

Preserving Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 17:5–9, 10–15, 16–34; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:2; 1 Thess. 2:17–3:10.*

Memory Text: “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy” (*1 Thessalonians 2:19, 20, NKJV*).

Key Thought: True evangelism leads to relationships that can stand the test of time and last for eternity.

Paul held a three-week series of evangelistic meetings in Thessalonica. It was a very exciting series, but it incited opposition from local religious leaders and from a gang of thugs. Paul was finally expelled by the city council, which also sought to prevent his return.

This lesson covers the aftermath of Paul's attempt to evangelize Thessalonica. It would have been easy after such an experience for Paul to focus on the opposition and on other obstacles along the way. Instead, Paul's mind was focused primarily on the relationships that he had developed with members of the new Christian community in Thessalonica.

Paul was heartbroken that he wasn't able to spend more time with the believers. He knew that the short time he had been with them would leave them vulnerable to discouragement and negative influences. Not being able to be there in person, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write letters to them instead. Those letters make up the books in the New Testament known as “Thessalonians.”

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 14.*

Opposition in Thessalonica

Read Acts 17:5–9. According to this passage, what was the primary motivation for the opposition to Paul’s message? What statements did his opponents make to get the city authorities interested in the case? How did those authorities respond?

When someone preaches new teachings and people get excited, the leaders and teachers of other religious groups may become jealous. Attention that was once placed upon them is now directed to others. As a result, they may behave in irrational ways in order to try to reduce the influence of the new teacher.

According to the Roman historian Suetonius, shortly before the events described in Acts 17, conflict arose among the Jews of Rome over a man Suetonius calls “Chrestus.” This term probably reflects a Roman misunderstanding of the Jewish concept of the Messiah or, in Greek, “the Christ.” Apparently someone’s preaching of the gospel had just split the Jewish community of Rome.

To Roman officials, debate over the Messiah sounded like preparation for the installation of a new king on the throne of Rome (*see Acts 17:7*). Probably for that reason the emperor expelled all Jews from his capital city (*Acts 18:2*). Some of these exiles settled in or passed through Thessalonica, bringing knowledge of these events to the city. Because the gospel had turned the world of Rome’s Jews upside down, religious leaders in Thessalonica were determined to prevent something similar from happening there.

Thessalonica itself was ruled by a city council of perhaps five or six “mayors” who made decisions as a group. This arrangement allowed for a considerable amount of independence from Rome, which they would be loath to give up. So, the behavior of the city officials in this matter was quite impressive under the circumstances. The similarity to recent events in Rome could have led to severe physical punishment for the new Christians. Instead, the city leaders responded evenhandedly (*contrast Acts 16:22–40*). They took a significant amount of money from the new Christians as security so that they would not be the cause of further disturbances. Then the leaders let everyone go.

Jealousy and envy can destroy us. What can we learn from the life and teachings of Jesus that can help us to gain victory over these deadly sentiments?

The Episode in Berea

Persecution can be a two-way street. It is often provoked by malicious slander against those who have done nothing wrong. But it can also be provoked by inappropriate actions on the part of believers (*1 Pet. 3:13–16, 4:12–16*). It is very likely that the disturbance in Thessalonica was prompted not only by the jealousy of Paul’s opponents but also by the inappropriate actions of the new believers. The two letters to the Thessalonians reveal that Paul had major concerns about the lack of appropriate public behavior by some in the church.

Paul urges the Thessalonian Christians to live quiet lives and behave properly among their Gentile neighbors (*1 Thess. 4:11, 12*). He admonishes the unruly among them (*1 Thess. 5:14*). He commands them to avoid those in the community who are disorderly (*2 Thess. 3:6, 7*). And he notes that some members of the church are not only disorderly and idle but have become “busybodies” (*2 Thess. 3:11*). Thus, some members were not only troublesome to the church but also to the wider society. The persecution in Thessalonica was malicious, but there was blameworthy behavior among some new Christians, as well.

How was Paul’s experience in Berea different from that in Thessalonica? See *Acts 17:10–15*. What’s the message for us in that difference?

The Bereans were eager to know more about God and to better understand their Bibles. But while they listened with much openness, they also tested everything they heard from the apostles on the basis of what they found in their own study of the Old Testament.

