

August 4 Lesson 10 (NIV)

## The Word of God

Devotional Reading: Psalm 121

Background Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5

1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5

<sup>13</sup> And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. <sup>14</sup> For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews <sup>15</sup> who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone <sup>16</sup> in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

<sup>17</sup> But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. <sup>18</sup> For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. <sup>19</sup> For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup> Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

<sup>1</sup> So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. <sup>2</sup> We sent Timothy, who is our brother and coworker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. <sup>4</sup> In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. <sup>5</sup> For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

### Key Text

*We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.—1 Thessalonians 2:13*

Hope in the Lord

### Unit III: Eternal Hope

Lessons 10–13

### Lesson Outline

Introduction



## Introduction

### A. The Power of Encouragement

When I was a sophomore in high school, I qualified for the state championship in swimming. Two days before the swim meet, my father became ill and ended up in the hospital. We quickly realized that he would not be able to come to the meet, and I was distraught. My father had never missed a meet since I started swimming at 8 years old. Now he would miss the biggest competition of my career.

On the morning of the meet, my mother came with a letter my father had written for me. The letter was filled with encouragement. He shared words of faith in me and my abilities. I was so touched by his letter that I swam my fastest times. I even placed in the finals. Even though my father was absent, he still encouraged me through my mother and his letter.

### B. Lesson Context

Because it was written around AD 51, the epistle we call 1 Thessalonians was probably the first of the New Testament's 27 books to be written. Although the four Gospels detail earlier events, most research agrees that those four were not written until the AD 60s and later.

Thessalonica was (and is) a Macedonian port city where Paul founded a church during his second missionary journey. His visit was quite controversial (Acts 17:1–9). The commotion Paul stirred was so intense that he had to escape by night (17:10). That was not the first time he had had to do so (9:23–25), nor would it be the last (23:31).

The city was on an important trade route and prospered as a result. Those of Greek, Roman, and Jewish heritage constituted its population. Paul and Silas had entered the synagogue in Thessalonica and argued from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. They ultimately persuaded some Jews and many Gentiles (Acts 17:1–4). Other Jews in the city became envious of Paul and Silas' success. They persuaded the governing authorities to persecute the residents who believed in Christ. While the church in Thessalonica grew, it continued to face challenges in the form of persecution (1 Thessalonians 2:14; 3:3–4). Paul wrote this letter to comfort and encourage the Thessalonian believers in their trials.

## I. Thanksgiving

### (1 Thessalonians 2:13–16)

#### A. Accepting God's Word (v. 13)

**13. And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.**

The phrase *because* introduces the reason for Paul's thankfulness: the Thessalonians' receptiveness to *the word of God* as being just that. Today we rightly identify the Bible as the Word

of God, which acknowledges its divine origin and character. The same was true in the first century AD (Mark 7:13; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 14:37). But when Paul began his missionary journeys, none of the 27 books of the New Testament had yet been written (see Lesson Context). Therefore the Word of God they heard was Paul's oral testimony to them. In Galatians 1:11–12, he explains why his preaching was to be taken as divinely authoritative: “the gospel I preached is not of human origin [but] by revelation from Jesus Christ.” Vital to their salvation and sanctification was their response of “belief in the truth” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul's original readers recognized the supernatural origin of Paul's message and responded fittingly. For a “sharper” description of how the Word of God *is indeed at work*, see Hebrews 4:12.

### **B. Imitating God's Churches (v. 14)**

**14. For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews**

The conjunction *for* links this verse closely with the preceding one. It also alerts the reader that what follows is the evidence that the Word of God is working daily in their lives. To be *imitators* of someone else's example is sometimes a good thing (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1) and sometimes a bad thing (Hebrews 4:11). Paul has already acknowledged the readers' wise choice in this regard (1 Thessalonians 1:6). We might call that “active imitation.”

But active imitation doesn't seem to be the sense of the verse before us. Paul here seems to have in view more of a “passive imitation” in that the Thessalonian believers are undergoing the same kind of persecution as are *God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus*. The Thessalonians had not chosen to be persecuted; rather, persecution has been inflicted on them. Paul doesn't minimize this fact (see 2 Thessalonians 1:4). Instead, this seems to be his way of providing assurance, comfort, and encouragement by telling his readers that they are not alone.

