

Grace Life Fellowship Group

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August 11, 2024

1 Thessalonians 1:1

Introduction to 1 Thessalonians

Today marks a blessed transition in the life of our church.

As much as it hurts on a personal level to say goodbye to beloved families...

It is a cause of rejoicing to know that we are part of a church body that is both **able** and **desiring** to participate in the work of sending laborers into a ripe harvest.

It is a sign of the health of a church that men are trained, equipped, and sent out for the purpose of gospel preaching and church planting.

We are seeing that happen right before us.

And Lord willing, this will continue to be a part of our church culture:

- For qualified men to be sent out plant churches,
- And for families be sent out with them

And it is difficult to express **my own** gratitude for the honor that it is to stand behind this pulpit for this next season of time.

I am grateful not just to be standing here... but mainly for all of you.

Because I know what kind of church body we have here at Saving Grace:

- You give unmatched support for those who labor at preaching the Word and teaching.
- You are a church who gets behind the training of the next generation of pastors.
- You are a people who desire the meat of the Word, which means you will not settle for anything less.
- You are a people **hungry** to hear the preached Word...
- That seek to understand and to put it into practice...
- And that challenge one another according to it.

In short: To have a fellowship of believers like the one sitting before me is every young preacher's dream.

So it is not only an honor, to be **behind** this pulpit... but even more of an honor to know the **kind of people** in this fellowship group that are **in front of** the pulpit.

So I thank you in advance for the love and encouragement that I know you will give to me and my family in this next season.

Well, this morning, we begin a new study together.

In this next season in Grace Life, we will be working through the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

So open your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 1.

We're going to jump right in to chapter 1, verse 1.

1 Thessalonians 1:1 (NASB95)

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

Now, multiple questions jump to the surface even as we read the first verse:

- First of all, who are Paul and Silvanus and Timothy?
- Who are the Thessalonians?
- And what is the relationship between Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to this church?
- And why are they writing this letter to this church?
- What events or circumstances precipitated this correspondence?
- What sort of letter is this? Is it a letter that is meant to encourage or to correct the church?
- And why are the people described as “the church of the Thessalonians *in* God the Father?”
 - Why doesn't he say the church **of** God **in** Thessalonica? Why instead is it the church **of** the Thessalonians **in** God and Christ?

Well, we want to answer all of these questions this morning, and we want to whet our appetites for what it to come during our time in this letter.

And to do that, we have to first transport ourselves back in time to get a handle on what is going on in this letter.

Verse 1 identifies both the **Preachers** to Thessalonica– Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy – but also the **People** of Thessalonica.

So this morning as we get acquainted with this divinely inspired letter, let's get to know both the **preachers** and the **people**.

First of all, the preachers – Paul and Silvanus and Timothy – are all introduced to us in the book of Acts, so turn with me to Acts chapter 22.

Here, starting in verse 3, we find Paul speaking, and he is giving his own autobiography and testimony of conversion.

Acts 22:3 (NASB95) — 3 “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.

So Paul says that he is a Jew, who was brought up in Jerusalem and educated under Gamliel.

The significance of referring to Gamaliel is the fact that Gamaliel was a highly respected Pharisee in the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin was a group of leaders that held religious authority in the city of Jerusalem.

So, Paul is saying, “I wasn’t educated by just anyone. I wasn’t educated by just any Rabbi in some unknown synagogue.”

“Instead, I was trained by the respected leader of the most respected religious council in the respected city of Jerusalem.”

And notice that he says, “strictly, according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God”

In Galatians 1, Paul says that he was “extremely zealous” for his ancestral traditions.

But then notice in verse 4 of Acts 22, Paul says that he was a persecutor of the way of Christ:

Acts 22:4–7 (NASB95)

4 “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,

5 as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

6 “But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me,

7 and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’

So, Paul is on his way to imprison more of those who are following the way of Christ, and his trip is interrupted by an appearing of Christ himself, who asks, “Why are you persecuting Me?”

