

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Prequel: Dangerous Faith Acts 17:1-9

Introduction

The books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians are letters from the apostle Paul to the believers in Thessalonica, in northern Greece (Macedonia; Achaia—where Athens and Corinth are—is the southern part).

95 miles from Philippi along the Ignatian Way, about a 700-mile Roman road (19.6 feet wide) running from current-day Istanbul, Turkey, across northern Greece (Macedonia) and on across Albania to the coast of the Adriatic Sea. If you sailed west across the Adriatic and picked up the Appian Way, you could travel all the way to Rome, capital of the empire.

Thessalonica—thriving city of 200,000 people, still exists today with a population of over a million. In Paul's day it was the capital of the province of Macedonia, strategic economic center with a "splendid harbor" on the Gulf of Salonika and near two rivers surrounded by fertile plains. Named after Alexander the Great's step-sister. Because of the city's support of Mark Antony and Octavian (Augustus Caesar) in their war against

Cassius and Brutus, who assassinated Julius Caesar, it gained free-city status in 42 B.C. That meant no Roman garrison was stationed there. The city enjoyed local autonomy. It had a senate and a public assembly. A council of 5-7 magistrates called *politarchs* governed Thessalonica. For years those who reject the accuracy of the Biblical accounts charged Luke with an error in calling the magistrates *politarchs* in our text this morning because the title was not used elsewhere in the empire. But over time archaeologists have found multiple inscriptions in the Macedonian region that use this term.

The point is this: *Paul writes 1 and 2 Thessalonians to real people living in a real historical situation. To understand the letters well, we need to understand what prompted Paul to write them.* So our series on 1 and 2 Thessalonians will start with a two-message prequel from Acts 17. Dr. Luke, traveling companion to the great apostle to the Gentiles, records the history of his missionary journeys. In that history Luke records the birth of the church at Thessalonica.

¹ Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

3 explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." **4** And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. **5** But the Jews^[a] were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. **6** And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, **7** and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." **8** And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. **9** And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The enemies of Christianity considered it a dangerous faith, disrupting the status quo. The missionaries were accused of turning the world upside down, even though in reality they were turning it rightside up.

The new believers in Christ would find their newfound faith put them in the path of danger. The enemies of the gospel would use

whatever means they could to stop it, including mob violence.

This Christianity Paul preached was "A Dangerous Faith."

1. Proven Strategy (1-3)
2. Initial Success (4)
3. Common Backlash (5-9)

Authentic Christianity continues to face hostility. We need to learn how to navigate the dangers of our day with faithfulness, wisdom, and courage. The founding of the church in Thessalonica and the letters Paul wrote to them will give us insight into how to do so.

Faith under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

1. Proven Strategy (1-3)

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Amphipolis (30 miles)

Apollonia (another 27 miles)

Large cities on the Ignatian Way, but passed by for reasons we do not know (possibly no synagogues?)

Thessalonica (38 miles)

“Synagogue”—place where Jews congregated for teaching of the OT and worship

“As was his custom”—Jesus described this way. God’s people Old and New Testaments do not forsake assembling together for worship and teaching of the word. Paul’s mission strategy was to go the Jew first, specifically to the synagogue. There he would find an audience already aware of the true God and of OT messianic prophecies.

The fertile ground of gospel endeavor is not just in the streets. It is among those who are drawn to the Word and worship. There’s not a Lord’s Day that goes by but that we have those with us who have not yet trusted in Jesus. We want to engage them and see them persuaded. Children’s Bible clubs, workplace Bible studies often lead to conversions and church plants.

The apostles were careful to prove their testimony by means of the written Word of God. The 19 examples of their preaching in Acts demonstrate their reliance on this strategy. The epistles stress why: the Spirit effects change in the human heart by means of God’s Word. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. There is no substitute.

“Reasoned with them from the Scriptures”—word we get “dialogue” from; to revolve in the mind, to teach with the method of question and answer; emphasizes the idea of stimulating thought—THINK!

