

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

**A
PARTNERSHIP
WITH GOD AND
ONE ANOTHER**

BY MALCOLM COX

**PAUL'S APPROACH TO NURTURING
CHRISTIAN GROWTH**

**SPIRITUAL
GROWTH
THROUGH THE
LENS OF 1
THESSALONIANS**

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WHAT IS AN EPISTLE?¹

Exercise in exegeting an epistle

What can we know about Emily & Tom from this letter below?

Dear Emily,

Hey there, how's it going? I hope you're doing well. It's been too long since we caught up, so I thought I'd drop you a quick letter.

I've been thinking about that time we went on that road trip together and had all those crazy adventures. Remember when we got lost and ended up in that tiny town with the world's best burgers? Good times.

Anyway, I just wanted to say hi and see how you're doing. We should plan another adventure soon, don't you think?

Take care and let's catch up soon.

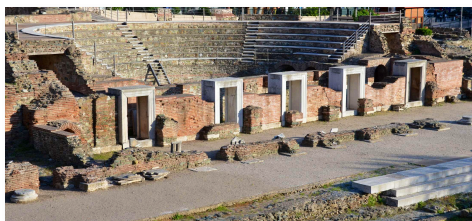
Cheers, Tom

I can deduce the following facts: _____

¹ My lesson 'Why did God give us letters?' can be found here: <https://www.malcolmcox.org/why-did-god-give-us-letters/>
<https://youtu.be/fta3dygNGZI>



BACKGROUND TO FIRST THESSALONIANS



The Roman theatre in Thessalonica

Paul, Silas (a link between Paul & Peter, 1 Peter 5:12) and Timothy arrived from Philippi, further east, where he had been imprisoned. There he had preached in the open, since there was no synagogue. That was not his normal approach, and once in Thessalonica he reverted to his more normal pattern - at least, until he was thrown out!

“As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,” (Acts 17:2 NIV11)



Typical 1st century synagogue

Paul preached on three Sabbaths, converting some Jews, some Gentiles and “quite a few prominent women.” Acts 17:4 Although the harvest was plentiful, so was the persecution.

“...they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.” (Acts 17:5)

Although Paul would have been happy to stay (his record demonstrates that he was not short on courage), he took local advice and agreed, for the good of the church, to depart,

“ As soon as it was night , the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.” (Acts 17:10 NIV11)

Location

Where is Thessalonica? It is modern day Thessaloniki, or Salonica, about 200 miles north of Athens. At that time it was the capital of Macedonia and the largest city in the region. It was strategically situated on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway to the East.



Dates

When was 1 Thessalonians written? In the mid-50s AD. It was Paul's second letter after the one to the Galatians. Jesus had been crucified, resurrected and ascended only 20 years earlier. The memories of his life and teaching were fresh in the memories of his followers.



Membership

What do we know of the make up of the church in Thessalonica? Most of them were not wealthy since Paul was at pains to stress he did not depend on them. It is also the case that he does not warn them about materialism, which he mentions in several of his other epistles.

“Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.” (1 Thessalonians 2:9 NIV11)

They are young Christians. The entire church is composed of disciples of one year or less of following Christ. Their religious background is pagan.

“They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,” (1 Thessalonians 1:9 NIV11)

Outline

We can divide up the letter in various ways, but I offer this one taken from ‘Outlines of Bible Books’, by Lang, Ward, and Nelson.

- I. Paul’s Greeting (1:1)
- II. Paul Gives Thanks for the Thessalonians (1:2-10)
- III. Paul’s Ministry to the Thessalonians (2:1-3:13)
 - A. Paul’s Ministry in Thessalonica (2:1-16)
 - B. Paul’s Desire to Return (2:17-3:5)
 - C. Prayer for the Thessalonians (3:6-13)
- IV. Paul’s Instructions to the Thessalonians (4:1-5:22)
 - A. Living to Please God (4:1-12)
 - B. The Coming of the LORD (4:13-5:11)
 1. The Living and the Dead (4:13-18)
 2. The Day of the LORD (5:1-11)
 - C. Instructions on Church Life (5:12-22)
- V. Closing Grace (5:23-28)

