

Mid Week • 1 Thessalonians 1-2

CHAPTER 1

**¹Paul, 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.**

Let's do a little background study on the city of Thessalonica and how Paul came to be involved with the church there.

This will give us a lot of insight into the contents of this letter.

Thessalonica was located in Macedonia, which is the region just north of Greece.

It had a good harbor that gave anchorage for large ships so it became an important seaport.

On land, it was connected to two great plains through which important land routes passed.

It became a key city on the well known Roman highway-the Egnatian Way, that ran all the way from Rome to the Far East.

In Paul's day it was a free city, the capital of the entire province and the most populous in the region, with about 200,000 people.

The population was predominantly the original Greek-Macedonian inhabitants, mixed with many Romans and some Jews.

The Jews were gifted merchants and had a knack for investing so they were usually found in the commercial centers of the ancient world.

While Paul took advantage of any open door to preach the gospel, he made it a point to focus his efforts on planting churches in strategic locations –

Cities that lay at the crossroads of culture and commerce.

He knew that these centers of economic and cultural life could then influence the regions around them, and even far flung locations that he himself would never be able to visit personally.

Thessalonica was a prime target.

It was much like Ephesus and Corinth in terms of its strategic location.

All three of these cities were large urban centers, well known and well connected to the rest of the world.

All three were commercial seaports with extensive trade and important land routes.

If something important happened in one of these cities, it was sure to spread to other locations simply because of the influence these cities exerted on the regions around them.

Paul's first visit to Thessalonica is related in Acts 16 & 17.

He was on his second missionary journey in Asia Minor when he had a vision of a Macedonian beckoning him to come there and preach the gospel.

While in Asia Minor, Paul had repeatedly made efforts to swing into the region north of there, but every attempt had been hindered by the Spirit.

When he had this vision he realized God wanted him to turn west instead of north.

So Paul and his companions sailed from Troas on the coast of Asia Minor and landed for the first time on what we would call Europe.

They landed at Neapolis and went immediately to the twin city of Philippi.

They had some success in working with the small Jewish community there and it wasn't long before a small but vital fellowship of both Jewish and Gentile believers was meeting.

Trouble began for Paul and his companions when Paul exorcised a demon from a slave girl.

Her master was irate because she had been a fortune-teller and their income was lost with her

deliverance.

So they raised a ruckus and persuaded the authorities to punish Paul.

Without trial, they beat him and his companions and threw them in chains.

The next morning, when the authorities received word that Paul was a Roman citizen, they grew fearful of their unjust treatment and asked him politely if he would depart lest a scandal break out that might result in their removal from office.

Paul complied, but only after getting some guarantees about the treatment of the disciples he left behind. Then he traveled to Thessalonica, about 150 miles west and slightly south of Philippi.

From the book of Acts it appears that Paul stayed in Thessalonica for only three weeks.

Following his usual pattern, he went first to the synagogue and preached Christ, proving him to be the long awaited Messiah.

A few Jews responded, as well as most of the god-fearing Gentiles, but the Jews who rejected his message became hostile and began to threaten him.

When they weren't able to intimidate him into silence, they went and gathered some trouble-makers, some town freeloaders and thugs, loafers who hung around the marketplace all day looking for odd jobs or handouts.

They persuaded these guys, probably by bribing them, to form a mob and agitate for Paul and his companion's censure by the authorities.

The charge they leveled was that Paul and his message upset the normal order of things – meaning they were advocating treason against Rome.

The ploy worked and when it appeared that Paul's continued ministry in the city would only make it more difficult for the church to grow, Paul realized he needed to leave.

So he left and went to Berea, then Athens and finally ended up in Corinth where he spent some time.

While in Corinth, Paul was distressed about the Thessalonians.

A solid work had begun but he had been unable to do the proper follow up on his converts and leave them with the kind of spiritual structure and leadership they so desperately needed.

So he sent his right hand man, Timothy, to help strengthen them.

He couldn't go himself because the Christian leaders of Thessalonica had paid a kind of *surety fine* to the civil authorities guaranteeing Paul would not return for a set period of time.

After staying with them for a short time, Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth with the report that the church was doing really well but had a few problems.

Paul penned this first letter to encourage and instruct them.

This letter was written in either 50 or 51 AD, just 15 years after Paul's conversion and 20 years after the Resurrection of Christ.

While there were small scrolls of the sayings of Christ floating around, not one of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John had yet been composed.

There's a good chance Matthew had begun writing down some things, but his gospel as we have it today was still several years off.

