

TUTORIAL
3.21

A Reason to Continue

Bible presenter Scot Keen analyses the apostle Paul's credibility as a Gospel messenger in this tutorial. We learn that Paul motivates the Thessalonian church to keep going, assuring them that they can trust the Message he gave them.

Introduction

In our previous tutorial, we looked at what some would call the ideal church plant. The Thessalonians believers had welcomed the Word of God, they had a healthy walk with God from the beginning and they became an example to others. If 1 Thessalonians chapter one is the standard for the ideal church plant, then 1 Thessalonians chapter two is the standard for the ideal church planters. So hopefully this portion of Scripture challenges us to consider serving others with the Gospel of Christ.

Paul is still developing his theme of perseverance in 1 Thessalonians chapter two. In essence Paul has two main goals in this chapter (1) motivating the church to keep going and (2) establishing his credibility as a messenger of the Gospel. We can gather from this that most likely people were attacking Paul's character. It is not hard to see how this could happen. Paul planted a church and then was sent away by the believers to protect him, and possibly even to protect them.

After Paul is sent away, it is easy to imagine how some people could ask questions like, "If this man loved them so much, if he was such a great guy, why did he leave when things got tough?" Paul defends his character and he does it not for his own sake, but I believe Paul defends his character so that the believers will continue to trust in the Message that they heard from him. Paul begins his defence with the claim that he is a faithful steward of the Gospel.

Paul's defense

Look with me at 1 Thessalonians 2:1. Paul says, "You yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain." They had a purpose in coming to Thessalonica. Now look at verse two, "After we had already suffered

and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.” Paul is basically saying, “Guys you know that we're genuine because why else would we suffer and still come to you and do the same thing that got us in trouble in Philippi?”

The fact that Paul preached the Gospel in Thessalonica in the midst of opposition shows that he was not trying to take advantage of them, but rather that he had been genuinely concerned for them. This opposition establishes his credibility. He says that they had suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, and we can read about this in Acts chapter sixteen. They were stripped of their clothing and Paul and Silas were beaten with rods.

After they had been beaten, they were placed in stocks and imprisoned. This is severe treatment to endure, and Paul is able to remind the Thessalonians that this happened. Somehow they knew that Paul had suffered for the sake of Gospel ministry when he turned up in Thessalonica, possibly by the scars on his back. Paul was bold to speak the Gospel in the midst of opposition. He was sold out for Christ and had a genuine concern for these people in Thessalonica who became believers and, because of that, was bold to share the Gospel.

Faithful stewards

Notice Paul says *boldness in our God*, and it reminds us that his boldness was not necessarily a natural boldness. Some people are naturally timid, as was Timothy, and we can be encouraged by texts such as this to know that even if we are not naturally bold, our boldness should not be coming from us anyway. Paul's boldness is in God, and so he could share the Gospel in the midst of opposition.

Now J. Vernon McGee, who has long since been with the Lord, said this, “If I were to pick the greatest sermon of Paul, I would choose his life in Thessalonica. It was not an exposition but an experience. He made his points on the pavement of the streets of Thessalonica.” Of course if Paul had not used words, then there would have been no church in Thessalonica, but I don't think that is what McGee is trying to say. He is just making the point that Paul has a beautiful testimony. He proclaimed the value of the Gospel just by virtue of being in Thessalonica after he had suffered in Philippi, and by persisting in preaching the Gospel, the very thing that got him in trouble in Philippi.

Paul gives the reason for his boldness in verse three, “Our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit,” which seems like an odd statement. Douglas Moo and D. A. Carson (in their intro to the New Testament) talk about people who travelled in the first century who would raise a following after presenting a certain message. They would then collect money and leave town.

Paul is defending himself against accusations like that. He was not in Thessalonica by error or deceit or impurity, in fact he says he was there *because* he was approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel. Now sometimes people are sceptical when you reach out to them, wondering what you hope to gain from them.