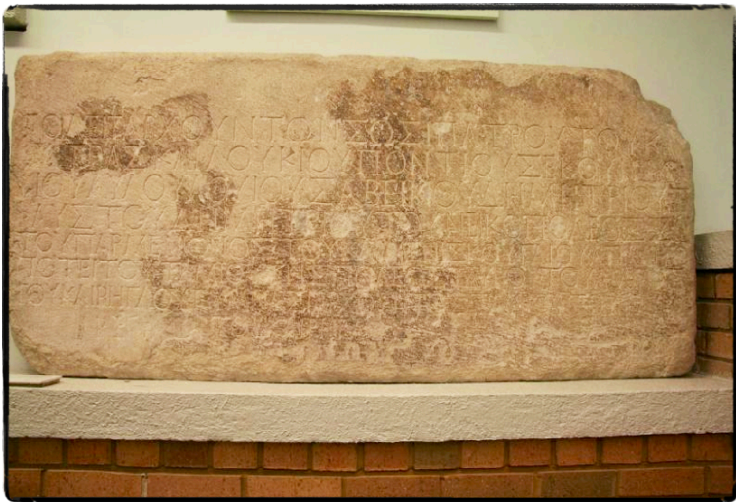
You can gain insight into a book by making your own outline. As you read the text, where do the natural breaks happen? When does Paul extend a topic, and when does he move on to something new? Can you find his shift from personal to congregational, or from God to local needs? What do you learn from these changes?

Apologetics and Thessalonica

Some say there are anachronisms in Luke's account of Paul's travels. One such is about the politarchs mentioned in Thessalonica:

“they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here...” (Acts 17:6–7)

The phrase ‘city officials’ translates the Greek word ‘politarches’. No evidence of people with that title was found until the 19th century. In the 1800s archaeologists dismantled a 1st century arch called the Vardar Gate which spanned the Egnatian Way at the west side of the city. This inscription was discovered: “In the time of the Politarchs ..” (on the stone in the picture). Since then a total of 35 inscriptions mentioning politarchs have been found.



Luke was right — again. In his writings he mentions 32 countries, 54 cities and 9 islands. He makes no mistakes. Not one. Luke was a historian of the highest calibre. We can trust what he wrote — including his account of what happened in Thessalonica.

Although our faith does not depend on archaeology, we can find it to be a helpful bolster to our faith knowing authors of Scripture like Luke checked their facts and wrote accurately.

Why was the letter written?

- Questions about dead Christians
- Possible harsh leadership (well-intentioned)
- Possible over-delegation of spiritual well-being to the leaders. Everyone is a 'shepherd'
- They miss Paul, Silas and Timothy
- Paul wants them to keep growing and not become complacent or proud
- They are young Christians - they need ongoing teaching
- Encouragement to persevere and keep growing despite persecution and opposition

CHAPTER 1

We see evidence of spiritual strength and growth in a group of young Christians even though separated from their spiritual parents. They are working at their own initiative, motivated by God (1:3), and focussed on Christ (1:3)

Foundational issues that ensured their strength and growth

- Spiritual basis to conversion, v5
- Christ-like leadership modelled by parents in the faith, vv5b-6

Evidence of growth

- Becoming a model of faith (i.e. a blessing) to other churches, v8

Further evidence of a healthy foundation

- A decisive turning in repentance leading to a radically different lifestyle, v9
- A determination to be active — ‘to serve’, v9b
- A healthy God-dependance and focus, vv9b-10
- Confidence in the future because of the resurrection

Key points

- Young Christians can be strong, influential and growing.
- Young Christians can grow despite suffering.
- The conversion experience must be profound
- The mentoring experience must be visceral
- God must be the focus

“Whereas envy isolates us, zeal brings us into mentoring relationships within the communion of saints—those who can help us get started, push us when our enthusiasm flags, rejoice with us when we make strides, and lift us up when we fall.” Glittering Vices, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung

CHAPTER 2

Motives of leaders

- Please God, not people (insincere), v4
- No flattery (manipulative), v5
- No greed (deceitful), v5

“When we process our leadership by our character, the quality of the outcomes will be measured by a thriving culture where people are valued and not used, where the leader is respected and not feared, where a leader is trusted and not doubted, where the moral authority of the leader’s life makes others glad to cooperate and achieve, where grace underwrites the administration of the employee handbook, and where the leader’s example stimulates those he serves to live and lead as the leader lives and leads.”