The similarities between Matthew, Mark, and Luke are due to the fact that at this early date, the teaching about Jesus' life and ministry was oral – and that means they followed a specific rote form.

When Mark and Matthew and then later Luke penned their gospels, they recorded the oral teaching that had come from the Apostles and had been memorized and repeated over and over again by the early believers.

But at the time Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, there was no Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

In fact, 1 Thessalonians is the first writing to be done that's in the NT.

Galatians and 1 Thessalonians were written right about the same time.

Unlike most of the cities mentioned in the NT, Thessalonica still exists as a living city.

It's an important industrial and commercial city in modern Greece and is second only to Athens in population, with some 300,000 people.

Here in v. 1, Paul lists the very same men that had been there with him when he first came to Thessalonica – Silvanus, or Silas, and Timothy.

As he does his other letters – Paul gives them that distinctly Christian greeting – one that combines “Grace” the Greek greeting, with “Peace” the Jewish greeting

Charis and Shalom – Grace & Peace

By using this greeting, he reminds them that in Christ there is no longer Jew and Gentile, we are all one in Christ.

Our faith transcends race or ethnicity.

There is certainly nothing wrong in being proud of one's ethnic group.

There is nothing improper with being loyal to one's citizenship or to honor one's cultural background.

The problem comes when such honor and loyalty turns into bigotry and hatred of others.

My ethnic background is white northern European; my ancestors were from Norway and Scotland. – I'm a cheap Viking!

I love reading my family history.

I love studying about my ancestors and how they lived.

Their music, food, family life, religious beliefs, culture, all of it.

But you know what, I also love hearing about the history and background of other ethnic groups – from all over.

As I listen to people talk about their ethnic backgrounds and the history of their people group, I look for glimmers of truth and how God has left Himself a witness among them that the gospel can exploit and bring them to faith in Christ.

You see, while I think it's entirely appropriate to honor ethnicity, we all share something deeper than the color of our skin and in which part of the world our ancestors came from.

If you follow the family tree back far enough, we all share the same parents!

And before we are white, black, brown, red or yellow, we're human.

And in Jesus Christ, we are new humans!

²We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers,

Paul often followed his opening greeting with a word of thanksgiving, as he does here.

Timothy had brought back an encouraging report on the faithfulness of the Thessalonians, and this caused rejoicing on Paul's part – rejoicing that led to thankfulness to God for His keeping power evident in the Thessalonians.

Try to imagine Paul's concern for them.

He had only spent a few weeks with them.

While Acts 17 tells us he spent 3 weeks reasoning in the synagogue, it's possible that he actually spent a couple more weeks there working in houses to build up the new converts.

In any case, we didn't spend as long there as he thought he needed to establish them.

So he was in a certain agony over what would come of them.

Specially when there had been such a whole-hearted response to his gospel on the part of those who were converted.

Imagine, if you can, that you join Greg Nava's team on their mission of spying out the land in the Philippines at the end of the month.

You arrive there, and visit a village of 1000 people.

Your team preaches the gospel and 400 come to faith in Christ.

They turn from their worship of tribal gods to Jesus and the power of God is evident among them in some dramatic ways – healings, miracles, deliverances from demons.

But there's a backlash and some 200 of those who reject the gospel start causing trouble and your team has to leave the village.

You have two days left, so you pour everything into those new converts you can.

In two days you pour every bit of bible knowledge into them you can.

But then, you have to leave!

In a week, in a month, are you going to be concerned over how they are doing?

It was even worse for Paul because he wasn't just a member of a mission team – he was their leader and felt a father's concern for the Thessalonians.

Timothy comes with news that they were doing great – not *perfect*, but really good.

And at this news, Paul rejoices and heaves a sign of relief and pours out a heart of gratitude to the Lord for sustaining them.

Paul believed in the power and goodness of God so he prayed!

He didn't just sit on pins and needles – vainly *wishing* good things for the Thessalonians.

He prayed and asked God to protect and bless them.

You and I ought to do the same, armed with the same knowledge Paul had.

God is good and God is powerful.

Not only that, He wants to bless.

Ask the Lord to bless to bless you, to bless you loved ones, to bless you enemies!

Paul goes on . . .

³remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father,

⁴knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.

When Paul thought back to the time he'd spent there, he was impressed with just how obvious the work of the Spirit was among them.

There was no doubt these people had been *converted*, in the truest sense of the word.

Paul had seen the three crowning virtues of the Spirit filled life abundantly evident in them – faith, hope and love!

