

THE COMPASS

Comings and Goings

Postcards From Paul, Part 7

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Thessaloniki.
Let's go there.

In your Bible, it's called Thessalonica. In Paul's day, it was the capital of Macedonia. Today, it's called Thessaloniki, and it's known as the coolest city in Greece. A million people — 1 out of every 10 residents of Greece lives there — great night life, delicious food, high fashion (the women of Thessaloniki are considered the most chic of all the women in Greece). Plus, it's always been a place for scholars and thinkers, philosophers and intellectuals.

By the time Paul the apostle got there, Thessaloniki had already been one of the most famous cities in the world for a long time.

The city has a huge port, and it's situated kind of in the crosshairs of Europe, between east and west. So down through history, it has been kind of a restless city. A place of comings and goings.

Thessaloniki was often a place where people headed when they got kicked out of someplace else.

In 1492, while Christopher Columbus was sailing to America, Spain was expelling all Jews living in that country.

They sailed east — and they landed in Thessaloniki.

For 400 years, there was a strong Jewish influence in the city.

At the beginning of World War II, there were nearly 50,000 Jews living in Thessaloniki.

But by the end of the war, more than 46,000 of them had been rounded up and driven off to be exterminated in the concentration camps.

A city of comings and goings.

In the 1920s, in the ongoing conflict between Turkey and Greece, Turkey expelled the Greeks living in their country.

Thousands fled westward to the biggest city, the closest port — Thessaloniki.

The city was suddenly overwhelmed by Greeks who had never lived in Greece.

A city of comings and goings.

When Paul the apostle arrived, he was coming from Philippi.

He had gotten in trouble with the authorities there, but he and his pal Silas knew God had called them to Macedonia, so when they had to leave Philippi, they headed deeper into Macedonia — to the capital city, Thessaloniki.

You can read the historical account of what happened in your own Bible, in **Acts 17**.

They lead a whole bunch of people to faith in Christ in Thessaloniki, so of course they get in trouble with the authorities there too — so once again they have to run, so

now they go to the next city to the west, Berea.

But while they're there, the authorities from back in Thessaloniki come to visit.

The people from this city of comings and goings couldn't seem to sit still.

When the Thessalonian leaders heard that Paul was preaching over in Berea, they actually picked up and headed over to Berea themselves, "agitating the crowds and stirring them up," according to **Acts 17:13**.

So Paul had to hightail it out of town again.

He headed down to Athens, and finally to Corinth — where nobody arrested him, jailed him, flogged him, or ran him out of town.

In Corinth, Paul finally catches his breath — he starts a church — but he can't relax.

He has the Thessalonian Christians on his mind.

He was there a short time — didn't get to really teach everything he wanted to teach, didn't get to really prepare those new baby Christians the way he would have wanted to — and they're in a very difficult city.

Persecution is intense. The religious authorities despise them. The city fathers are against them. The Christians were being threatened, their property was being taken away.

Paul is concerned that these young Christians, in the city of comings and goings — having come to Christ, will now go away ... they'll leave their faith ... because of the incredible pressure they're under.

But he can't break away from his new church project in Corinth to go check up on the Thessalonians.

Finally, when he can't stand it any longer, he asks Timothy to go back, visit

Thessaloniki, teach and minister and encourage the Christians, and bring back a report to Paul on how they're doing.

So Timothy packs his suitcase and heads north.

He gets to Thessaloniki, and what does he find?

The Christians there are really doing great.

The persecution has not broken them; it has galvanized them. They are united. They are loving God and loving people.

After he hears this report, Paul sits down and he writes his first letter to the Thessalonians.

He was thrilled with their steadfastness; he was proud of them.

As you read through this little letter — just about 4 or 5 typewritten pages, not very long at all — you can almost see Paul beaming, like a proud papa.

This is actually the first letter that Paul ever wrote that was inspired by the Spirit of God and became part of the Bible.

We've been cruising through the New Testament in the order that Paul's letters appear in the pages of our Bibles, but the sequence in which they appear doesn't match the order in which he wrote them.

