

Thessalonians
Week 1: Long Distance Relationship

I. Today, we're starting a new sermon series on the Letters to the Thessalonians. These-alone-ians is not a letter to a city of introverts. Thessaloniki is a city in modern day Greece that has a long history! Currently it's the 2nd most populous city in Greece and it's been a prominent city since its inception in the 4th century B.C. Interestingly enough, the city was founded by Phillip II, King of Macedonia and named after his daughter, Thessaly. Thessaly was the half-sister of Alexander the Great who established Greece as the dominate superpower until the Romans.

A. Thessaloniki in the Apostle Paul's day was still the capital city of its region and an important commercial hub due to its harbor on the Aegean Sea (north Mediterranean). Most important for our discussion is that Thessaloniki in the 1st Century was a:

Free City

1. Thessaloniki, like most of the known world in the 1st Century, was firmly in the grasp of the Roman Empire but as a free city was granted a level of autonomy in exchange for their loyalty. Thessaloniki had chosen correctly to side with Octavian after the death of Julius Caesar. Octavian would become Caesar Augustus a prominent figure in the Bible. Thessaloniki had no Roman military presence, significantly reduced taxes, and the ability to preserve their Greek culture and political structure. This was made possible by their ongoing loyalty to Rome, and it could have been revoked in the snap of a finger!

2. Paul, Silas, and Timothy are on their 2nd Missionary Journey, and they arrive in Thessaloniki just before 50 A.D. Acts 17:1-9 gives us the account of what takes place. We have to take a look in order to have the appropriate context for the 1st and 2nd Thessalonians.

Acts 17:1-4 – 1 After they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As usual, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead: “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah.” 4 Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, including a large number of God-fearing Greeks, as well as a number of the leading women.

3. Paul and his team arrive in Thessaloniki and per their usual process go to the synagogue to proclaim the death AND RESURRECTION of Jesus confirming that Jesus is the promised Messiah. The synagogue was the hub of Jewish religion and life in cities where there was no temple. There was only one temple, in Jerusalem (and that would only last a few more decades [70 A.D.]), so the Jewish synagogue of the 1st Century was very important for migrant Jews. Paul saw himself as the apostle to the gentiles but as I've studied Paul extensively it's not quite right to see Paul as attempting to start a new "religion." Paul wasn't starting what we think of today as Christianity, Paul was preaching a message that fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures. Paul, I believe, always saw himself as a Jew who believed in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah! Jesus was who the Scriptures were pointing toward all along and the culmination of God's salvific work.

4. A crucified and resurrected Messiah was offensive though, leading most Jewish people to reject Jesus.

Understandably so:

Deuteronomy 21:23b – 23b for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse.

5. We look at passages like Isaiah 53 and easily reconcile the Suffering Servant with Jesus but that was not the message a 1st Century Jew wanted to hear. They wanted the Anointed King to come and establish his rule through Israel.

6. Many gentiles would have found the gospel message offensive but for a different reason. For those in a free city like Thessaloniki it would have struck fear in some. This is a message of:

Sedition

a. What is that? The unlawful act of inciting people to rebel against the ruling power. We read Paul's words with 2000 years of history between us, but the phrase, “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” would have sent a chill down the spine of those embedding in the power structure! Well said Paul or not so well said depending on who heard this message.

b. Messiah is the Hebrew term (or Christos in the Greek) for “Anointed King.” This Jesus is God's Anointed King and everything belongs to Him. If that message were to take root in Thessaloniki it would land

them on the naughty list. So, what happens? Some of the Jews were persuaded, but more significantly many God-fearing Greeks and several prominent women. Yikes!!

7. The gospel message that Paul shared would have been unique not only for its content but also because of the gospel's inclusive and exclusive claims. Anyone can come to God through Jesus, but Jesus is the only way to God! The 1st Century was a relativistic and pluralistic world much like ours. Religion and culture were intermingled at every level and if a person was inclusive there would be no issue. However, if you start saying that Jesus is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, and no one comes to God apart from Jesus that would invoke a world of trouble!
8. That's what happens. The Jews don't want the bad press, so they hire some rough necks to start a riot and go after Paul and his team. They were being housed at the house of Jason, a wealthy patron, and here's what happens next:

Acts 17:6-9 – 6 When they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city officials, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too, 7 and Jason has welcomed them. They are all acting contrary to Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king- Jesus." 8 The crowd and city officials who heard these things were upset. 9 After taking a security bond from Jason and the others, they released them.