So from the very first encounter that Paul had with Christ, one thing had to be absolutely clear to him:

Jesus Christ has an intimate, personal, spiritual, and vital union with His people.

The people who were following the Way of Christ are identified by Christ as Christ.

It is impossible to imagine that this question did not ring in the ears of Paul for the rest of His life.

If there is one thing Paul knew with certainty, it is that the people of Christ are so loved and owned by Christ that He is willing to identify His church as Himself.

To be a follower of the way of Christ means that you are in vital union with Christ.

Paul learned that from the very beginning.

Turning back to Acts chapter 9 we have another account of this same event.

Starting in verse 3,

Acts 9:3–6 (NASB95)

3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

5 And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

[So, once again, to persecute the church is to persecute Jesus himself]

6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”

So, Paul is blinded by the Lord, and is instructed to go into the city and seek a man named Ananias.

Before Paul gets to Ananias, the Lord speaks to Ananias, and notice what the Lord says to Ananias in verse 15:

Acts 9:15–16 (NASB95)

15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

So who was the Apostle Paul?

He was a deeply religious Jew, having received the best religious instruction of his day, whose religious zeal lead him to persecute Christ.

And as we see here in Acts 9, he was a chosen instrument of Christ to both **bear** the name of Christ and to **suffer** for the name of Christ.

He is to preach to the Jews, to the Gentiles, and even to kings. And he is to suffer on behalf of Christ.

Now, fast forwarding to Acts 13, we find Paul as a member of a church in the city of Antioch, a city north of Jerusalem a few hundred miles.

And it's here that we begin to follow Paul on what we refer to as his first missionary journey.

Paul's conversion that we just read about was around AD 32, and this first missionary journey took place in AD 46 and 47.

So we have moved ahead by about 14 years.

Let's pick it up in verse 2:

Acts 13:2–5 (NASB95)

2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

5 When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews...

So they are sent away from Antioch, and they begin preaching the word of God to the Jews.

In verses 6 through 11, Paul is brought before the proconsul, a governmental leader...

Notice verse 12:

Acts 13:12 (NASB95)

12 Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

So already he is fulfilling the work that the Lord called him to do: He has preached to the Jews and now already to kings.

One of his first converts on his journey is a Roman proconsul.

Now start in verse 14 and following, Paul and his companions arrive in Antioch.

This is a Pisidian Antioch, which is a different city than the city they started from, which was Syrian Antioch.

And as is their custom, they enter the synagogue, preach to the Jews.

And notice what happens in verse 42 after Paul finishes preaching:

Acts 13:42–43 (NASB95)

42 As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath.

43 Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God.

There was once again receptivity of the message, and even among many of the Jews and God-fearing proselytes.

These God-fearers were Gentiles who had associated themselves to the God of the Israelites.

They believed in the monotheism of the Hebrews and sat under the teaching in the synagogue.

So both Jews and Gentiles were in the synagogue and followed Paul and Barnabas out of the meeting and followed the missionaries.

Then verse 44,

Acts 13:44–46 (NASB95)

44 The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord.

45 But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.

[So not all the Jews received the word, and began to oppose and contradict Paul's preaching, but notice their response in verse 46]

46 Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.

This is the pattern that we find in the ministry of the Apostle Paul. He goes into the synagogues to bring the message of the cross first to the Jews, and when he is rejected, he turns to the Gentiles.

Now verse 49:

Acts 13:49–50 (NASB95)

49 And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region.

50 But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.

So Paul then goes to the next town called Iconium.

He preaches to both Jews and Gentiles there, and once again, he is driven out by the Jews in that city... and then he goes to Lystra.

Now, verses 19 through 23 provide a good summary of some of the main features of Paul's first missionary journey:

Acts 14:19–23 (NASB95)

19 But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

20 But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.

21 After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,

22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

In these verses there are at least two important characteristics of Paul's missionary activity so far.

First of all, persecution from the Jews.

