

Introduction

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[0:00] You wake up, it's Sunday, it's sunny, it's breezy, like most days. You're on the Mediterranean after all, and you slip into your clothes and you slide into your sandals.

The year is about 50 A.D., and you are in Thessalonica. You're up early this morning because you have a long ways to go. You're going to church, and Thessalonica is a big city.

It's about the size of South Bend. And you don't have a car, so that means you're going to be walking where you want to go. So you take a deep breath, you head out the door, and you wind through some narrow alleyways until you reach the main road, the Ignatian Way.

That's a nice, big road, a very important road. The Romans built it when they conquered Greece about 200 years ago. And if you headed west on this road, and you stayed on it, you would walk over the top of Greece, and you'd walk over mountains and through valleys, and then you would reach the sea.

And you'd get on a boat, and you would take a two-day journey to Italy, and then you would get on another road. And then from there, you could walk to Rome. And all roads lead to Rome in that time.

[1:18] Well, if you stay on this road and you head east, you're going to go through the town of Philippi. And at the very end of this road is a little city called Byzantium, which later became Constantinople, and we call it Istanbul.

It's one of the most important cities in history. You're not going to either of those places. You're going to church. So, as you're walking, what do you see?

You see lots and lots of people. And you see oxen pulling carts. And you see men pushing carts. You see mostly Greeks, but you see several Jews.

And everyone is hustling and bustling. It's a normal business day, so people are buying and selling and yelling and laughing. Lots of noise, arguing about prices.

It's a normal business day this Sunday. And it will be a normal business day in Thessalonica for another 300 years. You see Roman soldiers, lots of Roman soldiers, marching this way and that.

[2:26] There's rumors of trouble far off in the east in Persia. And the best way to get troops from west to east is this road that you're on. You see lots and lots of sailors.

And you hear the calls of the gulls. And you smell the salt in the air and the sea and the wind.

Thessalonica has one of the best natural harbors in all of Greece.

And from that harbor, you can reach all of Europe and all of Asia. And so in its harbor sits ships from as far away as Spain and Rome and Egypt and Caesarea.

And as you're walking, you hear the language, every known language to man and people in every sort of costume. So what else do you see?

It's a clear day. And you can see if you look off to the west, over the bay, in the distance, a mountain, Mount Olympus.

[3:27] Now that's important. That's important. Or it used to be for you. Because when you were in school, when you were a little boy or a little girl, they told you that's where the gods lived.

That is where Zeus had his throne. And that's where the gods came together and they moved the gears of human life. And you used to believe that.

That used to be who you were, what you thought. But you don't believe it anymore. Not since you met that Jew, Paul of Tarsus, and you heard the good news of Jesus Christ.

But everywhere around you, there's idols and shrines and people burning incense and statues and temples. There's shrine prostitutes and men just paying token sums to the gods so they can have good luck on their next business trip.

Everywhere, there are idols. Your dad worships an idol. Your mom prays to an idol. Not you. Not anymore. You've turned away from idols and all those worthless things.

[4 : 33] And you're serving the living God. They are all buried in your past. So you're still walking. You see a large, elaborate, marble building with huge, impressive columns.

What is that? Well, that's City Hall. That's where the polyarchs, that's what they're called. The rulers do their work. Thessalonica is a free city.

And that means Rome stays out of your affairs. And you like it that way. The people of the city, well, at least the wealthy men of the city, choose the leaders.

Rome leaves you alone. And business goes on as usual. So as you get closer to your destination, you get more and more excited.

Because today is no ordinary Sunday. You've heard through the rumor mill that a letter from Paul has come. And you're anxious to hear what it is.

[5 : 38] So you turn into a large house and there's already lots of people there. There's several Jews. There's lots of Gentiles who used to worship at the synagogue.

And they used to follow Judaism. But they've left that for Christianity. There's lots of the most important women from the wealthiest families at this home today.

So it's an eclectic bunch of people. All sorts of people that, like we heard just before the service, that had no business being together. But here they were. Jews and Greeks.

