**1 Thessalonians 1:1**

slide 1

**Introduction**

***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. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;***

* With that opening salutation, this morning we begin our study of Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica.
* Surprisingly, despite the positive nature of Paul’s message to the Thessalonian church, I have never heard this letter preached. And despite having done many group Bible studies over the years, I’ve never done a study of 1 Thessalonians.
	+ I’m not sure why this letter does not receive more attention. Perhaps it is because the major doctrinal teaching in this letter is eschatological, dealing with the controversial subject of the ***parousia*** . . . the return of the Lord for His church.
* But as we examine and study this letter I think that you will find it to be as much an encouragement to you as it was to the saints in Thessalonica.

**The background of 1 Thessalonians**

* As we prepare to study this first letter to the Thessalonians, it is important to establish the context in which this letter was written. In other words, **why did Paul feel it necessary to write this letter?**
* In order to establish the context of the letter we are going to spend some time this morning in the book of Acts.

slide 2

**Acts 16:6-10—The Call To Macedonia**

* To understand how Paul came to be in Thessalonica, we first have to understand how Paul came to the region of Macedonia. Acts 15:36 records the beginning of Paul’s Second Missionary Journey. Returning to Asia Minor and the scene of his first missionary journey, Paul intended to continue preaching the gospel in Asia Minor. But in Acts 16:6-10 we learn that God had a different plan for Paul . . .

***Acts 16:6-10— 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.***

* It is not reveal how God manifested His message that Paul was ***“forbidden”*** from speaking further in Asia. We only have what is writing Acts 16:6.
	+ So, having been forbidden by both the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus to preach the gospel in Asia, as they had planned, Paul and his traveling companions, Silas and Timothy, realize that God has called them to preach the gospel in Macedonia.
* So, having been forbidden by God from preaching further in Asia, and discerning that God wanted them to go to Macedonia, Paul and his friends first traveled by ship and then by land, arriving in the major city of Philippi. There Paul encounters a group of women praying alongside a riverbank on the Sabbath. We learn in Acts 16:14 that included in this group of women was ***Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God***.
	+ Paul joins the women and preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. And upon hearing the gospel message, Lydia and her household, along with others, believe and are immediately baptized. Anxious to learn more and to help Paul and his companions, Lydia invites them to stay in her home, which they accept.
* While preaching in Philippi, Paul becomes exasperated by a demon-possessed girl who was following him and ***kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation."***
	+ When Paul casts the demon out of the girl, her masters lose the profit from her fortune-telling and bring a false accusation against Paul and Silas that results in them being beaten and thrown into prison.
	+ In Acts 16:25-34 we then have the account of the conversion of the Philippian jailor.
	+ Following their release from their night in prison, the local officials are terrified to learn that both Paul and Silas are Roman citizens. As Roman citizens, it was unlawful for them to have been judged without a trial, beaten and imprisoned the way they had been.
	+ Learning of Paul’s and Silas’ Roman citizenship and knowing their own part in the illegal treatment of Paul and Silas, the local officials plead with Paul and Silas to quietly leave Philippi, which they do only after taking the time to bid their goodbye to Lydia and the saints in Philippi.

**Paul and company arrive in Thessalonica**

slide 3

* Leaving Philippi, we then see in Acts 17:1 that ***when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.***
* The ancient city of Thessalonica was named after half-sister of Alexander the Great and was the capitol and largest city in Macedonia and a center of commerce and travel. Its port made it a strategic trading center and its location on the Roman *Egnation Road*added to its commercial importance.
	+ To this day Thessalonica remains a major city in the region.
	+ The fact that Luke records the presence of ***a synagogue of the Jews*** in Thessalonica indicates that there was a significant Jewish population in the city.