He had previously preached in the cities of Antioch and Iconium, and the message of the cross had much success among Jews and Gentiles, but in both cities he was driven out by some of the Jews.

And then here in verse 19 we find that these Jews were not content to simply have driven him out of their own towns, but then chased him down when he got to Lystra, the third city, and chased him out there.

And secondly, we see the pastoral heart of Paul who returns to each of these cities – Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra – for the purpose of strengthening the churches.

He encourages them, exhorts them, appoints elders for them, and prays for them.

So this is Paul's ministry: Preach the gospel, strengthen the those who believe, organize local assemblies of believers into what we call churches, appoint leaders for these churches, and commend them to the Lord.

In a nutshell, this is what Paul desired to do.

Yes, he faced stoning from the Jews, but this appears to be nothing more than a mere occupational hazard for Paul.

He did not absolve himself of responsibility to fulfill what the Lord said because it was difficult.

Instead, he traces back through each of these towns to ensure that the souls of the saints are built up and organized under church leadership.

So, these two features really define Paul's missionary work: Persecution and Building up the churches.

Or we might say **Suffering and Strengthening.**

Suffering at the hands of the Jews,

And **Strengthening** the churches that he founded.

Suffering and **Strengthening** – we will see these two characteristics come up again in his future missionary work.

Now it is interesting to note that all of these cities – Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe – are cities in the region of Galatia.

Just a short time after he returns home to Syrian Antioch, the churches in the Galatian region are being taught that you must be circumcised in order to be saved.

The churches that Paul just established are being infiltrated with false teaching that says you must accept the Jewish custom of circumcision in order to be made right with God.

This is the burden of his letter to the Galatians, and it is to **these** churches that he most likely writes his letter to not too long after he returns home from this missionary journey.

Not only is this teaching spreading in the region of Galatia, but also in Judea.

He returns home to Syrian Antioch and look at what happens when he gets there:

Verse 1 of Acts 15:

Acts 15:1 (NASB95)

1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

So then Paul and Barnabas go down to Jerusalem to discuss this issue with the other Apostles there.

In Acts 15, we have what is called the Jerusalem Council.

All the Apostles meet to discuss this issue of circumcision, and Peter and James give their judgement on the matter.

The essence of what they say is this: “We are saved by grace through faith. We will not require the Gentiles to be circumcised. But tell the Gentiles to be sensitive to the consciences of the Jews in their midst by abstaining from things contaminated by idols.”

This was a critical moment in the church’s history. The division between Jewish and Gentile believers threatened to split the church.

But the wisdom of the council was to uphold justification by faith and at the same time admonish everyone to abstain from things that would be offensive to other members of the body out of love and in order to maintain unity.

So, how is the council going to get their message to the churches?

Well, to spread the news of their decision, the council of apostles and prophets send a letter to the churches and they send official emissaries of the council who will deliver the message.

Notice verse 22:

Acts 15:22 (NASB95)

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

The man identified as Silas here is the same person in 1 Thessalonians referred to as Silvanus.

And as we just read, Silvanus was sent with the authority of the council of Apostles to join Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch.

From this point on, Silvanus becomes a missionary companion with the Apostle Paul.

Now, notice verse 36

Acts 15:36–41 (NASB95)

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”

[then skip down to verse 40]

40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Once again, we see Paul’s focus on the need to go back to strengthen the churches.

He says that he wants to go back to all the churches from their first missionary journey to see how they are and to strengthen them.

He has already written to them in the letter of Galatians, and now he’s going to check up on them in person.

In verse 40, we are told that Paul chooses Silas – aka Silvanus – to come with them.

Again, this is an important selection by Paul, because Silvanus was one of the men chosen by the Jerusalem council to communicate their judgment that salvation is by grace through faith.

Now in Acts 16:1, we meet Timothy, the third preacher listed in the letter to the Thessalonians.

Acts 16:1–3 (NASB95)

1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek,

2 and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium.