Free and slaves. Scythians and socialites. And the only thing they had in common was Jesus Christ. He had saved them. So everyone sits down.

And a letter is read. And the letter you hear that day is what we call 1 Thessalonians. So if you would turn there in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians.

[6 : 39] We're beginning a series that will last the next couple of months on this book, Lord willing. Today we're only going to look at the first verse. And hopefully after today we'll go at a much faster pace.

So 1 Thessalonians. We'll just read the first verse. Paul, Silas, and Timothy. To the church of the Thessalonians.

In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to you. Who wrote this letter? Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

But mostly Paul, we would say. 1 Thessalonians is a remarkable letter in the New Testament. Because of how many times the word we is used. We.

We always thank God for you. We know that he has chosen you. You know that we dealt with you as a father deals with his own children. We, we, we. There's lots of we's.

[7 : 43] But before you get the idea that this is sort of an equal opportunity letter. Every now and then Paul's voice breaks through.

And you know that Paul is the one standing behind it. And he says. When I could stand it no longer. I sent to find out about your faith. I did this. I did that.

Paul is speaking on behalf of Silas and Timothy. There is fellow workers. But mostly this letter carries Paul's love and desires for the church there.

But it also carries with it the idea that Silas and Timothy are behind this letter. And they love you too. After all, Silas and Timothy were Paul's partners in planning the church in Thessalonica.

And if you remember, Paul had chosen Silas to go with them after Barnabas. And he had this falling out. And along this missionary trip, they picked up Timothy and they went on their way.

[8 : 48] Soon after picking up Timothy, Paul had a vision. Do you remember the vision? There was a man from Macedonia. And he said, come over here and help us. And so Paul, in obedience to that vision, goes into Europe.

And the gospel comes to Europe. The first major town was Philippi. Do you remember what happened in Philippi? Paul and Silas were preaching.

People didn't like it. Paul and Silas were beaten and flogged and thrown into prison. And that night, an earthquake shook that prison.

The doors swung open and the jailer fell at his feet, at Paul's feet and said, sir, what must I do to be saved?

And he was saved that night and his whole entire family were saved that night. The next day, the officials escorted them out of prison and escorted them out of the city.

[9:45] And so they came beaten and bruised down the road through two smaller cities into Thessalonica, where they found a synagogue.

They preached for three consecutive Sundays, or Sabbath, excuse me. They stayed for a couple more months preaching to the Gentiles. And God worked. It was wonderful.

Many, many Gentiles were saved. Many were converted out of Judaism, and many were converted out of idolatry. But soon, the Jews became jealous again.

Do you remember? The Jews became jealous. They found some vagabonds, some bad characters, who were hanging out downtown Thessalonica, looking for trouble.

They rounded them up, and together they stirred up a riot. So Paul and Silas were arrested. And the man named Jason, and a man named Jason, who they were staying with, was forced to post bond.

[10:49] And they were let go. Just proving that Jasons often get the short end of the stick. They, not me though.

I'm better than I are. God's much more gracious than I deserve, that's for sure. So, from there, they left the city. They go down to Athens.

They stay in Athens for a while. They go to Corinth. And it's from Corinth that Paul writes this letter to the church of the Thessalonians. Now, if you were Paul, if you're Paul, what would you write?

What would you write to these baby Christians, newborn Christians, who, it just seems like they just met you. What would you write?

Well, thank goodness God didn't leave it up to you or me to write this letter. We'd probably make a royal mess of it. Instead, he inspired his servant, the Apostle Paul, to write one of the most elementary, one of the most affectionate and loving, maternal and fraternal letters in all of the New Testament.

[12:00] Well, what does Paul say to them? In this whole letter, he has several themes that he just goes over and over again.

And that's what we're going to be talking about just the rest of today. We're going to cover some of these themes and how they touch us in our church, in our lives. What does Paul tell them?

He tells them how much he loves them. How much he loves them. Over and over again, Paul is pouring. Pouring out his love and his affection for this church.

