

# Serving the Coming Lord

by John F. Walvoord

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*John F. Walvoord's sermon emphasizes the importance of serving God with boldness, purity, and love, following the example set by Paul in his ministry to the Thessalonians.*

**Topics:** "Faithful Servanthood", "Gospel Preaching"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the importance of salvation as the foundation of vital living for God, emphasizing that true life begins when one trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior. The success story in 1 Thessalonians 2 showcases Paul's boldness in preaching the gospel, despite facing suffering and opposition. Paul's preaching was characterized by purity, devoid of deceit, uncleanness, or guile, delivering the pure Word of God. He exemplified a faithful servant by seeking to please God rather than men, avoiding flattery and covetousness, and renouncing seeking glory from others. Paul's loving care for the Thessalonians, laboring tirelessly, and exhorting them to walk worthy of God, reflects his compassionate heart and dedication to serving the Lord.

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## Transcript

1 Thessalonians 2:1-20

Salvation First

Over the first chapter the word "salvation" was written because this letter would never have been written if the Thessalonians had not trusted in the Lord Jesus. It was the beginning of vital living for God, of entering into eternal things. It is a reminder, of course, that one does not begin living until he is saved by trusting the Lord Jesus Christ. Life begins when that greatest of all decisions is made of trusting in Jesus Christ as personal Savior.

There are many today who have religion, that is, they go to church and engage in religious activities. But it is only too true that many have only the outer appearance of Christianity and have never come to real faith in Jesus Christ as personal Savior. The Thessalonians were not guilty of superficial religion, however. They had really trusted Christ and their lives had been transformed. The fact of their salvation lays the foundation for the truths which are revealed in the chapters which follow.

A Success Story

Over Chapter 2 can be written a very common word, "service." The chapter reveals how to serve God both by precept and by Paul's dynamic example. Chapter 2 of First Thessalonians is a "success story." Paul had done something that was quite phenomenal. He had come to a town where there was not a single Christian. He had gone into the Jewish synagogue and there had preached the gospel. He had preached also to Gentiles in their homes. In three weeks this dynamic person by the grace of God had founded a new church--a church which has come down through the centuries to us as an example of faith and faithfulness. How did he do it?

There are many communities in America that need desperately churches bearing a real testimony for Christ. Can we have such churches? The answer is found in the second chapter of First Thessalonians. Paul begins chapter 2 with the fact of their testimony being used of God: "For yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain." God had undertaken for them and blessed the message and souls were saved. In verse 2 the secret of it is revealed.

### Boldness in Testimony

Over the first two verses of the second chapter we can write the word boldness. One of the reasons why Paul was successful was that he was bold. If he had gone to Thessalonica and had failed to preach the gospel, the probability is that in three weeks he would not have made much of an impression. If he had not told anyone about the Lord Jesus Christ, if he had not proclaimed boldly that Christ was the only Savior, that Christ loved the world, that He died for the world, that they could be saved only by trusting in the risen Savior, he would not have had one convert.

### Boldness in Spite of Suffering

The first point in effective service for God is boldness, a boldness made more significant by subjection to suffering. Paul and Silas had come from Philippi where they had been thrown into prison, and beaten, and had suffered for the gospel's sake. When Paul came to Thessalonica, instead of saying "I have suffered enough"--as some Christians might have done--he spoke boldly. Hence in verse 2 we read, "Even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention."

The word that is translated "bold" comes from a Greek word of eight syllables, *eparresiasametha*. It is a long word. It means to be bold in the sense of speaking out publicly, of making a public declaration. It is possible to be a secret believer. Undoubtedly, some are saved that have not told very many about it. But secret believers do not lead souls to Christ. The way to lead people to Christ is to be bold, to proclaim the gospel. This is the basic program of the present dispensation.

### Boldness with Agony of Heart

Paul was called to preach and he preached boldly, "with much contention." The word which is translated "contention" is *agoni*. It is the word from which we get agony. There was an agony of soul in Paul as he preached the gospel. To be effective in our testimony, to be successful even by worldly standards, it is necessary to have a boldness inspired by an agony of heart. This does not mean that one should be tactless, or without common sense in the approach, but there must be a bold witness for Jesus Christ.

### Preaching the Pure Word

In 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6, the character of Paul's preaching is graphically portrayed. One of the tragedies of our day, as all true Bible students know, is that some preaching is not according to the Word of God. Like the ancient Bereans, modern Christians need to search the Scriptures, testing the message by the Book. By this standard, Paul's preaching rang true. This was evident first by the things that were not true about his preaching. In verse 3 Paul writes, "Our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile." In other words, it was pure in its content and in its intent. It was pure in the sense that there was no deceit or, literally, no error. There was no uncleanness or impurity of motive either.

