

((( PREACHING *the* WORD )))

# 1-2 THESSALONIANS

*The* HOPE *of* SALVATION



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R. Kent Hughes

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**JAMES H. GRANT JR.**

R. Kent Hughes  
*Series Editor*

**■ ■ CROSSWAY**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*1–2 Thessalonians*

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In memory of my father,

*J. Harold Grant Sr.*

(1949–2007)

who is currently asleep in Christ, awaiting the resurrection.

Grief has not been without hope,  
for we believe Jesus will return,  
uniting us together in the resurrection,  
to be with the Lord and glorify him always.

This is good news indeed.

*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you  
completely, and may your whole spirit and  
soul and body be kept blameless at  
the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-24

*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and  
God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal  
comfort and good hope through grace,  
comfort your hearts and establish them in  
every good work and word.*

2 THESSALONIANS 2:16-17

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# A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our *ethos* as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen

going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

*R. Kent Hughes*  
*Wheaton, Illinois*

# Acknowledgments

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My wife, Brandy, should receive a special thank you. She encouraged me throughout this process, especially as our family grew from two children (Macy and Trey) to four (Nate and Addie). She deserves more honor than words can express, and together we agreed to dedicate this volume to my father, J. Harold Grant, Sr., who entered into the presence of the Lord in January 2007. I started this series in the summer of 2008, and through it the Lord comforted our hearts and established us in the gospel.



# Series Abbreviations

ABC	Anchor Bible Commentary
BECNT	The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IVPNT	The IVP New Testament Commentary Series
NICNT	The New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	The New International Greek Text Commentary
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
NTC	New Testament Commentary
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentary



# Listening to Paul's Conversation

## INTRODUCTION TO 1 THESSALONIANS



HAVE YOU EVER stepped into the middle of a conversation only to find yourself lost in the discussion? If you are supposed to participate in the conversation, then you have to be “filled in” on the background. If the conversation continues and no one provides this information, you have to fill in the background for yourself. You have to figure out what they are talking about and why this topic is important.

When we read one of Paul’s letters, we are walking in on a conversation that has already started, and we have to catch up with the discussion. Calvin Roetzel calls this a “conversation in context.”<sup>1</sup> The conversation is taking place with a particular group of people in a particular city. For our purposes, we will be examining Paul’s letters to the church in Thessalonica, a church he first planted with the help of Silas and Timothy. In order to get our bearings, we are going to set the stage for the whole first letter with an overview of Paul’s main “talking points” with this church. We are going to set the stage in two areas—the background of this letter and its actual contents.

### The Background for This Church Plant

Luke explains some of the background in Acts 17. Paul arrived in Thessalonica after a difficult ministry in Philippi that saw him placed in jail. In spite of that suffering, when Paul was released from prison he continued his ministry by heading to Thessalonica, but those trials continued to follow Paul. After establishing the church in Thessalonica, Paul had to leave quickly when a



mob dragged some of the Christian leaders before the magistrates of the city. This mob claimed that the Christians were against the decrees of Caesar because they were claiming allegiance to another king, a man named Jesus.

Although Paul left Thessalonica quickly, we know that he continued to communicate with this young Christian church, even before he wrote this first letter. Paul was concerned about the spiritual growth and strength of these young Christians; so he decided to send Timothy back to Thessalonica. In chapter 3 of 1 Thessalonians Paul says, “Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions” (vv. 1–3).

After Timothy visited the church, he reunited with Paul in Corinth and provided an update on the situation in Thessalonica. According to Paul, Timothy brought back “the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you” (1 Thessalonians 3:6). Timothy also brought Paul up to speed on the issues facing the Thessalonians, so Paul could continue to teach them and instruct them in the Christian faith.

From a certain perspective, my role as a preacher is similar to the role of Timothy. I am going to catch you up, as best I can, on the conversation that Paul is having with this church in Thessalonica. We cannot do this perfectly, but we can do it well enough to understand parts of this conversation. But as we listen in on this conversation between Paul and the church in Thessalonica, we are not just spectators. We are not just listening in on something that happened almost two thousand years ago. We are not just doing history. Instead we are part of this conversation. We must see ourselves in this story, seek to understand this conversation, and learn what Paul is saying to us. In a very real way Paul is talking as much to us as he was to them. As Paul tells them about events in his life, his desires and concerns for them, he is at the same time instructing all of us in Christian doctrine and practice, both in terms of personal issues related to individual Christians as well as of issues related to the church and the ministry.<sup>2</sup>

## A Conversation about Ministry and the Church

The first topic we notice is a conversation about ministry and the church. Now this might seem like a given, but we have to remind ourselves of this. We are listening to a conversation between a church and a man who was an apostle, a church planter, a pastor, and a teacher. So this is an opportunity to see how Paul approached ministry. We see his great concern for this church and for these Christians.

Paul gives us some insight into his view of ministry in chapter 2: “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” (v. 2). Paul says that although he suffered, he still came to declare the gospel to them. In the face of obstacles and opposition, he proclaimed the Word of God. But he continues:

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. (2:3–6)

Do you see what Paul is saying? His desire in ministry was not to flatter them, but to please God. And as he pleased God, he would help these Christians grow.

Is this not the case in the ministry? Paul is explaining to us the fundamental reality of a God-centered approach to ministry and the church. He could not enter into the task of church planting by flattering people; he could not do it out of a self-centered sense of glory. If he did, he would not be serving and benefiting them. Instead he had to serve them by following and pleasing the Lord.

Paul also describes his ministry toward them as being “gentle . . . like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (2:7). What an important view of pastoral ministry: the pastor is like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. That kind of gentleness should characterize all pastors, and this is a rebuke to me and to others who lead Christ’s church when we do not look at our congregation as children to be nurtured and led in the faith. So we see two perspectives that complement each other in Paul’s approach to the ministry. A pastor must approach the church with authority and conviction, not trying to flatter people and please them. But along with authority and conviction, the pastor must also display gentleness and nurture.

