

November 1, 2020
Sunday Evening Service
Series: 1 Thessalonians
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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THE CHURCH OF THE THESSALONIANS 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

A couple of weeks ago, we rejoiced to hear from Dr. Priest, who is ministering as interim pastor with a church in Indiana, that a young woman professed Christ as her Savior. Last week we rejoiced more to hear that she had showed up at the services on Sunday and was overwhelmed by the kindness of God's people. Now we pray that this woman will continue to grow in Christ as she learns more and more about Him. There is something very encouraging about hearing that people who are lost in sin have been overwhelmed by God's grace unto salvation.

Paul could identify with that sense of joy. Sometime in about the middle of the first century, God drew Paul and the team of evangelists/church planters to a region called Macedonia. In the city of Thessalonica, Christ built a local assembly of His Church. The new believers had come out of abject paganism, but had learned quickly about the blessings they had in Jesus Christ. However, as was often the case, those new believers were being persecuted for their new-found faith.

A Christian, who is called upon to suffer ridicule or even persecution because of their faith in Christ, knows how encouraging it is to be able to think ahead to that day when Christ will return to snatch His bride out of the sinful, wicked world. But, that was part of the problem the Christians in Thessalonica faced. Some false teachers had been teaching that the "blessed hope" was no hope at all because it either already happened or wasn't going to happen (2 Thessalonians 2:2).

Is our day so much different than the circumstances those first-century Christians faced? Persecution against Christ's followers is at

an all-time high worldwide. Even in Christian America, the turning tide is so obvious as the culture becomes more and more secularized. Commonsense and a quick review of history remind us that secularists will not tolerate the truth of the Bible. They hate God's truth and hate you and me for believing it. As a result, we will be marginalized and silenced in the public square and on social media.

When facing such unsavory circumstances, we lovers of Jesus have often consoled ourselves with the promise that Jesus will return in the same manner He left this world (Acts 1:11) to snatch away believers in a miraculous, stupendous miracle. Christians have rejoiced for centuries in the promise that we will not have to endure the Great Tribulation. But now we discover, through the conclusions and theories of modern Christian influencers, that it isn't true. According to many of these teachers, there is no rapture, no blessed hope, no serious tribulation period, and no millennium. We are taught that all of those promises of Scripture, in which our forefathers found hope, have been misread and misinterpreted. Come to find out, it is all figurative, a picture, an allegory. The Jews have no promises from God about a restored nation over which Jesus will rule, and Christians have no blessed hope of being miraculously caught up to meet our Bridegroom Jesus. So you better just buck up and plan to tough it out.

That is why we are going to study these two great letters from the Apostle Paul through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Let me offer a simple warning at the outset. I am not smart enough to create consistent, accurate allegories out of plain speech and literal writing. We will approach these letters the same way we approach all Scripture. If a statement can be interpreted literally, we will interpret it literally. We will interpret these words in light of their historical, cultural, and biblical context. We will be careful to interpret each phrase grammatically and syntactically. And we will be greatly encouraged to discover that the blessed hope is still the blessed hope—a rock on which we stand in the midst of a sea of rejection, mockery, and persecution by a secular world.

Introduction to the Letter.

The letter begins with the typical greeting, *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians . . . (v.1a)*. Obviously,

the letter was from Paul who, in this case, appears to be another fellow servant of the Lord. Notice that Paul equates himself with Silvanus and Timothy by not appending the title “apostle.” Most of the time he began his letters with an appeal to that position of authority. That was because much of the time his apostleship was a point of contention. Therefore, he appended the title “apostle” in letters to the Romans and Ephesians who he had not met and with whom he had not established a personal relationship or friendship. We would expect the same to be true in his letters to the Corinthian Christians who debated Paul’s authority as an apostle. And again in the letter to the Galatian churches who had succumbed to slander against him. We also see the appeal to apostolic authority in letters to Timothy who wholly accepted Paul’s authority but was pastor in a church that may not have.

In this letter, writing to people he knew and who knew him, the appeal was not necessary. Why did Paul write the letter? When did he write the letter? Questions like that are answered by fleshing out the circumstances behind the writing. It seems pretty clear that Paul wrote during the second missionary journey, approximately early A.D. 51. We know from the history recorded in Acts that Paul and the team had been forced out of Thessalonica by stubborn, rebellious Jews. That unsavory separation is referenced in 2:17-18: *But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, again and again – but Satan hindered us (1Thessalonians 2:17-18).*

After being forced out of Berea by the same people, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica and he went to Athens (Acts 17:15). The team met again in Corinth where Timothy brought a wonderful report of the Christians thriving in Thessalonica (albeit, they were dealing with the persecution that began while Paul was still in the city). From Corinth, in that setting, Paul wrote this letter.