And he tells them, you're my joy and my glory. And I'm thankful for you. I'm thankful for you. You're like our children and we love you. No matter what anyone is saying there, don't think that now that it's getting rough, that we just skip town and we don't care about you.

We miss you. We love you. We want to be there. We want to stay longer. And we want to come back. But to see you standing now, that's our life.

[13:06] That's life to us. We love to see that. You fill us with joy. And on the last day, you are going to be our glory. And he does exactly what every good and wise dad does.

Stuart Elliott said once that God's children need spanks and scolding sometimes. But more often than not, they need hugs and kisses and treats.

And Paul pours it on. He gives them lots of hugs in this letter and lots of kisses and lots of treats.

Paul's a wise pastor. He knows that these young Christians don't need any of the sarcastic arguments that Paul can give, that Paul does give to the churches in Galatia and Corinth.

They needed expressive, generous love. Baby Christians, they need help and told how much they're loved.

And they need talked to and special care and special attention. And that's how we treat our own small children, isn't it? We aren't harsh with them when they mess up, when they're confused.

[14:20] We lavish them with affection and praise. And when they're learning to walk, what do you say? You say, you're doing it. Oh, Daddy, so proud of you. I love you.

Good job. And Paul is like that. He's a wise dad. He's a wise father. And that's how he's treating these young Christians, just learning to walk.

Well, what else does he tell them? He tells them about salvation. About salvation. In different ways and in different words, interwoven through this entire book, he reminds them of this wonderful thing that has happened in their lives.

They were idolaters and they were not right with God. Things were not right and good in their lives. But they had been born again. Things were completely different now.

They had turned from idols to the living God. And they had trusted Jesus Christ. And their sins had been washed away. And the Holy Spirit had put a new principle of life in them.

[15 : 26] Things were different now with these Thessalonians. They were working. They were serving. They were suffering. Because they were living by faith now. They weren't living by sight.

They were living by faith. And he reminds them over and over again that God has saved you. Well, the grace of God in saving us and converting us should be a never-ending stream of wonder and praise in our life.

Paul never got over the fact that he, the worst of sinners, were saved. And he didn't want the Thessalonians to get over it either where it became commonplace.

And we can't either. God has saved us. We weren't right with God. Things weren't going well with us and God.

Our lives were messed up. And God saved us. So it's good for you older Christians. You have been in the faith for years and years.

[16 : 28] Go back and think. Remember what it was like in those early days when God rescued you. Brothers and sisters, we never get over the need of the gospel.

We never get over our need to remember the gospel and remember what Jesus has done for us. Well, what else did Paul tell them in this letter? He reminds them of his example.

Of his example. Again and again in this letter, Paul points them back to those few weeks, those few months. We're not sure how long he was there in Thessalonica.

And he says, remember what I was like when I was with you. Remember how we behaved.

Remember our attitude towards things. We were like a mom to you.

We were like a mother. We were like a father to you. Remember that. Remember how we presented the gospel to you. And how we worked. And how we behaved. Well, why would he keep pointing them back to how he acted?

[17 : 35] Because that's what you do when you're teaching little children, isn't it? If you're teaching a three-year-old to make her bed, do you just go and say, hey, honey, go make your bed.

Now, she has in her mind an idea. And it's a right idea. That making my bed means I make it nice and pretty and it's all smooth and it's all nice and clean. She has the basic idea.

That idea could be miles away from what her ability is. She knows what making the bed is, but she doesn't have any idea of how to do it.

So what do you do? Well, you go into her bedroom with her and you hold her hand and you say, okay, now stand here and watch what I'm going to do. I take off all the animals and I take off all the books and I take off the pillow and now I put the sheet up.

And the whole time you're showing her what you do. Well, little children need an example of how to live life.

[18 : 38] And baby Christians, young Christians, they need an example of just how to do the Christian life. And Paul was their example.

They needed to think about what Paul did and what he said and how he acted. How did he act towards money? How did Paul act and speak towards older people and younger people?