This is an example for us. We can be open to new ideas, but we must always test these ideas on the basis of the teachings of the Bible. We have many things to learn and many to unlearn. At the same time, we must be careful to avoid error, as it will lead us away from truth.

While troublemakers from Thessalonica soon inserted themselves into the Berean situation, the Jews there did not close their minds to the new message; indeed, “many of the Jews believed” (*vs. 12*). While it was thought expedient for Paul to move on to Athens, Silas and Timothy were allowed to remain in Berea in order to encourage and strengthen the new believers.

What are some examples of the Christian church acting in ways that were clearly in the wrong? What lessons can we learn from those mistakes? Bring your answers to class on Sabbath.

Interlude in Athens

According to Acts 17:14–16, Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea while Paul was escorted to Athens. Paul instructed his escorts to have Silas and Timothy join him in Athens, but there is no mention of their doing so. On the other hand, in 1 Thessalonians 3:1, 2, we learn that Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica from Athens. So, Timothy, at least, seems to have joined him there for a short time.

When speaking to Jews in Acts 17:2, 3, Paul begins with the theme of the Messiah in the Old Testament. When speaking to the pagan philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:16–34), where does he begin? What can we learn from these different approaches?

Paul does not simply enter Athens, march up to the Areopagus (known also as Mars' Hill), and engage the philosophers there. He begins by spending some time walking around and making his own observations. He also engages the Jews of Athens and some of the Greeks in the synagogue there. Besides evangelizing to them in his customary way (*see Acts 17:2, 3*), he also would have been learning about the dominant culture in the city. The first step in any missionary effort is to listen and learn about the faith and worldviews of the people you are trying to reach.

Paul also spent time in the marketplace of Athens (which was below and within sight of the Areopagus, or Mars' Hill), reasoning with anyone willing to talk with him. In the process he provoked the curiosity of some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who invited him to address them in the traditional place for such discussions.

He began his address to the intellectuals of Athens with observations about their city and religions. His theological beginning point was Creation, a topic in which both he and they were interested. In contrast with his approach in the synagogue, he did not argue his case from Scripture but from writings with which they would have been familiar (Acts 17:27, 28 both echo and quote Greek writers). But when he stepped into territory that went beyond the boundaries of topics where they were intellectually comfortable, the philosophers seemed to have abruptly ended the discussion. A few individuals, however, continued to talk with Paul and became believers.

How well do we understand the worldviews and religious beliefs of those around us? Why is it important for us to have at least some knowledge of these things as we seek to witness?

Arrival in Corinth

Acts 18:1–18 contains two major intersections with secular history. The first is the expulsion of the Jews from Rome during the reign of Claudius (*Acts 18:2*). Information from extrabiblical sources locates this event in A.D. 49. The other major intersection is the mention of the proconsul Gallio (*Acts 18:12*). Because proconsuls in Corinth were appointed for one-year terms, information from inscriptions and other data accurately dates Gallio's term of office to A.D. 50–51. Critical scholars often doubt the historicity of the book of Acts, but there are many casual references such as these that confirm its portrayal of history.

Timothy must have traveled from Thessalonica to Berea with Paul and Silas (*Acts 17:10, 14, 15*) after their expulsion from Thessalonica. He then briefly joined Paul in Athens and was sent from there to Thessalonica (*1 Thess. 3:1, 2*). There he joined up with Silas (*Acts 18:5*) and eventually journeyed to meet Paul in Corinth. First Thessalonians must have been written from Corinth shortly after Timothy's arrival. Paul knew what people were thinking in Achaia, where Corinth was located (*1 Thess. 1:7, 8*), and in 1 Thessalonians he was responding to information brought to him by Timothy (*1 Thess. 3:5, 6*).

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:2. What's Paul's main point in this passage? What do we learn from these verses about Paul's missionary strategies in Athens and Corinth?

Paul must not have been satisfied with the outcome of his encounter with the philosophers of Athens, for in Corinth he decides to take a more direct approach to the Greek mind. In doing so, he does not reject the idea of “meeting people where they are,” for he clearly promotes such an approach in the same letter (*1 Cor. 9:19–23*). What he demonstrates in Athens and Corinth is that the process of meeting people where they are is not an exact science; it requires constant learning and adjustment. Paul did not take the same approach in every city. He was very sensitive to changing times, cultures, and circumstances.

