

1 Thessalonians 2:13-18

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Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are suffering just as other believers do elsewhere, under persecution from people who oppose God. Paul misses the Thessalonians and wishes he could see them again, because they are his hope and joy as he looks forward to the day Jesus returns.

Paul continues his exhortation to the Thessalonians: *For this reason*, the reason being that God “calls [them] into His own kingdom and glory” (verse 12), Paul and his team *also constantly thank God that when the Thessalonians received the word of God which they heard from Paul, they accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God.* God called the Thessalonians to join His kingdom. They were born again, and become God’s children. Then the Thessalonians received the *word of God as the word of God*, that is, they believe it to be true. The *word of God* is what instructs us to live the kind of life that succeeds. The kind of life that gains eternal glory.

Paul declares that the word of God *also performs its work in you who believe.* Already he has commended them for the great reputation they have among the other churches in Greece (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8). Paul encourages the Thessalonians regarding how much they share in common with other churches, how they, *brethren*, fellow believers, *became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea.* The churches in *Judea* (southern Israel) were where Christianity began. This was a church of Jews who believed in Jesus, and followed the apostles and elders. They had endured great persecution. This new flock of Gentile believers was already living up to the great standard set by the “mother church” in *Judea*. Paul is paying them quite a compliment.

The Thessalonians are *imitators* of the other *churches of God in Christ Jesus* because they are suffering the same way: *For you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen.* The Judean churches suffer *from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out.* By *the Jews*, Paul means the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and their adherents. Paul was once one of them. It was the Jewish leadership that conspired to arrest *Jesus* and had Him *killed* (Matthew 26:3), just as it was their predecessors who put *the prophets* to death (1 Kings 19:10). There is a spirit of enmity with God that opposes those through whom God speaks, causing men to commit acts of violence, even murder, against God’s messengers.

Just as the Judean church of Jewish believers suffered at the *hands* of the *Jews*, the Greek and Roman believers in Thessalonica suffered *at the hands of their own countrymen.*

The Jewish authorities *drove* Paul and his companions *out* of Thessalonica, cutting their time with the new believers short. This is partly why Paul goes on to condemn the actions of *the Jews: They are not pleasing to God* even though they claim to be representing God, they are *hostile to all men*, not just their fellow Jews, for they were responsible for *hindering Paul from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.* They have persecuted him multiple times in his

missionary journeys (Acts 9:29, 13:50, 14:19), trying to stop the gospel of Jesus from spreading. But the oppositional Jews only end up *with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins*. They are not just sinning some. They are all in one opposing the true things of God. Sadly, this is the natural destination of legalism. When we begin to justify ourselves through the comparison of “my religious observance is better than yours” we naturally end up opposing that which we claim to represent.

Paul speaks grimly of what awaits these opponents of the gospel: *But wrath has come upon them to the utmost*. Paul speaks of the *wrath* of God often in his epistles. In Romans, Paul states that the wrath of God is delivered by human government. This is because God appoints human government as an agent of good, to punish evil (Romans 13:4). This makes it clear that God’s wrath is poured out upon sin no matter where it is found, including believers. (A believer in Jesus can’t get out of a speeding ticket by saying “But I am a Christian”). Paul also notes that when any human pursues their own way rather than God’s ways, His “wrath” comes upon them through God giving them over to their own appetites, to become their slave. This can be seen in the following verses:

- Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored (Romans 1:24)
- For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; (Romans 1:26)
- And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind (Romans 1:28)

Note here that the wrath of God is poured out by allowing people to have what they desire. This means when people want what is bad for them, God initially withholds it from them. But if they persist, God eventually disciplines them by giving them over to their desires. This starts a progression that ends in an inability to think properly; a loss of perspective.

It is likely that Paul has this progression in mind when he says *wrath has come*, stating this in a tense that indicates it has already occurred. Paul is saying that *wrath has come*. Paul is not saying that wrath “will come” in the future. He states the wrath is already being poured out. The fact that these Jews who profess to believe and follow the Bible are openly opposing the gospel of Christ is evidence of a “depraved mind.” God has given them over to untrue, twisted thinking. The *full measure* of these sins will likely include being held accountable at the great judgement of God. When final judgement comes, God will not look kindly on those who fought to destroy His messengers (Romans 13:2, 2 Timothy 4:14-15, 2 Chronicles 36:16).

