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Adams Center Baptist Church

1 Thessalonians Part 1 — The Christian Church at Thessalonica

Today, we begin a study of Paul's first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. I'm pretty excited about this series. I've read through 1 Thessalonians a few times, and I think we're going to find valuable insights that will help us as church to first, be healthy and second, fulfill our calling as a church.

Before we dive into the contents of this letter, let's take a look at the background and setting of this church. It's all too easy to think that the NT cities belong to ancient history and are too distant from us and our experience. But Thessalonica would be like a lot of cities and towns that we know today — a place with a long history, built in a location with good sea and road transport links. It had a thriving economy, and everything you could possibly want on offer for those who could afford it.

Thessalonica was the second largest city in Greece. It was a natural port, and was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was about 120 miles south west of Philippi. Philippi and Thessalonica were connected by the Via Egnatia, a road built by the Romans in the 2nd Century BC. Over 700 miles long, it stretched from Byzantium in the east to Dyrrachium in the west. See photo.

In Acts 17:1-9, we read about how Paul, Silas and Timothy founded the church in Thessalonica. They went there after they left Philippi, where they had been flogged and thrown in prison (Acts 16:11-40).

When they arrived in Thessalonica, following his usual pattern, Paul spoke in the synagogue. Read Acts 17:1-3.

17 When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said.

Notice that he "reasons" with them from the Scriptures, "explaining and proving." This is what we've been talking about for the last few months. He gives reasonable arguments and then he proclaims, declares, announces "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." To draw some applications right away, Paul gives us a good example. As you know, Paul was a tent-maker, he had a full-time job, but Paul made it a priority in his life to take every opportunity he could to share the Gospel message. Think how incredible it would be if all of us did the same! Can you imagine how our community, how our church would be transformed if we took every opportunity we could to share the Gospel message?

So, Paul has some success among the Jews there, but also among the “God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.” (verse 4).

But all was not well, as Luke goes on to say in Acts 17:5-9. Some of the Jews in Thessalonica hired a mob to attack Jason’s house where Paul was staying. Since Paul wasn’t there, Jason was dragged to the local authorities with charges of treason and trouble-making. The city authorities required Jason to hand over a sum of money as a deposit which he would forfeit if there was any further trouble. So, for the sake of Jason and the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul and the others left for Berea and then Athens.

It’s interesting to note that Paul’s preaching was perceived as subversive, as we read in verse 7 of Acts 17. Paul had obviously said enough for people to make the connection between the crucified Messiah and a reigning Lord, whose lordship encompassed every area of life. The gospel was somehow seen as a potential threat to the religious, economic, and political status quo. One of the things that I think is happening right now in our very divided, post-Christian culture is that the differences between those that identify as Christians and those that don’t identify as Christians are becoming more and more evident. I think it’s actually a really good thing, and something that Paul will go after in this book of 1 Thessalonians.

If you’re a Christian in a post-Christian world, you are counter-cultural, you stand out in a crowd going in the opposite direction. When we as believers stand out for the right reasons, when we stand out because we are being faithful to God’s Word, when we stand out because we are attempting to live our lives in a way that honors God’s commands, when we are standing out because we are loving our neighbors and even our enemies — that gets the right kind of attention from those that are being drawn by God’s Holy Spirit to the community of faith. Amen?

All right, so Paul was in Thessalonica only 3-5 weeks before he was wrongly banned from the city. But, Paul was really concerned for their spiritual welfare, so he sent Timothy back to check on them. Timothy reports back to Paul, and then Paul writes this letter from Corinth to encourage, instruct and equip them in their relationships with Christ.

Ancient letters began with the sender’s name. Often Paul gives himself a designation, normally ‘apostle’, but he doesn’t do that here. In this case, the letter comes from Paul, Silas and Timothy.

Then we have the recipients: ‘to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’ The church is a gathered community of people (1:1). When the NT uses the word “church” it never has in mind a building. In secular contexts the word could refer to any gathered assembly, such as a political body, where the primary focus is on the people who gather. The OT uses the word in contexts where Israel is assembled together, which shows something of its significance in Paul picking it up to describe the community of Jews and Gentiles brought together in Christ. The important thing about this word “church” is that it does seem to involve gathering together.

