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*13 As for us, we can't help but thank God for you, dear brothers and sisters loved by the Lord.*

*We are always thankful that God chose you to be among the first to experience salvation—a salvation that came through the Spirit who makes you holy and through your belief in the truth.*

*14 He called you to salvation when we told you the Good News; now you can share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*15 With all these things in mind, dear brothers and sisters, stand firm and keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you both in person and by letter.<sup>1</sup>*

Last week, Doug shared from 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, as well as some background context that is helpful to know when examining the book. Before we look at 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians, let's take a few minutes and refresh ourselves as to the context for the letter.

Thessalonica was a port city in Macedonia that had been founded in 316 BC by one of Alexander the Great's generals. It became a world cultural center because of its strategic location on both commercial sea routes and the Via Egnatia, a major Roman highway that ran from the Adriatic seacoast (in what is now Albania) through Macedonia (and Thessalonica) eastward to Byzantium (later Constantinople . . . today Istanbul. . . . been a long time gone Constantinople, why did Constantinople get the works? That's nobody's business but the Turks . . . ). Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and the largest and most important city in Macedonia up until the third or fourth century AD.

As a cosmopolitan city in the Roman Empire, the city was full of adherents to many different gods and religions. When Paul and Silas first arrived in Thessalonica in Acts 17 on Paul's second missionary journey, they found a significant Jewish population along with a good number of Gentiles known as "God-Fearers" who had rejected the paganism and instead

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15

accepted the one true God worshipped by Jews. As was his custom when he came into a new city, Paul goes to the synagogue and reasons with them from the scriptures, proving to them that Jesus is the Messiah. Acts tells us that some of the Jews were convinced as well as many of the “God-fearers,” and many prominent women, beginning the church in Thessalonica.

And that’s when the trouble starts. Acts tell us that some of the Jews become jealous of Paul and gather a mob to seize him. Unable to find him, they instead seize some of the new Christians, including Jason, the homeowner that they are staying with and take them to the city authorities, where they accuse them of preaching treason – that they are professing allegiance to a king other than Caesar, King Jesus. Acts 17 tells us that the believers send Paul and Silas out of town that very night, probably for their protection, and Paul and Silas continue on their missionary journey down through Berea and onto Athens.

And while Paul and Silas have left the Thessalonians behind, they keep in touch through at least two letters, the first of which Doug discussed last week, is a love letter. A letter that expresses love for the Thessalonians and appreciates the love the Thessalonians have shown to Paul and Silas.

The second letter, 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians, is a letter of encouragement sent by Paul, Silvanus (Silas’ Latin name), and Timothy to a church that they dearly loved. The church seems to have been doing very well as the letter begins with a compliment:

*Dear brothers and sisters, we can’t help but thank God for you, because your faith is flourishing and your love for one another is growing.<sup>2</sup>*

Somehow word has reached Paul that the Thessalonian church is thriving and Paul is thrilled! But in spite of this, Paul sees three things that he needs to address because he perceives them as potential threats to the health of the Thessalonian church.

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:3

The first threat that Paul addresses is the persecution and hardship that the church is facing. Even though Paul and Silas had left town, and some time had passed, it seems that the persecution of the church had continued.

And so Paul begins by encouraging them:

*4 We proudly tell God's other churches about your endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering.*<sup>3</sup>

Isn't it a great feeling to hear from your parent or an important mentor how proud they are of you? Now we do not know what the Thessalonians were facing in the way of persecution. But Paul is acting like a proud father who can't stop talking about how well his child is doing. He makes it clear that he is proud of how they have dealt with the persecution, so much so that he is holding them up as an example of how other churches should respond to persecution and hardships – by facing them with endurance and faith.

It is a difficult thing for us living in 21<sup>st</sup> century America to really grasp the kinds of persecution and hardships that the 1<sup>st</sup> century church (and much of the church around the world today experiences). While we may feel that our culture is at times unfavorable or even hostile to Christianity, we do have the freedom to practice our faith in Christ freely, without fear of imprisonment.

We don't have to make a choice, as some Christians in the first century did, between worshipping the emperor and being able to buy food and refusing to worship the emperor because we worship Jesus, and wondering where that food might come from. We don't worry about whether our church gatherings have been infiltrated by secret police or if a mob will come and attack us while we worship as some Christians do even in some parts of the world today. We are truly blessed to have the freedom that God has blessed us with in this country, and we should be sure to be thankful to God this week as we celebrate America.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:4

But our freedom can make it difficult for us to understand persecution. How difficult must it be for Christians to stand in the face of persecution, and yet remain steadfast and faithful to Christ like the Thessalonians without knowing when it would end?

After the fall of the Soviet Union, one of my high school friends went on a mission trip to a town in the Ukraine not too far from Chernobyl. While they were there, they met a man who was a Christian who walked with the aid of crutches because of a severe limp. He had been arrested by the KGB because he was a Christian and been told while being interrogated that if he did not deny Jesus, they would break his leg with a baseball bat. He refused and they broke both of his legs. He said of the experience, “they broke my legs, but they could not break my faith.”

To those who are persecuted, Paul offers reassurance to those who suffer persecution and hardship in life:

*5 And God will use this persecution to show his justice and to make you worthy of his Kingdom, for which you are suffering. 6 In his justice he will pay back those who persecute you.*

*7 And God will provide rest for you who are being persecuted and also for us when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven. He will come with his mighty angels, 8 in flaming fire, bringing judgment on those who don't know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power. 10 When he comes on that day, he will receive glory from his holy people—praise from all who believe. And this includes you, for you believed what we told you about him.<sup>4</sup>*

Paul reassures them and us that God promises rest for the persecuted and the afflicted, that Christ was indeed returning, and those who did not obey the Good News and were persecuting them would receive the judgment they deserved from God. This is welcome news for the persecuted and can help to provide strength to endure and be faithful in the midst of

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:4-10

difficulty, and Paul provides them with a reason for hope and encourages them to stand firm in their faith even at the most difficult moments in the midst of the persecution.