Our proclamation of the good news must engage the minds of our hearers, not just their emotions. Repeating slogans is not preaching. Preaching means explaining and applying God’s Word. And Paul’s work among the Thessalonians clearly was not just preaching. It was also interaction. We have to learn to listen as well as talk to evangelize effectively. Hear their questions. Understand where they’re coming from. How else can you know your audience? We shouldn’t just give them a speech then run. Ask probing questions—like Jesus did! Give solid answers.

Much public discourse today has devolved into shouting down the opposition and repeating mantras to those who already agree with you. It’s not convincing, whether the topic is science or politics or history or the arts. Why would we use such a shallow, off-putting strategy for spreading the most important news ever?

We need to recover the art of thoughtful conversation. Sound-bites may work for advertising, but not for evangelizing. Truth deserves better. People deserve better.

We have to work at this. It means taking time to be with people where they are. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes about how patient, compassionate, and caring he and his fellow missionaries were with the Thessalonians.

Fretfulness and fear, anger and protests, dismissiveness and pride—all these repel people. The gospel is compelling. It meets us where we are. It answers to universal human need. We do not need to fear the engagement. Truth resonates with the human heart, even if a person declares there is no such thing. Love and respect are attractive.

If we're going to turn the world rightside up we have to engage people, listen to their questions, and have solid biblical explanations, not pat answers that can't bear scrutiny. And no little religious talk that affirms everybody but fails to lay out clearly what the Scriptures actually say will do either.

The whole notion that Christianity is an unthinking religion is foreign to the Bible's portrayal of it. If you have to check your brains at the door to receive the gospel, it's not the gospel. We want people to stop and think. We want them to understand. We want the evidence to convince them. And we want our interaction with them to be compelling.

Three Sabbaths—used to think Paul was in Thessalonica only 3 weeks, but the description he gives in Philippians reveals that he was there long enough to receive supply from the church in Philippi at least twice, in addition to his deriving income from tentmaking. After he taught three Sabbaths in the synagogue, Paul must have spent additional time evangelizing and discipling primarily the Gentile population.

As Paul taught the Scriptures, what was his focus?

Acts 17:3

Explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”

“Explaining and proving”—opening the minds by opening the Scriptures, just as Christ did on the road to Emmaus—explaining; and proving—literally, laying things out side by side, proving by means of evidence

Jesus Himself declared that the Scriptures testify of Him, and that searching the Scriptures should lead you to Him. Yet sometimes it can be difficult to find Christ in the preaching of even Bible-believing teachers and preachers. They are hung up on their systems and pet doctrines. They are lost

in the weeds and the side paths. They will never turn the world rightside up. We have to get the emphasis of our message to the world right. We preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves their servants for Christ's sake.

When we point others to Christ through the Scriptures, what should we emphasize?

That it was necessary for the Messiah (Anointed One) to suffer.

The great stumblingblock for the Jews; foolishness to the Greeks.

Jews looked for a conquering Messiah to bring back national freedom and prosperity; difficulty reconciling the suffering passages; led to a 2-Messiah theory.

Akin to the health and wealth distortion of Christianity prevalent today. A mistake to talk about God's having a wonderful plan for your life instead of addressing the universal human need for perfect righteousness to replace our wrath-deserving sin against God's moral law.

The Messiah is the Conquering King, but the OT is clear: He must suffer and die to fulfill the Scriptures, and to accomplish God's appointed plan of redemption and rescue.

Whole sacrificial system

Isaiah 53: suffering Servant—wounded, bruised, unjustly executed for the sins of many

Daniel 9: Messiah the prince will be cut off

Also necessary to rise from the dead—
Scriptures, God’s plan of salvation

Psalm 16:10

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or
let your holy one see corruption.

Isaiah 53:10-12

10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief; when his soul makes
an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring;
he shall prolong his days; the will of the
LORD shall prosper in his hand.