### Danger of Adulterating the Word

Sometimes truth is mixed with error. In fact, the most dangerous kind of preaching is that which is partly true. But Paul said, "my message was not just partly true. It is without error. It has no deceit in it. It is the pure truth. It is not adulterated by human philosophy and human speculation." It was, then, God's message to them concerning Christ.

Paul goes on to a further claim: his message was also without guile--that is, Paul did not come to trick them and to use methods that were questionable. He did not try to get a superficial decision for Christ, but he laid down plainly before them the truth of the gospel and the issues of heaven and hell that were concerned. The result was that when they trusted in Christ it was a clear-cut decision which resulted in a real testimony that stood the test in the days that followed. It depended upon the purity of the message in both its content and intent.

### Pleasing God

It is also brought out that Paul was a faithful servant of God as he preached. "But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts." The final test of every life and of every message or sermon is "What does God think about it?" The judgment of God is not always according to the judgment of men. Men may judge a message by its interest, its literary quality, the words delivered, its intelligence, the fact that the speaker revealed great background of knowledge in his subject, or by the skill with which it was delivered. When a preacher delivers a message for God it should be just as good as he can make it. On the other hand, God is primarily concerned with the message itself. Is it true? The most beautifully delivered sermon that is not true, that is not God's message, is useless in the hands of God.

The ultimate test of a message is, does it please God? That is true for the preacher, for the Sunday school teacher, or the personal worker. There is no more acid test of any service that is rendered for God than the question, "Is it pleasing to God?" Our little houses of self-praise and self-gratification tumble in a moment when we stop to consider "What does God think about it?" As Paul preached he said, "I was not trying to please you Thessalonians; I did not come here to impress upon you that I was a great pulpit orator, or a great missionary, or a great scholar. I was here because I was seeking to please God." Certainly this is a standard to challenge every thoughtful Christian.

### Twin Evils of Flattery and Covetousness

Paul reveals how this worked out in verse 5: "Neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness." In this verse is seen, as was mentioned earlier, in Chapter 1, that Paul appeals sometimes to the outward, i.e., what man can see; sometimes he appeals to what God can see. It is not difficult for us to identify flattery. We all know people who are flatterers, and

sometimes we like to listen to them. Some people delight to be told, "My, you look so young," and to hear the comment that they look fifteen years younger than they actually are. The flesh loves flattery. But Paul said, "I did not come to you Thessalonians and say, What outstanding citizens you are! What beautiful characters you are! Folks as good as you are ought to be trusting Christ." No, he did not use any flattery. He told them the hard truth, that they were lost sinners, that they were bound for hell, that they needed a Savior desperately, that their religion such as they had was not enough. They needed Christ; they needed His glorious salvation. There was no flattery in that, was there? That was the truth. He said, "I did not come to flatter you; I came to deliver a message from God." He reminds them of the fact that they knew it. There was no one in Thessalonica who thought of Paul as a flatterer.

But when it came to covetousness, there was something that pertains to the heart. It is not always apparent whether a person is covetous or not. It is difficult to determine whether one is serving you to make money or whether he is honestly trying to help you without covetousness. Paul does something here which is certainly the application of the acid test. He calls God to witness. "As God is my witness, I did not come here to make merchandise of you; I did not come because you promised me an honorarium, or a high salary, or any of the things that pertain to the comforts of life. I did not come that way to you and you know it. God is witness that my heart was right in this thing." Not only was his message pure in its content, but his whole purpose was pure in the sight of God. That, of course, was one of the reasons God could use him.

#### Renunciation of the Honor of Men

Verse 6 adds another important factor: "Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ." In other words, Paul could have come to the Thessalonians and expanded his chest and said, "I am an apostle and you must recognize my high office because God has sent me." He could have told them he had the right to order them around, but he said, "I did not come in that spirit. I did not come to be honored by you. I came because I had a message, because I wanted to help you, because you needed the Savior." Certainly that is the secret of effective Christian testimony. Boldness, having our hearts right before God, delivering God's message in its purity and in its power, seeking not our own advantage but seeking the glory and the approbation of God--that is the secret of Paul's success.

#### Loving the People of God

Through verse 6 Paul has itemized the things that he did not do. He was not covetous or deceitful and he did not have errors in his message. In verse 7 and through verse 12 we have what he did do--the positive side of his message. There is a danger of regarding Christianity as a negative standard. We should not do this; we should not do that; we should not do something else. There are bona fide negatives in the Christian faith. If one is going to have a real testimony for Christ, there are some things he cannot do. But Christianity does not consist in negatives. Christianity consists in what one believes, in the life one lives and in the service one renders. Paul is revealing here the secret why he was so effective in this Thessalonian church.