As the opening greeting reveals, Paul wrote to the Christians living in Thessalonica. It was a significant city politically and socially. It was the largest and most significant city in Macedonia (modern Greece). Thessalonica was situated on the Egnatian Way, one of the most significant Roman highways that connected Rome with the eastern provinces. The city also sat on a good, natural harbor.

Trade and merchandising was huge in this place. As a “free” city it had the right to mint its own coins.

Socially, Thessalonica was a thriving metropolis made up of Greeks, Romans, Jews, soldiers, sailors, merchants and businessmen. In Paul’s day it was home to over 200,000 citizens. Rome named it a “free” city in 42 B.C., which meant that no Roman garrison of soldiers was housed there and the people were free from certain taxes. Today it is still an important city of Greece with a population of about 400,000.

Like most cities in the first-century Roman Empire, Thessalonica was a secular city. It was wholly influenced by Greek thought from past centuries but still was a thoroughly Roman city in Paul’s day which meant, in spite of being thoroughly secular, it was also a religious city. There was plenty of activity connected with false gods. The political leaders promoted the imperial cult, Caesar worship. The business leaders promoted a local cult that worshiped Cabirus. Neither of these religions would tolerate competition from a “new way.” Nor would the Jews, obviously!

Contributing to the vast array of religion was the synagogue. We know there were at least ten Jewish families (and probably a lot more) in the city because there was a synagogue. Luke recorded, *Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ” (Acts 17:2-3).*

But the really great news about Thessalonica is that there was this church! Responding to the Macedonian call (Acts 16:6-10), Paul and team entered modern-day Greece and preached first at Philippi. We know the story from Luke’s history. In Philippi, Paul and the team (at least he and Silas) were arrested and beaten. Eventually the authorities asked them to leave the city. It seems logical that during the 100-mile journey from Philippi to Thessalonica they stayed at Amphipolis and Apollonia (Acts 17:1). But because there was no synagogue in those towns, they didn’t stop long enough to preach but moved on to Thessalonica.

On three consecutive Sabbaths Paul preached Christ in the synagogue at Thessalonica. As often happened, jealous Jews

disrupted the process but not before Christ planted the church. *And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women*” (Acts 17:4). And that is how God established this church in the secular Roman city.

Introduction of the Letter (1:1-5).

God described some important aspects of the nature of the church in Thessalonica. Like every local expression of the Body of Christ, this church existed *in* God. Paul described them as being *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (v.1b). This is the same “in” that Jesus described when He explained the believer’s union with Himself and the Father. He taught us, “*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me*” (John 15:4). Likewise when Jesus prayed to the Father just before His arrest and crucifixion, He prayed, “*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me*” (John 17:20-21).

The simple preposition “in” speaks volumes theologically. When the sinner is born again, regenerated by the miracle of salvation, we are placed in vital union with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At that moment, God indwells us and we begin to live in fellowship with God, draw on the resource of God Himself, and thus produce fruit that looks like God. That phrase in Ephesians, “*being created in Christ Jesus for good works,*” speaks of the expected result – not our effort to enter into vital union with Christ.

The Christians in Thessalonica, like all Christians, received *God’s grace and peace* (v.1c). The new believers were brought into union with God through grace. They demonstrated how Christians do good works being in vital union with God through daily grace. The result is that we enjoy peace. First, this refers to peace with God. This is not just absence of strife. It is a supernatural condition of being reconciled with our Creator who is offended continually by sin . . . including our sins before we were reconciled. God drew up the

“treaty” and then drew us into it by His grace. True peace, peace with God, is the most illusive treasure in the world.

Second, this peace speaks of the peace in our own souls. This is the condition of the conscience that has been cleansed from sin. It is a conscience that is cleansed from guilt, enjoying the reality that God has picked up and carried away sin.

Finally, because we have peace with God, we pursue peace with our enemy. This is often a one-way relationship. In this case, peace is the absence of conflict. Rather than to engage conflict, we choose a peaceful response.

Another trait of believers, whether ancient Thessalonians or modern Greenvillians, is that we were chosen by God. Paul wrote confidently, *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you* (v.4). That is not to say that those people were wise enough to “choose” Jesus or convicted enough to atone for their sins through good works. They were by nature enemies with God just like all of us are. Rather, God showed His love for them by choosing to save them from their offenses against Him. He did this in eternity before any of them were imagined. That wonderful news shows up in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him* (Ephesians 1:3-4).

