

# Study 1: The Disruptive Gospel

## Introduction

As we open our study of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, we should get our bearings by carefully studying the greeting and introduction that Paul wrote. While often skimmed over, these first words not only provide insight into the details of the letter, but the encouragement that can be gleaned for suffering Christians everywhere is invaluable.

## Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

*1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

## Discussion

1. When we try to understand Paul's letters, it is important to pay attention to the greetings he writes. Most exude love and joy, while others like Galatians are shortly followed by a rebuke! Understanding the greetings sets the tone for how we should read the rest of the letter. **What would you say is the tone for this greeting? What "tone" does it set for the rest of the letter?**

*The main tone here is thankfulness. Paul is thankful as he writes to the Thessalonians, mainly for their endurance of faith through such a struggle. It sets a paternal tone for the rest of the letter, leading us to expect both encouragement and discipline.*

2. Other important features of these greetings are found in the specific details. Two features come up in this greeting like they do in every other greeting of Paul's. The first is the "grace and peace" motif. The second is the address that Paul gives to God: "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The first is directed towards the recipients of the letter, while the second is directed towards Paul himself as he proclaims who he is serving as he writes. **Discuss the ideas of "grace" and "peace" as part of Paul's greeting. What might be Paul's goal in choosing these terms? Afterward, discuss the "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" portion of the greeting. What does this say about Paul's view of himself writing these letters?**

*"Grace" (Karis in Greek) and "peace" (Eirene in Greek) are two closely associated terms. Grace ought to direct our attention to our present gift of favor from God in light of Christ's redemptive work. Peace makes us look forward to the great "Shalom" we will all enjoy in eternity. Both of these terms indicate the status of the original audience as beloved believers. Paul addressing God in this way both humbles himself and glorifies God. It*

*gives a meek yet important tone to the rest of his writing, as he is but a mere servant, but a servant of God Most High.*

### **Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6**

*4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit,*

### **Discussion**

1. One of the obstacles for so many of us is assurance of our faith. In moments of doubt or guilt we might ask: "Am I really a Christian?" Apparently and thankfully, we aren't the first people to feel this way. This was also a struggle for ancient Christians as well. Paul writes here about how he knows that the Thessalonians have been chosen by God. He knows they are chosen because the Gospel didn't only come to them in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction. **What does it look like when the Gospel only comes to someone in word? How is the Gospel coming to someone also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction different?**

*When someone makes a profession of faith in word only it can be seen by a lack of actual change in the way they live. Be careful in saying this, as some believers will bear guilt and shame for sin and take it to mean that their profession of faith is false. The evidence points to the contrary: The fact that they are cut over their sin is sure evidence of Christ sanctifying them day by day. One who professes in word only has no pain over sin, even if they outwardly make it seem so. When someone receives the word in power and the Holy Spirit they turn away from sin (repent and believe) and bear fruit (Matt. 28). If this question becomes a big point of discussion, turn to Mark 4 and go over the Parable of the Sower. The last seed is the one who receives the Word in Power and the Holy Spirit.*

2. One of the most important, yet often overlooked, aspects of ministry is the character of those working in ministry. For the sake of those being ministered to, those in ministry need to be worth following! Paul notes here how the Thessalonians knew what kind of men were ministering to them, apparently worth imitating even in the midst of hardship. **What do you think makes a leader worth following? What does it demonstrate to others when we show faith and endure suffering?**

*Nobody wants to follow someone who's not going anywhere. It is as much about the "location" a leader is going as it is about the leader themselves. While it is true that we would follow the best leader anywhere (even unto death!), we only do so because we would have the confidence that life is on the other side of the suffering. A major reason*

*that Paul was worth following to the Thessalonians was that he was an imitator of God who was leading Paul day by day. Paul was heading for eternity, not death. It ought to make us want to follow those who follow him! When we endure suffering well, it shows that we have something worth suffering for. Just like our leaders who lead through danger, we become the same automatically when we willingly preach the Gospel even when it becomes most difficult.*

### **Read 1 Thessalonians 1:7-10**

*7 ...so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

### **Discussion**

1. The result of people in a tumultuous position receiving leadership from faithful ministers is that they themselves become examples! In fact, the influence of people who endure suffering in faith goes far beyond what might be expected. This influence is actually so impactful, that Paul said that they didn't even need to say anything! **How can we display faith like this through suffering?**

*One major way we can display faith through suffering is to actually speak of Christ to everyone we know. It is one thing for our neighbors to know us as Christian, but something else entirely for us to confront them with the Good News. Another way is to be honest about our pain (see Job or Psalm 88) yet not abandon faith in the Lord. Christianity is not a grin and bear it life. Rather, we are called to boldly come before God's throne and make our needs known, even if those needs are made known through tears.*

2. Finally, we return to the place where we began. What shows us as believers is how we receive the Gospel. Again, the Thessalonians not only received the Gospel in word, but they also turned away from idols and went to serve the living God. It is this stark transformation from idolatry and sin to faithful following of Christ that is reported to Paul, and this ought to lead us to think about how our own stories impact those around us. **Thinking back on your own testimony, how do you think that your story can contribute to the ministry of the Gospel?**

*More of an individual question. But broadly speaking, encourage those who might feel like they don't have a "story" to tell. Point out how the greatest testimonies in Scripture were not radical overnight changes but stories of the Lord long-suffering with the people*

*he loved so much. You'd be hard pressed to find a biblical figure who had the typical "story" that is so valued today of overnight change! Most people who the Lord plucks up to serve him are unextraordinary and have lived quiet lives, until the Lord calls them to service. That's the story of every Christian, everywhere.*

### **Closing/application**

This introduction to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians gives us a detailed picture of the radical transformation of the Christians that Paul was writing to. Their faith through suffering created a Gospel witness that, according to Paul, basically made further word ministry unnecessary! This ought to wake us up to the impact that our testimony as Christians can have. We should be encouraged in two ways.

1. Our suffering is not worthless. Our endurance in faithfulness through difficult periods of life serve the purpose of showing the importance of the Gospel. It shines as a light to others when we can stand firm in Christ when life is trying to blow us over.
2. Our impact is not limited by our capabilities. We can often become discouraged when we feel like we can't quite communicate the Gospel in the most effective way. The reality is that the lives we live, especially in the most difficult periods, are often the greatest evangelistic tool we have! We can be freed to stop thinking about how our *presentation* will impact the world, and instead think more about how we as individuals can more closely follow God.