In verses 7-8 Paul shows his loving care for them: "But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: so being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us." Here is the compassionate heart that made possible the successful ministry of Paul.

In our service for God have we lost our heart? Sometimes we do things for God because it is our duty. If we cannot do it for any other reason, let us do it as our duty. But certainly there is something deeper than that. Paul had come to this city of Thessalonica, to those he had never seen before. But how he loved them now as trophies of grace! As a parent loves his child he loved these little ones of Christ.

Paul was taking care of them just as a nurse takes care of her children. Literally, the expression is a "nurse taking care of her own children." A professional nurse will often do a good job of taking care of someone else's child because she believes in a certain professional standard of duty. But if it is her own child, that makes a tremendous difference. All the technicalities now become tremendously important and she is willing, if necessary, to give her own life, as Paul says he is willing to do for the Thessalonians. Paul is revealing the compassion, the burning heart that he has as he deals with these whom he had led to know Jesus Christ as Savior.

### Laboring Night and Day

Paul reminds the Thessalonians also in verse 9 how he had labored in their midst: "Ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God." Paul did not have a forty-hour week. When it came to 4:30 or 5:00 o'clock, he did not say, "Now the rest of the day is mine; I can do with it as I please." No, Paul was a bondsman of Jesus Christ. He was under orders like a soldier whether it was eight hours or twelve hours or twenty-four hours. Paul was on duty, and as he realized that his time was short he "laboured night and day."

In apostolic times it was customary to stop work when darkness came and go to bed. When a person labored night and day it was the unusual thing, but that was what Paul did. Many a lonely hour in the night he was trying to help some soul come to Christ, to understand the tremendous issues that were latent in the gospel message, and praying with them. He was laboring night and day. There was many a late hour when Paul was alone on his knees before God getting the power and strength and the wisdom to know what to do the next day as he sought to be a true servant of God. The Christian life is not a continuous vacation. Christians should have vacations even as Christ took His disciples off to rest awhile. But the Christian life should not be a question of doing as little as possible. Rather like Paul our lives should be poured out in service for the Lord.

Inverses 10-11 he reminds them of his faithful labors: "Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: as ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children." Earlier Paul used the figure of a nurse caring for her child, a mother's love if you please; now he turns to a different figure, a father's love for his children. Both were true in the Apostle's heart. His labor and his ministry were honorable before God who sees the heart. Seeking to win others for Christ is not only a matter of boldness in the spoken message. There must also be the attendant life of testimony for God. Few Christians realize how many are watching them to discover in their lives the answer to the question of whether Christianity is real, whether it really satisfies, and whether it pays to serve the Lord. Paul, as he ministered to the Thessalonians, not only delivered the message in word but he delivered the message also in life. His daily life before them was the life of a man who was walking in the will of God.

### Walking Worthy

Paul concludes this section, therefore, in verse 12, with the exhortation "That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory." Christians are in the kingdom of God now, but there is a glorious kingdom ahead of us also, the glory that is going to be ours in the predicted millennial kingdom and throughout eternity as we are with Christ. In view of these things, God has called us to a walk that is in keeping with our destiny. A little child born into a royal family is given special care. He cannot do the things that other children do, at least not in quite the same way. The reason is that he is being prepared for a place of responsibility and leadership.

Christians are exactly in that position. We do not "walk worthy" in order to be saved, or in order to become a royal child, but we "walk worthy" of God because we are saved, because we are a child of the King by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So Paul lays before the Thessalonian Christians this exhortation to "walk worthy." How many problems this standard solves! Sometimes folks will come to a preacher or a Sunday school teacher and say: "Now, is this right? Can a Christian do this?" So many of those problems are solved in a moment if the question is asked: "Is it worthy? Is it something that is honoring to God? Would God be pleased with this situation? So often the uncertainties and the obscurities in the judgment of men are wiped away when one applies the test of the Scriptures. Certainly there are many things that we cannot do as Christians because we are Christians, because God has called us to a holy walk and a life that is well pleasing to Him.

#### Receiving the Word As From God

In the closing portion of Chapter 2, beginning with verse 13, the other side of the picture is presented. In the first eleven verses Paul's secret of success is unfolded -- why he preached, how he preached, and why he had such phenomenal results. There are two aspects to every sermon; one is the delivery and the other is the hearing. How do we listen to sermons? We listen to sermons from different standpoints. A preacher may listen to a sermon to see if he can get a message for some future occasion. A Sunday school teacher may listen to a sermon to see if he can get some information for his Sunday school lesson. A person who is lonely may be coming for comfort. A person who is unsaved may be seeking salvation. There are different motives behind our hearing. Sometimes our motives are not good. Sometimes Christians do not really come with open hearts to receive a message from God, and become occupied with the messenger instead of the message and the Savior.