3 Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

So here, we meet Timothy: A man chosen by Paul to accompany them on their mission.

We of course are familiar with Paul's future correspondence with Timothy in the two letters named after him, but it is here in Lystra that they first meet.

And what is so interesting about this encounter is verse 3, look at it again.

Acts 16:3 (NASB95)

3 Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

- Paul, why did you have Timothy circumcised because of the Jews?
- Didn't you just come from the Jerusalem council that upheld salvation by faith, not by circumcision?
- And isn't Silvanus with you, the man authorized by this council to communicate to the churches that circumcision is **not** necessary for salvation?

Of course he knows all that.

Paul did not have Timothy circumcised as a matter of salvation, but as a practical concern.

He knew that he was going to go into synagogues and preach to the Jews, but Timothy would have been an immediate offense if the Jews found out that Timothy did not follow their customs.

So it wasn't a matter of salvation that Paul is concerned about, but a matter of love to those who they hoped to preach to.

Paul wasn't scared to offend the Jews, because by this point, he had already done so many times and was even stoned by them.

Instead, his concern was that he didn't want to offend them with something as unimportant as abiding by Jewish customs.

If the missionaries are going to offend, they want their **message** to offend, not something as trivial as refusing to follow Jewish customs.

So Paul has Timothy circumcised.

So, we've met Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, now let's see how they came to Thessalonica.

Look at verse 6:

Acts 16:6–10 (NASB95)

6 They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia;

7 and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them;

8 and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas.

9 A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

10 When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Now, remember, what was the purpose of Paul and Silvanus in going on this second missionary journey?

We read in Acts 15 that it was to check up on the churches they planted, give the message of the Jerusalem council, and to strengthen the churches.

But here we find that God had more plans for them.

As they traveled through the Galatian region, they moved westward, and as they did so, they were forbidden to preach the gospel in certain areas.

They were forbidden by the Holy Spirit.

And then Paul gets a vision of a man in Macedonia, and concludes that they must go over to Macedonia to preach the gospel.

From where they were, this was even further west.

For them to travel into the region of Macedonia would be to leave the Eastern Asian regions, and go into the Western, European regions.

This is the gospel crossing over into Europe for the first time.

They are getting closer to the heart of the Roman Empire.

Now the rest of Acts 16 is their journey into Macedonia, and the first city they preach in is the city of Philippi.

And by the end of chapter 16, they are forced out of the city of Philippi not by Jews this time, but by Gentiles.

And this brings us to chapter 17, where we finally meet the Thessalonians.

Verse 1:

Acts 17:1 (NASB95)

1 Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

Now, before we look at the message Paul preached in Thessalonica, we need to first understand the people and the city of Thessalonica.

Who were these people religiously, socially, and culturally? What was their history?

Now, we don't want to give a history lesson simply for historical trivia, but we need to situate ourselves in ancient Thessalonica, so that we can understand how the message of Paul would have hit their ears.

So, let's explore some of the history and background of the city.

Thessalonica was a part of the Macedonian kingdom of Alexander the Great.

Founded in 313 BC, it was named after the half-sister of Alexander the Great. So already, the city has a rich history.

The place chosen for the Macedonian city of Thessalonica was no doubt because of its location.

Not only was it a port city, accessible by sea, but it sits right along an important land route that connected the heart of Europe with the Middle East.

So whether by land or sea, the city was crucial for both commerce and military movements.

About 100 years after Thessalonica was founded, Macedonia came into conflict with the Roman Empire.

There were a series of massive wars and battles, and ultimately Rome came out on top.

Rome divided Macedonia into 4 districts, and Thessalonica was chosen as one of the capitals for its district.

From this point on, the relationship between Thessalonica and Rome was mixed.

The city itself enjoyed being under Roman rule, primarily for the protection Rome offered from invading barbarian tribes.

But the region of Macedonia that the city was in was known for its attempted rebellion and revolution.

