them.

The Thessalonians willingly **suffered the same things** because they were convinced that Paul brought them not the word of man, but the Word of God. The word of man isn't worth suffering for, but a true message from God is worth it.

**Churches** is the ancient Greek word *ekklesia*; it was not a specifically religious word. Christians passed over many Greek words that were commonly used for religious brotherhoods. "The force of this is that Christianity is not just another religion. It is not to be named with any of the words proper to religions in general [of that day]." (Morris)

**Who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us:** Paul comforted these suffering Christians with the assurance that they were not the first to suffer this way. **The Lord Jesus** faced persecution, and the Christians in **Judea** faced it first. Additionally, Paul and his associates were also persecuted.

**Who killed... the Lord Jesus:** Here Paul wrote that his own countrymen (the Judeans) had **killed... the Lord Jesus**. But Paul knew well that the Jews of Judea were not the *only* ones responsible for the murder of Jesus. The Romans had their full share of guilt, so *both* Jew and Gentile were guilty.

**And they do not please God and are contrary to all men:** Paul also comforted the Thessalonian Christians with the awareness that *they* were right, that *they* are the ones pleasing God. This was necessary assurance because they were persecuted by religious people and might wonder if these other religious people were in fact right before God in their persecuting.

**Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins:** Here Paul revealed what offended the religious persecutors of the Thessalonians so much. They were outraged that Gentiles could be saved without first becoming Jews. This exclusive attitude filled up the measure of their sins.

"The Jews' opposition to the work of the missionaries among the Gentiles was not due to the fact that they were seeking to win Gentiles. The Jews themselves were vigorously engaged in this period of their history in actively proselyting Gentiles. Their fierce opposition was due to the fact that Christian missionaries offered salvation to Gentiles without demanding that they first become Jews." (Hiebert)

"The plural 'sins' points to the aggregate of their separate evil acts, and not to the general abstract concept of 'sin.'" (Morris)

**But wrath has come upon them to the uttermost:** Paul comforted the Thessalonians by assuring them that God would indeed take care of their persecutors. When Christians forget this, they often disgrace and curse themselves by returning persecution for persecution towards others.

“At the same time we should notice that Paul’s anger is the anger of a man with his own nation, with his own people. He is very much part of them, and he sorrows for their fate.” (Morris)

## II. Fellowship – the Tie that Binds (1 Thessalonians 2:17-20)

**Away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face:** Paul knew that the Thessalonians appreciated the comfort he gave, but they wondered why he didn’t come and bring this comfort in person. They naturally thought that this would be much better. Yet Paul assured them that the reason was not a lack of love or desire on his part.

**We wanted to come to you... but Satan hindered us:** It wasn’t that Paul did not *want* to visit the Thessalonians. It was that **Satan hindered** Paul and his associates. Paul assured the Thessalonians that he desired to be with them, but he was hindered by Satan, and that this happened time and again.

The Thessalonians were mostly Gentile converts, yet when Paul mentioned **Satan** here, he gave no further explanation. This shows that in the few weeks he was there, Paul taught the Thessalonians much about Satan and spiritual warfare.

**Satan hindered us:** Paul, in all his apostolic ministry and authority, could still be blocked by Satan. But Paul did not just receive this Satanic hindrance in a fatalistic way. He did something about the hindrance.

First, Paul understood that this was *Satanic* hindrance. He knew this was not a random circumstance, but a direct attack from Satan. Paul had the discernment to know.

Second, Paul had faith. **For a short time** means that Paul knew it would only be a **short time** until the roadblock was overcome.

Third, Paul was committed to fight against the roadblock any way he could. If he couldn’t be there in person, his letter would go for him and teach and encourage them in his absence. Many scholars believe that 1 Thessalonians was Paul’s earliest letter written as an apostle to a church. If this is the case, then Satan’s roadblock got Paul started on writing letters to the churches.

Finally, God brought the victory. Acts 20:1-5 describes Paul’s eventual return to Thessalonica and to other churches in the area.

