

“A Letter of Encouragement”

September 17, 2017

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

I. Introduction

The last time I was here, we finished our study of one of last letters Paul wrote before his death—the Letter to the Colossians; today we are beginning a study of one of his first letters—1 Thessalonians. (Galatians may have been written first.) Contrary to popular belief, 1 Thessalonians and its companion 2 Thessalonians aren’t just about the end times or eschatology, they were written to people who were experiencing real problems in a world that was not friendly to their Christian faith—it is a letter of encouragement. As we work our way through both of these letters in the coming weeks, there will be many places where we can identify with these people who lived almost 2000 years ago—we live in a similar world and face many of the same problems.

II. Background

But before we look at the book itself, it might be beneficial to look at some background. The town of Thessalonica is one of the few New Testament towns that has been in continual existence since Paul’s day—really since its founding in 315 BC. Today it is called Salonika or Thessaloniki. It is an important industrial and commercial city in modern Greece. It is the capital of Greek Macedonia and with a population of 325,000 it is second in size to Athens. It is a thriving seaport on the northwestern shore of the Aegean Sea.

In Paul’s day around 200,000 people lived there—most of them were Greeks, but there were also many Romans and a strong Jewish minority. Thessalonica’s greatest asset was its location on the major highway of the Roman Empire called the Egnatian Way. It ran from Istanbul in Turkey to Albania and then on to Rome itself via the Appian Way. Thessalonica was an important location since it would enable the Gospel to spread to the west all the way to Asia Minor (or Turkey) and all the way

east to Rome itself. As one commentator put it, *“The coming of Christianity to Thessalonica was crucial in the making of it into a world religion.”*

Acts records how Paul came to Thessalonica and how the church was founded—turn to [Acts 17:1-10](#). Paul first came to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. [Acts 16:9](#) records that when he was in Troas, an island in the Aegean Sea, **“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”** Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy arrived first in Philippi where they led Lydia and her house to Christ and then established a church in her home. Like it did in so many places, Paul’s preaching caused a riot; he and Silas were seized, beaten, and placed in stocks in the city jail. But God delivered them by means of an earthquake and they were able to lead the Philippian jailer and his household to faith in Christ.

Horrified that they had beaten Roman citizens without benefit of a trial, the Philippian magistrates begged Paul and Silas to leave town quietly. So after encouraging the new believers there, Paul and his friends left Philippi, and made the 100-mile journey along the Egnatian Way to Thessalonica. Since Paul’s method was to minister in large cities and then have the believers reach out to the smaller towns nearby, they bypassed Amphipolis and Apollonia which were on the way.

As was his practice, Paul began his ministry in Thessalonica by preaching the gospel in the synagogue there. Here Paul spent 3 Sabbaths reasoning **“with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead”** ([Acts 17:2-3](#)). Because of his preaching some Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks and some of the upper-class Greek women believed the gospel.

Paul and his friends ministered in the synagogue for three Sabbaths before some unbelieving Jews began to oppose their work. Eventually they gathered a gang of thugs from the marketplace and assaulted Jason’s house looking for the Christian preachers. When they couldn’t find them, the frustrated Jews seized Jason and some of the other Christians and took them before the city officials.

Since Jason and the other believers would forfeit a bond they had to post, Paul and his helpers left the city and went forty miles to Berea and ministered there. However, Jews from Thessalonica soon arrived and stirred up trouble and Paul was forced to leave again. This time Silas and Timothy stayed behind in Berea while Paul went on to Athens. Eventually Silas and Timothy caught up with Paul.

Even though Paul hadn't spent a lot of time in Thessalonica, it was *long* enough, and I suspect *intense* enough, to leave behind a thriving church. Paul wanted to return to Thessalonica but was unable—turn to [1 Thessalonians 2:17-18](#). So when Silas and Timothy caught up with Paul in Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage the Christians and to assure them of his love and concern for them—turn to [1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, 5](#).

III. The Occasion of 1 Thessalonians

It was when Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. He wrote 2 Thessalonians just a short time later. Timothy brought an encouraging report about the situation in Thessalonica—turn to [1 Thessalonians 3:6-9](#). But there were some issues at Thessalonica that concerned Paul—this was the occasion for 1 Thessalonians. Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians around A.D. 51. It is a letter from a spiritual father to his children. Paul pictured the church as a family (the word “*brother*” or “*brothers*” is used 17 times in 1 Thessalonians). First, he wanted to assure the Christians of his love and concern for them. He had left the city hastily at night and he didn't want them to think he had deserted them. Second, enemies of the Gospel were spreading lies and slander about Paul and his helpers. They claimed that the Christian preachers were only in it to make money and to build their reputations. They insinuated that after stirring up trouble, the missionaries fled the scene, leaving their converts to face the music alone. So Paul needed to defend their integrity.