11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall
see and be satisfied; by his knowledge
shall the righteous one, my servant, make
many to be accounted righteous, and he shall
bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with
the many, and he shall divide the spoil with
the strong, because he poured out his soul to
death and was numbered with the
transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The Scriptural portrait of the Messiah’s person
and mission in relation to sin, the law,
justification, resurrection, exaltation—must be
our central message if we are to turn the
world rightside up.

The apostles demonstrated that Jesus matches that Messianic portrait exactly. He is the fulfillment and nobody else can be.

All efforts to divorce the Jesus of history from the Scriptural portrait are completely at odds with the eyewitness testimony of the first century to the words of Christ and His apostles. They amount to fake news not good news. They are only masquerading as scholarship. They ignore the primary sources. They gut Christianity of its meaning and power to change even one human heart, let alone turn the world right side up. *True Christianity is not just philosophy—its real history—as is the salvation yet to come. And it is powerful to save to the uttermost all who believe.*

Application

Much of the failure of modern evangelism seems to be rooted in its departure from the apostolic methods.

Historically, when Christians get back to the Scriptural basics practiced by Christ and the apostles, awakening and revival follow. O that we would see such a surge in our day!

The effects of awakening and revival can be spectacular, but the means of getting there are not. Day in and day out faithful interaction with people who need Jesus. Dialogue, explaining, proving. Focusing on

Jesus as the promised Messiah, the only Savior-King.

Preacher or not, this is what our lives are about. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus the Christ and displaying His power at work in our lives.

2. Initial Success (4)

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

Were persuaded—the evidence presented was convincing; the answers to their questions satisfying. Jews and Greeks, men and women. The gospel is for everyone.

Joined Paul and Silas—literally, they were allotted to Paul and Silas. There is an unseen force at work—God Himself. He used Paul and Silas as His messengers, but He was the one who brought them to repentance and faith, who convinced them that Jesus is indeed the Messiah foretold by the OT.

Never forget that when you share the gospel, you are not alone. God is at work. He has promised to use His Word. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Whoever proclaims the Word is the middleman, a messenger sent out by the Lord of the harvest. Christ has called His disciples

to proclaim the gospel to all creation, making disciples of all ethnicities. We do so as ambassadors of Jesus, to whom God has given all authority in heaven and on earth. There is no place you can go where He is not the rightful ruler. He is with us all the days till the consummation of the age.

Besides these Jews, there were also a great many devout Greeks who believed. Worshipping Greeks; God-fearers like the Roman centurion Cornelius in Caesarea

And not a few of the leading women—possibly wives of city officials, but more likely women who were themselves leaders in the community. Like Lydia the successful businesswoman of Philippi, women in the Greco-Roman world at this time could achieve high status.

Later we learn the names of some Thessalonian converts: Aristarchus traveled with Paul; was in Ephesus, returned with him later to Philippi and Thessalonica, with him on the voyage to Rome, a fellow prisoner in first Roman imprisonment—house arrest. When Paul writes Philemon, he lists him as one of his fellow workers.

Gaius was also with Paul in Ephesus. Secundus traveled with Paul.

Demas, famous for his defection, in love with this present world, left Paul in his final imprisonment and headed to Thessalonica. Possibly his home city?

Those who believed were joined to Paul and Silas. Common cause. Common life in Jesus. Part of the new community called the church—the called-out assembly of the family of God.

A professing Christian who does not want to keep company with other believers raises the question whether he or she has actually been born again. We need one another just as the members of our physical bodies need one another to function in a healthy way. Jesus joins us to our forever family. Make it a habit to be building and nurturing that relationship with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

3. Common Backlash (5-9)

⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities (*politarchs*), shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and

they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things.⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The Jews here are those who did not believe. They resented that the good news of the Messiah would even be offered to Gentiles, let alone received by them. It was an outrage to them, a dishonoring of their cultural heritage and God-given privilege. They had forgotten that God promised Abraham even before the Israelites came into being that in his offspring all the families of the earth would be blessed. Or Isaiah’s words that the Gentiles would trust in the Messiah. The Messiah would be of Jewish heritage, but all peoples would be part of His kingdom.