There was a time in my family's life where we didn't attend "church." We didn't gather together with God's people. We did gather together with some close friends who were believers. There seems to have always been this question about whether or not you have to attend "church" in order to be a Christian. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that you do NOT have to attend "church" in order to be a Christian. However, there does seem to be something missing in the life of the believer or maybe in the life of other believers when that believer doesn't regularly gather together with other believers.

Let me read for you Hebrews 10, starting in verse 19:

19 Therefore, brothers and sisters, since **WE** have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for **US** through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since **WE** have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let **US** draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having **OUR** hearts sprinkled to cleanse **US** from a guilty conscience and having **OUR** bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let **US** hold unswervingly to the hope **WE** profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let **US** consider how **WE** may spur **ONE ANOTHER** on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting **TOGETHER**, as **SOME** are in the habit of doing, but encouraging **ONE ANOTHER**—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

I've emphasized all the places where it seems like the writer of Hebrews is talking not to an individual Christian, but to the Christians who are gathered together — the called-out assembly of believers. So, maybe it doesn't matter in your own life if you don't go to church, but the called-out assembly of believers, Christians in a village, or a town, or a city are missing out if you don't attend.

Another thing to notice in this very first verse is that the church (the called-out assembly of believers) has its identity in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of what God has done through Christ, we have been brought into a community in which we are incorporated into Christ and related to each other — not as a lifeless organization but as a living organism.

Then comes the greeting. The standard greeting in a Greek letter was *chairein* "greetings." But Paul uses the similar sounding *charis* "grace" and "peace" (which is perhaps a nod to the Jewish greeting, *shalom*).

Now, let's look at verse 2. Paul almost always begins his letters by telling his recipients that he thanks God for them. But these folks are special. Of all of his letters, he says more about why he thanks God for them than any other church. He even goes so far as to call them a model church. We'll talk about it more in the coming weeks, but skip ahead to read 1:7-8.

This doesn't mean that they were perfect, as we will see—they have their share of problems and lots of room for improvement in both knowledge and practice. But what Paul is saying is that the church at Thessalonica was a model of spiritual vitality—they fit Paul's profile of a healthy

church. They have the right culture, the right attitudes, and the right priorities. This is important if you are already in a church or looking for one . . .

What is this profile? Good news for us — it isn't in attendance numbers, annual budget, media coverage, or slick marketing techniques. Paul summarizes his profile in 1:3 (read).

“We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The profile of a healthy church according to Paul is a church characterized by faith, love and hope.

These three terms have been trivialized into generic, pious platitudes through wedding sermons and Hallmark sympathy cards. But, properly understood, they describe a radical, revolutionary movement of God's Spirit in and through his people.

In the last verse of that great 13th chapter of I Corinthians, the apostle Paul gives us a very pointed message about these three very important subjects in Christianity: “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (I Cor 13:13 NKJV).

How many lessons have we had about faith, about love, about hope? We have defined them and analyzed them. We have emphasized how important they are. And, they are indeed fundamental to Christian doctrine and Christian conduct.

But, if we want to see best how faith and love and hope all work together to motivate and sustain our Christian life, then I Thessalonians 1:3 is a verse that provides great insights. Paul writes to the young church at Thessalonica that he is . . . “constantly bearing in mind” their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope” (I Thess. 1:3 NASB). Note the way Paul pairs each of the three virtues, faith and love and hope, with a practical necessity of daily Christians living: work and labor and steadfastness.

Let us look at the important connections between faith and work, love and labor, and hope and steadfastness.

Faith and Work

The first connection Paul makes in verse three is between work and faith. It's what Paul sees as the first mark of a healthy church. What does Paul mean “work of faith”? I believe he means a work that proceeds from or results from, faith. That's how the NIV actually translates it: “work produced by faith.” It's not a “work” in the sense of what you might do to earn spiritual life. In John 6:27-29 we read about how Jesus challenges people by saying, “Do not work for food that spoils (he had just miraculously fed them the day before), but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.’ Then they asked him, ‘what must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered “**The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.**”

So, Jesus gives us this food, this faith that endures to eternal life, we don't earn it. But once given to us, it changes us!