## A Conversation about Suffering and Persecution

How would you like to walk in on a conversation between Paul and a church on the topic of suffering? That is precisely what we have here, and this is important for us, too, because suffering and trials make up a fundamental part of life that touches all of us. We struggle with suffering, and we often do not know how to handle it. This is a central reason why Paul wrote this letter—to help Christians face suffering in a Christ-centered way.

Immediately in chapter 1 we come across the issue of suffering. Paul

says they received the word of God with much affliction, and that was imitating what had happened to him (v. 6). Both Paul and the church faced suffering, but the conversation about suffering and affliction runs through the whole book. Paul goes on to explain to us a central theological perspective about suffering in 2:14–16. Paul is encouraged that this church imitated other churches in the midst of their suffering, but he reminded them that those who hinder us are also “displeas[ing] God and oppos[ing] all mankind” because they are attempting to stop the message of salvation. But in their attempt to stop the gospel, Paul says, those who oppose the gospel are actually “fill[ing] up the measure of their sins” because “God’s wrath has come upon them at last!”

In these verses we have Paul’s theology of suffering and trials. We can call this “A Doctrine of Persecution and Suffering.” Paul did two things. First, he explained to these Christians that their suffering was not a result of their sin. Instead they were in a long line of Christians who suffered under the cross: “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” (2:14, 15). Jesus suffered, the Jews suffered, Paul suffered, and now the Thessalonians suffered for the sake of the gospel.

Paul did not stop with the suffering of these Christians. He went on to explain to them that even those who oppose the gospel are not outside of God’s power. On the contrary, they are currently under God’s wrath because they reject the offer of salvation. If we misunderstand those two points, we will constantly struggle with God. A proper understanding of suffering and affliction involves a proper understanding of God, who he is, and what he is doing.

This is just as important for us now as it was for them then. When we suffer for our faith, or even if we just suffer from the typical trials and tribulations of this life, our normal response is that we are doing something wrong. Secretly we ask God, “What did I do? Why are you letting this happen to me?”

Paul will have none of that. He is changing our perspective on the issue of suffering. He is telling us to transform our minds, to approach suffering from a completely different perspective. How then should we view suffering and trials? First, we should expect that we are going to suffer. Suffering and trials should not surprise us. We must embrace the reality that through much suffering we must enter the kingdom of God. Second, we should realize that God calls us to persevere through it because we are not suffering under his wrath. As Christians, God’s wrath was poured out on the cross, on his Son. We are suffering because we are bearing the cross that God has placed on us in this life to make us long for Heaven.

This is not the typical perspective on suffering that is predominant in the Christian world. In fact, some Christians would say that I have just given you a wrong view of suffering. I could imagine you having a conversation

with someone about suffering, and you say, “The Scriptures tell us that we should expect to suffer. I was just reading something on 1 Thessalonians that explained how suffering can be redemptive and how God uses it to help us grow.” And your friend responds by saying, “That is just wrong! Why would I want to suffer? I was just listening to someone preach about this on TV, and the preacher said that our problem is our attitude. We have the wrong attitude about life. We are not positive enough, and our problem is that we think we should suffer. Instead we should expect God to bless us.”

That perspective on suffering is not Christian, but it is being taught in some churches. It is not the message we find in the Bible. Paul's view of suffering is summarized in Acts 14:22: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Paul's discussion on suffering with this church in Thessalonica will help us understand a Biblical approach to suffering.

## A Conversation about the Future and Christ's Second Coming

Perhaps this conversation about suffering brought up our next topic: the second coming of Jesus Christ. We have in both of Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica an ongoing conversation about the second coming. This is one of the most prominent themes in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. It is mentioned in every chapter of this first letter (1:10; 2:19, 20; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:1–11, 23, 24), and Paul continued this conversation in the second letter.

This church was asking very important questions about the future and the coming of Jesus Christ:

- What happens to those who die?
- What happens to those who are alive?
- What about those who do not believe?

Paul explains to us what to expect. At Jesus' future coming, the dead in Christ will rise and will be caught up along with the living to meet the Lord in the air (4:15–17). Unbelievers will be subject to God's wrath, but Christians will be delivered from God's wrath, inheriting salvation instead (1:10; 5:2–4, 9, 10). There is a lot to examine regarding the second coming of Christ, and God has blessed us with the opportunity to understand Paul's instructions to these Christians in Thessalonica.

## A Conversation about the Christian Life and Godliness in This World

The final area I want examine in this overview is connected to all three previous topics, but specifically to the second coming. Those saints who are

destined to be with Jesus in his second coming must be holy and blameless (3:11–4:8; 5:23). This is one reason why Paul concludes the book the way he does. Notice this in 5:12–22, where Paul tells us to love those who minister over us, be at peace among ourselves, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and be patient with everyone. As we live this life and face evil, respond with love, continue to rejoice, and always pray, and as we give thanks in all circumstances, we will be following the will of God and holding fast to what is good. What helpful and practical advice!

Paul has charged us to live differently than the world, but he knows that this can seem impossible for Christians. Sometimes all the commands and instructions overwhelm us. We often think, *How can I possibly do all that?* Paul has some closing words for us: “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24).

Do not get discouraged: God will do this work. He will sanctify you completely. God will keep your whole spirit and soul and body blameless at the coming of the Lord.

God is faithful; he will do it.

That is the gospel. The conversation that we are dropping in on is a conversation about the gospel and what it means for our lives. Let us believe that God is for us and that he will finish the work he has started, and let us attend to his revelation to us in his Word.



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### PRAISE FOR THE SERIES

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