The parallel between *your own people* and *the Jews* is interesting for comparing and contrasting the sources and nature of the persecutions. We may wonder to which group or groups the word *people* refers exactly, since Romans, Greeks, and Jews all inhabited the area in significant numbers (see Lesson Context). The answer lies in Acts 17:4–5; the instigators of the persecution in Thessalonica are “other Jews” who did not believe. The mindset of those who inflicted *the same things* is the subject of the following verse.

### **C. Seeing God's Justice (vv. 15–16)**

**15. who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone**

A small group of Jewish leaders had ensured the judicial murder of *the Lord Jesus* (compare John 11:45–53; 18:28–31; Acts 2:23; 13:28; etc.). This was entirely consistent with how *the prophets* in the Old Testament had been rejected and condemned (Luke 11:47–48; Acts 7:52; example: Jeremiah 26:20–23).

In such context, Paul noted the Jewish leaders' culpability in continuing this pattern of opposition not only to *God* but to *everyone* who opposed their agenda—an agenda seen in our next verse.

**16a. in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit.**

The general hostility of Jews toward *the Gentiles* of the time is well known. Such hostility reaches back into the approximately 400 years between the Old and New Testaments. The literature of that time tells of the periodic desecration of the temple and Jerusalem by Gentiles. Those transgressions eventually resulted in the Maccabean revolt of about 167–160 BC. The animosity between Jews and Gentiles is detectable in various places in the New Testament (examples: Luke 21:24; Acts 10:28).

The Thessalonians had personally witnessed persecution against Paul and Silas (Acts 17:5–9). Paul's criticism of his persecutors here echoes Jesus' pushback on the scribes and Pharisees in his final week (Matthew 23:13).

**16b. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.**

The divine *wrath* that *has come upon* the Jewish leaders may include a future punishment, but the main idea is that of the present at the time Paul writes. The word translated *at last* can take at least eight meanings, depending on how it is used in a given context. A reasonable conclusion here is that *at last* is to be understood in the sense of “completely.”

Luke 18:5 is another case that shares this same likelihood: “Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!” The phrasing at issue is the translated word *eventually*. The sense of “continuing to pester me until I'm completely worn out” is a very reasonable interpretation.

## II. Encouragement

### (1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:5)

#### A. Paul's Desire to Return (v. 17)

**17. But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.**

After spending at least 15 days in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), mob violence had resulted in Paul's hasty exit from the city under cover of darkness (17:5–10). The phrasing *being separated from you* indicates a departure that was less than voluntary. This fact undoubtedly was a key factor in Paul's intense desire to return.

But Paul quickly reassured his readers that “out of sight, out of mind” was not his method of operation. The phrase of being absent *in person, not in thought* indicates quite the opposite (similar are 1 Corinthians 5:3 and Colossians 2:5). In other cities, Paul spent months teaching and preaching the truths of the gospel (Acts 18:11; 19:8); he undoubtedly realized that his having been in Thessalonica for less than a month was inadequate. His hasty, secretive departure had necessarily left work undone, as witnessed by 1 Thessalonians 3:10.

## B. Desire Thwarted (v. 18)

**18. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way.**

Paul's inability to make a return visit was not due to a lack of desire on his part. *Satan* was to blame, although the text does not tell us what specific method he used. Some propose that it was an illness (as also possible in 2 Corinthians 12:7). Others theorize that the city leaders of Thessalonica may have forbidden his return, given the disturbance his work in the city caused (Acts 17:5–9).

Both options are merely guesses. Neither should distract us from the main point: Satan, the enemy and accuser of God's people (Revelation 12:10b), was responsible for Paul's extended absence. He may have been responsible for other travel hindrances, but some cases involved Paul's juggling his ministry priorities (Romans 1:13; 15:22).

## C. Paul's Joy in Them (vv. 19–20)

**19–20. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.**

Old Testament prophets sometimes received no assurance that their ministries would result in changed hearts and changed behavior. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah was told that his prophetic ministry would *not* succeed (Jeremiah 7:27–28; 18:11–12)! No wonder Jeremiah is called “the weeping prophet.” To be assigned a task predicted to fail would strain anyone's emotions to the maximum.

Paul's ministry was not like that of Jeremiah's, however. Paul did have opposition, but he also had a successful harvest of souls that was evidence of a God-given ministry (compare 1 Corinthians 9:1). And Paul does not take this for granted. Rather, he communicates its results loud and clear with the rhetorical question: *For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory?* The answer comes also by the rhetorical question, *Is it not you?* As affirming as this harvest is, Paul knows that it's not all due to his efforts (see 3:6–9). An apt summary of all this is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:4a.