“Supposing that we have ascertained that hindrances in our way really come from Satan, WHAT THEN? I have but one piece of advice, and that is, go on, hindrance or no hindrance, in the path of duty as God the Holy Ghost enables you.” (Spurgeon)

**For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing?** Paul assured the Thessalonians that he could never forget them because they were his glory and his **joy**. His inability to visit should never be taken as a lack of love towards the Thessalonians.

Perhaps Paul would say that he didn’t need a crown in heaven because these precious ones were his crown of victory. Those whom we bring to Jesus and disciple are a crown of victory for us.

### III. Fellowship Finds A Way (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

**Therefore, when we could no longer endure it:** The agony of separation between spiritual parent, Paul, and his children in Thessalonica became unbearably painful (verse 5).

**Left at Athens alone:** Paul and Silas stayed behind while Timothy returned (verse 2). This would not be the last time that Timothy went to a church in Paul's place (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10; Philippians 2:19-24; 1 Timothy 1:3). For the sake of the Thessalonians, Paul was willing to be left in Athens alone. It cost him something to send Timothy to the Thessalonians, and he thought it was good to pay that cost.

**Sent Timothy... to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith:** In the previous chapter Paul explained how much he wanted to be with the Thessalonians during their time of trial (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18). However, since Paul could not be with the Thessalonians himself, he did the next best thing. He sent his trusted companion and fellow worker Timothy to them.

**Our brother and minister of God:** "*Minister* is not an official title and does not connote an ordained minister in the modern sense of the term. The word rather designates one who renders a service of some kind to another. It speaks of the servant in relationship to his work, stressing his activity of serving." (Hiebert)

"Originally the word denoted the service of a table waiter, and from that it came to signify lowly service of any kind. It was often used by the early Christians to give expression to the service that they habitually were to render to both God and to man. Where a word like 'slave,' which is often used of Christians, puts the emphasis on the personal relation, this word draws attention to the act of service being rendered." (Morris)

**To establish you and encourage you concerning your faith:** Paul wanted Timothy to do two things – to **establish and encourage** the Thessalonians. Both are necessary but *establishing* comes first. *Encouragement* can really only come after we are *established* in the right direction; otherwise, we are only *encouraged* in the wrong course.

"When Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica it was not nearly so much to inspect the Church there as it was to help it." (Barclay)

**That no one should be shaken by these afflictions:** As the Thessalonians were established and encouraged, they would not **be shaken by these afflictions**. Timothy's ministry would help them to endure their present hardship.

The ancient Greek word translated **shaken**, came from the idea of a dog wagging its tail. "Flattered, as a dog flattereth, by moving his tail; the devil, by flattering you, with promise of more ease by a contrary course, will but do as a dirty dog, defile you with fawning." (Trapp)

Without a good understanding of the truth concerning the place of suffering in the life of the believer, we are in great danger of being **shaken** in our faith.

**These afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this:**

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that their time of present suffering was in God's control. These were afflictions they were **appointed to**. As part of the normal Christian life, believers have an appointment with affliction.

Some believe that Christians shouldn't suffer affliction and that God wants to teach us *only* by His Word, and not through trial or tribulation. It is true that there is a great deal of suffering we could be spared by simply obeying God's Word, and God wants to spare us that suffering. Nevertheless, suffering was good enough to teach Jesus (Hebrews 2:10 and 5:8), therefore it is good enough to teach us. God does teach the believer perseverance, obedience, how to comfort others, and deeper fellowship with Jesus in trials.

Some believe that the only kind of affliction a Christian should experience is *persecution*. The truth is that there are two ancient Greek words used to translate the concept of suffering, and neither of them is used exclusively in regard to persecution. *Thilipsis* was used for such things as physical pain, emotional hardships, and suffering under temptation. *Pasko* was used for such things as physical sufferings unrelated to persecution, suffering under temptation, and hardships in a general sense.

Some believe that affliction means God is angry at the believer. The truth is that affliction means that God loves us enough to give the *best* when we may only desire what is *easy*. The symbol of Christianity is the cross, not a feather bed. Affliction is just part of following Jesus; therefore, Paul recognized that Christians are **appointed to affliction**.

