

Ministry of Grace Church

1 Thessalonians Chapter 1

Preface:

Before we get started, let's look at the map to see where the events that we will be talking about today took place.

Last week we looked at Acts chapter 17 where Paul and Silas left Philippi and headed west to the next large city, Thessalonica. They skipped over a couple of smaller towns, probably because they didn't have a synagogue in them. However, in the synagogue in Thessalonica, a number of Jews, many devout Greeks, and quite a few women believed the Gospel message and this caused jealousy among the Jews. As a result, these Jews stirred up the rabble of the town and chased them out after only three Sabbaths.

There is some minor disagreement as to how long Paul and the team spent in Thessalonica. Since Luke says Paul went into the synagogue and reasoned on three Sabbath days, some people assume that they were only in Thessalonica for three weeks. Others feel that Paul was probably there for a longer period of time, perhaps as long as six months. Those who hold the latter opinion base it on the implications of other passages that may hint at Paul's experiences in Thessalonica during this visit. For example, Paul apparently worked at his craft of tentmaking while in Thessalonica ([1Thessalonians 2:9](#); [2Thessalonians 3:8](#)). These references may imply a prolonged stay, but they do not require it. There are other indications that the stay exceeded three weeks as well, but there is no definitive proof.

According to the Bible Knowledge Commentary:

The length of Paul's stay is significant because of the doctrinal background of his readers which the Thessalonian Epistles reveal. Of course knowledge of what went on in the Thessalonian church after Paul left as well as while he was there is sketchy at best. But it seems that Paul fed these new believers a rich diet of doctrinal instruction in a fairly brief period of time. Also, Paul wrote as though he left Thessalonica before he really wanted to. Perhaps a stay of a few months in Thessalonica is fairly accurate.

Leaving Thessalonica, the missionary team headed to Berea. The Jews there were more noble than those in Thessalonica and after hearing Paul's preaching, they searched the Scriptures to validate what he had said. As a result, many of the Jews in Berea, both men and women, believed. However, when the Jews from Thessalonica heard that Paul was preaching in Berea, they came there and stirred up the town just as they had done in Thessalonica. So, to protect him, Silas and Timothy sent Paul by ship to Athens.

As was his custom, as soon as Paul got to town, he began reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue. He also reasoned in the marketplace with anyone who would have a conversation with him. While he was talking with people in the marketplace, he encountered men from two groups of philosophers, the Stoics and the Epicureans. After some discussion between Paul and the

philosophers, Paul was dragged off to the Areopagus where he was asked to speak to the entire group. As a result, he was jeered at and mocked by some of them, but a few of them believed his message and followed him.

After Athens, Paul went to Corinth where Silas and Timothy joined him. They remained a year and a half having, again, a very successful ministry. It is commonly believed that it was while in Corinth that Paul heard news of problems in the church in Thessalonica. In order to understand the issues and to provide additional teaching for them, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. It appears that it was a result of Timothy returning to Paul, bringing good news about the church, that Paul wrote this letter.

Greeting

1 Thessalonians 1:1

¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

Notes:

Paul opens this letter in the way that was typical of that time. He identified the sender(s), the intended receiver(s), and expressed a greeting. We know who Paul and Timothy are, because we just learned about them these past two weeks. But – who is this Silvanus fellow? Actually, Silvanus is simply the Roman equivalent of Silas. So, once again, we see the missionary team of Paul, Silas, and Timothy. As we have discussed previously, it appears that Paul had a vision problem, so it is very likely that Silas (Silvanus) was Paul’s secretary, writing this letter as Paul dictated it.

Paul wrote this letter while he was in Corinth, where he ministered after leaving Athens. The letter has all the familiar earmarks of a Pauline letter including the opening greeting, “**Grace to you and peace.**” Paul included this expression, or a slight alteration of it, in every letter that he wrote. It was common in the first century to open a letter with a greeting, but the most common was *chairein* (a form of *chairō*, meaning “be full of cheer”). Instead, Paul always used a different form of *chairō*, which is “*charis*,” meaning “grace to you.” As we have learned recently, grace refers to an,

unearned and undeserved favor done without expectation of anything in return.

It is the grace of God that gives us our salvation which is unearned and undeserved. This concept seems to have been in the forefront of Paul’s mind for his entire life, after meeting our Lord on the road to Damascus.

The Thessalonians' Faith and Example

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because 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. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received

the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For 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. ⁹For 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, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Notes:

The work of evangelism is difficult and with little reward, at least in this life. And, although Paul received support from some churches (see **Philippians 4:16**), he also worked as a tentmaker (**Acts 18:1-4**) to pay for his own expenses. As we have already seen, Paul faced opposition from the very people he was witnessing to. The Jews who did not receive his message of salvation by grace through faith, ended up persecuting him, sending him to prison, beating him, and even stoning him. So, when a church responded to the Gospel message like the church in Thessalonica did, it brought joy to Paul's heart. Not "puffed-up" joy because of anything he had done, but heavenly joy because of what the Lord had done.