9. We know exactly how the message was perceived and why it was such a problem for the Thessaloniki citizens and appointed leaders. They had a privileged position granted by the Romans for their loyalty and a message spreading of another king wasn't going to be tolerated. Paul and the team had to leave the city under cover of darkness and travel to Berea. These Thessalonian Jews were so angered by the message that they pursued Paul to Berea and eventually forced him out all the way to Athens.
10. By late AD 50 or 51, Paul had made his way along with Silas and Timothy to Corinth. It is from Corinth that we get the Thessalonian Letters. Timothy managed to fly under the radar and was able to go back to Thessaloniki. He is operating as correspondent, and while Paul longs to be reunited with the Thessalonians, Paul must be content with a long-distance relationship.

B. Let's dive into 1 Thessalonians!

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

1. Paul sometimes gets portrayed as a lone ranger but that's never the testimony we receive in Scripture. He's always surrounded by a team. Paul had a hard life. We all at least have seasons of hard. Following Christ is always going to be a life that goes against the grain. Don't try to do it on your own. We do life together for a reason. We need one another's support.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 – 2 We always thank God for all of you, making mention of you constantly in our prayers. 3 We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Paul's heart is still with the Thessalonians even though he can't be with them physically. But a lack of physical proximity doesn't impact the most powerful gift we have within the community of faith: Prayer!

- a. One of the best examples I've seen over the years of this point is Dr. Bob and Mallory Boyd and their commitment to those they minister to all around the globe. They believe in the power of prayer, and it has a powerful impact on their ministry. I'm challenged by their example. Prayer changes things!
- b. Saying we're going to pray for someone could be the best or worst thing we could do for a person. It's the worst thing to say if we're using it as an excuse to end a conversation and we don't pray for the person. It's the best thing we could do for another if we believe in the power of prayer and pray!

3. Another aspect of verse 2 and 3 that should penetrate our hearts is the content of Paul's prayer! In every example of Paul's letters, we see one simple but powerful theme:

Praise before petition!

- a. After the events unfolded at Jason's house, the City of Thessaloniki was united in stamping out this new movement. There would have been plenty to petition God about! But Paul and his team (We always thank God) are united in prayer, and they are giving thanks for what they see taking place in the life of these persecuted Christians. And what is it that they see:

- (1) Work produced by faith!
- (2) Labor motivated by love!
- (3) Endurance inspired by hope in Jesus!

b. Where do we see faith, love, and hope taking root in the lives of those around us? If we can't answer that question, I would be willing to bet we have a frustrating prayer life right now. I would challenge us that our prayer life is out of alignment. Prayer is about conforming our lives to the will of God, not conforming God to our will. Praise, and praise on behalf of others, should always receive priority in our prayer life! Praise then petition is the consistent theme of Scripture.

1 Thessalonians 1:4-6 – 4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full assurance. You know how we lived among you for your benefit, 6 and you yourselves became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with joy from the Holy Spirit.

4. We can easily give people an emotional experience and we must be cautious of this. This was a sobering time for early Christ followers in Thessaloniki and yet they have come to know God's love for them with full assurance and joy through the power of:

The Holy Spirit

a. Paul recognizes that both a transformed heart and life are dependent on the Holy Spirit's power. The more difficult our situation in life becomes the more evident the power of the Spirit becomes! We shouldn't put our confidence in the eloquence of the message or our ability for strategic thinking. Those are great things, but we always recognize the transformation of the human heart is beyond the realm of man's power. Only the Holy Spirit can transform a human heart!

1 Thessalonians 1:7-10 – 7 As a result, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out. Therefore, we don't need to say anything, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception we had from you: 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 rescues us from the coming wrath.

b. We started out 2023 anticipating revival. We said there are 3 key ingredients that come together in Scripture when we see a clear work of God's Spirit:

The Word + Repentance + Worship = Revival

all undergirded by the power of prayer. This is what's taking place in Thessaloniki! The word of the Lord rang out. They turned to God from idols and served the living and true God! In the darkest of times the light shines brightest!

c. Paul and his team are observing this work of the Holy Spirit resulting in transformed lives! Pray and praise aren't limited by proximity. What is the main evidence that a work of God has transpired?

1 Thessalonians 1:9b - 9b They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God!

d. Those early Christians in Thessaloniki realized that no matter the cost Jesus + Nothing = Everything! They were willing to walk away from an entire culture built on idol worship and their lives reverberated across Macedonia and Achaia! That's going all out in their commitment to God through Jesus. They could not be halfway in and halfway out. It wasn't an option! We convince ourselves that a mediocre life with Jesus is an option, and our culture may let us get away with it, but Scripture never presents that. We fail forward by repenting of our sins and continuing to pursue Christlikeness by the same Holy Spirit that transformed those in Thessaloniki!

II. I can't wait to dive into these letters over the next several weeks and see what God has to say to us! A lot of things have changed in the world, but a lot have not! Many of the same issues the Thessalonians were wrestling with, we are too! I hope you'll join in over the next several weeks as we learn together.