Various men would gain a following in Macedonia, call themselves King of Macedonia, and attempt to overthrow Roman control.

These would-be kings saw themselves as taking up the mantle left behind by previous Macedonian kings, not the least of which was Alexander the Great.

But time after time, when Macedonia attempted to revive their monarchy and be ruled by their own king, Rome put down the rebellions.

Being just one city within Macedonia, Thessalonica wanted to distance themselves from these rebellions, because they did not want to ruin their relationship with Rome.

Just four decades before the time of Christ, when the Roman Empire was engaged in a civil war, Thessalonica aligned itself with what would be the winning side.

Because they supported the winning side, Thessalonica received a multitude of benefits:

- Thessalonica was declared a “free city”.
 - This meant that although they were part of the Roman empire, they were free to govern themselves according to their own local government.
 - They were ruled by half a dozen city officials known as Politarchs...
 - And in addition, they established a democratic form of government, where the assembly of the people had the highest authority.
 - They were free to establish laws within their own city

So Thessalonica did not have a Roman governor or proconsul that ruled over them.

And they were free from being occupied by the Roman military.

So, the city of Thessalonica had the best of both worlds:

- They were self-governing, and
- They had protection from Rome

On top of that, they were a hub of commerce, because the main highway of the day passed through the city.

The highway was called the Via Egnatia, and this would have been the highway the Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy would have used to get to Thessalonica.

If anyone wanted to pass between the eastern and western regions of the empire, they had to use the Via Egnatia, which passed through Thessalonica.

Traders, travelers, government officials, military divisions, and everyone else used this highway.

So not only did Thessalonica have a prized position in the Roman Empire as a “free city”, but they were in a prized location.

Now, religiously, what was Thessalonica like?

Well they certainly embraced and worshipped the plethora of ancient Greek gods...

But what is most important for us to know is that the people of Thessalonica embraced the imperial cult.

This was the cult that deified the imperial rulers in Rome, in particular Julius Caesar.

And this was a state-sponsored worship of Roman leaders.

The local Thessalonian city officials supported and promoted this cult.

In return, Rome continued to allow them to function as a free city, with all the financial and political and social benefits they had.

So, this is Thessalonica in the first century:

- They were protected by Rome
- They were people who were free to govern themselves
- They were an empire-wide center of trade and commerce

- And they were full of false idols and cults, not the least of which was the imperial cult, which worshipped the Roman leaders.
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And all of this is important for how we understand Paul's message to the Thessalonians.

Look at Acts 17:2

Acts 17:2–4 (NASB95)

2 And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

3 explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."

4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

So the message of Christ in Thessalonica converted some Jews, a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks and a number of leading women.

And of course, this angered the unbelieving the Jews, who were losing God-fearing Greeks as their own followers.

Notice verse 5:

Acts 17:5 (NASB95)

5 But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people.

Notice **to whom** the mob brought the house of Jason: The end of verse 5 says, "the people."

This is not just a generic term for “people,” indicating simply they dragged them out to the public square in front of anyone who would listen.

No, this is the term δῆμος, that refers to an official assembly of citizens who were responsible to vote and judge and act on behalf of the city.

This was their democratic form of government at work.

Remember, there were no Roman governors in Thessalonica.

But they couldn’t find this official assembly, so they brought them to the Politarchs, or the city officials.

Verse 6:

Acts 17:6–7 (NASB95)

6 When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities [**this is the word πολιτάρχας, referring to the Politarchs that ruled the city.**]

[And notice what charge they brought against Jason and his household]

shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also;

7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

Now, notice the charges that are brought against the believers here:

1. First they charge them with causing **Social Upheaval**: “These men have upset the world. They are going against the way things are. They are not falling in line with the traditions and beliefs and social dynamics of the world as it is. They are disrupting peoples’ lives and our cultural order.”

2. Secondly, they are charged with being **Political Rebels**: “They act contrary to what Caesar has decreed and are saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

Remember the multiple attempted revolutions that Rome put down a century before this.