Read again the passages for today. How is the main message there relevant for us today, when the “wisdom” of the world so often clashes with the “foolishness” of the Cross?

Paul Reveals His Heart

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:10. What does this passage tell us about Paul’s emotional attachment and relationship to these believers? What can we learn from it regarding the ways in which we should relate with those to whom we minister?

Paul’s depth of thought and confrontational tone (*see, for example, Gal. 1:6, 7; 3:1–4; 4:9–11*) sometimes make him appear dismissive of feelings and personal relationships. But this delightful interlude in 1 Thessalonians shows otherwise. He was an intensely relational evangelist along the lines of the Great Commission, which places primary emphasis on the making of disciples (*Matt. 28:19, 20*).

In the above passage Paul reveals his inner emotions. He misses the Thessalonian believers with “intense longing.” When Jesus comes, Paul intends to present the Thessalonian believers to Jesus as examples of his ministry. Paul is not content merely to be saved at the end of time; he wants evidence that his life made a permanent difference for the kingdom of God.

When Paul can “no longer endure” his intense longing for the Thessalonians, he sends a mutual friend to learn how they are doing. Paul is afraid that somehow Satan might lure them away from their original convictions. But he is comforted tremendously when Timothy reports that they are standing firm in the faith.

There is an interesting hint of a deeper dynamic in 1 Thessalonians 3:6. Paul rejoices at Timothy’s report that they have a good opinion of him and that they are longing to see him as much as he is longing to see them. Paul’s departure from Thessalonica was sudden, and he seems to have some uncertainty about the way in which they viewed him and his absence. Thessalonian faithfulness made a big difference to Paul. Paul’s sense of personal worth was, perhaps, to some degree tied to the success of his mission. He was, after all, only human.

Timothy’s report brings Paul an intense experience of joy in his prayers to God. But his present joy does not squelch his intense longing to see them face to face and to complete their education in the Christian walk. However, unable to be personally present with them, Paul first sends an emissary, Timothy, and then engages the Thessalonians by letter. Those letters make up part of the New Testament corpus.

Further Study: “If we would humble ourselves before God, and *be kind and courteous and tenderhearted and pitiful*, there would be one hundred conversions to the truth where now there is only one. But, though professing to be converted, we carry around with us a bundle of self that we regard as altogether too precious to be given up. It is our privilege to lay this burden at the feet of Christ and in its place take the character and similitude of Christ. The Saviour is waiting for us to do this.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, pp. 189, 190, emphasis added.

“During His ministry, Jesus had kept constantly before the disciples the fact that they were to be one with Him in His work for the recovery of the world from the slavery of sin. . . . In all His work He was training them for individual labor, to be extended as their numbers increased, and eventually to reach to the uttermost parts of the earth.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 32.

Discussion Questions:

❶ Discuss your answer to Monday’s final question. How can we avoid making the same kind of mistakes? Or are we in some cases making them even now?

❷ In *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 189 (see today’s Further Study), Ellen White identifies “self” as the barrier to both a more powerful outreach and more conversions among the lost. In what ways does “self” manifest itself in our lives? How can we learn to die to self? What is the only true way to be able to do that?

❸ The central focus of the Great Commission (*Matt. 28:19, 20, NIV*) is to “make disciples.” Share some of your own experiences of being or making a disciple. To what degree is your own church discipleship oriented? How can it become more so?

❹ How can you explain to someone the “foolishness” of the Cross? Why do you think Paul used that terminology? What should that tell us about how limited our understanding of reality can be when the most important of all truths is deemed “foolishness” by many?

Summary: In a mere three weeks, Paul had become intensely bonded to the new believers in Thessalonica. Not being able to return to them, he first sent Timothy. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, he also put his heart into two letters. Meaningful evangelism must not settle for mere acceptance of Christian beliefs. The whole life—physical, mental, and emotional—is involved in Christian faith.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that true evangelism involves building close and caring relationships with the people to whom he or she ministers.

Feel: Sense the need to invest not only time but his or her life in the people that he or she is influencing spiritually for Christ.