Paul explains his frustration with being separated from the Thessalonians: *But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while*, again referencing when he was driven out of town (Acts 17:5-10), he pauses to clarify that he was *taken away—in person, not in spirit*, and then he expresses how he is *all the more eager with great desire to see your face*. Paul left them physically, but continued to think, pray, and care for them spiritually. The authorship of this epistle is attributed to Paul, Timothy, and Silas, and it is mostly narrated in the first person plural, “We,” “Us,” etc., but here Paul specifies that he is the main author, *For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us*.

It seems that after Paul and his team escaped Thessalonica, he made efforts to return. Perhaps while he was in Berea, where the people were “more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica” (Acts 17:11) and things settled down for a period of time, Paul may have wished to return to the Thessalonians, since the two cities were relatively close to one another (about 45 miles apart). But then the same rabble that had driven Paul out from Thessalonica travelled to Berea, “agitating and stirring up the crowds” against the believers (Acts 17:13b). Paul then departed to Athens, then ultimately Corinth. In that time period, the spiritual health of the Thessalonian believers was never far from his thoughts. *Satan*, the enemy of God, *hindered* any effort Paul made to go back, plagued by the Jewish opponents who followed Paul from town to town.

While he was in Athens, Paul said he could “endure it no longer” and dispatched Timothy to check on them, to see if they were continuing to live faithfully, enduring the persecution (1 Thessalonians 3:1). Like a caring father or nursing mother, Paul cared for the welfare of his children. Timothy was able to visit the Thessalonians to learn how they were doing, and then reported to Paul, which prompted this very letter (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

Paul elaborates on why he wanted to return to the Thessalonians, echoing his desire for their maturation in verse 12. He tells his readers, *For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.*

This provides a window into Paul’s supreme goal in life. It was, as he analogized in 1 Corinthians, to win the prize of life (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). Paul’s *hope* and *joy* is in seeing his children in the faith honored in the presence of Jesus for having lived faithfully. This is his *crown*. He is like a parent watching his child receive a great reward. Paul makes clear in other passages that he desires to be judged by Jesus as having lived faithfully himself (1 Corinthians 9:17, 24-26). But here, Paul looks forward to the *crown of exultation* of seeing his spiritual children being found faithful *in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming*. The addition of *at His coming* indicates that Paul is speaking of the time of Jesus judging all things (1 Corinthians 3:11-17; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

The Thessalonians are Paul’s spiritual children, and he is both a mother and a father to them (1 Thessalonians 2:7,11). They are his *crown of exultation*, they are his achievement that he boasts in, just as parents boast of their children. But it is not just that they believe in Jesus, it is the picture of them *in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming*. Paul’s *hope* is that they will persist through the opposition they are experiencing from their neighbors, and from the Jewish rivals who have already done harm to them (Acts 17:5-6). His *hope* is that they won’t abandon their faith, but will live lives of faithful obedience to God, so that in addition to inheriting eternal life, they will be glorified alongside Christ for suffering with Him. As he wrote to the Roman believers:

“The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.”
(Romans 8:16-17)

This passage in Romans demonstrates that part of our inheritance as believers is unconditional; God is our inheritance irrespective of how we live. God is our Father, and we are His child, even if we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13). But part of the inheritance is conditional. We only receive the privilege of being “fellow heirs with Christ” to rule the world as servant kings if “we suffer with Him.” This glory is what Paul wishes upon his spiritual children. It is why he was so anxious to see them continue in the faith. Paul makes it clear that he values nothing in this life as precious compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ through a walk of faith, and pleasing God with our lives (Philippians 3:8).

Paul cites *our Lord Jesus at His coming* in part because the Thessalonians were concerned about dying before Jesus’s second *coming*. Their worry was that those who died would stay dead, and would miss out on the *presence* of the *Lord*, eternity, and glory. Paul made mention of Jesus’s second coming at the outset of this letter, stating that part of a believer’s new life is to “wait for [God’s] Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Paul will explain and alleviate those fears later in this letter, in Chapter 4. Along with the Thessalonians, he believed Christ would return in his lifetime; that was the end goal in his mind, to expect Christ’s return, to be ready for it, and to withstand all suffering for His sake. Though none know when Jesus will return, we can imitate Paul’s example, and look for Him expectantly, for as Jesus promised, “I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown” (Revelation 3:11).

Biblical Text

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17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. 18 For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us. 19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.