

Intro

1 Thessalonians is Paul's earliest known letter, written around 50CE, to the church in Thessalonica, in the Roman province of Macedonia. Paul and his companions visited Thessalonica on their second missionary journey between 49-50CE, after being imprisoned and beaten in Philippi for disturbing the peace. Paul had to leave Thessalonica suddenly (he was run out of town, essentially) because of his teachings to the church to divert their attention away from worldly concerns of prestige in expectation of the imminent end of time. See Acts 17: 1-15 for more information on these events. Paul was unable to ever return to Thessalonica, and so sent Timothy back to them while he was in Corinth. He was pleased to hear from Timothy that the church had stayed faithful to his teachings. Thessalonica is at the foot of Mt. Olympus in Greece (yes, THE Mt. Olympus), so the idea of following any religion other than Greco-Roman religion, in this region where you can SEE the home of the gods in front of you would have been laughable and/or offensive to the wider community.

Chapter 1

“Grace and Peace” is a combination of the classic Greek greeting of “Grace” (charis), and the classic Hebrew greeting of “Peace” (shalom). Paul begins his letter celebrating the faith of the Thessalonians, that they received the gospel message with joy and embodied it for others, in spite of the persecutions they faced. They turned to the “living and true God” as opposed to the numerous idols worshipped by the Greco-Romans. The converts were mostly Gentiles. Vs. 9-10 are essentially a very early Christian creed. This is the core of what they believe, of what Paul was teaching.

Chapter 2

Paul, Silas, and Timothy had already been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, and yet kept pressing onward in Macedonia to spread the gospel. God gave them the courage they needed to set an example for other Christians to hold fast to the faith in spite of persecution. Our speech is not to please mortals, but to please God –who knows our heart. Paul shares that they did not come serving their own interests –as was the normal way of interacting, and indeed is still the normal way of presenting one's self. Rather, they came as servants, as a nursing mother feeding her own children. Paul's mission is self-less, self-emptying, like a mother's love, following in the example of Jesus Christ. The content of their preaching

night and day was urging the Thessalonians to “live a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

The anti-Jewish tone in vs. 13-16 has been used to justify anti-semitism, but Paul himself is writing as a Jewish Christian, and he is not talking about all Jews (which is how this passage has been misconstrued), but rather specifically about those leaders of the Jewish community (the local synagogues and the Temple in Jerusalem) who actively persecuted the Church (including those specific leaders who plotted to have the Romans kill Jesus). Paul is making the parallel that by imitating Christ the church is facing the same persecution that Christ endured. The persecution that Paul has endured has prevented him from returning to Thessalonica, thus making him feel like the church has been left orphaned (continuing the metaphor of himself as the church’s nursing mother). Paul is so proud of the church he can’t wait to tell Jesus all about their faithfulness when he comes again!

Chapter 3

Though Paul was unable to visit them, he was able to send Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in the faith. Paul has been worried about the church because of the persecutions, but it turned out that the church at Thessalonica was flourishing and healthy, full of love and faith! Paul returns to the theme of joy that the church stirs up within him, and offers words of prayer for the church. Try praying this for your loved ones: *“May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”*

Chapter 4

Paul tells the church basically to “keep doing what you’re already doing.” The goal of life is sanctification (the work of the Holy Spirit, which makes us holy as we carry on throughout our course of life, growing in faith and discipleship). Paul gives some specific examples (though not an exhaustive list) of ways the church at Thessalonica can practice living holy lives (all of these very counter cultural life choices): observing a holy and healthy sexual expression by abstaining from fornication by either abstaining altogether or taking a wife, so that no one will be exploited, live quietly, mind your own business, and create with your hands –learn how to do what is needed for survival, so that you won’t be dependent on those who are persecuting the church. These words of wisdom some across as isolationist

to our modern ears, but were necessary for spiritual and physical survival in this culture.

Vs. 13-18, Paul describes what the church is imminently waiting for (the return of Jesus Christ in glory), and the implications this has for the normal human experience of grief. Paul is not saying “don’t grieve”, but rather “don’t grieve like those who have no hope.” Christ will descend from heaven, the dead will rise boldly first and be gathered to him, and then those of us left on earth will meet Christ on his descent, and he will be with us forevermore. This passage is the one place that talks about what Evangelical churches call the “rapture.” However, this passage is not talking about us all being beamed up to heaven, but rather about us meeting Christ halfway as he brings heaven down to earth. It was a common custom in the ancient world for servants to go and meet travelling dignitaries halfway down the road as they approached their city, to parade them into town with great pomp and circumstance. This is the image Paul is describing here, of the church parading with Jesus Christ as he victoriously carries heaven down here to earth, where we will dwell with him forevermore.

Chapter 5

Paul continues the encouraging theme of “keep doing what you’re doing, you’re doing great,” while reminding them of Christ’s teachings that the timing of the end will come unexpectedly –like labor pains come upon a pregnant woman. He reassures the church that they have nothing to fear, and that they should guard their hearts (breastplate) with love and faith, and guard their minds (helmet) with the hope of salvation.

Paul concludes his letter to the Thessalonians with some admonitions: Always seek to do good to one another and to all, pray without ceasing, rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances. Knowing this was a time of persecution, this may seem like an impossible list to achieve, but this is truly the gift of faith that enables us to be thankful and joyful and kind in spite of our present circumstances.