Redefining Leadership, Joseph M. Stowell

Attitude of leaders

- Not dependant on ‘authority’, v6
- Child-like, i.e. vulnerable, v7
- Nursing mother, i.e. feeding; skin-tight, v7
- Father, i.e. helpful (encouraging, comforting and urging), vv11-12
- Building trust through sacrificial love

"He exhorted them like a sports coach telling his team how to win; he encouraged them like a friend strengthening someone facing a daunting task; he testified to them like a witness in a court of law." N. T. Wright, The NT for Everyone

Effect on the people

- Responsive to the Word of God - trusting in God, v13
- Perseverance despite mistreatment, v14

“with the help of our **God** we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ...we speak as those

approved by **God** to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but **God**, ...—**God** is our witness....even though as apostles of **Christ** we could have ‘asserted our authority. ...we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of **God** but our lives as well....we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of **God** to you. You are witnesses, and so is **God**, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed...encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of **God**, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” (1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 NIV11)

Effect on Paul of the Thessalonians’ response to him

- Intense longing to see them, v17
- Made every effort to see them, v17
- Only Satan stopped him from seeing them, v18
- They are his joy, v19

Key points

- Effective leadership that helps members grow is more about motives and attitude than skills or gifts
- We can grow despite suffering
- Love is practical, intense and personal

‘Lasting leadership is grounded in character. Character produces respect. Respect produces trust. And trust motivates followers.’ Twelve Ordinary Men, John F. MacArthur



CHAPTER 3

Sharing resources

- Paul sends Timothy: A sacrifice for him to be left alone, v2
- Motivated by his concern for them. He feels it. "I could stand it no longer" X2. vv1, 5
- Long journey: Dangerous; did not know what to expect on arrival
- Key concern: Their faith, v2

Expressed love

- Strong bond between Paul *and* the Thessalonians.
- 'Your faith and love', 'you long to see us', 'your faith', 'you are standing firm', 'joy because of you'
- 'We long to see you', 'we are encouraged', 'we really live', 'all the joy we have'

Expressed hope

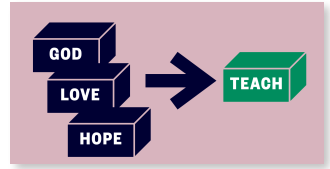
God – focused prayer, v9

- Specific request, v10
- Prayer for them to keep growing – overflow, v12
- Prayer for them to be close to God – blameless and holy, v13
- Praying with and for one another?
- What do we leave unexpressed?

Key points

- Are we using our church resources effectively to strengthen those who need it?
- Do we express our love for one another?
- Do we know what to pray for one another, specifically and with a God- focus?

CHAPTER 4



Direct talk

- After 3 chapters of affirmation
- Desire for growth assumed: 'do this more and more', v1
- Based on authority of Jesus, v2

Holiness a priority, v3

- Responsible for your own purity. Not dependent on anyone else. v4
- Understand the responsibility within the community, v6
- Based on the authority of God, v8

Can always grow in love

- Commendation for loving other churches, v10
- Capable of growth, 'More and more'

What happens to dead Christians?

- Answer focuses on Jesus.
- Reassuring the anxious - they need encouraging, v18

Key points

- Direct talk is needed, but will not be effective if not spoken from a position of loving trust.
- Questions are good opportunities for teaching. Reward those who ask questions.

“Trust is a product of vulnerability that grows over time and requires work, attention, and full engagement. Trust isn't a grand gesture — it's a growing marble collection.” Daring Greatly, Brene Brown

CHAPTER 5

Questions about times and dates

- Reminding them of what they already know, vv1-2.

Reassuring the worried.

- Uses the opportunity to remind them of their identity, v5
- Thus influences their behaviour from a healthy, positive place, v6, 8
- Paul ties his instructions to positive promises, vv9-10

Instructions

- Healing divisions, v13
- Honour the hard working, v12
- Work for peace, v13
- Collective responsibility for congregational health, v14
- What is the difference between intrusive and attentive?
 - “I noticed that...”
 - Would you like some feedback?
 - How much feedback would you like?
 - How would you like your feedback delivered?
- Adjust your approach according to each person
- Healthy habits: Rejoice, pray, give thanks, vv16-18
- Thoughtfulness in learning (so as to grow), vv19-22
- Hope because God is with you, vv23-24

Key points

- Remind yourself and one another of your identity
- Correct faulty views of who we *are* more than faulty behaviour
- Take personal responsibility for ensuring congregational health

‘Effective solitude is intentional time alone with ourselves and with God. Then God can do something powerful within us in the area of identity.’ The Good and Beautiful God, James Bryan Smith



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Connect with Malcolm at his website: www.malcolmcox.org and his Youtube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUyzW6CZvdv4rmTE-z5QfNA>

Please pray for Malcolm's work with the Watford church of Christ and the Thames Valley churches of Christ, as well as the Athens Institute of Ministry for the UK & Ireland. He serves as a Teacher, is a certified Solutions Focussed coach, and is currently pursuing a Masters in Theological Studies at the London School of Theology. He has been married to Penny (a doctor of medicine) for 38 years and has two adult children. Malcolm has been a disciple of Jesus for almost 40 years.