What was his attitude about work? What was his attitude about outsiders and people in the church? How did he run a church service? How did he do things like that?

They needed to think again and again of what Paul and Timothy and Silas had given to them. And we need examples to this day, don't we?

We need our examples. I know I need to see how the Christian life is lived out in older saints. And they needed to see it.

[19 : 34] So older men, older women, are your lives exemplary? Can younger Christians look at you and say, that is how the Christian life is supposed to be lived?

That's how I should be living. And this is one of the beauties of the Christian church. If you look around here, what do we have? We have 12-year-olds, 13-year-olds that are just starting out in their life of faith, and we have 70- and 80-year-olds who are finishing the race.

Those 12- and 13-year-olds need those 60- and 70- and 80-year-olds to set them an example. And that's what we have in the church. Where else can a teenage boy see what it looks like to be a man after God's own heart, except in the church when he sees a 40- or a 50-year-old man setting him an example.

Well, God has designed the church to work that way, to help the young. So older brothers and sisters, older in the faith, be an example for the younger believers. And younger believers, you need an example. Don't think that you have it figured out, that you're so smart, that you have it all down. The Thessalonians need an example.

[20:55] And all younger Christians need an example. Well, what else does Paul tell them in his letter? He tells them how to behave. You do that with your children, right?

You tell them what to do, and how to do it, and why to do it. The Thessalonians needed to go through sexual morality 101 again. They needed to go through Christian work 101 again. And church relationships 101 again, bottom elementary level, they needed it. And this letter, the letter of 1 Thessalonians, touches on all those things briefly.

The culture was pulling them towards idolatry and sexual immorality, and they needed instruction. So some of the Thessalonians had the wrong idea about work and about all these things.

They thought that Jesus was coming back tomorrow, and maybe at the latest, the day after that. And so they were not working. Why do you need to work if Jesus is coming back tomorrow?

[21:57] Well, Paul sets them straight. You need to work. You need to glorify God in that area and win the respect of the outsiders, because we don't know when Jesus is coming back.

We don't know. They needed to know how to do church relationships. Can you imagine a church that's three months, four months, five months old? They're going to need help on just how to live with each other.

And so he gives instructions to the pastors. This is how you treat the flock. And he gave instructions to the people and said, this is how you're supposed to act towards the pastors.

Well, what else does Paul tell them? He straightens them out on some doctrinal issues. So we just said, they thought Jesus was coming back tomorrow, very soon.

And that was causing some problems. We're going to talk about all these things in more detail later. But what about the people that just died? Does that mean they're missing out on Jesus coming back?

[23:01] And what's going to happen to them? What does that mean? And they were getting discouraged. What about if I die? What does that mean for me?

What does that mean for my life and for my future? Paul says, no, no, no, brothers. Jesus died and he rose again.

And that means when you die, you're going to rise again. Those who die aren't going to miss anything. And so they needed to hear that. You need to cheer up.

You need to encourage each other. We don't know when Jesus is coming back. But you don't need to worry about it like that. You are of the light. And you need to live as the light.

So encourage each other. Stay alert. And brothers and sisters, we still need that. I mean, we probably understand that elementary idea that if you die, you just don't miss out completely.

[24:00] But the days are going long, aren't they? Jesus hasn't come back yet. And we need to be reminded of how we are to live in these last days.

If they needed to be taught that, then surely we do too. And so as the days and the years pass and Jesus still is not coming back, some of us can grow discouraged.

Say, will he ever come back? And that discouragement can easily turn into disbelief. He's never coming back. Well, 1 Thessalonians encourages us, wait patiently.

You are of the light. You're children of the light. Live as children of the light. He's going to come as a thief in the night. And so be alert. Be ready. He's going to come when you least expect it.

Well, 1 Thessalonians is the word of God to Grace Fellowship Church, as much as it was to the church in Thessalonica. And we need to receive it as it really is.

[25:08] Not a word of men, but as it actually is the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. So we who are believers here need to hear this word and receive it and obey it as obedient children because of what it is.

