

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 24 – Philemon, Thessalonians

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, so let's jump right in. You've got to understand the Apostle Paul wasn't just some theologian writing from a quiet study. He was a problem solver, right on the front lines.

And his letters that survived? They were basically his inbox, jam-packed with urgent, difficult questions from his followers. Today, we're going to look at how he handled two of the absolute toughest challenges the early church was facing. And we are not pulling any punches.

We're starting with the big one. It's a question that, if you've read the New Testament, you've probably asked yourself. I mean, looking back at it now, it's really jarring, right? Why didn't Paul, this guy with all these revolutionary ideas, just come right out and say, slavery is wrong.

Stop it. It's a huge question, and it deserves a serious look. So to even begin to get our heads around Paul's approach, we can't look at it from our 21st-century point of view.

It just doesn't work. We have to kind of get in a time machine and travel all the way back to the first-century Roman Empire. Okay, and this is absolutely crucial.

When we hear the word slavery, our minds immediately go to the horrific, race-based, chattel slavery of the last few hundred years. But in the Roman world, it was a totally different beast. It had nothing to do with race.

It was almost entirely economic. You could be a prisoner of war, or maybe you just fell into massive debt. Now, let's be clear.

It could be unbelievably brutal. But there was at least the possibility of earning or buying your freedom. It was a fundamentally different system.

And it was everywhere. I mean, this wasn't some fringe part of their world. Slavery was the engine of the Roman economy.

Some historians estimate that as many as one third of the entire population of the empire were slaves. One in three. So for Paul, in his tiny, brand-new movement to stand up and yell, end slavery now, that would have been like trying to tear down the entire economic and social structure of Rome with a few pamphlets.

It was a non-starter. So if a direct, head-on attack was completely off the table, what do you do? Just ignore it? No. Paul chose a much smarter, much more subversive strategy.

He decided to play the long game. And this quote from the scholar F.F. Bruce just nails it. Paul's strategy was to use the message of the gospel itself as the solution.

He wasn't trying to chop down the tree of slavery from the outside. He was planting a seed that he believed would cause it to rot from the inside out. So how did this work in practice? Well, first, Paul introduces this completely radical idea of spiritual equality.

In Christ, he says, there is neither slave nor free. Imagine hearing that for the first time. Suddenly, in the church, a master and his slave are equals.

Second, he completely rewires the relationships. He tells a slave owner to receive his runaway slave back, not as property, but as a beloved brother. You see what he's doing? He's changing the very DNA of the master-slave dynamic, making the institution itself unthinkable within the Christian community.

All right, so that's how Paul tackled a massive, society-wide problem. But that wasn't the only kind of fire he was constantly putting out. He also had to deal with really intense personal anxieties and deep theological confusion.

So let's pivot and look at a completely different kind of crisis. Yeah, let's go back to that ancient mailbox and pull out a couple of letters that were sent to a church in a city called Thessalonica. And believe me, these people were in a full-blown panic, but for a whole different reason.

So here's the situation. Paul had visited; he taught them about the future return of Jesus, and they were really excited about it. But then he left and, you know, life happens.

Some of the believers in their community passed away. And this just sparked a wave of grief and worry. They started asking, oh no, did they miss it? When Jesus returns, are our friends and family who just died going to be left out? And Paul's response is just pure pastoral care.

He's not trying to draw some complicated timeline. He basically says, hey, listen, don't worry. Don't grieve like people who have no hope.

He reassures them that actually believers who have died will be the first to rise to meet Jesus. They're not left behind. They get front-row seats.

The whole point was to give them comfort and hope. But you know how it goes. You try to solve one problem, and you can accidentally create a new one.

It seems his message of comfort got misinterpreted or maybe taken to an extreme because a second, totally opposite crisis erupted. People went from worrying the end was far away to panicking that it was already happening. This end-times hysteria was spreading like wildfire.

There might've even been a forged letter going around with Paul's name on it, stirring everyone up. Whatever the cause, people were alarmed. They were shaken, and some were apparently quitting their jobs and completely upending their lives because they thought it was the literal end of the world.

So Paul has to pick up the pen and write to them again. Only this time, he's not trying to comfort them about the future. He's trying to calm them down about the present.

He needed to correct the hype fast. His argument is pretty direct. He says, "Guys, pump the brakes."

The day of the Lord has not come. And how does he know? He says, remember what I told you when I was with you, certain things have to happen first. He mentions a rebellion, the appearance of a man of lawlessness and the removal of something he calls the restrainer.

Since those things hadn't happened, he tells them you can all relax. Now you're probably wondering what on earth those signs are? And the honest answer is we don't know for sure. That's because we're basically eavesdropping on one half of a phone call.

Paul is reminding them of things he already explained in person. We're missing that context, but the core message for them and for us is crystal clear. Don't get swept up in the panic.

It's not time yet. And here's a wild bit of trivia. That first letter, the one all about comfort, it contains the Greek phrase for caught up.

When that was translated into Latin, we got the word that eventually became the English word rapture. Isn't that ironic? A single phrase intended to bring peace has sparked centuries of intense debate. And a lot of that modern debate is all about the timing.

Does this catching up happen before a future period of suffering, in the middle of it, or after it? People have built entire theological systems around these different views, but it's so important to remember that creating these detailed charts and debating the exact sequence of events was not Paul's original focus at all. And this brings us right back to the most important point. Look at how Paul ends his thought.

He doesn't say, therefore, go debate one another with these words. He says, therefore, encourage one another with these words. His goal was always pastoral.

It was about caring for an anxious community. So when we put these two very different situations side by side, what's the big takeaway from these ancient letters? What we see is that Paul's letters aren't these dusty, abstract documents. They are urgent, practical, on-the-ground responses to real human problems.

Everything from a massive systemic injustice like slavery to the deeply personal pain of grief and the social chaos of end times panic. He was a pastor and strategist through and through. And that leaves us with one last thing to think about.

How does understanding this context that Paul was writing to specific people with specific problems change the way we read his words today? It reminds us that behind these ancient texts are real human beings, just like us, looking for answers, looking for hope, and just trying to figure out a better way to live. Kind of changes everything, doesn't it?