**Paul preaches the gospel to the Jews first**

slide 4

* Then, in Acts 17:2-4 we learn that ***2 according to Paul's custom, he went to them* [the Jews]*, 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.***
* Throughout the book of Acts we learn that whenever Paul arrived in a new city that had a Jewish synagogue, he would preach the gospel to the Jews first.
	+ Usually within only a few messages the majority of the Jews would reject the gospel as blasphemy and expel him for the synagogue.
	+ But in virtually every synagogue he preached, **some or many** would hear and believe the gospel message and follow Paul. Sometimes even the leader of a synagogue would leave and follow Paul.
* Notice in Acts 17:4 that among those who believed were ***a large number of God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women***.
* Within every synagogue in Asia and Greece that Paul came to, he always found a number of ***God-fearing Greeks*** who had become students of the Jewish teachings.
	+ As D. Edmund Hiebert points out, the reason we find Gentile converts in the synagogues of the Jews is because *some Gentiles were disillusioned with their pagan gods and pagan morality were drawn to the purer ethical teachings of the Jews*.
	+ But though there were many Gentiles attending services in the Jewish synagogues, most were informal adherents. They learned and appreciated the teaching of the Jews, but did not accept the narrow nationalism and legalistic ritual requirements of Judaism.
* In Acts 17:4 we are also told that ***a number of the leading women*** within the synagogue of Thessalonica also follow Paul.
	+ A.T. Robertson points out that *it is noteworthy that in Thessalonica, as in Philippi, leading women take a bold stand for Christ. In Macedonia women had more freedom than elsewhere.*

* + Whether independent women of means, such as Lydia, or the wives of influential Thessalonian husbands, it is significant that ***leading women***, not “leading men,” play a significant role in the spread of the gospel.

**Two universal outcomes of Paul’s teaching in the synagogues**

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***Acts 17:4-5— 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. 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.***

* Throughout Paul’s many journeys and opportunities to preach in the Jewish synagogues, two outcomes were constant and universal . . .
	+ First, **some people would hear and believe.**  As we read in Acts 17:4, the elect Jews who heard the gospel believed and followed Paul’s teaching.
	+ On the other hand, **many would hear the gospel and not believe.** As we read in Acts 17:5, those Jews who rejected the gospel became jealous and declared Paul a blasphemer and persecuted him to the point of plotting and conspiring to murder him or to have the Gentiles kill him.

**Trouble with the Acts 17 timeline**

slide 6

* As you read Acts 17:4-5, it seems as though the two verses describe events that occur simultaneously . . . that some Jews and Gentiles in the synagogue believed and followed Paul, while the unbelieving Jews immediately created trouble for Paul.
	+ **But this is not correct.**
* If the events of Acts 17:4-5 did occur simultaneously, this would lead to the conclusion that Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica only lasted for 3 weeks and he was immediately driven out of Thessalonica by the Jews after being ejected from the synagogue.
	+ **If this were true, when did Paul find time to evangelize, teach and form a close friendship with the Gentiles in Thessalonica?**
	+ The great affection with which Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians clearly indicates a great friendship had grown between Paul, Silas and Timothy and the saints in Thessalonica.
	+ **Apparently the book of Acts does not tell the whole story.**
* It seems likely that Luke’s description of Paul only being allowed to preach the gospel in the Jewish synagogue for **3 Sabbath days** describes only the length of time Paul preached to the Jews before taking the gospel message to the Gentiles, as was his practice.
	+ As he had in Philippi, Paul preaches to the elect Gentiles in Thessalonica and the Thessalonian church is formed.

**How long did Paul remain in Thessalonica?**

slide 7

* But the question remains, **how long did Paul remain in Thessalonica before the events of Acts 17:5 forced him to flee?**
* Francis Beare states that *the pastoral care with which the apostle had followed up his evangelism and the strength of the affection which he had developed toward his converts would suggest, if not absolutely require, a period of months rather than weeks.”*
	+ In other words, it seems very likely, in light of other evidence, that while Acts 17:5 gives the impression that Paul was immediately run out of Thessalonica after only 3 weeks, he, in fact, remained in Thessalonica for a period of several months before being driven out of Thessalonica by the Jews.

**Paul’s travels after leaving Thessalonica**

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* But Paul is eventually persecuted by the Jews to the point that he is forced to flee. After being forced to leave Thessalonica, we read in Acts 17:10-12 that Paul travels 40 miles west, to Berea, where he encounters a group of devout, but open-minded Jews, who receive the gospel with gladness.
	+ But upon learning that Paul was in Berea, the Jews of Thessalonica come to Berea and, once more, incite the pagan Greeks to rise up and persecute Paul.