It is hard for people to believe that someone might be motivated simply out of a genuine concern for others. F.F. Bruce says this, "There are cynics who cannot believe that public or private action involving sacrifice is ever undertaken purely with a view to the well-being of others." I remember years ago when my wife and I were living in Kentucky, I was pastoring a church while we were preparing to leave for missions training. I met a man who I knew from years before when I was not a believer, and he found out that I was now a Christian. This was a shock enough to him, and then I told him, "Yeah, my wife and I are getting ready to sell everything and move to Papua New Guinea." When I said that he was absolutely shocked and stood there in silence for a few minutes. "How much are they paying you to do that?" he asked. I told him, "Well, I'm not being paid anything. I actually have to raise my own money to go." He stood in disbelief for a while and then said, "Are they making you do that?" He thought I was being forced somehow to go to another country with the Gospel of Christ.

People have a hard time believing that Christians do things because we genuinely care about others. So Paul defends himself and says his reason for doing this was because God had entrusted him with the Gospel. Paul saw the Gospel as a sacred trust that God had given him and so he wanted to be faithful with it.

The image that comes to my mind is that of a football player who is running with the ball close to his body. When I played football in high school the coach would say, "Cradle the ball and squeeze it is tight as you can and never let it go." He taught us to lower our shoulders and keep giggling our legs if we hit opposition, and that is what I see in Paul.

He had been entrusted with the Gospel, and whenever he faces opposition, he keeps going. Paul simply wants to be faithful because he is a steward of the precious Gospel of God's grace. What a challenge this is for us as servants of Christ to remember that we, too, have been entrusted with this Gospel of God's grace. So Paul says, "We speak not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts." Ultimately Paul's ministry is for God.

Paul wants to please God who had entrusted him with his ministry, and if we have that same mind-set (that our ministry is ultimately for God), then we will not be discouraged if people do not appreciate the sacrifices we make. We are ultimately doing it to please God who examines our hearts. Look at verse five,

“We never came with flattering speech as you know, nor with the pretext for greed, God is witness.” Paul was not there to take from these people.

Further on we will find that Paul actually worked while he was in Thessalonica. He was not trying to take from them, he was just wanting to give them the Gospel of God's grace. Notice verse six, “Nor did we seek glory or honour from men either from you or from others, even though as apostles we have a right to assert our authority.” When Paul speaks about this right to assert his authority and about receiving honour, he is referring to financial compensation.

Those who preach the Word should be able to live by the Word, but Paul lays aside the right that he has as an apostle because he wants to serve the Thessalonian church and to set an example, which he will tell us more about this later on. Paul says that they were gentle among them as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. This brings us to this next subsection, living sacrificially for the sake of the Gospel.

Living sacrificially

When I think about living sacrificially, I think about all the hours during the night my wife sacrificed to look after our first child. *A nursing mother tenderly caring for her own children*; this phrase also shows us that when Paul disciplined these believers, he was aware of their maturity in the Lord and he treated them accordingly. In other words, he knew that they were just babies in Christ and so he was tender with them.

Paul is aware of their maturity and he responded accordingly. I think that is an important principle for us in ministry. We should know where people are at so we can disciple them based on where they are and move them to the next level. Paul was sacrificial like a nursing mother caring for her children. Look at verse eight, “Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.”

Catch this. Paul says they had a fond affection for the Thessalonian believers, to the point that they were willing to give their lives for them. Sometimes we can look at ministry as either-or instead of both-and. Here's what I mean. Some people emphasise that our ministry should have a God-ward focus, that we should ultimately be focused on pleasing him, and in fact Paul just said that in verse four. But other people talk about being focused on those we are serving.

A God-focused ministry and a genuine love for others are not mutually exclusive. Paul was serving to please God, but in the doing so he also had a fond affection for the people he was serving. Let me challenge you to have a genuine love for the people you are serving. Your love for them will not get you to the mission field, and it probably will not keep you on there either. It will be a God-ward focus which gets you there and keeps you there. But I believe it

is Biblical to trust God to give us a love for the people we are serving, as He did with Paul.