For that reason, he was constantly giving thanks to the Lord for the work God had done through Paul's ministry. Here, he states that he gave thanks for three things regarding the Thessalonians:

- Their work of faith
- Their labor of love
- Their steadfastness of hope

Although it looks like Paul is talking about their work, their work, and their hope, he is making a profound doctrinal statement here. First of all, the words translated "work" and "labor" have two entirely different meanings. The work of faith that he is referring to is what James speaks about in his letter. This is not "works that produce salvation," but "works that are produced by salvation." James tells us that the good works of a Christian are the indication of the "branding" if you will, of genuine faith. Paul tells the Thessalonians that their works of love give him great joy. This word translated "work" refers to "any act or deed, whether for employment or not." The word translated "labor" however, refers to "strenuous toil or wearisome, sweat producing effort." Paul is impressed with the effort that the Thessalonians put into loving others. It is not a passive "feeling of love," but thoughtful, heartfelt, laborious action that demonstrates an attitude of "love your neighbors as you love yourselves."

Let us not pass over this too quickly without noticing Paul's teaching of the greatest of virtues. He told the Corinthians,

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.
(1 Corinthians 13:13)

And he commended the Christians in Thessalonica for their work of *faith*, their steadfast *hope*, and their labor of *love*.

Election?

Paul now mentions once again the often-maligned doctrine of God's sovereign election (sometimes called predestination), when he says, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he

has chosen you.” But, because we are self-centered beings, which is brought on by our sin nature, we like to take credit for our own salvation. After all, we were a lot smarter than those worldly fools who think that Christianity is self-deceiving. We recognized the obvious truth in the salvation message and we had the wherewithal to submit to the prompting of the all-powerful and irresistible Holy Spirit of God. Therefore, we have all the reason in the world to take credit for our salvation. We earned it, didn’t we? We earned it by believing the Gospel message and by accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Right?

If that’s what you believe, then let me ask you one simple question. Where would you be 100 years from now if God had not chosen you before he ever made a single atom of His creation? Here’s how he said it to the Ephesian Christians,

even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love (Ephesians 1:4)

Yes, I know what Paul teaches us in Romans,

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:13)

So, which is it, the sovereignty of God or the responsibility of man? I believe that they are both true. I don’t understand how they can both be true, but I believe them both because both are taught in the Bible. I can’t explain it any more than I can explain how three separate persons can be one God.

Also, remember what we have said about grace? It is God giving us something we really don’t deserve. That’s why he also said this to the Christians in Ephesus,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Now, we have to ask ourselves, what made Paul so sure that the Christians in Thessalonica were God’s chosen? The answer is, because their lives showed the evidence of what had happened inside. Not only did they receive the word with joy, but the way they lived their lives was exemplary. They became living examples of the love of God. And – not only were they living examples to the rest of the people in Thessalonica, their reputation spread throughout Macedonia and Achaia.

But it didn’t stop there, even. Paul says that wherever he and his companions went, people talked about the Thessalonian Christians. They had a reputation for receiving Paul and the gospel of grace. Not only that, they had a reputation as people who had turned away from worshipping idols to not just believe, but to also serve the living and true God.

But wait – there’s more. Back in verse three, we talked about their “work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ.” What was it that they were hoping for? Were they hoping that they were really saved? Were they like our dear friend back in Illinois who during the last few months of her life here on earth kept saying, “I hope I’ve done enough to be saved!”? The tragic answer to that question is, “No, you haven’t!” You see, none of us have done enough to be saved. But – Jesus has!

So, you see, that’s not the hope that Paul was talking about. But before we get to the punch line, let’s look briefly at the word translated “*hope*.” It is the Greek word *elpis*. It means, “to desire

some good thing to happen.” Well, that’s what the English word means. The Greek word *elpis* has essentially the same meaning with one exception. It also carries with it the idea of fully expecting that that good thing will, in fact, come to pass.

These Thessalonian Christians were:

Wait(ing) for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The hope that these Christians had, the thing they were waiting for was the coming of Jesus from heaven. But don’t get confused here, because they were not waiting for “the second coming of Jesus.” That event is what will happen at the end of the Tribulation when Jesus will descend from heaven and come to the earth to destroy the armies who had come to wipe out the Jews. Then Jesus will set-up His Millennial Kingdom where He will reign for a thousand years. Here’s how the Apostle John described the second coming in the book of Revelation:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. (Revelation 19:11-15)

The prophet Zechariah also described this same event:

Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward. And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there shall be no light, cold, or frost. And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter. And the LORD will be king over all the earth. On that day the LORD will be one and his name one. (Zechariah 14:3-9)

Oh, how I look forward to that day, when God will strike down His enemies. But, again, this is not the event the Thessalonians were waiting for. What they were waiting for was something that I long for even more than His second coming! They were waiting for the day when Jesus will come from heaven, but He will NOT set His feet on the earth. He will only come into the atmosphere of the earth. Here’s a description of this event:

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel,

and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18)

The “coming” of Jesus that the Thessalonian Christians were waiting for is what we refer to as the Rapture of the church. So – how do I know that Paul is talking about the Rapture here and not the second coming of Jesus? Verse 10 tells us:

and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Wait, that doesn't say anything about this being the Rapture or the second coming, does it? Well, yes, it actually does. Notice how Paul described Jesus, “... who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

The word translated “delivers” actually means, “to snatch away out of danger.” When is the wrath of God poured out on mankind? During the Tribulation. The Tribulation can't happen until the church is raptured out of the way. The Tribulation, the 70th week of Daniel, is God dealing with Jews. We will be taken out of the way (snatched away out of danger) before that happens. Although there are some who claim that the church will be present during the Tribulation and will be preserved and protected, the word translated “from” actually means “out of.” Christians will not just be protected and preserved during the Tribulation; we will be taken “out of” this world before it happens.

Now What?

We'll talk a lot more about the Rapture when we get to the fourth chapter of this letter to the church in Thessalonica. The thing that's important to understand now is that it could happen soon. But, Pastor, you said it “could” happen soon, not it “will” happen soon. Yes, the exact time of the Rapture is hidden. The Apostle Paul thought it could have been any day while he was alive. That was almost 2000 years ago. So, why do I say that it could be any day now?

As you all know, I have done extensive research on the End Times as part of my book on Revelation. And, as I said before, the Tribulation can't happen until Christians are taken out of the way. One of the events that I believe has to happen before the Tribulation is the military campaign described in Ezekiel chapters 38 and 39. Some people refer to this as the War of Gog and Magog. I used to refer to this as the Ezekiel war, but it won't be a war any more than the battle of Armageddon will be a war. They will both be single battles. Very short battles, with God taking out His vengeance on His enemies.

The battle that Ezekiel describes will be one in which a number of nations (6 are mentioned specifically) will attack Israel under the leadership of a man referred to as Gog. The seven nations mentioned are all Muslim nations today and their one goal in life is to wipe Israel off the map. Historically, these 6 nations have never been aligned before. But that has changed in the past 20 years. Today they are all aligned and united as the nation of Islam. Today, there are only a handful of nations who will consistently stand up for the rights of the Israelites, including the United States. When that support goes away, however, there will be no deterrent to prevent these 6 nations from attacking. I believe that the Rapture will effectively eliminate Israel's support from other nations.

The Ezekiel war is primed and ready to take place, as soon as that deterrent is removed. Since everything is in place for the Ezekiel war, I believe that the Rapture is imminent.

So What?

Well, so what? As I just said, we will be taken out of the way before the Ezekiel war. What's the point? Here's the point – If you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Rapture was going to occur before the end of this calendar year, would it change the way you live? Keep in mind that immediately after the Rapture, we Christians will appear before the Bema Seat, also known as the Judgment Seat of Christ. This is not a judgment to determine whether or not we'll get to go to heaven. If you and I are part of the Rapture, then we already have the righteousness of Christ. God already sees us as sinless and NOT GUILTY, remember? We already have our free pass into heaven!

So, what's the point of the Bema Seat Judgment? This is a judgment of our works. What? Wait! Pastor, you have said over and over again that we are not saved by our works. We are saved by God's grace, right?

Yes, but I have also said that our works are the evidence of our salvation and good works are an outgrowth of our faith. Here's what Paul told the Corinthians about the Judgment Seat of Christ in his second letter to them,

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

And, in Paul's first letter to these Corinthians, Paul described what will go on at the Bema Seat Judgment,

For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:9-15)

Now What?

So, I have to ask you again, If you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Rapture was going to occur before the end of this calendar year, would it change the way you live? C.H. Spurgeon said:

“Oh! This is a high mark of grace, when the Christian expects his Lord to come, and lives like one that expects him every moment. If you and I knew to-night that the Lord would come before this service was over, in what state of heart should we sit in these pews? In that state of heart we ought to be.”

If you truly are a Christian, then you should be looking forward to the Rapture, when God will take us out of this world to deliver us from the wrath of God that will be poured out on those who dwell on the earth. However, if you are a Christian who has been living for yourself instead of living for your Lord and Master, then you might not want the Rapture to come soon. This life is temporary, but eternity is, well – forever! How you live your life now will have eternal consequences.

If you are not absolutely certain that Jesus is your Savior, *and your Lord*, don't wait another day. Today is the day to face eternity with hope instead of fear. If you are not certain about your salvation, please come and talk to me (or Conie) after the service. Don't put it off any longer!

If you truly believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then be forewarned, He is coming soon to take us home. Let's get ready for Him. Let's dedicate ourselves to living the remainder of this life as His servant, giving Him all the credit.

Let's pray.

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