He had a third purpose in mind: he wanted to reinforce their understanding of the doctrines of the Christian faith. The Thessalonian church continued to go through persecution and that is always a

time of temptation to compromise and to give in to discouragement. By reminding them of the truths of the Christian faith and what God had done for them in Christ, Paul encouraged them to stand firm and maintain their strong witness. Fourth, he instructed the Thessalonian congregation about the basics of Christian living, including respecting and honoring their spiritual leaders and congregational behavior. Paul was also concerned about their reputation with those outside the church, so he encouraged them to live holy lives. The temptations to immorality were strong and sexual sin was not condemned by the culture of the day, so Paul emphasized the purity of the Christian life—these are some of the same problems we are experiencing today.

Finally, the new Christians were confused about the return of Jesus Christ. Paul had told them that the Lord would return in the air and take them home, but some of their number had died and there was concern about them. Paul had to clear up that and other misunderstandings about the end times.

IV. Paul's Salutation

A. The Senders With that behind us, let's look briefly at Paul's salutation: **"Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers."** First, we see the senders. Unlike all the rest of his letters, in his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul doesn't refer to himself as an apostle, a servant or a prisoner; he simply and humbly refers to himself as Paul. And in the same attitude of humility, Paul places his coworkers, Silas and Timothy, on an equal level with him. Both of these men were important to Paul and to God's work.

Silas was a prominent member of the Jerusalem church who first accompanied Paul on his 2nd missionary journey (**Acts 15:40**) and later was a scribe for Peter (**1 Peter 5:12**). Timothy was a native of Lystra (**Acts 16:1-3**) a city in Turkey. He was Paul's child in the faith (**1 Corinthians 4:17**) and Paul's protégé. He worked with Paul on the 2nd and 3rd missionary journeys and was with Paul in his first imprisonment in Rome. Later, Timothy served the church at Ephesus (**1 Timothy 1:3**) and was

himself imprisoned ([Hebrews 13:23](#)). At the end of Paul's life, when Timothy was in Ephesus, Paul wrote two inspired letters to him.

B. The Recipients Paul identifies the recipients as the church of the Thessalonians. The word *church* (or ἐκκλησία in Greek) means “a called-out people.” The church is a gathering of people who have been called, the elect, to come together to meet with God. God calls and the invitation is to all who will come. [John 6:37](#) says, “All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” As we read earlier in [1 Thessalonians 1:4-5](#), Paul was certain that the Thessalonians were among God's elect because he had seen the evidence of their transformation.

When Paul wrote “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” he was emphasizing the union of the Thessalonians with God and Christ. [1 Corinthians 12:13](#) says, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body-- whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” At the same time, Paul was emphasizing the equality of the Father and the Son. Paul used the Savior's full title: “the Lord Jesus Christ.” In 3 words we have all the major aspects of who Jesus is. **Lord** describes Him as creator and sovereign ruler, the One who made us, bought us, rules over us, and to whom we owe full or complete allegiance. **Jesus**, i.e. “*Jehovah saves*,” refers to His humanity, it was the name given Him at His birth. We worship and follow a real person who was born, who lived, died, and rose from the dead. **Christ** isn't His second name—it is a title from the Old Testament. He is the Messiah, the promised “*anointed one*” to be sent by God for the redemption of those who would believe. If we were going to be precise in our language, we would call him Jesus *the* Christ.

Paul continued the salutation with his common greeting “Grace and peace to you.” *Grace* is God's undeserved favor to the sinner in the form of complete forgiveness of sin and the granting of eternal life. *Peace* is the result of that amazing gift of love; a peace with God and the peace of God. Because of his sincere wish that they constantly know God's grace and peace, Paul and his helpers

“always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.” Paul, Silas, and Timothy thanked God continually for all of them because of their response to God’s call.

V. Conclusion

Like the Thessalonians we will experience persecution—most may not be physical but there is emotional persecution even now. It comes in the form to compromise with the world; temptation to give up and quit in the face of all the pressure to conform, to be like the rest of the world—to fit in. In [2 Timothy 3:12](#) we are reminded that “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” What Paul is going to tell the Thessalonians will be appropriate for us, too. Like them, we must not give up hope—in the present or in the future, Jesus is coming back—in [Acts 1:11](#), as Jesus was ascending up to heaven, angels appeared and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

In Paul’s salutation there is something that already applies to us: the church does not exist and certainly has no life, apart from God and His saving work in Christ. This means that the church is not just another social organization. It is nothing less than the people of God, called together by Him for His worship and glory and commissioned to spread the gospel, i.e. the good news about Jesus Christ. It is God who calls humans to follow, to worship, and to serve Him, rather than vice versa. [God does not exist for the sake of the church; rather the church exists for the praise and glory of God.](#) From the beginning, Paul is emphasizing the God-centeredness of the church. Contrary to the feelings in many churches today, the worship service isn’t about us and what it does for us but rather it is an opportunity for us to glorify, to praise, and to worship God. The ministries of the church are not a means of

meeting our needs of being “*good people*” and helping others, but rather an opportunity to serve others as disciples and servants of God; they are ways and opportunities to share His love and His Gospel. The social gospel, i.e. social outreaches, is okay, but sharing the Word of Life with others is the Christian’s prime directive; in Jesus’ last words, He said, “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew. 28:19). We need to be careful that what we do—whether in church or out of church—is for God’s glory and not our own.