

## *The Beginnings of a Great Church*

I Thess. 1:1-3; Acts 17:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

<sup>2</sup> We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup> We continually 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.

### **I. Background and Introduction to First Thessalonians**

#### **The City of Thessalonica**

##### **1. Thessalonica was a Thriving City**

- Thessalonica enjoyed a natural harbor that was perhaps the best in the entire Aegean Sea. The port of Thessalonica (Thessaloniki today) continues to be a busy and profitable port.
- The city was situated on or near the Via Egnatia (Egnation Way), the major east–west highway built by the Romans in the second century BC.
- Additional geographical factors ensuring the success of the city were its favorable climate conditions, fertile plains nourished by abundant rivers, rich mineral deposits (gold, silver, iron, copper, lead), and vast forests to provide timber for building. At the time of Paul's visit the city numbered approximately 80,000 people. [Pictures of Today]

##### **2. Thessalonica was a Free City**

This gave them a measure of autonomy over local affairs, freedom from military occupation, and lower taxes.

The city's leaders would deal aggressively with anyone or any group within the community whom they feared might jeopardize their favored status. This explains why the crowd and city leaders "were disturbed" (Acts 17:8) on hearing about the anti-Roman charges brought against Paul and Silas as well as about those local citizens who had embraced their teachings.

##### **3. Thessalonica was a Confused City – It was a Swirl of Religious Pluralism**

Thessalonica had a significant number of pagan cults and temples to diverse deities. The citizens were expected to participate in the local religious practices and festivals. Of course, Judaism existed amid this swirl of religions confusion (Acts 17:1–9).

## The Author of this Letter – Paul

### 1. Background on Paul

On his first journey, Paul and Barnabas sailed to the island of Cyprus and then planted churches in several cities in Asia Minor (Acts 13-14). A year later, Paul set out on his second trip, and this time his traveling partner was Silas. On the way, a young Greek believer named Timothy also joined the team.

Paul had a vision in which a man begged him to come to Macedonia. Without hesitation, they boarded a ship and sailed to the area that is northern Greece today, taking the gospel to Europe for the first time.

### 2. In Thessalonica – Acts 17:1-9

After Paul and his friends had been treated shamefully in Philippi, they journeyed 92 miles west to Thessalonica, following the Egnation Way. That's approximately 3 to 4 days on foot.

The Arrival: The local Jews would also have been eager to hear from a fellow countryman who might have news from Jerusalem and elsewhere. Furthermore, Paul had excellent credentials, having graduated from the "Harvard" school of Judaism: he had studied at the feet of the renowned Jewish teacher Gamaliel, "a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people" (Acts 5:34; 22:3). Paul remained there at least three weeks and probably longer, but he was able to minister in the synagogue for only three Sabbaths.

The Gospel made an instant impact as "Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women." (Acts 17:4)

We envision Paul preaching on street corners, but it's more likely that Paul connected with several people in the setting of a workshop. Paul linked his work and his preaching together. In 1 Thess. 2:9 Paul wrote, "We worked night and day, in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you." The workshop was often a setting for intellectual discourse and instruction.

While there were many who believed, there was also a lot of opposition. The Jews of the city became so enraged by his teaching, and jealous about his converts, that they hired "some bad characters from the marketplace." These thugs created an uproar and dragged Paul's host, Jason, before the city leaders, bringing their accusations against the whole movement.

The angry crowd lodged two charges against Paul and Silas. The first charge of disturbing the peace is ironic, coming from an angry mob that is disturbing the peace. The second charge was that "they are defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king."

one called Jesus" (Acts 17:7). All citizens of Rome made an oath of loyalty to Caesar so they were accusing Paul and Silas of insurrection against Claudius.

After receiving a "pledge" (a bond or guarantee that there would be no more trouble) from Jason, Paul and Silas would leave town and not return. Thankfully, Timothy was not implicated along with Paul and Silas so he was able to go back to Thessalonica and encourage the church (1 Thess. 3:1–5).

Paul is persuaded to flee to Berea where Paul began to preach again. However, the Jews from Thessalonica followed him, creating another uprising in Berea. Finally, Paul was sent on alone to Athens. He remained but a short time in Athens, and then went on to Corinth where he would stay for eighteen months. It was from that city, in the year 50 or 51 A.D., that he addressed this letter to the new believers in Thessalonica.

### **The Reasons for this Letter**

Timothy reported to Paul that the church was doing well but was under intense pressure to cave to the culture around them. Timothy also let Paul know that there was some confusion about the return of Christ, along with some moral and doctrinal problems in the church.

Paul wrote this letter of encouragement for several reasons.

1. To provide hope and encouragement during their growing persecutions. Not only was there a growing mistrust of Christians from Rome, but the Jewish opposition was relentless.
2. To encourage and instruct these young believers. We sometimes have a distorted view that the early Christians were always on fire, winning every battle in Christ's name. But they also had very normal problems. Sexual perversion was common and was even regarded as a religious right. To live a life of purity was regarded as weird. Sound familiar?

This letter is filled with practical instruction on to live the Christian life. Some of the topics include conversion, integrity, compassion, the Word of God, heavenly rewards, suffering, prayer, moral purity, hard work, the second coming, the role of spiritual leaders, and dealing with difficult people.

3. To encourage the church about the return of Christ. Every chapter of 1 Thessalonians concludes with a reference to the return on Jesus to this earth. This was meant to fill the church with encouragement and joy. [Share about the dread some people have with end time teaching.]

## II. **The Core of a Wonderful Church**

<sup>2</sup> We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup> We continually 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 church at Thessalonica is a model for LCBC to emulate. 1 Thessalonians 1:7: “And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” Paul’s prayer highlights three essential ingredients that the Thessalonians had at its core.

### A. **Their Work Produced by Faith**

<sup>3</sup> We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith,

The Greek word used here for “work” (Ergon) has the sense of vocation, not necessarily toil or labor. Our primary vocation is being a Christian.

Faith must always demonstrate itself in action. We are saved by faith alone but that faith should produce good works. James 2:17: “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” We don’t work in order to be saved; we work because we are saved. We are not justified by faith plus works, but by a faith that works.

### B. **Their Labor Prompted by Love**

<sup>3</sup> We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love,

The word for labor here is kopos. It is different from the word for work in the previous phrase. Ergon (work) emphasizes the result of the effort while kopos emphasizes the pain and discomfort involved in the effort.

Love must be our core motivator in everything we do. When we’re truly motivated by love, serving others becomes a joy and delight. I’m reminded of what Jacob said when he labored for Laban for seven years in order to get Rachel for his wife in Genesis 29:20: “So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.”

### C. **Their Endurance Inspired by Hope**

<sup>3</sup> We continually 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.

To endure means to demonstrate strong fortitude in the face of opposition or difficulty.

This endurance was inspired by hope. Hope is powerful! It means to look forward with total confidence. It's amazing what we can endure if we know that tomorrow will be better.

The "hope" from which this steadfastness originates is not a feeble wish or desperate desire that things will somehow turn out right in the end; rather, it is a confident belief "in our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Peter 1:3-4 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-kept in heaven for you.

### **Conclusion – Flow Into Communion**

The core of Christ going to the cross – a work produced by faith, a labor prompted by love, and an endurance inspired by hope.

### **Final Encouragement**

First Thessalonians is one of the easiest New Testament letters to understand. Everything is simple, clear and direct. If you want to know Paul's doctrine, read Romans. If you want to know his heart, read 1st Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians is also one of the shorter letters in the New Testament. It contains only 79 verses and can be read easily in about 15 minutes. I encourage you to read the entire book at least once a week for the next two months.