He says he remembers their work of faith – how their faith in Christ had proven itself to be genuine because it was translated into a changed life.

He remembered their labor of love – the word labor meaning toil to the point of sweat. That's genuine love – when the giving goes deep enough to demand something of our *selves*.

He also remembered their patient or enduring hope in Christ – they were willing to put up with trials because they looked beyond them to the reward that was to be there's in Christ.

This evidence of faith, hope and love conspired to prove they were the elect of God.

⁵For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

⁶And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit,

⁷so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.

One of the problems Paul wrote to deal with was the problem of those who had begun troubling the Thessalonian church with the idea that Paul had made up the gospel, that he was a con man and the gospel was his schpiel to rip them off.

Paul refutes this by reminding them of how the Lord had worked so powerfully among them when he first came and preached.

The gospel wasn't merely about clever words – it was a message that God showed His approval of by attending it with a powerful move of the Holy Spirit that brought both internal conviction of sin and

external signs and wonders.

Besides that, Paul reminds them of the kind of lifestyle he had lived among them.

If the critics were right and Paul was a con man – the con wasn't working!

Paul had been humble and persecuted.

In fact, when he arrived in Thessalonica, he had wounds on his back from Philippi and bruises on his wrists and ankles from the prison shackles!

Are these the evidences of a con?

No – Paul's lifestyle had been in complete accordance with his message – that to follow Christ means to turn one's face against the world and to know the world's hatred and opposition.

The Thessalonian believers had then joined Paul and also experienced opposition.

But the joy and reality of God were so strong it *more than compensated* for the world's hatred.

The example of the Thessalonian church became a solid testimony to the entire region – just as Paul hoped it would.

⁸For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

⁹For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

This is amazing!

Even though Paul had spent as few as three weeks and as many as six in Thessalonica, the church had become so strong and so vibrant that word had spread throughout that entire region of the world.

Paul's strategy of reaching the urban and commercial centers was working!

As the church in Thessalonica grew, people that had come to the city to do business heard the new message of Christ and carried that message back to their homes throughout Macedonia, Achaia, and the other regions and provinces of the Mediterranean.

Soon Thessalonica had a reputation for being a center of Christian activity and a nexus of the gospel among the Gentiles.

What the Thessalonians were getting a reputation for was their turn from idolatry to God.

This is remarkable when you consider the historical context.

Everyone thought of the Greeks as believing in many gods.

In fact, because of their history as world conquerors, their gods were thought to be especially potent deities.

Many other nations had absorbed the Greek gods and worshipped the Greek pantheon of Zeus and his cohorts.

Even mighty Rome had adopted the Greeks gods – they just changed their names.

Greek mythology which centered on the life of the gods had pretty much come to dominate the cultural landscape of the Roman empire.

Thessalonica was a major Greek city – second only to Athens in terms of cultural influence, but now, there was a religious movement among many of the Greeks in Thessalonica to jettison the pantheon of Greek gods and worship one solitary deity whose law said He cannot be represented by an image.

In fact, worship of Him requires a whole new ritual, creed, and morality.

No wonder the church's opponents in Thessalonica accused Paul of turning the world upside down!

Really, we know he was turning it right side up – but for those on their heads, it seemed upside down.

Word spread quickly that there was a new religion afoot in Thessalonica and the steadfast testimony of the believers lent tremendous credibility to its truthfulness and power.

No doubt the curiosity factor helped spread the gospel even more quickly.

CHAPTER 2

¹For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain.

²But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict.

³For our exhortation *did not come* from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit.

⁴But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

Since we took a look at these verses on Sunday, I'm keeping my comments on them brief this evening . . .

He is still answering the critics and nay-sayers who were trying to discredit him by saying he was merely a con man bent on suckering them into some trap.

But what did Paul gain by this?

Suffering, pain, prison, beatings?

If he was a con man he was both really bad at it and then really stupid that he kept at it.

No, his motivation and center were something other than deception –he wanted to please God and God had given him a job to do – preach the gospel.

One day he would have to stand before God and give account for how he had discharged his duty as an Apostle.

You know, what was true for Paul is true for us – each of us will give account to God for how we have lived and how we have discharged our calling.

If you've been called to be a teacher – teacher

If you've been called to be a wife – wife!

Are you a husband – husband your wife!

Are you a parent – then parent!

Are you called to be an artist – create!

Are you called to be a used car salesman – then sell cars to the glory of God?

Are you called to be a parole officer or a judge or an attorney – then be faithful and work to please God, not man.

One day, we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and render an account.