They demonstrated election through Holy Spirit conviction. Paul knew that God had chosen them *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction* (v.5a). How can Paul make such an amazing statement about God having predestined them? How dare we, I, claim that God chose us for salvation before we were even born? Where is the proof of such a claim?

The power of the gospel to lay the sinner low is great proof of God’s choice. Most people hear the gospel and, at best, ignore it; at worst, they argue and scoff. Some people hear the gospel and determine that they must work diligently to make God love them and forgive their sins. But, Holy Spirit power humbles the sinner whom God has predestined for salvation. He lays us low by bringing us face to face with our rebellion against God. His power leaves us lying

prostrate before the cross begging for God's mercy because we know that we have nothing to give in exchange for forgiveness of sins.

That is what Jesus meant when He taught: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*" (Matthew 5:3-5). Humility is what He wants when He offered, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). That is what Paul meant by the confession, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Galatians 2:20).

How do you feel about that? How do we respond when we hear the wonderful news that God has convicted a sinner of sin and that person has received God's grace in humility, confessed sin, and been born again? Consider Paul the servant's response to the Thessalonian believers' salvation and subsequent works.

He was thankful. He was thankful to God for all of them writing, *We give thanks to God always for all of you* (v.2a). Are we thankful for other believers? Paul was not thankful that they were smart enough to see the light like we did. He was not thankful that they decided to get on our side of the issue and become part of our chosen "sect." Rather the Lord's servant was truly thankful to God for what He accomplishes when He regenerates a sinful soul. And we should be thankful to God for His work in people we don't even "like."

If we are thankful for fellow believers, we will continually mention them in prayers. Or as Paul put it, *constantly mentioning you in our prayers* (v.2). Paul must have had an amazing prayer list. He often made similar statements in letters to other churches. At times he even mentioned individuals he prayed for. No wonder he instructed us to pray without ceasing! We have a much smaller circle for which to be thankful and for whom to pray. All of us have friends, relatives we pray for regularly. But added to that, if we are truly thankful for each other, we will pray for each other.

Third, the Lord's servant was always remembering them *before our God and Father* (v.3a). This is probably part of praying. It is true

that we ought to think about each other. But in our prayers remember to not only intercede for each other, but to be thankful to God.

And more specifically, Paul was thankful for three traits those Christians manifested. He was thankful to God for their *work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ* (v.3b). What was their work of faith? We will discover further in this letter that these Christians were quite busy regarding the work of telling the good news. But they were also obviously diligent to live out the "good works" of salvation in that their testimony was known in many places (1:7-8).

We should be thankful for our fellow-believers' labor of love. Labor speaks of hard work that involves difficulty or is done in the face of trouble. That is a fitting description of Christian "work" while being persecuted. These were the "good works" for which God created us in Christ. They are labors in behalf of others because we desire for them to be conformed to Christ and are willing to sacrifice to make it happen.

We have a great resource to help us, to motivate us to engage in such works. We should be motivated to work hard to benefit fellow-believers by unwavering hope. This is the hope of seeing Christ when He returns (4:13-18). The very nature of salvation instructs us to hope, as Paul would write to Pastor Titus. *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ* (Titus 2:11-13).

Steadfast hope does not waver in the face of persecution, ridicule, false teaching. It perseveres. The person who gives up the hope of seeing Christ and, with finality, goes back to live in the sin of the world is not "backslidden" but was never born again. It is possible for a Christian to return to sin or fall into sin for a period of time, but he or she cannot remain there.

A third trait for which Paul was thankful to God was the Thessalonians' following the good example he and the team set. *You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake* (v.5b). Okay, just what kind of men were they? Notice the repeated

use of the plural pronoun “we.” It wasn’t just Paul but all the guys on the team.

The context describes their example. They were examples of Christ (1:6; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:1). They were humble (2:5,6). They were gentle (2:7). They were loving (2:8). They were self-sacrificing (2:9). They were holy, righteous, blameless (2:10). They were encouraging (2:11-12).

Why did they do all that hard labor? Why were they so sacrificial in setting the example? It was *for your sake* (v.5c). Living an exemplary Christian life is difficult. But we should be motivated to make the sacrifice to do it out of love. We work out of love for God first. Then that love we have for God, because He first loved us, causes us to work diligently out of love for others.

We should be reminded often of our relationship with each other. We should be thankful for each other. We should remember that each of us was brought into vital union through the same infinitely valuable price – the blood of Christ. So thank someone today for their testimony.