The concern of the Gentile unbelievers of the city was this: Is this another attempt to revolt against Rome and establish a king over Macedonia?

Remember, since Thessalonica did not have a Roman government or military presence within the city, they were not concerned about upsetting local Roman authorities who might be watching.

They were concerned about their status as a favored and privileged city in the Roman empire.

“Are these people telling us that there is another king? We can’t let this continue in our city.”

But this was more than *political* rebellion, but a *religious* rebellion as well.

To the people of Thessalonica, the message of Paul was both treason and apostasy.

The message that Jesus is the Messiah was both politically treasonous and religiously apostate.

That is how tied together religion and government was during this time.

As a side comment: The union between government and religion in the first century gives even greater significance to all of Paul’s commands to be submissive to government in the book of Romans.

Because think about how “submitting to governing authorities” would have sounded to people who came out of worshipping the Roman Emperor.

They could have argued: “Well, if we submit to the government, won’t that look like we are going back to worshipping the emperor, Paul? We can’t be so submissive, because that would be confusing to unbelievers. They’re going to think that we are worshipping the emperor again”

Even for people who probably came out of a background of worshipping the Emperor, Paul still saw fit to command them to be submissive to the governing authorities.

Paul clearly thought that we could make a distinction between **worshipping** the state and **honoring** the state in our submission.

Now, verse 10 of Acts 17:

Acts 17:10 (NASB95)

10 The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Paul and his companions spent anywhere from 3 to 6 months with the Thessalonians and their time was abruptly ended, and they were sent off to Berea.

Once again, Paul preaches in the synagogue of the Jews, many people believed... and then notice verse 13:

Acts 17:13 (NASB95)

13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

So, even after they went to the next town, the Jews chased them down there just to stir up the crowds again.

Just like in his first missionary journey, this second journey is once again marked by suffering.

But there is one aspect that is missing on **this** journey that was present in the first.

Paul's desire was always to go back and strengthen the churches he planted.

He was not just a traveling preacher who preached the gospel and didn't care about the new converts.

No, Paul's model was to preach the gospel, establish churches, appoint elders, and ensure they were strengthened in the faith.

If you were converted under Paul's ministry, you received the benefits of his care.

From this we learn that true missionary and evangelistic activity consists in the preaching of the Word, the establishment of local churches, and a continued strengthening of the churches that are planted.

But Paul is prevented from strengthening the church in Thessalonica.

He had to flee to Berea and he is not able to return.

Turn back to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 2.... In verses 17 and 18 notice what is written Paul says,

1 Thessalonians 2:17–18 (NASB95)

17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.

18 For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us.

We tried to come back to you, but we were prevented.

So, what does Paul do?

He flees from Thessalonica to Barea, and then to Athens.

And while Paul and Silvanus and Timothy are in Athens, he sends them back to Macedonia.

Specifically, he sends Timothy back to Thessalonica, and Silvanus he most likely sends back to Philippi.

Notice verse 1 of 1 Thessalonians 3.

1 Thessalonians 3:1–2 (NASB95)

1 Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone,

2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith,

There it is again: Even though I have been prevented from returning to you, I had to at least send Timothy to you **to strengthen and encourage your faith.**

Once again, the ministry of the Apostle Paul was about strengthening the faith of those who had believed the Word.

And given the way he had to leave Thessalonica, no doubt the church there was facing their own persecution from both the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles of the city.

So this is Paul's burden when he send Timothy back to Thessalonica:

- In light of all the suffering they have endured... have they kept the faith?
- I remember that when I was with them, they received the word with joy. But was this seed sown on the rocky ground, so that the roots only sunk into their heart temporarily? Has affliction and persecution because of the word caused them to fall away?
- Has the devil taken advantage of their pitiable state and tempted them to abandon Christ?
- Was our labor with the Thessalonians all in vain those months we were with them?