Scholars believe, in fact, that this first letter to the Thessalonians, written in 50 or 51 A.D., is actually the oldest book in the entire New Testament, written before any of the Gospels or anything else.

And after he sent off his first letter, Paul got more information from Thessaloniki — persecution was getting worse, some other stuff was going on — so he sat down and wrote them again.

This letter, which we call the book of Second Thessalonians, is even shorter — 1,000 words or so, 6 or 7 minutes long if you read it aloud.

But these two letters are not just pats on the back.

The Thessalonians have some problems, which Paul has to address.

If they have one unique issue — if there's one problem that stands out with these Christians in the city of comings and goings — it's their confusion about COMING and GOING.

Paul had enough time with them to teach them about coming to God, but not enough time to teach them about going to God — how we move toward God as we go through this life, and how we eventually go to God in heaven at the end of life.

And this was not just a philosophical thing.

The gap in their understanding of spiritual comings and goings manifested itself in their emotional lives, in their financial lives, even in their sex lives.

For example:

Some Thessalonian Christians apparently got discouraged.

They didn't understand the Rapture of the Church.

Rapture is the term we use to describe that moment, at some point in the future, when Jesus will come back from heaven, interrupt human history, and take all his people instantaneously into the spirit realm to live forever with God in heaven.

In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul paints a picture of what the Rapture is going to be like:

1 Thessalonians 4:

16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

But the Thessalonian Christians thought the Rapture was going to happen really soon — and what bummed them out was that some of their friends and loved ones were dying.

They thought they were going to miss it. They thought if you didn't stay alive till the Rapture, you lost out.

They thought that when you die, you're dead.

They didn't understand that we're designed by God to live forever — we were created as eternal beings.

As people who love God, we have an eternal future, and after we die in this natural realm, we're going to enter the supernatural realm — and we're going to be with all the other people who loved God but who went there before us.

So Paul, in his letters, set them straight.

He says it in the simplest possible terms:

1 Thessalonians 5:

10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

We can live with hope. We are not going to die, even though our physical bodies shut down.

And in heaven, we are going to be with our pals who loved God but who switched from the earthly channel to the heavenly channel before we did.

It's going to be party time, and there will be no last call at the bar!

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Other Thessalonian Christians, with this gap in their understanding of spiritual comings and goings, apparently got lazy.

They thought that Jesus was coming back so soon that it was pointless to work.

They quit their jobs and hung around, waiting for the Rapture.

No job, no income — and soon, it appears from the record, they were having to mooch off of others in the congregation.

They didn't understand that part of loving God and loving people means living a productive life, working hard and providing for oneself, keeping yourself strong enough to help others when they need it.

They didn't understand that we're designed by God to work, not to coast.

So Paul, in his letters, set the record straight.

2 Thessalonians 3:

10 ...“If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”

11 We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies.

12 Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to ... earn the bread they eat.

Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived, and he sensed that labor is integral to spiritual health.

He reserved some of his strongest language for this subject.

Proverbs 6 says:

9 How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?

10 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—

11 and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.

We're designed to serve, not to be served. And because this is how we're designed, when we're not serving, our spirit gradually corrodes.

This is part of why Jesus said, in **Mark 10:25**, **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”**

If I don't need to work in order to live, it takes enormous discipline for me to go to work anyway. But if I'm not working, I'm wasting away.

If I'm not engaged in doing productive stuff, I stunt my ability to serve as God's conduit for blessing in the lives of people around me.

I can't love people well if I'm stagnant.

I can't love God well if I'm not loving people well.

Even if Jesus is coming back next week, God's design for my life is to be active for one more week.

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And finally, some Thessalonian Christians, with the gap in their understanding of spiritual comings and goings, apparently got loose.

The culture of Thessaloniki was intensely sexual — immorality was a commodity in that part of the world, a lot like it is today — and some of the Christians there were caving in.

They were telling themselves that this life would be over soon, and they better get all the pleasure they could while the gettin' was good.

They didn't understand that we're designed by God for sexual purity, within marriage, and that anything else is somehow detrimental to our spirit, harmful to our spiritual self, our true self.

So Paul, in his letters, sets the issue straight.