1 Thessalonians says, you didn't receive our message as a word of men, but as it really is the word of God. Well, 1 Thessalonians is a word to unbelievers, too.

It tells of a people who, despite of their background, despite of the persecution that faced them, they heard the gospel and they turned to Jesus Christ. And so if you don't know Jesus here, if you haven't loved him and trusted him, and if you don't have a relationship with him, if you haven't turned from your sin, you're still loving your idols.

They're not statues anymore, but you love them. They're holding on to them. You haven't cried out to be saved. Then hear me.

Hear me. Jesus Christ saved people 1,960 years ago, and he's been saving people since, and he's still waiting to receive sinners.

[26 : 23] He's waiting with open arms. If you lift up your voice as that jailer in Philippi, as these people did and say, what must I do to be saved?

Paul's answer was repent and believe. And Jesus is still lifting up his voice and saying, why will you perish? He said it to them, and he's still saying it to people today.

Why will you perish? Are you thirsty? Come and drink. Are you dirty? Come and be washed. Are you needy and scared? Are you condemned and guilty?

Then come to me and be saved. Jesus said that to these Thessalonians, and they heard, and they responded. Jesus saved them when they called.

And he saved moral Jews, and he saved immoral Gentiles, and he saved rich, powerful women, and he saved slaves that didn't have anything but the shirt on their back. He saved them when they called.

[27 : 26] And he will save you too. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, he will save you too. If you call on Jesus, you will be saved. And if you are calling, then keep calling.

Call and call until you know that you're safe in his arms. Well, brothers and sisters, what should we do? We're at the beginning of a series.

It's sort of hard in a sermon like this to come up with some pointed application, but what should you do? What should you do? What should you do this week? Read 1 Thessalonians.

I read it in 15 to 30 minutes, basically out loud to myself this week. That's all the time it takes. So one or two times this week in your devotions, just read it so you know what's going on.

And if you can understand it and obey it better, then that will glorify God. So read 1 Thessalonians. What should you do this week? Pray for me.

[28 : 31] Pray for me. 1 Thessalonians ends with Paul saying, just a simple request. He says, brothers, pray for us. Pray for us.

And so I'm asking you to pray for me. I've never preached an entire book of the New Testament before, and I need God's wisdom and grace to do that. And he gives that through prayer.

I need God's spirit. And if God's spirit doesn't come, this is all for nothing. So will you pray for me? Pray for all who teach and preach.

We're sinful men just like you, just like Paul, and we need your prayer. So pray for me. What should you do this week? You should pray for yourself.

Yourself. If the spirit doesn't come and work in your heart, then you will be standing still. Do you understand? Do you agree with me? If the spirit doesn't come and take the word and put it into your heart, you're not going anywhere.

[29 : 32] Instead of advancing in Christlikeness, you'll be going backwards. So pray for yourself. If you're not ready to hear God's word, if you're not prepared for it, you'll be the poorer for it.

So pray for a heart that's ready to receive God's word and is eager to please him in all that you do. So pray for yourself. Well, that's the end.

And we'll end where 1 Thessalonians ends, with a blessing. And Paul says at the end of all this, he says, May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for inspiring your servant Paul to write the book of 1 Thessalonians, for knowing what your church would need there, and what your church needs here, and what all the other churches who have ever heard and read and been changed by this book, what they needed.

[30 : 46] Thank you for thinking of your people, for remembering your flock, and giving us what we need. And I pray that your word would go into our hearts and encourage us to live exemplary lives, to live lives at work that are pleasing to you, that adorn the gospel of God our Savior.

Thank you in Jesus Christ that you have become our Savior. Savior. We were once under your wrath, but your wrath has been turned aside by his death.

And we have life in him because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, and surely we will be raised in the last day. Thank you that all these things are true.

Thank you for your Holy Spirit that applies these things to our hearts. I pray that we would be different, we would be changed, we would be more Christ-like, more perfectly conformed to him in every way.

Will you grow us and change us this week? We pray all these things in Jesus Christ's name and for his glory. Amen. Amen. Amen.