The mention of *our Lord Jesus when he comes* sets another event-context for the text before us. It refers to Jesus' future advent when he returns to earth. It's the same day referred to in Philippians 1:6, 10; 2:16. Paul thinks so highly of his Thessalonian readers that he can count them as already on the right side when that event comes to pass.

## D. Paul Sends Timothy (vv. 1–5)

**1–2. So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and coworker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,**

Having escaped from Thessalonica by night, Paul and Silas then traveled 45 miles to the west to preach the gospel in Berea (Acts 17:10–12). They would have made that trek in three days if they had maintained an average walking pace of two miles per hour, eight hours per day (17:10).

But Paul was soon forced out of that town as well, making his way south to *Athens* under escort (Acts 17:13–16). As he dismissed his escort, their task having been completed, he sent instructions back to Berea with them for “Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible” (17:15).

There is some debate regarding whether that reunion took place in Athens or happened later in Corinth (compare Acts 18:5). The latter seems more likely, as there is no hint of Timothy’s coming to Athens. Research indicates that Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians while in Corinth, perhaps in AD 51 (see Lesson Context).

The phrase *we could stand it no longer* indicates that Paul was on pins and needles, wondering how the new Christians in Thessalonica were doing. He knew their need for him and did his best to plan for a return visit. But his best wasn’t good enough, and he seemed nearly to have reached a breaking point. Ultimately, Paul made what undoubtedly seemed to him a “second best” decision: if the apostle couldn’t go back to Thessalonica personally, he would send Timothy instead. Thus Timothy could carry Paul’s correspondence to the Thessalonians.

After Timothy’s conversion in Acts 16:1–3, Paul often trusted him with special tasks. This involved travel that was unaccompanied by Paul himself (Acts 19:22; 1 Corinthians 4:17).

**3. so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them.**

In speaking of *trials* as they intersect the Christian life, a more modern way to say what Paul says here might be, “The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress” (Frederick Douglass, 1818–1895). The Bible itself has much more to say about oppression. Consider Jesus’ words in John 15:18: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” Paul used to be one of the haters (Acts 8:3), and he’s been on the receiving end of hatred as well (16:22–23). So he knows what he’s talking about when he says, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

**4. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.**

Having been forewarned, the Thessalonians should not have been surprised when the predictions of persecution came true (*it turned out that way*). This theme of “don’t be surprised” is echoed by the other apostles as well (compare 1 Peter 4:12; 1 John 3:13). In fact, Paul later argues that suffering with Christ is linked to eventual glory with him (Romans 8:17). Suffering was (and is) unavoidable; it is a key part of the way that God makes us into Jesus’ image. Hardship can result in distinguishing between those of deep and shallow faith (Matthew 13:5–6, 20–21). It’s an issue of counting the cost of becoming a disciple (Luke 14:26–27).

**5. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.**

At the same time, Paul was concerned about the state of the Thessalonians’ faith. He had been with them such a short time! Now having received the left foot of fellowship from Thessalonica, he

feared the worst. Since Satan had been hindering Paul from visiting them (1 Thessalonians 2:18), what harm might he be doing in Thessalonica?

When Paul wrote that he feared *the tempter had tempted* them, he probably was not referring to the common temptations to sin. Paul knew that such temptations were part of earthly life (1 Corinthians 10:13). What concerned Paul was the temptation to reject Christ to escape suffering. If that happened, Paul's ministry in Thessalonica might turn out to be *in vain* (compare Philippians 2:16). The antidote for the tempter's poison was encouragement, so Paul sent his trusted "son in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2) to bring that encouragement to the Thessalonians.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Encouraging One Another**

Suffering is part of the Christian life. But sometimes, we fall into the habit of dealing with suffering alone. We think we need to just grit our teeth and bear it. While God does call us to endure suffering, he does not ask us to suffer alone. Paul talks more about suffering for Christ than anyone else in the New Testament. Yet his solution was not telling people to buck up but encouraging them. Because the church is Christ's body, we share in each other's sufferings (1 Corinthians 12:26). By encouraging one another, we can help bear the burdens of our brothers and sisters in Christ (Galatians 6:2). We will also keep sufferings from becoming temptations, leading one another away from following Christ.

### **B. Prayer**

Father, help us to seek and comfort the discouraged in our midst. Let their burdens be ours as well.  
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

Encouragement is a defense against despair.<sup>1</sup>

---