* Apparently only Paul was the object of the hatred of the Jews, as we read in Acts 17:14 that he leaves Silas and Timothy in Berea, while he, alone, flees southward to Athens.
	+ The remainder of Acts 17 records Paul’s activities in Athens as he fled southward.
* Following his departure from Athens Paul travels alone to Corinth. Then, finally, in Acts 18:5 we learn that Silas and Timothy rejoin Paul in Corinth.
	+ It is from Corinth, after receiving the report from Silas and Timothy on the condition of the Thessalonian church, that Paul writes his first letter to the Thessalonians, followed shortly thereafter by his second letter.

**Why did the Jews so aggressively persecute Paul?**

slide 9

* As you study the life and journeys of Paul and read of the constant persecution he suffered at the hands of the idolatrous Gentiles and jealous Jews, the question that comes to mind is, “why did the Jews hate Paul so viciously?”
	+ Considering the great hatred that he, himself, once held toward Christians, it is understandable that the suggestion that Jesus, the executed blasphemer, was the promised Jewish Messiah would raise the ire of the Jews.
* But more than rejecting the gospel and ejecting Paul from their synagogue for teaching heresy, the Jews often pursued Paul into other districts in their attempts to have him arrested or killed. Why?
	+ Well, the primary reason the Jews had such an animated hatred of Paul was **jealousy**.
	+ For years the Jews had been wooing receptive Gentiles with the hope that they would embrace the Jewish faith. But these hopes were shattered by the work of the missionaries who came preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not only were large numbers of the God-fearing Gentiles being won by the apostle, but the continued success of Paul among the Thessalonian Gentiles ruined any hope the Jews had of reaching and converting the Gentiles. Paul’s success in teaching about Jesus Christ ruined any chance the Jews had of converting the pagan Gentiles to Judaism.
	+ And for this reason they not only despised Paul, but sought to both discredit him as a false teacher and to remove any further influence he might have among the Gentiles.
	+ Being foreigners and a minority, the Jews could not act directly against Paul. Instead, they had to resort to manipulating the local Gentile rabble into inciting violence against Paul or blaming their rioting on some supposed offense given by Paul.

**Why did Paul write to the church in Thessalonica?**

slide 10

* It is safe to assume that because Paul was forced to prematurely flee Thessalonica that he did not have time to complete his instruction of the new believers there.
	+ And not only had Paul not been able to complete his instruction to the Thessalonians, but following his departure, the believers in Thessalonica came under attack by the jealous Jews.
* The form of the attack of the Jews first came in the form of calling into question of the gospel message they had believed and the character of Paul as an accused blasphemer and false teacher.
	+ When the believers did not succumb to this direct attack on the gospel, the Jews resorted to the “tried and true” back-up plan of physical attacks and intimidation.
* Knowing that the Thessalonian believers were at risk, both spiritually and physically, Paul was justifiably concerned for their well-being.
	+ And being unable to be with them to give them strength caused Paul great concern. Seeing the Thessalonians as his spiritual children, Paul was very concerned for their safety.
* With Silas and Timothy having now rejoined him in Corinth and having received their report on the condition of the Thessalonian church, Paul now feels compelled to write for several reasons.
* **Exhortation:** In **chapter 1** Paul first expresses his joy and relief at hearing of the steadfast faith and love growing within the Thessalonian church.

slide 11

* + Despite the attacks they had come under, God was blessing them abundantly and they were flourishing.
* **Defense**: In the **second chapter**, knowing that the Jews were continuing to assail his message and his motive, Paul is compelled to offer a defense of both.

slide 12

* In the **third chapter** Paul explains why he was only able to send Timothy to them and not return personally. But upon hearing Timothy’s report, Paul rejoices to hear of their perseverance of faith.
* **Instruction**: In **chapters four and five** Paul then goes on to give some instruction to the new believers in Thessalonica.

slide 13

* + First, Paul addresses a reported concern of Timothy, that some of the Thessalonian believers were in danger of falling back into their former immoral heathen ways.
	+ Therefore, Paul feels compelled to warn the Thessalonian believers of this danger and exhorts them to remain steadfast in their brotherly love and faith.
* **In the second part of chapter four and chapter five** Paul’s instruction comes in the form of answers to two significant questions vexing the Thessalonians.

slide 14

* + The Thessalonian believers were of the mistaken view that if someone died before the return of Jesus Christ, that person would be excluded from the promise of eternal life.
	+ In response, Paul explains in 4:13-18 how all believers, whether dead or alive, will participate in the return of Jesus Christ for the church.
* The **second major question**, which Paul answers **in chapter 5**, is related to the subject of the return of Christ. In chapter 5 Paul reveals the things that will occur preceding the Lord’s return.

slide 15

**The Three-Fold Purpose of 1 Thessalonians**

* So, we learn that Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians serves **3 purposes:**
	+ To **exhort** and encourage the church in Thessalonica.
	+ To **defend** himself against the charge by the Jews that he was a false teacher and was preying upon them.
	+ To **teach** 2 major points of doctrine, in response to questions that had arisen in the church.

