

The Hope of the Gospel

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The Thessalonian letters are either the earliest Pauline letters, or among the first (if one thinks that Galatians was written first). Hence they are one of the earliest windows we have into the early Christian movement (ca. A.D. 50). As readers we want to grasp what Paul communicates so that we do not impose our own ideas upon the letters. We want to have a fresh vision of what Paul says, and thereby hear the word of God for our day. Understanding the message of Thessalonians requires discipline and attentiveness, for reading our own conceptions into the scriptures is extraordinarily easy.

One of the striking features upon reading the Thessalonian letters is the tremendous optimism that permeates them. Paul's words about the church could even lead us to think that the Thessalonian church was a mega-church. The Thessalonians function as an example for churches in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess 1:7). Their conversion is trumpeted "in every place" so that Paul can dispense with telling others of their transformation (1 Thess 1:8-10). In reality the Thessalonian church was probably comprised of no more than fifty to one hundred members. They were a fledgling and insignificant group in the midst of a large city like Thessalonica. How easily these believers could have been discouraged when considering the godlessness and evil lives of most people in the Roman empire, not to mention Thessalonica itself. If Paul resorted to counting, the number of believers paled in comparison with unbelievers.

How does Paul respond to this fledg-

ling church? Does he emphasize their shortcomings? Does he give the church a statistical breakdown of the percentage of believers relative to unbelievers, leaving the church with the impression that they are failures? He expresses joy and confidence in what God has done in Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:3-2:2; 2:13-14; 2 Thess 1:3-4). He abounds with joy because the church has endured persecution with the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:6; 3:1-10). What is the reason for Paul's confidence, optimism, and joy? He is filled with hope because he believes that God builds his church. No power in heaven or earth will be able to thwart what God has begun. The church may be small but it is invincible. This invincibility stems not from the impressive abilities of Christians but from God's greatness.

This is not to say, of course, that Paul is ever satisfied with the church being small. Those who have discovered joy cannot wait to share such joy with others. A joy shared is a joy doubled. As we look at history, we confess that God has sustained and increased the church through the ages. The Thessalonian letters remind us, however, that we will be mistreated and even hated for spreading the good news (1 Thess 1:6; 2:13-16; 2 Thess 1:3-7). The church will always be an embattled remnant until we reach the heavenly city. Such rejection did not quench the joy of the Thessalonians but became the pathway to it. They "received the word in much affliction with the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess 1:6). Such was the confidence of the early church in God.

Another corollary follows in the ministry of those who hope in God. They will conduct their ministry with integrity and love. Paul presents his own ministry as a model for the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12. As I read these verses I am impressed by the assurance, confidence, and boldness with which Paul ministered. Such confidence flows from hope in God. And those who trust God do not need to resort to flattery to advance the ministry, for they believe that church growth is God's work. Nor will such a minister live for the financial comforts the ministry can bring. Those who live for the comforts of this world reveal that their joy is not truly in God, but in vacations and the easy life. Those who know God, however, have found a greater joy than material abundance, so that they are motivated to please God rather than men in all things.

The minister who hopes in God trusts that he will supply every need (Phil 4:19). Hence, he is free to love others genuinely, for he believes that God will take care of his needs. Thus Paul says of himself, "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" (1 Thess 2:8). We all know the experience of being unable to love others because we are paralyzed by our own worries and concerns. Since Paul placed his confidence in God, he was free to love the Thessalonians with the same concern that a father has for his beloved children (1 Thess 2:11). He was as tender and caring as a mother who nurses her precious infant (1 Thess 2:7).

Confidence in God also means that one trusts that the word of God is the way to build a church. What an unnecessary weight many pastors feel! They are told that they must be experts in so many

areas to run a church in a way that pleases God. But we must remember what Jesus said to Mary. "Only one thing is necessary" (Luke 10:41). The good part Mary chose was hearing the word of God (Luke 10:42). Every pastor must begin by hearing the word of God and letting it minister to his soul. When we experience its transforming power, we will know that proclaiming it is the way to build a church. Paul recalled the effect of preaching the gospel in the lives of the Thessalonians, "Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:5). He also voices thanks in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, "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." The word of God was the effective power that produced a response in the Thessalonians.

The message of hope that pulsates through the Thessalonian letters expresses itself in a longing for the second coming of the Lord. The Thessalonians, of course, were confused about some elements of biblical eschatology. Paul instructs them so that they will not be deceived about end time events. Still, what leaps out to us today is their fervent desire for the Lord's return. They knew that "this world is not my home. I am just passing through." They pinned their hopes on being with the Lord, not their retirement accounts. Even though the early church was small numerically, they had an increasing impact upon the world in which they lived. Believers who live to please God and set their hope on the future will have a great impact on this world, precisely because they live for the next one.