Paul kept that day in the forefront of his thinking – and that's what we must do.

⁵For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness.

Paul starts to dissect this charge of being a con.

What do confidence men typically do – they use flattery.

They try to butter you up with compliments and an inflation of your ego.

Then they threaten to hold you in lower esteem if you don't do what they want.

So they pump you up, then hold a pin to you.

Paul reminds them that he had never stooped to flattery.

Nor did he have a secret agenda of greed.

⁶Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

He didn't even hide a less obvious goal of simply trying to gain his own following by starting some new religious movement – it seems there's no end of guys doing that.

Paul was an apostle and knew it, but when he came to Thessalonica, he didn't send a publicity team ahead of him whipping the people into an expectant mood.

Soon Appearing – The Apostle Paul - Saturday at the Synagogue!

See the Apostle the whole world's talking about.

He killed Christians, now he's making them!

Come hear his exciting story and get a chance to touch his holy hanky.

Also appearing, Silas and Timothy!

No – when Paul was among them, he never claimed privileges as an apostle.

⁷But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children.

Paul had never pushed his spiritual weight and authority around.

He was gentle and humble.

They knew this, and all he had to do was remind them of his example – that would be enough for them to categorically reject the objections of his critics.

⁸So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.

⁹For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.

¹⁰You are witnesses, and God *also*, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe;

¹¹as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and ^ocharged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children,

¹²that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Paul is determined to silence his critics once and for all.

They had been dogging his steps for months and he wants to make sure the Thessalonians will never gain entertain their foolish objections.

So he reminds them that when he and Silas and Timothy were there, they had not depended on their generosity.

They had paid their own way.

They worked with their own hands so that they wouldn't be a burden to anyone.

We know that they also received some assistance from the Philippian church when they were in Thessalonica, but this was only supplemental to what they were providing for themselves.

And the message they preached all this time – love and serve God – not love and serve us!

¹³For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed *it* not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

Finally, to put the criticism to rest, Paul reminds them of how they received him and his message at the first – as the word of God which made an eternal change in them.

While they might not be able to know exactly what was going on in Paul's heart and mind, they knew what had happened in their own – they were touched by God.

¹⁴For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they *did* from the Judeans,

¹⁵who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men,

¹⁶forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up *the measure* of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

Paul tells them that the work the Spirit of God had done in them was the very same work he had done at the beginning in Jerusalem and Judea.

Even though Macedonia and the city of Thessalonica seemed a world away from where it all began, God had shown His power in the very same way and done the very same work.

Different language, different location, different culture, different religious backgrounds, different everything –but the same powerful work of conviction and drawing to Christ.

And the same kind of result – a committed group of believers who had a new center and new motive for living – Jesus Christ.

This is another proof of the truth of the Christian message and it's superiority over other religions – it transcends

time, culture, language, geography.

You can't say that about Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and even to a certain extent about Judaism.

Hinduism is heavily tied to the culture of India, just as Buddhism is tied to the cultures of the orient for so many of its beliefs and practices.

Islam demands a return to 7th century Arabia.

Judaism centers on the temple and the sacrifices.

Only Christianity transcends all these limitations.

[Story of the EE-Tow in Papa New Guinea.]

Have confidence in knowing that as you share the gospel with the people around you, it is as relevant today as it has ever been.

¹⁷But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.

¹⁸Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.

¹⁹For what *is* our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? *Is it* not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?

²⁰For you are our glory and joy.

When the Thessalonians read this last sentence, I'll bet they hung their heads in a bit of shame as they realized that Paul loved them so much and found such total joy in them.

How could they ever doubt a man who said that he found his glory and joy in them?

Paul says, "You want to know what my hope is, you want to know where I count my joy and reward? It's this – when Jesus comes, you'll be there too!"

Paul had planned on visiting them but then he was reminded that they had paid a fine and given bail guaranteeing that he wouldn't come back to the city for a period of time.

He saw that as the enemy's plot to hinder and weaken the church.

He chomped at the bit for the deadline to come so he could visit them again.

In the meantime, he would pray, and send letters and assistants like Timothy to strengthen them and ensure they were growing in the faith.

CONCLUSION

The book of Acts shows us Paul's fierce passion to win the lost but his letters reveal his unconquerable desire for believers to grow in their faith and demonstrate the crowning virtues of faith, hope and love.

Salvation – Sanctification / Mission – Discipleship

That's a balance every Christian and church ought to strive for.

“Feed My Sheep”

DATE \@ "MM/dd/yy" 08/09/00 • FILENAME mw1thes01.doc