Timothy came back to Paul, who by this time was in Corinth, and his report was what every church leader desires to be true about the people under their care:

The church of Thessalonica was absolutely thriving.

Timothy's report was nothing but good news about the Thessalonians.

As we will see, they were an exemplary church in every way.

Turning back to 1 Thessalonians 1:1, notice again how Paul describes the church:

1 Thessalonians 1:1 (NASB95)

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

To describe this church as being **in** God unmistakably means that this church was in a vital spiritual union with God.

Remember Paul's first encounter with Christ, where Paul learned that Christ identifies Himself with His people? He learned that Christ remains in vital communion with His people.

Well, here in 1 Thessalonians, identifies this church as being in vital communion with both Christ and God.

We think of the language of Ephesians 1, where to be “in Christ” refers to being in spiritual union with the Lord.

Or use the language of John 15, it means that we abide in Christ and He abides in us.

So, here in 1 Thessalonians, the church is described as being **in** God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a church that is in an intimate, spiritual union with God and Christ.

So, Timothy’s report to Paul is good news about the Thessalonians... so much so that they are described as a church **united to God and Christ**.

So just to whet our appetites for what is to come in this letter, I want to leave us with

Just four aspects of Timothy’s good report... What we will call:

Four Qualities of a Church in Union with Christ

What was it specifically about the Thessalonians that marked them out as such a church?

First of all, they were an **Enduring** church.

Look at chapter 2 verse 14:

1 Thessalonians 2:14 (NASB95)

14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

Part of Timothy's report was that the Thessalonians had faced the same kinds of persecutions from their own people that the Judeans faced from the Jews.

A man whose life as a Christian and whose ministry as an Apostle was full of suffering was sure to tell the Thessalonians of the suffering they would face.

Chapter 3 verse 4, Paul says,

1 Thessalonians 3:4–5 (NASB95)

4 For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.

5 For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.

Once again, this was Paul's great burden: What would their faith be after the testing of affliction?

Verse 6,

1 Thessalonians 3:6–8 (NASB95)

6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you,

7 for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith;

8 for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

Don't you love that?!

We live because your faith lives. We are comforted because you have stood firm in the Lord.

Our sufferings are not identical to theirs, but we suffer afflictions nevertheless...

And what is at stake in how we respond to afflictions is not only our **own** spiritual health and faith, but also the joy and comfort of others.

We are not island unto ourselves, but our personal faith in Christ influences others to trust and obey the Lord as well.

How many times has your own joy and faith in the Lord been increased simply to hear of others whose faith has remained firm under affliction?

As if we don't already have ample reasons to remain firm in the Lord when our faith is tested, we have here yet another motivation: We have the opportunity to bring Spirit-produced joy to the hearts of others in body of Christ by standing firm and enduring.

Our spiritual battles are not just about us, but about the spiritual health and vitality of others who benefit from seeing our faith.

Paul knew that this church was in vital union with Christ because they were an Enduring church.

Secondly, this church was in union with Christ because they were a **Sanctified** church.

Their faith caused them not only to endure suffering, but it produced holy living in the congregation.

Notice chapter 4, verse 1

1 Thessalonians 4:1 (NASB95)

1 Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.

Notice that parenthetical phrase “just as you actually do walk”

He is saying, “Look, I know that you already are walking in a way that pleases the Lord, but we exhort you to keep going. Excel still more.”

Even as the Thessalonians are being exhorted to live in a way that pleases God, Paul makes sure that they understand he knows that they are indeed walking in this way.

Down in verse 9 we have a similar idea,

1 Thessalonians 4:9–10 (NASB95)

9 Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;

10 for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,

You have no need for anyone to write to you to tell you to show love to the brethren, because you are already doing it.

You are already practicing a life of love to all the family of God in Macedonia.

Nevertheless, excel still more.

This is not the same as the letter to the Galatians or to the Corinthians, where exhortations and commands are given as a way to **correct** their behavior.

No, this is completely the opposite.

They are a sanctified church, and so we might think they have no need to be given exhortations and commands.