The Thessalonian Christians, according to the record, were not simply interested in Paul, as grand a figure as he was, but as he delivered the message recorded in these verses they received it as the Word of God. Verse 13 notes: "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe." The message was received not because Paul delivered it. The thing that thrilled them was that they had heard the Word of God. They had received it as the authoritative Word of God because it came from God. The proof of it is found in the verses that follow.

#### Persecution a Test of Faith

Testing had come almost at once for this new band of Christians and they were bitterly persecuted. Paul tells them that they became followers of others who were persecuted. "Ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews." One of the hardest experiences in life when you stand for Christ is to have your own loved ones oppose you. If friends and neighbors and relatives--one's own loved

ones--oppose a young Christian, it makes it very difficult, but this was often true in the early church. It is also true in modern times. What a young Christian does under these circumstances is a test of the reality of his faith. The Thessalonians had stood true, no matter who opposed them.

Persecution was not peculiar to the Thessalonians however. Paul mentions the fact that those who lived in Jerusalem at that time had "killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men." You see Paul, who was a Jew, was being persecuted by his fellow countrymen just as Christ had been crucified before by His own people. The Thessalonians were going through a similar experience. Opposition to the apostles had gone so far as to be described in verse 16 as "forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost." The opposition of the world and of the unbelieving heart is especially brought out when a person faithfully preaches Christ. The world does not necessarily oppose morality as such. It often does not oppose religion as such, but it does oppose a bona fide, transforming kind of Christianity. The world does not want Christ and Him crucified. When we take our stand for Christ, we can expect some opposition from unbelievers.

#### Paul's Longing for Them

Paul opens his heart in verses 17 and 18 as he tells them how he longed after them. When we have loved ones who are away from us and we get word that they are going through the deep waters of affliction, how we want to drop everything and rush to them! We think they need us, and our comfort and help. Paul was just that way, but he could not go back. If he had gone back, he would have become a martyr for the faith. He would have cut short a ministry that God had for him. It was not God's will for Paul to die at this point in his life. For this reason, he could not go to Thessalonica. Satan hindered him. How Satan sometimes gets in our way! This word hinder in the Greek means to break up the road. The thought is that the way was impassable. Satan had broken up the road before him and Paul could not get through to them, even though he longed to see them and to be a further help to them.

#### What Is Our Hope?

But all was not lost. In verses 19 and 20 there is a bright note, repeated so often in this epistle, the theme of the coming of the Lord and the joy that will be ours when Christ comes back. Paul asks in verse 19, "What is our hope?" What does the future hold for us? Do we have a real hope? A person who is a Christian has a real hope. One who has been born again, who is a child of God, has a real hope. But if our hope is not in Christ we have no ground for hope. Paul said, "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing?"

#### What Is Our Crown of Rejoicing?

Paul is looking forward to that glad day when this life's journey will be over and he would be in the presence of the Lord along with all the other Christians. He is picturing the time of the translation of the church, when Christ will come for His own to take them home to glory. He had asked, What is our hope, our joy, our crown of rejoicing? The answer is: "Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy." Paul was not content to be saved himself. It is wonderful to be saved; it is wonderful to know one is going to heaven. But Paul said the real joy that was going to be in his heart as he stood in the presence of the Lamb of God, the one who loved him, the one who had died for him on the cross, would be his spiritual children that he would bring with him, whom he had led to know Jesus Christ as Savior.

Have you ever led a soul to Christ? One may say, "I am not an evangelist. I am not a good personal worker." But have you ever tried? God loves to use those who are willing to be used, and there is latent in many a Christian a gift for leading souls to Christ which he does not realize. Almost anyone can give out gospel tracts. Any Christian can pray. Anyone can give of his substance for missions. There are more ways than one by which earnest Christians can lead souls to Christ. When that glad day comes when we are in the presence of Christ, will we have some trophies of grace? Paul said, "When that day comes, I am going to be exalted. Why? Because of you Thessalonians who came to know the Lord Jesus Christ through my ministry among you." In that day, will it be our portion to look at those saved through our gospel testimony and with Paul to say, "Ye are our glory and joy"?

#### Questions

1. Why is this chapter a success story?
2. What do we learn about boldness?
3. Explain how Paul's message was pure in content and intent.
4. Contrast Paul's desire to please God and his approach to pleasing men.
5. Contrast what Paul did not do with what he did do in presenting his message to them.
6. How does Paul describe the response of the Thessalonians to his message?
7. How does Chapter 2 end on a message of hope?

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