Do: Resolve to make the people to whom he or she ministers his or her primary focus rather than the act of ministry itself.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Relationships Are at the Heart of Ministry

A Paul always shared a close relationship with the people to whom he evangelized. Why are personal relationships so important for leading others to Jesus?

B What different metaphors does the apostle Paul use in 1 Thessalonians 2:7–11 to describe the nature of his relationship with the Thessalonians?

II. Feel: Genuine Concern for Others

A Examine the words that Paul uses in connection to the word *you* in 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:5. On the basis of this terminology, describe Paul's feelings toward the believers in Thessalonica.

B Why is it so important to have and to express genuine concern for the people whom we want to reach?

C Who was the most influential person in your spiritual development? Describe the nature of his or her relationship to you and what made it so significant.

III. Do: Investing in Others

A Who are the individuals that God has brought under your spiritual influence? What steps could you take to strengthen your personal relationships with them?

► **Summary:** Building close relationships with the people to whom we are ministering is the result of true evangelism.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Paul's tender concern for the believers in Thessalonica is an example of the type of caring relationships that God desires to develop in us and with people to whom we minister.

Just for Teachers: For many people, evangelism is all about reaching a baptismal goal. While baptisms are important, sometimes the new converts are forgotten after they are baptized. With few genuine friends within the church, the new members often end up leaving the church not long afterward. This week's lesson is an important reminder that true evangelism should result in the formation of new and close relationships that last forever.

It happens all the time in churches. An evangelistic series of meetings results in new converts coming through the front doors of the church, while a little while later, they disappear out the back door. More often than not the problem is not that the new believers stopped believing but that they never really felt part of the church. They may have joined the church intellectually but not relationally. They may have felt open to developing a relationship with the evangelist or the pastor, but once the meetings ended and life within the church went back to normal, they felt like the odd person out in a game of musical chairs. Without close relationships with their spiritual mentors, they did not have the personal relationships that could have helped to anchor them in their new decision.

Opening Activity: After sharing with the class the scenario presented above, invite individual class members who were not raised in the church to describe how they joined the church. Next, ask them what it was that helped them to remain in the church when so many converts don't stay. Be sure to highlight the importance of forming relationships with new converts, an essential component that will certainly be part of the stories.

Discuss: Why is the building of relationships with new converts such an important part of evangelism?

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. New Converts in Thessalonica *(Review Acts 17:1–4 with the class.)*

Paul must have been overjoyed at the initial response to his proclamation of the gospel in Thessalonica—especially after the beating that Silas and he had received in Philippi (*Acts 16:22–24*). Not only were some Jews persuaded by Paul’s reasoning, but a number of devout Gentiles, including several prominent women, also decided to become members of Paul’s newly organized house church. The description of these new converts should not be overlooked. Luke is careful to point out that the Christian message was not some kind of religious farce designed to take advantage of the gullible; it was a well-reasoned presentation that appealed to Jews and Gentiles of intelligence—and not merely men but also women of significant social rank.

A close reading of Acts also reveals the names and a few details about three of the new believers in Thessalonica. The first person we meet is Jason, Paul’s host. Jason appears to be a Greek-speaking Jew, given the fact that this name was common among Jewish men who, like Paul, grew up outside of Palestine. Jason must have been a man of some means, because his home was large enough to host Paul and to also serve as the house church for the believers. The next two names are introduced later in Acts: Aristarchus and Secundus. According to Acts 20:4, these two men were from Thessalonica and had been appointed to journey with Paul to Jerusalem, bearing a financial gift that was intended to demonstrate the goodwill and unity of the Gentile churches with their fellow Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Secundus was a Gentile Christian (his Roman name means the “second” son of his father). Aristarchus was a Jewish Christian (*Col. 4:10, 11*) who became an especially close friend of Paul’s. He accompanied Paul on his travels and even shared in his imprisonment (*Acts 19:29, 27:2, Philemon 24*).

Consider This: Paul’s evangelistic success resulted not only in the making of lifelong friends but also in the making of enemies. Does the latter always have to be the case? Why, or why not?