But here we see clearly that they are a church faithful to Christ, walking in love, and are pleasing to the Lord, yet the commands still come: Excel still more.

They are an Enduring Church, a Sanctified Church, and thirdly, they are a Receptive church.

Look at chapter 1 verse 6:

1 Thessalonians 1:6 (NASB95)

6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

This church was marked by a reception of the word.

And notice that he says, “in much tribulation” – In other words, they received the Word in spite of the fact that they had every reason to reject it.

They received the message of the cross even under the threat of affliction.

And notice also that he says they received the word **with the joy of the Holy Spirit**.

Receptivity of the word with joy is something that only the Holy Spirit can produce.

I know that you are a church **in God** because you received the word in such a way that can only be accomplished by the Spirit of God.

Any claim that a church is “in Christ” must be a church that receives the food of His word.

And the word for “receive” here does not simply mean a passive acceptance, but a welcome embrace.

They didn’t receive the Word like we might casually receive a package on our doorstep... but they received the Word as we would welcome an honored guest into our home.

Their reception was a welcome embrace of the truth.

Notice also chapter 2 verse 13:

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NASB95)

13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

So here again we see their reception of the truth.

But not only was it a joyful reception, but also a reception that recognized the authority that it came with.

They were not trifling with the Word.

They received it with the joy of the Holy Spirit and recognized it as having the authority of God.

Four Qualities of a Church in Union with Christ

They were **enduring, sanctified, receptive, ...**

Now fourth and finally, they were **Expectant**.

And this is the one theme that dominates not only First Thessalonians, but also second Thessalonians.

The church at Thessalonica in God was **Expectant** of the Lord's return.

We might say that they were a **Second-coming church**.

The return of Christ was heavy on their hearts and minds. They longed to see their Savior.

This truth is mentioned in each of the 5 chapters of this letter.

Chapter 1, verse 10:

1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 (NASB95)

9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,

10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

They were waiting for the Son of God to come from heaven.

And the emphasis here is that He will be the one to rescue us from the wrath to come.

Chapter 2, verse 19:

1 Thessalonians 2:19 (NASB95)

19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?

Again he reminds them of the Lord's coming, and his point is that the joy and exultation he will enjoy when Christ returns is seeing this church meet their Savior.

Chapter 3 verse 13:

1 Thessalonians 3:12–13 (NASB95)

12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you;

13 so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and **Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.**

Here he is reminding them that the Lord will establish their hearts to be blameless and holy as they await the return of Christ.

Chapter 4 verse 16:

1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 (NASB95)

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

The Lord will return, we will meet Him in the air, and we will always be with Him.

Chapter 5 verse 23:

1 Thessalonians 5:23 (NASB95)

23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Once again, he reminds them of the reality that the Lord desires to preserve us entirely so that we would be without blame at the coming of the Lord.

It was simply part of this church's DNA that they were eagerly awaiting the Lord's return.

They were **so** expectant, in fact, that they were worrying about what would happen to believers who had already passed away before Christ's return.

So Paul has to provide some theological encouragement and counsel in chapter 4.

There are many ideas today about how to identify a local church that is truly **in** Christ.

Is it having a charismatic and charming figure as the pastor?

Is it a church whose members fit into a particular demographic criteria?

Is it an entertaining church that attracts large crowds?

Is it a church that is involved in social work?

Is it a church that offers a weekly experiences of emotion?

And as we will continue to see in this letter, **none** of these are what gave the Apostle Paul joy and comfort in hearing the report from Timothy.

Instead it was a church that was genuinely united to Christ, evidenced by a people who

Endured in their faith under trials,
Who were Sanctified in their personal holiness
Who were marked by a joyful receptivity to the Word
And Who eagerly expected and awaited the return of Christ.

And because this is an inspired letter, we know that these characteristics are not merely what pleased the Apostle Paul and his companions....

But these are the things that pleases the Lord Himself about a church.