

The Second Missionary Journey started like a bad soap opera. Barnabas wanted to take his relative, Mark, who had deserted Barnabas and Paul on the First Missionary Journey. Paul refused to take Mark. After a sharp disagreement, Paul and Barnabas split after more than a decade of working together.

Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus. Paul chose me as his new companion for the Second Missionary Journey, possibly because I was famous for always finding the best food in any town. Timothy joined us when we went through Lystra.¹ Luke joined us when we reached Troas, a city on the coast of modern day Turkey.²

From Troas, we crossed into modern day Greece. That means we crossed from Asia to Europe. We were making the first concerted evangelical effort in Europe! Although we would deal with some Jews, the vast majority of our evangelical efforts would be with Greeks and Romans. That would be a change of audience, and a big change in opportunities and problems.

Our new audiences knew the gods of the Greeks and Romans, not the God of the Jews. They knew the myths of their gods, not the Scriptures of the Old Testament. They were not looking for a Savior. They considered their lifestyles pleasurable, not sinful. This was going to be a challenge even for Paul's great intellect. Without the Holy Spirit, we had no chance to succeed.

Our group of four traveled to Philippi, the place where Lydia heard the Gospel message and became a Christian. After a stint in a Philippian prison, three of us traveled to Thessalonica, leaving Luke behind. I hated to leave Philippi because Lydia had one of the best cooks in the country.

As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue in Thessalonica and preached that Jesus was the Messiah, using the Old Testament scriptures as evidence. After three weeks, some of the Jews were persuaded, as well as a number of Greek God-fearers and prominent women.

Just when I thought we might get through the city without trouble, our success infuriated the other Jews who led a riot against us. Although one of the new believers, Jason, was accosted and accused, nothing came out of it. However, Paul, Timothy and I had to leave the city.

¹ Acts 16:1-4

² Acts 16:8-10. The language changes to "we" indicating the writer of Acts joined the group.

While in Thessalonica, Paul taught about future times when Jesus would return.³ That teaching captured people's attention, just as Paul's heart was captured by the Thessalonians. A few months later, when we reached Athens, Paul sent both Timothy and me back to Thessalonica to see how the young church was doing and to strengthen the Christians there.⁴ I was happy to go back without Paul, because that would lessen my chances of getting another beating... and increase my chances of finding a good restaurant.

Months later, when Paul was in Corinth, Timothy and I returned and gave him the good news that the Thessalonian church was doing well.⁵ As part of his rejoicing, Paul wrote the letter that is known as the book, *First Thessalonians*. This is probably the first letter Paul wrote to a specific church that is in your New Testament.

Paul opens his letter with such love and affection that it is clear he cares for the Thessalonians. His description of them verifies that Timothy and I had brought back a good report about them. He compliments them for turning from foreign gods to the true God, and for their good behavior. Paul also mentions themes of faith, power of the Holy Spirit, and being chosen. These are themes he would return to in his future letters.

Paul reminds them about how he had been abused for the sake of the Gospel, and that they are experiencing the same thing. He urges them to continue leading lives worthy of God's kingdom and glory. He assures them how much he loves them and wants to come be with them.

Paul reminds them that he had sent Timothy to be with them, not to tattle on them, but to strengthen and encourage their faith. He tells them again to expect persecution, but to keep the faith. Paul reassures them that Timothy had given him a good report about them, and encourages them to have more and more love for each other and for everyone else.

I think the first half of First Thessalonians is the most loving and encouraging passage that Paul ever wrote. He was clearly a proud father of these new Christians. But as a proud father, he knew he needed to correct and discipline his children. He chose to use honey-covered words, just as Luke used honey-covered medicine.

Paul says they are behaving well, but need to behave better and better. He urges them to avoid sexual immorality and control their lusts. He tells them that leading an impure life is tantamount to rejecting God and the Holy Spirit. Rather than being specific about what he means, Paul makes very broad statements. This is to keep the Thessalonians from finding loopholes in the instructions like people are apt to do. As I'm sure you've experienced.

³ 2 Thessalonians 2:5

⁴ 1 Thess. 3:1-5, Acts 18:5

⁵ 1 Thess. 3:6-10

After growing up in a world where sexual immorality and lust is the normal way of life, you can just imagine the questions and talks they had. I bet it sounded just like your current day teenagers who debate just what they can do and how far they can go. You can just imagine how the Thessalonians debated among themselves what an impure life was or was not.

Paul slips in a little encouragement that may be hard for you to understand. He asks them to make it their ambition to lead quiet lives, mind their own business, and work with their hands so that they can be financially independent, and win the respect of non-Christians.

Paul had already learned that Christianity best spreads when non-Christians admire the lifestyle and behavior of Christians. He knows nothing worse for the Christian cause than Christians who are lazy busybodies. I believe the Holy Spirit guided Paul to write this specific instruction because he knows this problem will haunt future churches.

Why will Christians behave in this way? In the case of the Thessalonians, it is partly because they expect Jesus to return any day, so what is the use in working? The Thessalonians are fascinated with the ideas of resurrection and the return of Jesus. If those things are true, why should they worry about anything in this life? They were taking Paul's teachings and coming to an inaccurate conclusion because they misunderstood the timing involved.

This is the way that the early Bible translators repeat Paul's response, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."⁶

These may be the most famous words in *First Thessalonians*. This is the description of what many modern people call The Rapture. Paul considers these words to be comforting enough that the Thessalonians should encourage each other with them.

At that point, Paul is wise enough to follow the wisdom of good forecasters – give a date or give an event...but never give both. He gives the event, but now the Thessalonians are eager to know when that is going to happen. Tomorrow? Next week? Next year? The answer to that question will surely affect their behavior.

Paul continues his discussion by insisting that the date of the day of the Lord cannot be known. He insists that the event will surely happen, but it will come like a thief in the night. Living in the light means to live as if it may happen the next moment, but it may not happen in your lifetime. For that reason, it is important that Christians always encourage and build-up each other.

Like a good preacher, Paul lets them know that he is coming to the end of his letter. He encourages the Christians in Thessalonica to honor their leaders and hold them in high regard.

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

Paul also acknowledges that not everything is going perfectly in their church. He instructs them to live in peace, and to warn those who are idle and disruptive. He also tells them to encourage the disheartened and weak, and to always strive to do what is good for others. By doing this, Paul is telling them that he knows there are Christians in their church who fit these negative descriptions.

As Paul reaches the end of his letter, he tells them not to quench the Spirit or treat prophecies with contempt, but to test them all. He tells them to hold on to the good and reject every kind of evil.

Some of my favorite verses in all of the Bible are toward the end of Paul's letter, and I will end my story with them. Three short verses that you will do well to memorize and live by.

“Rejoice always. Pray without stopping. In everything give thanks: Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”