Notice verse nine, “For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.” Paul will talk more about this later on in 2 Thessalonians. He was actually bi-vocational while he was ministering to the Thessalonians because he wanted to set them an example of hard work and serving others. So he says here that he worked night and day so he would not be a burden to them and could minister to them free of charge.

Contrary to those who would attack Paul's character, Paul actually was sacrificial. He was not trying to take from the believers, all he did was give to them. Look at verse ten, “You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children.”

Understand what Paul is saying here. Paul says they were gentle like a nursing mother, they had a fond affection for the people, they gave their own lives, they laboured night and day, they lived devoutly, uprightly and blamelessly and they exhorted and encouraged.

Keep going

Paul did all of that so that because he had a goal in mind. Look at 1 Thessalonians 2:12, “So that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” Everything Paul did was for the purpose of helping believers walk worthy of God. Paul's labour was for their maturity and a healthy walk with God. Paul is labouring so that they would keep going, so that they would live in a healthy way.

Now verse twelve is pivotal because it shows us that ministry and church planning is not just sharing the Gospel; it is not just about evangelism. Paul still was not satisfied even when these people came to faith. He was not satisfied until they were walking worthy of God. That shows us that Paul is focused on the entire Great Commission. Not just the going, not just the preaching of the Gospel, but he was also focused on seeing believers walk in a manner that pleases God.

So I want to challenge both myself and you to not to be content with our discipleship efforts until believers are living in such a way that is consistent with who God has called them to be. Paul tells the believers to keep going because everything he had done so far was for the purpose that they would walk worthy of God.

God is at work

Now Paul tells the Thessalonian believers to keep going because God is presently at work in them. Look at how God's Word was having an impact even when Paul wrote, "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." Paul says that they accepted his teaching as the *Word of God*. The apostolic message is considered God's Word, for which they were God's representatives.

Notice Paul's comment in verse thirteen, "His word which performs (present tense) its work in you who believe." What Paul is saying is, "Yes, I remember God was active in your past, and now God's word is active in your present." His Word is actually working in you even now, and so that was reason enough to keep walking with God.

Paul also wants them to know that persecution is to be accepted. He says, "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews" (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16). Just like the churches in Judea were persecuted by the Jews, even so the Thessalonians were persecuted by their own surrounding countrymen. These Jews who persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem, Paul says in verse fifteen, "Killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men." They were hostile to all men because they were hindering the Gospel from going out.

Read verse sixteen, "Hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles or the nations so that they may be saved." Now, please don't miss this very important verse. The Jews hindered Paul from speaking to the Gentiles, and because of that he says, "So that they may be saved." In other words, Paul says if the Gospel does not go to the nations, then the nations cannot be saved. There is no other way. It has to be through the Gospel Message or not at all, and as long as the Jews kept the Gospel from going to the nations, the nations could not be saved. People have to hear the Gospel in order to be saved.

Paul says (speaking about the Jews) because of that, they fill up the measure of their sins and wrath has come upon them to the utmost. Now the way this wrath *has come upon them to the utmost* is going to be firstly their experience of a judicial hardening from God (as we saw previously in Romans). Another avenue of wrath may also be something that not even Paul was anticipating, but what Jesus said in Luke's Gospel that took place in 70 AD. Jesus said that the Jews would face destruction from the hands of the Romans, which indeed they did.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. In 1st Thessalonians 2, Paul talks about his ministry among the Thessalonians. As you read through the chapter, what do you identify as the primary goal(s) of his ministry?
2. Why was Paul so determined to faithfully preach the gospel in spite of the sufferings he endured? Are there principles that relate to your stewardship of the gospel? How might these principles impact your life choices?



ACTIVITIES

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1. Read 1st Thessalonians 2:5-11 and take note of the price that Paul paid as a servant of Christ.
 - a) According to 2:12, why did he do all of the things mentioned in 2:5-11?
 - b) How does this impact your view of discipleship and the time commitment involved in seeing a church brought to maturity?
2. Ask a cross-cultural church planter to describe the labor and time involved in establishing mature believers. Discuss this with a friend or mentor.