

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians 2, verses 1-16 For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.

For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive. But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak.

Not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed. God is witness.

Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil.

[1 : 06] We worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers.

For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you, and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you received from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen, as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displeased God and opposed all mankind, by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins.

But wrath has come upon them at last. Moving into chapter 2 of 1 Thessalonians, Paul continues his discussion of the way that he and his fellow missionaries acted among the Thessalonians when they were with them.

[2 : 21] Through elaborating the nature of their ministry among the Thessalonians, Paul can contrast them with the sorts of false teachers that might come along to the Thessalonians afterwards. There are four successive four statements in which Paul does this.

The first begins in verse 1, the second in verse 3, the third in verse 5, and the fourth in verse 9. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the manner of their arrival there.

They had been badly treated at Philippi, where they had been mistreated and imprisoned. However, when they came to the Thessalonians, their coming was not in vain. Their message was characterised by great boldness, even in the midst of conflict.

Paul is here most concerned that the Thessalonians appreciate the way that their behaviour as missionaries served properly to showcase the message that they declared. Gordon Fee helpfully presents Paul's argument in the form of a series of related not, nor, and but statements.

Paul's intent here is by careful description to demonstrate the garless and self-giving character of their ministry, a ministry faithful to the message that it served.

[3 : 55] In such a way Paul can distinguish himself from other teachers and philosophers. Paul describes himself and his fellow missionaries as driven by a strength beyond their own. Despite fierce persecutions, they have courage in God to declare the gospel against great opposition, knowing that its effectiveness depends not upon their own force of personality or rhetorical skill, but upon the power of the God who entrusted them with it.

As Paul describes the situation elsewhere, Paul proceeds to present the unfeigned and pure motives from which they acted in declaring the gospel to the Thessalonians.

In his apostolic ministry, Paul was not driven by a desire for personal gain or for public praise, but by a weighty responsibility to God, who had committed the gospel message to him.

He declares himself to be a tried and true servant, one whose heart is tested by God, whose ministry is approved, presumably through the many trials and forms of persecution that he endured.

Unlike the charlatans who were characterised by the vices of deceit, impure motives and trickery, Paul and his companions were the genuine article. Summoning both the Thessalonians and God as his witnesses, Paul insists that he was unmotivated by a desire for human praise or material gain.

[5 : 30] His only intent was to acquit himself well as a servant pleasing to the God who sent him. Consequently, the message of Paul and the missionaries with him to the Thessalonians was not marked by the artful flattery typical of sham teachers.

Nor perverted by attempts to use his message as a means of personal gain. Indeed, even though he was in a position that would have enabled him to make self-serving demands of them, Paul's actual conduct was in the most startling contrast to such exploitative behaviour.

Rather than taking advantage of his power in relationship to the Thessalonians, Paul and his team not only went to considerable lengths to avoid placing any demands upon them, but also gave of themselves in ways that invite the most arresting imagery.

There is a difficult textual issue at this juncture, as some Greek manuscripts have a word meaning infants, while others have a word meaning gentle. The weight of the arguments on both sides are quite finely balanced.

And the liveliness and fluidity of Paul's imagery in this context is something that's worth noting. He moves from comparing himself and his team to nursing mothers in verse 7, to fathers in verse 11, to orphans in verse 17 in their relation to the Thessalonians, all in the span of a few verses.

[6 : 46] This makes the possibility that he might be referring to themselves as infants more likely than it might have been elsewhere. If this were the meaning, it would powerfully illustrate the garlessness and the completeness of their self-bestowal to the Thessalonians.

In a striking comparison, Paul likens his missionary team to nursing mothers. The apostles' surprising use of such a maternal image for their ministry is not unique to this context.

In Galatians chapter 4 verse 19, Paul speaks of himself as a mother struggling to give birth to her children again. The image is a fitting one. It expresses the Thessalonians' dependence upon Paul and his fellow workers, and the loving self-donation of the missionary team to the infant believers.

Paul is not merely conveying a message, but is like a mother begetting, nursing, and cherishing the children formed by that message, who have the most intimate of bonds with him. The image also represents Paul's longing for and intimate involvement in the Thessalonians' well-being and growth.

While the charlatan might value the self-serving praise of men, or the wealth that might be deceitfully gained from them, Paul values the Thessalonians themselves, as a mother values her own infants.

[8 : 00] As he expresses it in verse 19, For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus as it is coming? Is it not you? From the image of the maternal affection and bond, Paul later progresses to one of the father in his role of preparing the child for life in the wider world.

Using both the maternal image and the paternal image that succeeds it in verse 11, Paul demonstrates the depths of his personal investment in the life, the health, and the growth of the Thessalonian Christians.

