

A Letter from Paul!
I Thessalonians

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Gerrit Scott

I first came awake to Christ in the summer between my 8th and 9th grade years. As I've recounted to you, it was both a simple and a miraculous experience. I had been searching for a deeper connection with God; I had been resisting surrendering control of my life to Christ. At the end of our week of summer camp, one of the counsellors gave a simple invitation to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. No card to fill out, no aisle to walk, no hand to raise. Just an invitation to pray silently in your own words. And suddenly I could. Joy filled me. That night the Scriptures went from being an impenetrable tome to words written just for me. Prayer and song became vital. I was lit up by Christ's Spirit.

Others in our youth group had a similar experience in the last year. We didn't know we were part of what would come to be described as the Jesus People movement. In the early 70's millions of young people entered a personal, experiential relationship with Jesus. This made us strikingly different from the adults in our church. We had a bustling, faithful congregation. We heard Scripture read, and a sermon preached, albeit tepidly, every week. We sang classic hymns, made prayers of confession and intercession. But for most of the adults there was little personal intimacy with God. Church was what good people did and part of living a good life and doing good works. They believed but they weren't, as I experienced our church, particularly passionate about Christ.

So as young people, we were desperate to be led. We read the Bible and talked about it together. We prayed together. We supported each other. But we longed for someone who had met Jesus the way we had but had more experience with how the whole life of discipleship goes. What do I do with my feelings of guilt? Do I have to confess every single sin in order to be forgiven? What happens if I don't feel the joy anymore? Am I still a Christian? I find I'm afraid the devil is going to get me. Is that possible? It hurts when people make fun of me for being a Christian and wearing a cross.

How do I get through that?

I really wanted to talk to some of the high school students who had led us at camp. I wanted our camp counsellors to lead us in the faith. But they lived far away. We weren't old enough to drive. Long distance calls were expensive and I wasn't allowed just to use the phone to call out of town. Of course, there was no internet. So we had to write letters. Hand written letters stuffed in an envelope, stamped and taking a few days to get there. In particular, I wrote to the girl we called Nature Nancy, because she led the nature classes at camp. She had an overflowing joy in Jesus. And she was willing to answer me.

I didn't get many letters from her, maybe only four or five that year. But they meant the world to me. I'd check everyday to see if a letter came to me. The rare times I'd receive a fat envelope with her handwriting on it was better than getting a suitcase of gold. She wrote verses to me and explained them. She assured me about the peace that passes understanding that would keep safe through rejection and difficulty. Early on, I learned God doesn't prevent suffering but he sees us through it. She would quote lyrics from Andre Crouch songs. There were very few Christians doing the kind of music we related to. I played my Andre albums over and over. She told me that it was normal to feel guilt for sin in ways I hadn't before I was in Christ. She gave me verses about claiming forgiveness. Especially she taught me James 4: "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." And 1 John 4, "Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world." I got disciplined through precious letters from an older believer who knew what I was going through.

The church in Thessalonica was only a few months old. Paul had been forced to leave the city before he had taught them and led them into maturity. In a city of 100,000 or more people, there were perhaps only a hundred Christians. Thessalonica was a harbor town. And a trading town. All the vices were in full bloom: sex trade, gambling, swindling, drugs. All kinds of pagan religious practices appeared much more dramatic and interesting than the quiet services of the Christians. Their families would have thought they had gone weird on them—just like my parents worried about me. They could so easily have been sucked back into their old lives. The Thessalonians longed for encouragement and direction. Paul could not re-enter the city. So after he heard that they were still meeting, still pursuing

Christ, he *wrote* them.

Imagine what it would have been like, after going all week feeling like fish out of water, to gather in a house one Sabbath morning to sing, pray, hear Scripture and share the bread and the cup. Worship would be so precious. Then imagine the day your young leader said, “I have a surprise for you! We have received a letter from Paul!” The man who taught you the gospel sent a letter full of love, wisdom, encouragement and advice. Many of the Thessalonians were illiterate. And there was only one letter anyway. It would have been read aloud that day in worship. Yes, let’s imagine, that we are that little church. We are those new believers, desperate to hear more about Jesus and to hear our many questions answered. And this morning, we get to hear personally from Paul. Kevin McCarter will take us now to that very moment. [Kevin recites the entirety of I Thessalonians]