“Surveying the whole Christian movement, he saw suffering everywhere as the result of loyalty to the faith; and he did not conceive of it merely as something to be endured. He saw God ruling over all, and knew that this pathway of pain was a Divinely-arranged one.” (Morgan)

**We told you before when we were with you:** When Paul was with the Thessalonians (just a few months before writing this letter) he warned them they **would suffer tribulation**. Though he was only with them a few weeks, he taught them about the place of suffering in the Christian life.

**We would suffer tribulation:** In Jesus' parable of the soils (Matthew 13:1-23), He described the way that some fall away when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word – Jesus said *when* tribulation arises, and not *if* tribulation comes. The Christian's faith will be tested. Paul knew this, and as a good pastor, he warned the Thessalonians.

**When I could no longer endure it:** Paul could barely **endure** the thought that the faith of the Thessalonians might crumble under this season of affliction, so he sent Timothy to both check on them and to help them.

“Paul's subdued missionary activities at Corinth before the return of Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5) seems to indicate that Paul was deeply depressed because of the heavy burden of suspense and uncertainty concerning the outcome of his mission at Thessalonica.” (Hiebert)

**Lest by some means the tempter had tempted you:** Paul recognized that the tempter – that is, Satan – wanted to exploit this season of suffering. As in the case of Job, Satan wanted to tempt the Thessalonians to give up on God.

**And our labor might be in vain:** If the Thessalonians did waver in their faith, Paul would consider his work among them to have been **in vain**. In the parable of the soils (Matthew 13:1-23) Jesus described the seed that withered under the heat of trials. If the Thessalonians withered, Paul's hard work as a farmer among them would have born no harvest.

Paul *did* something to help prevent the Thessalonians from falling under their affliction. He sent Timothy to them, because those who are in affliction need the help of other godly people.

### Lesson Summary

1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5 contains several key themes and lessons that can be applied to the lives of believers. Here are some lessons from these passages:

#### 1. Thankfulness for the Word of God (2:13)

Paul expresses gratitude that the Thessalonians received the message not as human words but as the Word of God. This teaches the importance of:

- **Valuing Scripture:** Recognizing the Bible as God's Word and allowing it to work in believers' lives.
- **Receiving with Faith:** Accepting the message of the Gospel with faith and letting it transform one's life.

#### 2. Endurance in Suffering (2:14-16)

Paul acknowledges that the Thessalonians faced persecution from their own countrymen, similar to the experiences of the churches in Judea. Lessons include:

- **Perseverance:** Continuing in faith despite opposition and hardship.
- **Solidarity:** Understanding that suffering for faith is a common experience among believers worldwide.

#### 3. Spiritual Warfare and Hindrances (2:17-18)

Paul speaks of his intense longing to visit the Thessalonians but mentions that Satan hindered him. This highlights:

- **Awareness of Spiritual Opposition:** Recognizing that there are spiritual forces that may attempt to hinder the work of the Gospel.
- **Determination:** Maintaining a strong desire to encourage and support fellow believers despite obstacles.

#### 4. Joy in the Faith of Others (2:19-20)

Paul finds great joy and pride in the faithfulness of the Thessalonian believers, viewing them as his crown and glory. This teaches:

- **Investing in Others:** Finding joy in the spiritual growth and faithfulness of others.
- **Eternal Perspective:** Valuing relationships in the context of eternity and the ultimate reward.

#### 5. Concern for Spiritual Welfare (3:1-5)

Paul sends Timothy to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonians in their faith. Key lessons include:

- **Support and Encouragement:** The importance of sending and receiving encouragement and support in the faith community.
- **Preparation for Trials:** Preparing believers to endure trials and not be unsettled by them.
- **Pastoral Care:** Paul's example of caring deeply for the spiritual well-being of others, ensuring they are growing and standing firm in their faith.

From these verses, believers can learn the significance of receiving God's Word with faith, enduring through trials, recognizing spiritual opposition, finding joy in the faith of others, and actively supporting and encouraging one another in their spiritual journeys. These lessons emphasize the importance of a strong, supportive, and enduring faith community.