Paul's second concern is that the Thessalonians might become distracted and deceived by rumors that were circulating that the Day of the Lord, the second coming of Christ and judgment had already occurred. This suggestion was especially troubling to the Thessalonians who were being persecuted, because even though they heard claims that the end had come, their persecution had not ended. So Paul writes in chapter 2:

*1 Now, dear brothers and sisters, let us clarify some things about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and how we will be gathered to meet him. 2 Don't be so easily shaken or alarmed by those who say that the day of the Lord has already begun. Don't believe them, even if they claim to have had a spiritual vision, a revelation, or a letter supposedly from us. 3 Don't be fooled by what they say.<sup>5</sup>*

Paul answers these claims and rumors directly and simply: Don't pay an attention to them. The things that I told you before and the things I am telling you now haven't occurred yet, and until they do the Day of the Lord will not have arrived. Paul then goes on to explain a little bit about the second coming as a clarification of what he had previously taught them before going on and dealing with the third threat.

The third threat that Paul deals with in 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians is laziness and idleness. This concern arose from the fact that some of the Thessalonian Christians had stopped working and were idle. It seems that some of the Thessalonians were convinced that Christ's return was so close that it was a waste of time to work, and that they would rather just spend their time waiting for the return of Christ. This laziness posed a problem for the church because it meant that some members were relying on the hard work of others to feed and care for them as well as

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3a

those who were truly in need, and because their lack of having something to do left open great possibilities (and time) for sin. This laziness greatly concerned Paul, leading him to write:

*6 And now, dear brothers and sisters, we give you this command in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Stay away from all believers who live idle lives and don't follow the tradition they received from us. 7 For you know that you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you. 8 We never accepted food from anyone without paying for it. We worked hard day and night so we would not be a burden to any of you. 9 We certainly had the right to ask you to feed us, but we wanted to give you an example to follow. 10 Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat."*

*11 Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and meddling in other people's business. 12 We command such people and urge them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and work to earn their own living. 13 As for the rest of you, dear brothers and sisters, never get tired of doing good.<sup>6</sup>*

Paul doesn't just suggest that they work, he commands them to work and to stay away from those who do "lead idle lives" and don't follow the tradition they have been taught. Paul is keenly aware of the axiom that "idle hands are the devil's workshop." When people have nothing to do (or are doing nothing) it is easy for them to fall into sin and meddle in and gossip about the business of others, or simply to fall into sin out of boredom. The same goes for us. It is important for us not to live idle lives, but instead to work hard for the kingdom and work to meet our own needs so that we can help to meet the needs of others who are unable to do so themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

So Paul addresses each of these three threats, persecution, misinformation, and idleness, with the same instruction (given in different forms): remember what you were taught and obey it.

How simple that sounds! We often want advice that is customized to our own situation. We look for scriptures that address the specific situations that we face in our own lives, but instead of providing different instructions for each situation, Paul basically gives the same instructions in dealing with each threat that the Thessalonians faced. Stand firm. Cling to the Good News and live out what you have been taught.

Regarding their persecution and suffering, he says: He tells them that those who don't know God and those who refuse to obey the Good News will be judged and punished. And he writes of praying for the persecuted Thessalonians: *11 So we keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call. May he give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do. 12 Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with him.*<sup>7</sup> Paul calls them to and prays that they might obey the Good News they have been taught and live lives worthy of it.

Regarding the confusion about the timing of the second coming, Paul encourages them this way: *15 With all these things in mind, dear brothers and sisters, stand firm and keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you both in person and by letter.* Here again Paul emphasizes the importance of holding fast to and obeying that which has been taught to them.

And regarding the problem of idleness, Paul offers the same remedy: *Stay away from all believers who live idle lives and don't follow the tradition they received from us.* And a little bit later *Take note of those who refuse to obey what we say in this letter.*

For Paul, the way to deal with these threats to faith (as well as others) is quite simply, to live out what we have been taught, as Paul indicates the Thessalonians are already doing and

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

doing well. To forget what we have been taught, to disobey it, to seek to chart a different course, or to kick back and relax waiting for Jesus to return are all paths to failure and trouble, whether it be in the face of persecution and hardship, in the face of the contrary claims of others, or in the face of work, and Paul hammers home this message throughout the entirety of 2 Thessalonians.

A simple message for us . . .

So then the question is, what does this mean for us? It seems that Paul wants us to understand that the key to living and experiencing the life that God desires that we live is holding fast to the Good News we have heard about Jesus and living out his teachings. This is the key that enables us to stand firm in the face of hardship, suffering, and even persecution. It is the filter by which we are able to discern whether or not the latest belief or practice is true and beneficial for us. Living this life keeps us moving and keeps us on track rather than wasting away in laziness.

And so while we may not experience real persecution, we all face difficult times, we all face hardships. We all face messages and news that threaten to distract us or deceive us and draw us off course. We all face the temptation to become complacent. We can get tired of doing the hard work of obedience and allowing Jesus to change us completely can be uncomfortable.

But Paul urges: Don't give up. Keep going. Live out the life you have been called to live. Live a life worthy of the call of Christ. Don't get tired of doing good. Keep pressing forward no matter what you face, for the reward to those who obey is great and the punishment for those who do not obey is terrible.

God is calling us not just to believe, he is calling us to live the life. May what Paul said of the Thessalonians be said of us: “Dear brothers and sisters, we can’t help but thank God for you, because your faith is flourishing and your love for one another is growing.”