

## Introduction to 1st Thessalonians

Call to Worship: Psalm 122

1st Scripture: Acts 17:1-15

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1

Hymn Insert- *Better is One Day*

Hymn Insert- *Amazing Love*

Hymn Insert- *10,000 Reasons*

### Introduction:

So much has been going on in our country, at the national level, that no doubt, we have grown increasingly concerned about where things are truly heading. Our government is racked with corruption and scandal, on both sides of the political aisle. The trending jokes about politicians being corrupt, crooked, self-serving liars has become so cliché, that we presume that the job description for politicians includes the ability to craftily lie to the people and get away with it. We call that "just politics."

We have an embarrassingly large, insurmountable national debt, in the trillions of dollars, which is increasing by the second. The coming economic collapse is inevitable, but we are gifted at stretching out a delay for as long as we are able to do so, pushing the massive debt further and further into the pockets of our children. We are morally bankrupt, reaching a level of depravity, which in some ways, perhaps supersedes most generations. We have just legalized "gay marriage," attacking the very ordinance of God, and His design for mankind. Our children are educated in government schools, which exalt the logically insane theory of evolution, standing upon the given premise that God simply cannot exist. We have murdered over fifty million unborn children since Roe vs. Wade, and have regressed to the point that baby body parts are harvested and sold for profit, under cruel, painful and gruesome conditions. Sexual perversion is rampant, marital fidelity has eroded tremendously (over 33 million accounts on a website that promotes adultery! "Ashley Maddison"), and racial tensions are on the rise. Entertainment events are sold out, while even Christians struggle to maintain a basic level of commitment to local churches. Churches are compromising in large numbers, the Gospel is watered down, and the Lord's Day can hardly be distinguished from any other day of the week.

All in all, we seem to be on the heels of great devastation and tribulation. And all the more, we need to be a focused and faithful people, so that we are not swept away by the

increasing pressures that will soon come upon the church. We are a Lampstand, standing amongst many compromising and smoldering lampstands, set apart to shine the light of God's glorious truth in a dark and desperately lost world. We are a pillar and ground of eternal truth; truth that is able to save lost, dead sinners to the uttermost; we carry within us that most precious of all cargoes, the revelation of God's Beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ! And so, we must stand firm, steadfast and immovable; faithful against all opposition, confident that our conquering Savior, will yet, conquer through us.

1 Thessalonians is a divinely inspired Epistle, which will greatly aid and encourage us in the times ahead, as it is an Epistle, which was born in the throes of great persecution and tribulation. Indeed, the fledgling church in Thessalonica was under attack, right from the outset, leading the Apostle Paul to pen this glorious exhortation to a church that was entrenched in the winds of much opposition.

For this morning then, I simply want to provide you with a general context of the Book, along with an overview of the prominent themes, which emerge out of this context.

## **I. The Historical Context**

"Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 1).

Paul writes this letter on behalf of himself and two of his most trusted travel companions, namely, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, both of whom were very well known to the Thessalonians, as they not only aided Paul in his short time of ministry there, but further ministered there, later on, after they were all forced to leave because of the mounting opposition.

It was during Paul's second missionary journey that he had come to Thessalonica for the first time. You might recall that when he (along with Silas and Timothy) had crossed through southern Galatia, Paul had planned to work his way through the heart of Asia. However, he was instructed by the Holy Spirit not to go through Asia. And so, he ultimately traveled north and west, around the outskirts of Asia, ending up in the port city of Troas, on the shore of the Aegean Sea. It was there that Paul received the famous "Macedonian call," where Paul saw a vision of a

man, pleading with him to come over to Macedonia. And so, Paul and his companions set sail from Troas, across the northern portion of the Aegean Sea, making his way into Macedonia.

One of the first major cities of Macedonia, in which Paul had ministered, was, of course, Philippi. That is where he met Lydia and that is where he and Silas were beaten and imprisoned, ultimately leading to the conversion of the Philippians jailor and his household. From there, Paul made his way through Amphipolis and Appolonia, and into another major city of Macedonia, called Thessalonica. In our first Scripture reading (from Acts 17), we saw that Paul entered a synagogue, which was stationed in Thessalonica, and he preached Christ to them (from the OT Scriptures) for three Sabbaths, "explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ' (Acts 17:3). Now, while some of the Jews were persuaded, along with a great multitude of Greeks, there were a large group of Jews who were not persuaded and they saw Paul as a threat to their influence on the people. And so, out of envy, they caused a great uproar and attacked the house of a man, named Jason, who was harboring Paul and Silas. That said, Paul and Silas were not there when the attack took place, and so, Jason along with some of the other brethren who were there, were dragged before the rulers of the city, being accused of "rebellng against Caesar," since they were proclaiming that Jesus was king. Included in this accusation, we find those famous words, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too" (vs. 6).

As a result of this uproar, Paul and Silas were forced to flee Thessalonica, in what would seem to be, at least from the standpoint of man, a premature fashion. In other words, the great work that was erupting in the few weeks that they were there in Thessalonica was quickly interrupted by this opposition, which caused Paul and Silas to have to flee prematurely. So, you can imagine the burden that Paul had had for the Thessalonian converts, as they were forced away from them so quickly, and the desire he would have had to get back, and to further establish the fledgling church. This burden is expressed in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

And so, Paul and Silas (and Timothy) fled west by night to the city of Berea. We recall the people of Berea were very wise and noble, searching the Scriptures as Paul preached to them, to see if the things that he said were true. And while Paul was beginning to have success in Berea, somehow, word had gotten back to the Jews of Thessalonica that Paul was in Berea. And

so, they came to Berea and stirred up the crowds there as well. Things were so dangerous for Paul, that he was forced to flee immediately, and that, without Silas and Timothy. Some of the brethren from Berea, quickly escorted Paul to the coast, where he was put on a boat, and compelled to set sail, along the coastline, south, some 200+ miles to Athens. However, he had given instructions to the brethren to tell Silas and Timothy to come asap to meet Paul there in Athens. Eventually, Silas and Timothy did arrive and meet Paul there, but not before Paul had his famous experience among the Athenian philosophers at the Areopagus (Mars Hill).