II. Trouble in Thessalonica *(Review Acts 17:5–9 with the class.)*

According to Acts 17:5, Paul’s success in Thessalonica infuriated some of the Jews who were not persuaded by his message. Jealous of Paul’s success with the Gentiles, and certainly not very happy that some of their fellow countrymen had joined him, they decided to enlist the help of “some wicked men of the

rabble” (*ESV*) to stir up trouble. In Greek the phrase “wicked men of the rabble” literally means “men of the marketplace.” It refers to a group of unemployed ruffians who hung out in the marketplace looking for something to do. What a contrast to the people who responded to Paul’s gospel.

According to Luke, these hooligans barged into Jason’s home in order to drag Paul out to the crowd (*17:5*). The Greek word translated as “people,” or “crowd” (*demoi*), can also refer to the public assembly of citizens who had authority over local legal matters. Unable to lay their hands on Paul, they decided instead to haul Jason and others before the local magistrates. When they arrived, they laid two accusations against Paul: (1) Paul was an itinerant troublemaker with a track record of causing problems in other cities; (2) Paul was guilty of sedition for claiming that Jesus, not Caesar, was King. Sufficiently alarmed by these charges, the magistrates banned Paul and Silas from their city and required Jason to pay some kind of fee in order to ensure that the two men would not return.

Consider This: Although the charges against Paul were certainly misconstrued, there was some element of truth in them. To what extent should evangelistic preaching challenge the status quo today?

III. Paul’s Concern for the New Converts (*Review 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:10 with the class.*)

Paul’s abrupt departure from Thessalonica left him in anguish about the spiritual well-being of his new converts. What had happened to them? Were they holding onto their faith in the midst of persecution? Or were the Jews who were responsible for Paul’s departure from Thessalonica, and who had hounded him all the way to Berea, making life miserable for the believers too?

After weeks of bouncing from one town to another and worrying about the fate of the believers whom he had left so suddenly in Thessalonica, Paul was an emotional wreck. In the span of only a few short verses, in 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:10, Paul repeatedly talks about his desire to see them, his distress, his afflictions, and twice he mentions his inability to bear this burden any longer. Another interesting glimpse into Paul’s state of mind is the way in which he describes his sudden departure from Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 2:17. The phrase “torn away” (*ESV*) comes from a Greek word (*aporphanizō*) and means “to make an orphan” of someone. In other words, Paul likens the deep anguish he feels with that of a parent bereft of a child. In this state of mind, Paul certainly must have wondered whether he and his fellow workers had been divinely called to Macedonia or not (*Acts 16:9, 10*).

The gloom that threatened to submerge Paul and Silas was overcome by Timothy’s positive report about the situation in Thessalonica. The fact that the gospel had taken root in Thessalonica, despite adversity and persecution, renewed their confidence that God had indeed called them to Macedonia.

Consider This: Paul’s concern for the new converts in Thessalonica lasted well beyond his “evangelistic campaign.” What does this tell us about the type of relationships that should accompany evangelism?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Thought Questions:

- 1 Paul does not say in what way Satan hindered him from returning to Thessalonica (*1 Thess. 2:18*). How did he respond? What lessons about endurance and resilience can we learn from Paul’s response to the hardships and obstacles that challenged him?
- 2 As the lesson says, in 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:10, Paul reveals his heart to the Thessalonians. How important is it for us to share our feelings and concerns with those to whom we are ministering?

Application Questions:

- 1 Evangelism was certainly uppermost in Paul’s mind. How evangelistic is your church? How evangelistic minded are you? What can you do to improve?
- 2 Paul had a burden for the spiritual stability of the new converts in Thessalonica and took action, not only to see how they were doing but to encourage them in their walk. How have you or your church sought to encourage the new members within your congregation?
- 3 Paul says that his hope, joy, and crown of boasting are not what he will receive at the Second Coming but rather that they are the converts whom he will see on that day. What does this tell us about what our priorities should be as Christians?

► **STEP 4**—Create

Activity: As we have seen in our lesson this week, true evangelism should result in caring relationships that last forever. As a class, come up with a list of new believers who have joined your congregation within the past year. In addition to making a decision to set aside a little time to pray for these people during this next week, as a class come up with a plan that will help you to reach out to these new members so that they will feel loved and supported by their church family.