1 Thessalonians 4:

3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;

4 that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable,

5 not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God....

7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

Holiness is not weird. Holiness is what God designed me for.

Some define holiness as being "set apart" from the world, but we're only set apart from the world because people in the world are living by their own design, which makes us look different from them.

God designed us a certain way, we function best that way. The world doesn't like it, and they try to convince us that we'll function best another way.

It's especially tempting in areas involving physical pleasure.

It's easy to cave in to the alternative view that our culture is selling us, because in the short haul it's going to feel GREAT.

But we pay a price. And we're NOT designed for making that payment.

So it's painful.

I know the way this passage is translated into English makes Paul sound pretty preachy.

But in the original language, he's really quite a bit more poetic.

In verse 4, he doesn't actually talk about "controlling" your "body"; he talks about knowing how to "purchase" your "vessel."

He pictures our bodies as vessels — like a pot or a container — in which we carry around our lives, and in which we carry around the Spirit of God.

But it's a vessel we have to buy. We have to obtain it. We have to exchange something of value for it.

Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, and God is saying to us, don't make a purchase you're going to regret. I don't want to see you suffering buyer's remorse.

Stay holy. Avoid impurity. Find your pleasure in the places God has prepared for you to

find it.

If we go back to wise King Solomon, we find in **Proverbs 9:17,18** that he imagines two women, named Wisdom and Folly, and he compares what they say about various subjects.

Folly finds an audience with people who lack judgment, and she offers them advice.

Proverbs 9:

17 “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!”

18 But little do they know [Solomon says] that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave.

Something more than just a physical act happens in a sexual encounter. We may think of it as “just for fun,” “just for pleasure” — but there’s more. Not only is there a mingling of molecules and germs and stuff between the two partners; **1 Corinthians 6:16-20** says something SPIRITUAL happens. Each partner is attaching to the other spiritually.

Paul isn’t being puritanical; he’s being practical. He’s saying, “Please — AVOID PAIN. Keep yourself pure.” Sex outside of marriage is a sin “against your own body.” It’s self-destructive. The world says, “It’s all for fun.” But God says, “You are killing yourself.” Somehow, in the heat of the moment, we hear the voice of Folly saying, “**Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!**” — and we can’t see that “**the dead are there,**” that people who have tried it before have suffered and died from consuming that sweetness.

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In a way, I like it that we wind up our 7-city tour in Thessaloniki, because these were people living in a hostile anti-Christian environment, something along the way our society is going...

They were dealing with constant temptation to sin, just like us...

They were way oriented to leisure and comfort, they really didn’t want to work if they didn’t have to — which sounds kind of like our culture today...

They didn’t have a seminary-level understanding of the Scriptures — and neither do most of us...

So when Paul talks to them, inspired by the Spirit of God, it really is God talking to us.

And in the very heart of Paul’s communication with the Thessalonians, he says exactly what I need to hear when I’m discouraged. Exactly what I need to hear when I’m feeling lazy or ready to quit. Exactly what I need to hear when I’m facing temptation.

“Stand firm.”

“Hold on.”

When he gives this advice, he does it in three little statements ... and in these three little statements, he describes me — not the “me” that I see myself as, but the “me” that I really am ... the “me” that God sees me as.

2 Thessalonians 2:

13 ...From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

He chose me!

He saved me from the gunk of my sinfulness.

He did it without pills or injections — without religious rituals or regulations — he did the work himself, by his Spirit, set in motion by nothing more than my just trusting him to be telling the truth when he claimed that he loved me and he would take care of it all for me!

14 He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God didn't choose me so he could toy with me or torture me. He did it so I could share in the amazing, eternal, abundant, thrilling life of Christ ... the glory of the Lord!

15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you....

What kind of persecution or hardship are you facing? Stand firm. Hold on to Jesus. There's glory ahead.

What kind of despair or discouragement are you lugging around? Are you fighting the urge to quit? To give up? Stand firm. Hold on to Jesus. There's glory ahead.

What kind of temptation are you struggling with? What are you thinking about doing in secret, that's outside of God's best for you? Stand firm. Hold on to Jesus. There's glory in sticking with God's design.