All of these things, to some degree, come out, in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, helping us to establish and grasp the context of urgency, which surrounds the Book. At some point, Paul had sent Timothy back up to Thessalonica (from Athens), in large part, to see how things were going with the fledgling, persecuted church of Thessalonica, and to establish and encourage them in their faith (1 Thess. 3:1-3). He also sent Silas up to Macedonia, at some point, as well.

Timothy and Silas then later met Paul in Corinth, which is where Paul wound up, for at least a year and a half, following his time in Athens. It is during his lengthy stay at Corinth, after hearing back from Timothy and Silas, that Paul had penned this first Epistle to the Thessalonians.

And so, brethren, we have done some of this historical leg work, mainly to establish the fact that the Book (letter) of 1st Thessalonians was written in a context of great persecution and suffering, to a church that had hardly had a chance to take root, before Paul was forced out of there, ultimately winding up a few hundred miles away. The author is a man who has suffered much by way of persecution, but his greatest concern was for the welfare of the fledgling church, which was under vicious attack by the unconverted Jews. This comes out, very loudly, in chapters two and three.

That said, having received a good report from Timothy, concerning the faithfulness of the Thessalonians, the letter moves on to address a few additional very important matters, which Paul would get across, to this church that was under constant attack.

This then brings us to simply mention some of the main themes of the Book, which again, erupt out of the context of persecution that we have just considered.

## **II. The Prominent Themes**

What then are the prominent themes, which emerge out of a context of persecution and tribulation? How would Paul further instruct this church, as it was forced to bear a heavy load of opposition, right from its birth?

1) Paul appeals to them to pursue holiness and purity (Chapter 4). In other words, Paul is greatly (indeed, primarily) concerned for their sanctification, as they bear up against the weight of fierce opposition.

And brethren, we will find then, as we work through this letter, that God would have us constantly focus on our sanctification (our pursuit of holiness), in whatever state we find ourselves in, even, and especially during times of persecution. In other words, brethren, we cannot excuse our sin, even when we are facing trials and tribulations. You see, Paul knows that when the weight of opposition is felt by the people of God; when our possessions and physical wellbeing are in jeopardy; when we are suffering in any sense, that we will be tempted to find relief in some kind of sinful or idolatrous fashion. It is easy to seek immediate, temporal relief in ungodly places, when we are suffering, especially when we are suffering for our faith. The temptation to flee to sexual sin, gluttony, drug or alcohol abuse, and all manner of idolatry, can be great, when our sufferings tend to cloud the joys of our life in Christ. And so, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians here, as one who was not unacquainted with much suffering himself, to maintain self-control, to stay focused and to continue to strive after holiness and purity, contrary to the rising temptations that come during such times of suffering. That is a major, major, practical theme found in this Book.

And it is no wonder then, that...

2) Paul delivers a powerful motivation for pursuing holiness and purity, by providing his audience with a critical reminder, which can counter all of the voices of temptation, which strive to lead suffering Christians to compromise. What is that powerful motivation and reminder? It is the coming "Day of the Lord!" He reminds us of that which is to come, when Christ returns (End of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5). And brethren, this reminder; the return of Christ, unto the final salvation of His people and unto the judgment of His enemies, is the very reminder that we need to constantly lay hold of, if we are to find ourselves persevering, when the floor of this

world and this life, begins to crumble beneath us. If we lose sight of this, the temptation unto quick fix, immediate, but short-lived fulfillment, will overpower and dominate us! And so, this is the critical asset; the impenetrable armor, which Paul gives to the persecuted, fledgling church of Thessalonica, as a primary means of holding them up, in the face of great opposition.

Paul, as it were, is reminding the church, of our Lord Jesus Christ's encouraging words to His disciples, as He was preparing to face His passion and cross, leading to a life of their own suffering, as they would continue to lay the foundation of His church: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." And brethren, that is the solid Rock, which will hold us up, in a country that is doomed to collapse! Our peace is in Christ! No matter what the world does. No matter what we must suffer on this side of the grave, nothing could ever separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord! We have peace with God; our sins are forgiven and forever washed away, and that can never, ever change, no matter what happens in this ever changing world! And soon enough, Christ will return; and soon enough, we will be in glory, and all of the sufferings of this life will be forgotten... done away with, in full! No more tears. No more pain. No more sorrows. No more death. For the former things will have passed away. God will be our God and we will be His people! Therefore, pursue holiness; don't compromise; possess your own body, in a spirit of self-control, and fight the good fight. [At the center of the whirlwind with Christ]

Now, that brings us to conclude, back where this letter begins. How fitting then is this opening?

"Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 1).

Indeed, a church was born, even in such difficult and oppressive circumstances! And the grace and peace from God, was infinitely stronger and more powerful than the hatred and opposition and persecution that came from men (and the world)! Upon that grace and on that peace, they would stand! And they would prevail and overcome!

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25