**Paul, a man like us**

slide 16

* One of the things that comes from a study of the book of Acts and Paul’s letters is a great admiration and appreciation for the faith and character of the apostle Paul.
	+ In several places in Paul’s writings we are reminded of the degree of persecution Paul endured in service to the Lord, **especially at the hands of the Jews**. Paul was truly a man of faith and willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ.
* But we have to remember, especially in the book of Acts, that the events recorded are extremely brief and lacking much “back story.” It is only when you explore more deeply that you begin to see and understand some of what Paul was feeling at any particular time.
* The apostle Paul was, after all, a man like each of us . . . experiencing all the emotions that we feel. He experienced elation, hope and great joy in seeing so many people responding to his preaching. But he also experienced great sorrow, fear and trepidation because of the hatred, opposition and persecution that he encountered.
* But Paul also experienced great frustration and discouragement in his life.
	+ Imagine what Paul was going through. As he preached in Thessalonica, he is elated to see many people receiving faith in Jesus Christ and he begins to teach these excited new believers.
	+ But even as he is teaching the essential doctrines of faith, Paul is almost immediately set upon by hostile Jews and pagan Gentiles, who see him and his teaching as a threat. So, being unable to complete his instruction of the new Christian converts, Paul is forced to flee for his life.
	+ And as he is forced to flee, Paul knows that the new believers are still lacking much in their knowledge of their Savior and will be set upon by the savage wolves who will seek to deceive them and destroy their faith.
	+ Paul must have been greatly discouraged as he was forced to flee from one city after another, always feeling that he was leaving his new brothers and sisters, babes in Christ, in grave danger.
* As I mentioned, Paul’s most frequent opponents were unbelieving Jews who opposed Paul out of jealousy.
	+ The Jews were trying to win the pagan Gentiles as Jewish converts and saw Paul’s message as a direct threat to their own efforts. Therefore, the Jews sought to undermine both Paul’s teaching and his character. **And they had some success in their strategy**.
	+ For example, in one of his first letters . . . to the Galatians . . . Paul expresses his frustration that the Galatian believers were falling under the spell of the Judaizers, who wanted to add the works of the law to grace. In Galatians 1:6 Paul expresses this discouragement with the statement . . .

***Galatians 1:6 — I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;***

slide 17

* Later, after having spent 18 months establishing the church in Corinth, it is necessary for Paul to write a series of letters instructing and rebuking the Corinthians for various problems that had come to light.
	+ In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul is compelled to defend his apostleship from the Jews who, once again, had succeeded in attacking Paul’s character before the Corinthians to the point that Paul has to write to defend himself. In 2 Corinthians 11 we read Paul’s sarcastic statements that precede his defense of himself . . .

slide 18

***2 Corinthians 11:18-31— 18 Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. 19 For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. 20 For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face. 21 To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison.  But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself. 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. 23 Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. 24 Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. 26 I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; 27 I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28  Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? 30 If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.***

* When you read statements such as the ones I just read in Galatians 1:6 and 2 Corinthians 11 . . . and others . . . that you get a feel for the degree of frustration and discouragement that Paul felt during his years of ministry.
	+ Yes, he had great success in leading thousands to Christ. And yes, God did watch over him and bless him in so many wonderful and miraculous ways. But Paul still felt the frustration & discouragement of seeing so many people being lured away from the truth by the opponents of the gospel and by their undiscerning hearts.
* Despite being one of the greatest men of faith, Paul was not a “superman.” He was, in the end, a man like us. He experienced the heights of great elation, but also the depths of great discouragement and frustration.
	+ So, as we begin our study of 1 Thessalonians, keep these things in mind. Having been reunited with Silas and Timothy and having gratefully received their report that the Thessalonian church was strong and thriving, Paul feels it necessary to write them to further solidify the saints in the church of Thessalonica in their faith.