The Gospel is for all ethnicities. If it was not to be confined to the Jews, to whom the oracles of God were first given, how much less is it to be confined to America, or the West, or for that matter, to any particular region or people group. If it does not export, it’s not the gospel.

Our task is not to conform other cultures to our own, but to preach Jesus as the Savior-King. That’s why Christians can move among

any culture and people and thrive there.

Daniel or Joseph, Peter or Paul can thrive in any culture. Gospel truths and practices are non-negotiable and universal. We must not overturn the authority of God's Word for the sake of changing human customs. But we must be clear on what the Bible says matters and what doesn't. If we build a following for ideas and practices that aren't what the Bible advocates, we build a house of sand and we cut ourselves off from other cultures.

The apostles had made their case from the Scriptures, but these unbelieving Jews could not bring themselves to accept what the Scriptures were saying. They had made an idol of their version of religion. It was really an idol of themselves.

Their zeal and jealousy moved them to do wicked things. The Word of God and the Spirit of God produce just the opposite.

They gathered wicked men of the rabble—evil harmful people loitering in the marketplace—and set the city in an uproar. We see the same kind of violent rioting today.

Don't miss the contrast. *The apostles reasoned, dialogued, proved, and persuaded. Their enemies protested and rioted. They did not have an argument, so they threw a tantrum. Beware of using such tactics.*

Protesting and expressing outrage are not good ways to advance the gospel. They are the tactics of those who hate truth. The gospel calls people to think, to reason, to compare, to find answers. Remember that when you engage on social media, or encounter someone who does not believe what you believe.

The enemies of the gospel not only created widespread disturbance using these wicked marketplace loafers. They also used lies.

They took the truth and then twisted it. Is Jesus a King? Yes. He is the Anointed One with Universal Authority. But not the kind of king they were alleging.

Jesus to Pilate in John 18:36-38

³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." ³⁷ Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went back

outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him."

People attack evangelicals and the gospel they preach in similar ways. They twist the doctrine. They define calling for repentance from sin—especially the celebrated sins of the times—as hatred that produces hate crimes. They define preaching Christ as the only Savior and King as exclusive, divisive, and disrespectful to other views. They view Christians in terms of political advantage or disadvantage.

What they need are Christians courageous enough to endure the abuse and to engage them in conversation with reasoned argument.

What they need are believers who don't get sidetracked, but keep their focus on Jesus. He is the Christ, and Savior-King of the world. If they actually see Him and trust Him, they will bow the knee gladly.

Conclusion

Follow the apostolic pattern:

1. Proven Strategy (1-3)
2. Initial Success (4)
3. Common Backlash (5-9)

We live in volatile times, full of propaganda and mob psychology. Let your life cut through

the fog of warring factions with the clarity and compassion of gospel thinking and living. It's a dangerous faith—a threat to pagan ideology and a call to endure mistreatment for Jesus. But you can thrive in this hostile world. Your faith under fire will be purified, and you will come forth as gold.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some reasons it's important to connect apostolic letters like 1 and 2 Thessalonians to the history in which they were written?
2. What practical reason did Paul have for evangelizing in the synagogue first, and what does that teach us about our opportunities to share the gospel if we imitate his strategy?
3. How should the apostolic strategy of reasoning with people from the Scriptures using a question-answer method shape our gospel interaction with others?
4. What patterns of communication today interfere with such thoughtful conversation, and what are some ways you could create opportunities for this kind of interaction with lost people you know?
5. What was the focus of Paul's Scriptural teaching, and why is that focus vital to effective evangelizing?

6. Given what our passage teaches us about the apostles' methods, why is the following statement true? "The effects of awakening and revival can be spectacular, but the means of getting there are not."
7. Both Jews and Greeks and men and women were persuaded by the gospel and were joined to the apostles. What does this outcome reveal about the gospel's target audience and the resulting church family?
8. How should the contrast between the strategy of the apostles and that of the gospel enemies shape our own gospel efforts?
9. In what ways is Biblical Christianity a "dangerous faith"?