Paul's representation of his ministry in these opening chapters of Thessalonians dramatically challenges many of the assumptions that we can bring to acts of communication. While our understanding of the acts of communication can often very sharply distinguish between senders, messages, messengers, and the recipients, Paul systematically unworks each of these oppositions in relationship to the gospel message.

Drawing the minds of the Thessalonian Christians back to the founding events of their church, Paul speaks of the gospel as God's self-communication by the Spirit, of God working through and in his messengers, of the emissary of the gospel as one borne along by the message that he bears, of the message as something that is powerfully at work in its recipients, and of the recipients as children of the message, begotten and nourished by the messenger.

At each point, Paul reveals that the oppositions that can serve as occasions for deceit, for perverse motives, and for distrust are destabilised by the very character of the gospel.

[9 : 38] In the gospel, there is the tightest of possible connections between the one who sends the messenger and the messenger themselves, between the messenger and the message, and the one who sends the message and the message, and then between the recipients and the ones who bring the message to them, and then the message and the sender.

All of these things are tightly bound together in a way that makes them inseparable. One of the most significant features of Western society today is the breakdown of public trust in various authorities, in politicians, in governments, experts, scientists, in church leaders, in journalists, in the media, in constitutional documents, national principles, governmental agencies, and sometimes even the very basic principles of our society themselves.

And this loss of trust penetrates down to the very founding events and principles of our societies and nations, events and principles that are deemed fatally corrupted by guile, deceit, self-serving power, and all these other corrupting forces.

Once we strip away the mask of our feigned values, what we find is dishonesty and untruth and attempts just to bolster power. Scandals, revelations of abuse, manifest corruption, incompetence, self-interest in office, and all these sorts of things lead to growing distrust and that metastasizes into more general suspicion.

As the healthy movement of truth in the body of society depends upon a circulatory system of trust, the breakdown of trust will produce the crisis of truth that we currently face.

[11 : 15] Arresting the progress of this disease is an immense challenge. Reaction against dysfunction seldom straightforwardly yields healthy functioning, often merely producing new or exacerbated problems in the place of those it once opposed.

Without a clear vision and a model of genuine, forthright, and trustworthy discourse, and of the sort of robust and healthful social relations that can bear the weight of truth, it can be very difficult to address such social sickness.

Yet this vision of society, marked by the strength of trust and truth, is what Paul is presenting us with in 1 Corinthians 2. This is a society seen in God's entrusting of his truth to human messengers who entrust themselves in turn to the recipients of their announcement.

It's a society seen in and revelatory of the power of the communication of truth itself as a social bond. The genuine communication of the truth requires the communication of ourselves, reinforcing the trust that allows it to circulate.

Just as untruth and distrust can cause a society to disintegrate, so truth and the mutual trust and entrusting it produces are health to society's flesh and marrow to its bones.

[12 : 33] To those who might have accused Paul of using his message as a mask for greed, he reminds the Thessalonians of the way that he and his fellow missionaries worked tirelessly so as not to place a burden upon the converts.

In Acts chapter 18 verse 3 we discover that Paul was a tent maker which seemed to be a way in which he supported his missionary work so as not to put a burden upon converts and to protect himself from the false charge that he was engaged in his missionary labours for personal gain.

Paul and his fellow missionaries were marked by unimpeachable character among the Thessalonians and also by holy conduct. They acted towards the Thessalonians like a father with his children, exhorting, encouraging and charging in a paternal manner.

If they were like nursing mothers in sharing and giving their very selves to the converts as a woman might give her breast to her infant, they are also like fathers in their authoritative paternal guidance, their direction, their encouragement and their oversight.

The power that a father has to encourage and build up his son to give his son confidence was something that they showed towards the Thessalonians along with the authoritative instruction and direction that fathers can provide.

[13 : 45] Paul renews his expression of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians conversion at this point. This is something that confirms his ministry among them. When they received the gospel from Paul and his companions, they received it as a word from God, not merely as a word of men.

In verse 6 of chapter 1, Paul described the Thessalonians becoming imitators of Paul and his companions and of the Lord. Here he speaks of them becoming imitators of the churches in Judea.

Much as the Judean churches were persecuted by their Jewish compatriots, so the Thessalonians were persecuted by the Gentiles around them. Jew and Gentile Christians are here united in a shared experience of suffering for Christ's name.

Paul lists the sins of the Jews, which had been brought to a climax in the crucifixion of Christ after their killing of the prophets. They had also rejected the message of the Spirit through the church and had sought to prevent that message from being brought to the Gentiles.

In the Gospels, Jesus spoke of Jerusalem filling up the full measure of its sins and full judgment falling upon that generation. Paul here describes the same thing.

[14 : 54] Jerusalem and Judea faced God's wrath at last in the coming destruction of AD 70. A question to consider.

Paul closely connects the truth of the Gospel message with the garless and trustworthy way in which it is brought by the Lord's ministers. How can we make the truth of the message of the Gospel clearer by the ways in which we present it?

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