

1 Thessalonians

Intro and Background

Paul is writing a letter to the church in the city of Thessalonica.

His tone is pastoral.

The City

- Established in 316 BCE
- In 187 BCE King Phillip V permitted the city to issue its own coinage.
- Rome took control of the city in 168 BCE.
- The leadership of the city was shrewd and made a series of politically wise decisions.
 - A. The city did not support a revolt against Rome. This resulted in the Via Egnatia being built. This was a roadway that connected the east to the west from the Adriatic Sea to Thessalonica (on the coast of the Aegean Sea).
 - B. After Julius Caesar was murdered, the city supported Octavian and Marc Antony, not Brutus and Cassius. As a result, Antony bestowed upon Thessalonica the status of "free city". This allowed the city to operate with considerable autonomy, and still receive significant support from Rome.
- By Paul's time it would have been a huge, wealthy, city of significance.
- The largest ethnic population was Greek, but there were pockets of Italians, Thracians, and Jews (viewed by Romans more as a social group rather than an ethnic group).

Spirituality / Religion

- Greek deities widely honored, (Zeus, Aphrodite, Demeter, Artemis, Poseidon)
- Egyptian gods, (Serapis, Isis) - In 1917 an ancient temple was discovered now called Serapeion.
- The myth of Cabirus - Cabrius (depicted as young with no beard) is worshipped as a savior who would return and bless the people, especially the poor.
- Roman nationalism
 - A. A cult in honor of the goddess Roma - a female deity who personified the city of Rome. She embodied and idealized Rome's pride and self-exalting worldview, its advancement and its eventual domination of its neighbors. Roman political, moral and religious ideas were portrayed through Roma.
 - B. A temple for Caesar - Caesar was viewed as divine.
 - C. The Thessalonians had benefited greatly from showing loyalty and respect for Rome.
- Jewish Community - present in the city as early as the second-century BCE. The only place in the region that had more than one synagogue.

Acts (16-17) as a historic backdrop

Paul and Silas are in Philippi.

They cause a stir, are beaten and imprisoned, but are miraculously delivered.

Before they depart they encourage the new believers (including Lydia, the first believer in Europe).

As they continue to travel they reach Thessalonica.

Paul goes to the Jewish synagogue and preached about Messiah Jesus on three Sabbath days (17:1-2).

Acts 17:1-15

Most likely the size of the church was dozens, not hundreds.

There were a great number of Greeks.

Consisted of leading woman (vs. 4) - wealth and influence (Phoebe, Romans 16)

The good news of Jesus was gaining traction.

Persecution (social harassment) is taking place.

Old = good / New = bad.

When people are "like minded" it strengthens social order. This new belief is disruptive!

Followers of Jesus are disturbing social cohesion.

They fail to honor Rome and they are critical of civic laws, traditions, and expectations.

Paul is concerned about the Thessalonians faith.

Covenant Relationship -> complete trust in Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 3:5 For this reason, when I could no longer stand it, I also sent him to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter had tempted you and that our labor might be for nothing.

Paul's will remind the Thessalonian church of Jesus centered hope.

The timing of Jesus' return diminishes when we live faithfully in light of our identity.

Question: How would you describe your identity? What or who is it that defines your identity? Is Jesus your identity?

"Faith goes up the stairs that love has built and looks out the windows which hope has opened." ~ Charles Spurgeon

Hope -> embracing the invisible (but real) future promised by the invisible blue (but real) God.

Seeing the promises of God in the distance and welcoming them.

Question: Are you able to live a Jesus-centered life now even if the blessing doesn't come until later?

Paul sees a church that is beginning to lose its confidence and foundation of faith.

His purpose in writing the letter is to re-establish a firm foundation.

- Anchoring their faith in the past
- Encouraging their on-going resilience and love in the present.
- Reminding them of the hope of Jesus' return in the future.

One eye on hope and the other eye on the reality of the everyday.

"Hope in Jesus is the vision that drives believers who work and witness in a dark world as they dream of a redeemed tomorrow."

~ Nijay Gupta

The everyday requires diligence. Cultivation is a daily process and it takes work.

1:3 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.

2:9 For you remember our labor and hardship, brothers and sisters. Working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God's gospel to you.

3:5 (repeat)

4:11 to seek to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business,^[a] and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you,

5:13 and to regard them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Question: What are you cultivating? How would you describe yourself in the area of diligence? What does patience mean to you? How does God's word inform all of these areas?

Significant Images in the Letter

1. Church as Family

Intentional word choices are made -> Brothers and sisters / Philadelphia - sibling love / father (2:11), mother (2:7), sibling, orphan language

1 Thessalonians 2:17 But as for us, brothers and sisters, after we were forced to leave you (orphaned) for a short time (in person, not in heart), we greatly desired and made every effort to return and see you face to face.

2. Holiness (purity, sacrifice)

3. Mixture of bravery, salvation, loyalty (abiding), endurance, joy, and love

Question: Does your perspective of church as family need to change / shift? What does it mean to embrace the sacrifice of Jesus? Are you in need of bravery, endurance, joy, love? Are you abiding in the salvation found in Jesus?

vs. 1, sender - recipient, greeting

Silvanus (Silas, Acts 16:19) & Timothy - not co-writers but part of the team.

Paul is giving emphasis to plurality.

Paul speaks directly to the church in Thessalonica concerning their identity. Their identity is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is your *identity anchor!* Grace to you and Peace!

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful.

There is never a time in our human existence that we do not need to be reminded of the this truth.