

When we follow the Lectionary for our sermons, we are often given the choice of 3-4 different readings for each service. This week and I have chosen the shortest reading that we heard earlier, just 9 verses.

The reason I chose this reading, which is Paul signing off his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, and encouraging the believers there, is because these 9 verses could so easily be written to us as we come towards the end of what must have been for millions of us right across the world, the strangest, hardest and for many the saddest year we have ever experienced.

Here is Paul writing to the Thessalonians to encourage them and set them right on certain issues that have arisen in the church there, ending with these verses.

There were serious problems in the church at Thessalonica.

So, what are the issues that concerned Paul?

What was so serious that he wrote to the Thessalonians not once but twice?

As in any situation, there were many interwoven difficulties in Thessalonica.

**Firstly**, the struggle of persecution.

**Secondly**, the rise of false prophets within the church.

**and thirdly**, some issues of practical Christian living that the false prophets brought to the church.

Let's look together at what was going on in Thessalonica and maybe we can take Paul's last 9 verses of chapter 1 for ourselves.

### **Persecution**

When Paul had first brought the gospel to Thessalonica, the believers there had become the object of violence, enduring serious, life-threatening persecution.

**Luke tells of events in Thessalonica in Acts chapter 17 v 5:**

**The Jews were jealous, so they rounded up some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They attacked Jason's house, seeking to bring Paul and Silas out to the crowd.**

In fact, the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica were so aggressive that they were not satisfied simply to drive Paul and Silas out of their city. Instead, they followed the missionaries to Berea to trouble them even further.

Luke recorded this in Acts chapter 17 verse 13:

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians also indicate that this suffering continued after his departure from Thessalonica.

From the time Paul first preached in Thessalonica until he wrote his letters to them, persecution had been a prominent feature of living for Christ in Thessalonica. And as Paul wrote to the believers in that city, he was very concerned about this persecution and the effects it was having on them.

### False Prophets

In addition to suffering persecution, the Thessalonian church had also come under the influence of false prophets. In some ways, this is not surprising.

In the first place, throughout history, when Christians have suffered persecution for long periods of time, they have often longed for Jesus to return to deliver them from their trials.

In the second place, when Christians are highly concerned with the return of Christ, they often become susceptible to false teachers or false prophets who have extreme views regarding the second coming. And this is precisely what happened to the Thessalonians. False teachers came into the church with misguided beliefs about the nearness of Christ's return.

What we might describe in today's social media as fake news.

To appreciate how much trouble the false teachers stirred up, we will touch on two matters: the conflict that developed between the false prophets and Paul, and the content of the false prophets' teaching.

It is apparent in many sections of Thessalonians that false teachers strongly opposed Paul's teaching. For example, when he received Timothy's reports on the condition of the Thessalonian church, Paul learned that false prophets had entered the fellowship of believers and had spoken against some of his teachings.

One of Paul's responses to this problem was to remind the Thessalonians to examine every prophecy they heard.

Do not despise prophecies. Test everything; hold on to the good.

Sometimes when we read what's doing the rounds in the social media we may need to test it and only hold on to what is good.

(1 Thessalonians 5:20-21)

Paul instructed the Thessalonians to "test everything" and to "hold on to the good" because he wanted them to evaluate the content of every instruction they received. They were to retain only the good, disregarding everything that did not **comport** with what they knew to be true from the Scriptures and from Paul's teaching.

But the false prophets did not give up easily. Instead, they continued to teach their false doctrines. In fact, they may have gone so far as to forge letters under Paul's name in an attempt to persuade the Thessalonians of their views.

Paul's concern with the problem of forgeries is also apparent in 2 Thessalonians.

**The greeting of Paul by my own hand. This is a sign in all my letters; this is how I write. (2 Thessalonians 3:17)**

Paul added words written by his own hand as a signature that distinguished his letters from forgeries, helping the Thessalonians to identify letters that were genuinely his and to reject false prophecy.

This conflict with the false prophets raises another issue for us as we read Paul's letters to the Thessalonians: What were these false prophets teaching? We cannot be sure of everything they taught, but when we recall the ongoing

persecution in Thessalonica and examine the content of Paul's letters, we may surmise that the false prophets had a variety of misconceptions about the second coming of Christ. Their central problem, however, was that they believed that Jesus would return almost immediately.

In fact, as incredible as it may seem to us, some false prophets had even proclaimed that Christ had already returned.

Evidently, at least some of the false prophets had taught that the church of Thessalonica had already missed Christ's return.

Whatever the source of these errors, Paul strongly condemned the false prophets, instructing the Thessalonians to hold fast to what he had told them about the return of Christ.

### **Christian Living**

Now that we have seen how persecution and false prophecy had come to the Thessalonians, we should look at some practical ways these problems impacted the church.

Two significant things happened. There was discouragement and irresponsibility.

Let's look first at the Thessalonians' discouragement.

Usually, when Christians have believed that Jesus' return was just around the corner, they have inevitably been discouraged because Jesus has not appeared. In Thessalonica, many believers had lived their entire lives focused on the immediate return of Christ. They had suffered and given up much for the sake of Christ. Yet, as the months went by, not only were they disappointed, but to make matters worse, a number of believers passed away.

Paul gently corrected them in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 v 13 and 14:

**We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, about those who are sleeping, lest you grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)**

In addition to discouragement and confusion, the message of the false prophets had led to irresponsible living.

This is precisely what happened in Thessalonica. The false prophets convinced some of the Christians there that they no longer needed to support themselves. Their attitude was "Why bother with work when Jesus is coming back so soon?"

False prophecies about the imminent return of Christ had encouraged the Thessalonians to become lazy and idle.

So, we see that in Thessalonica the problems were manifold but interrelated. Persecution had opened the door for misconceptions about the immediate return of Christ. And those false beliefs led to practical problems such as discouragement and irresponsibility. Paul hoped that his letters to the Thessalonian church would help them deal with these difficult problems.

**<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**

As we look back over 2020 these verses are quite hard to swallow. How do we give thanks in all circumstances when we are perhaps facing job losses, financial short fall, grief following the loss of a loved one, loved ones in care homes that we can't visit, illness.....the list is endless.

Let me tell you about Mrs K.

Canon Harry Sutton who married me and David was a Liverpudlian through and through. Not only was he a vicar, but as a lifetime supporter of Liverpool football club, he would often be standing at the Kop end on match days and such was his love of the game, he was also a part time referee.

Mrs K was one of his parishioners. He always stood at the door of the church to welcome people as they came in and whenever she came in they would embrace in what was lovingly called a Hallelujah Clinch. Then he would always ask her the same question. "How are you today Mrs K?" She would always reply with the same answer "Well Vicar, under the circumstances, not too bad"

Clearly it is not God's will that any of us should be under the circumstances, he wants us to be above the circumstances.

There is a positive side to this pandemic we have seen so many good things come out of it. The kindness of so many people, the lengths that some people have gone to do something positive for others.

So, there is much to give thanks for, not least of all this week the beginning of the vaccinations that will hopefully bring an end to this pandemic.

<sup>16</sup> **Rejoice always**, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> **give thanks in all circumstances**; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

<sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not treat prophecies with contempt <sup>21</sup> but test them all; **hold on to what is good**, <sup>22</sup> reject every kind of evil.

<sup>23</sup> May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.