Paul commends the faith of the Thessalonians. He says, in verse 8: "... Your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it." And, in verse 9, Paul tells us how that faith had made changes in what they did in their lives. Paul says they "...turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

Do you see here how their faith changed what they were doing in their lives? Their work had been the worship and service of idols. They served those idols because that is what they had faith in. But, when Paul preached the gospel to them, their faith changed—it changed to a faith in God. When their faith changed, their work changed.

Where you put your faith determines what you do. Remember those words of James, who says: "... I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18 NKJV). Faith is not merely belief; it is something that changes you. So, you can look at what you are doing and tell where your faith really is. So, you can ask yourself, "Is God's glory the focus of my life? Am I focused on doing things that will advance His Kingdom in the lives of those around me? If the answer is yes, it's a good indication that your faith is in God. Or, you may answer, "No, actually, I am more concerned about how to gather possessions for myself and enjoy my recreation? If that's the case, it's a good indication that your faith is in idols. That is the important connection that Paul makes between faith and work, and it's the first mark of a healthy church—"work produced by faith."

Love and Labor

The second connection Paul makes in verse three is between love and labor, and it's the second mark of a healthy church. We have defined the "work" that Paul refers to here as the things that people do in response to their faith — it's turning from idols to service of the true and living God. The "labor" then in verse 3 is the effort we put into that task. The word "labor" means "to work arduously, to toil, to work to the point of exhaustion." Here's a truth for you: It is the attitude we have toward our work that determines the intensity with which we do the work. The connection Paul makes is that our love is what produces the right kind of intensity.

A person, or a church, that does not love will not labor. They may know what to do. They may have a faith that properly defines the work that they should be doing. But, if they do not have true love (not just affection, but true Biblical love), they simply will not do the work. The Thessalonian church had the love—and it showed in the intensity of their work for the Lord.

How important is love? Love is the thing that moves you in the direction that your faith points you. If you don't see any motion in your life, it may be because you do not love, or do not love enough. I invite you to ask God for this love. Ask God today to give you greater love for your family, your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers, your village, your town, your county. This love will be the fuel for the work that we are going to do ahead.

Hope and Steadfastness

The third connection Paul makes in verse three is between hope and steadfastness, and it's the third mark of a healthy church. The Enhanced Strong's Lexicon tells us that in the New Testament the word "steadfastness" is used to describe "the characteristic of a man who is not swerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings." The result in our lives in this verse is described as endurance to the end, even through the most difficult times.

Now, what is it that produces that endurance in our lives? Paul said to the Thessalonians that it is hope. The word "hope" is surely one of the most misused words in our language today. When we say "hope" we usually mean "wish." We say we hope it rains—when there is not a cloud in the sky!

"Hope," at least as the Bible uses the word "hope," is something entirely different. It means a "joyful and confident expectation." What we hope for is what we expect to happen. When we speak of a "hope of heaven," but only think of heaven as a "long shot," it is no wonder we lose our endurance.

If you are discouraged and want to quit—especially when things are difficult, you need to ask God to work on your hope. If you do not have the right kind of hope, you will not endure. Faith gets us headed in the right direction. Love gets us moving. But, only hope keeps us moving when the going gets tough.

So, what the apostle Paul wrote to that relatively new and much-tested church at Thessalonica was a commendation: I give thanks to God for your work defined by your faith, and your hard labor motivated by your love, and your steadfast endurance inspired by your hope.

Would that commendation be true of us? How is your faith in God—does it define what you do each week, or is your week defined by worldly idols? How is your love—does it get you moving in serving your Lord and others, or is it so weak that you are stuck in neutral? How about your hope—is it a confident expectation that drives you faithfully through the hard times, or is it a whimsical wish that lets you falter at every speed bump?

Let's ask God to revitalize our faith, rekindle our love, and refortify our hope.