

- \***READ Acts 17:1-3\*** Paul's time in Thessalonica was like his time in other places in some ways while it was dissimilar in other ways. Paul, per his custom, made his way to the synagogue so that he might reason with them from the Scriptures. His main goal was to give evidence as to why it was that Jesus was truly the Christ. His main argument seems to have been concerning the resurrection. Based upon God raising Jesus from the dead, "*This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.*" (**Acts 17:3**) This message was nearly universal in Paul's dealings with the Jews who should have been able to connect the dots of the teachings of the Law along with the Prophets.
- However, unlike his other stays Paul was not able to spend much time at all beyond these initial days of establishing disciples in Jesus. Persecution and strong opposition quickly forced Paul towards the next stop of his preaching journey. And yet, this persecution didn't cause Paul to wash his hands of these brethren. Instead, we find him very quickly writing this letter of I Thessalonians as soon as within a year after his departure from Thessalonica.
- As I read and colored my way through this letter over the past couple of weeks, I came to notice some pretty strong and evident themes throughout the letter, and I eventually settled on this letter centering around a compliment that Paul offers up on behalf of these disciples in **1:9**. Thessalonica was, like many Roman cities, a hot bed for idol worship, especially the worship of Caesar as deity. However, these brethren are strongly commended by Paul in this verse for having turned away from serving idols so that they would be able to serve a living and true God. Let's look at some things I noticed as themes in this letter that tie into this main idea, and then we will close with three simple practical points that will hopefully help us as we ourselves strive to serve the one living and true God.

## I. What I Noticed When I Read *The First Letter To The Thessalonians*

### A. Paul greatly appreciated these brethren.

1. It is not usual for Paul to begin his letters with a mentioning of his appreciation for those whom he is addressing the letter being written. However, Paul seems to go above and beyond in the kindness that he shows to these brethren in this letter. "*We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 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.*" (**1:2-4**) The reasoning for his great appreciation for these disciples centered completely around their faith, what it led them to do, and the impact it had on others.
2. What was the impact of their faith? Their faith and the example they put forth had an impact on all of the believers who were in Macedonia and Achaia. Everywhere their faith was made known it seems that they served as a great encouragement. (**1:7,8**) No doubt this encouragement was a result of the tremendous change that had taken place within themselves. Paul notes that they had turned away from idols who were lifeless and false and turned to a living and true God who resided in heaven and had sent His Son to die for their sins. (**1:9**)
3. Knowing this reality of what had been done for them, it should be no surprise that these brethren were willing to go in their faith to the extent that they would be imitators of Paul, his companions, and even the Lord Himself. (**1:6**) This is only the first time that Paul refers to them in such a way with the second time being found in **2:14**. Not only do both of these verses mention them as being imitators, but it is also important to notice that they were also fellow sufferers along with Paul. The circumstances in which they received the word and were living out the word were not the best of circumstances. In fact, Paul notes that they had received it amongst much tribulation and they continued to endure the "*same sufferings*" at the hands of their own countrymen. Sure Paul knew a little something about that! He knew how difficult it could be to be faithful in a place you were not wanted, and for all of this he was extremely grateful for their brethren.

**B. Paul seeks to reassure them of the validity of their faith in him as an apostle of Jesus.**

1. One of the issues and difficulties that these brethren seemed to have been facing was the presence of false teachers who were trying to turn them away from the faith that had been implanted within their hearts by the Apostle Paul, his teachings, and his efforts. In **2:14-16**, Paul addresses specifically the troubles that had been given to him and that were being given to these brethren by the Jews. These were the same people who hindered Paul, and he would even go on to say that they were the same kind of people who were guilty of killing Jesus and the prophets. They not only hindered Paul's works in the synagogues, but they also tried to keep him from sharing the Gospel with the Gentiles! These people were nothing but a thorn in the side of the Apostle Paul, and yet he wasn't too worried about them because he was confident that they were going to suffer the wrath of God for their sins. (**2:16**)

2. Paul highlights the wickedness of their actions so that he might be able to turn around and show just how different he was from the way they operated. Paul makes the claim that his message was coming to them not from a place of error, impurity, or deceit. (**2:3**) Instead he was only trying to share with them that which was approved by God and according to the Gospel. His heart was not on pleasing men, but only on pleasing God who was able to truly examine their hearts. (**2:4**)

3. From **2:5-13**, we find Paul listing the different ways in which he behaved towards them and how those actions should prove to them that he was truly coming in the name of Jesus.

- a) He didn't come with flattering speech as if he was looking to monetarily gain from them. (**2:5**)
- b) He didn't seek to gain notoriety or glory from anyone he associated with. (**2:6**)
- c) He didn't throw around his valid authority as an Apostle. (**2:6**)
- d) He was gentle and affectionate towards them because he deeply cared for them and their spiritual well-being to the degree that he not only extended to them the Gospel but he even offered his own life to them. That was how dear they were to Paul. (**2:7,8**)
- e) He worked hard among them so that they would have every opportunity to know the Gospel. (**2:9**)
- f) He and his companions were devout, upright, and blameless in their behavior towards these brethren during their time with them. (**2:10**)
- g) He continually exhorted, encouraged, and implored each of them as a father might his own children so that they would walk in a way worthy of God's grace. (**2:11,12**)
- h) He did all of this without taking any shortcuts because he truly wanted to the brethren to recognize that what he was sharing with them wasn't the words of men, but that it was truly the word of God...the living and true God of heaven, and he was thrilled that this was how they actually received him and his teachings. (**2:13**)

4. When comparing the actions of Paul to the actions of those who were causing these brethren issues...it becomes extremely obvious that only Paul and his companions were from Jesus and acting on His authority. In writing this letter, Paul truly wants for these brethren to know just how much he appreciates their work and he wants to them to only be confident that those things they had learned from him were those things that were pleasing to God. Their faithfulness brought nothing but joy and happiness to the heart of Paul. (**2:20**)

**A. Paul encourages them toward continued faithfulness.**

1. And yet, Paul wasn't content with them simply being faithful up to this point. We see this as Paul's mindset beginning in **3:1-5**. He could no longer bear the thought of these brethren not having encouragement, so it was his desire for Timothy to go to Thessalonica so that he might strengthen and encourage them concerning their faiths. Paul wanted no part of them being truly disturbed by the difficulties they were facing.

2. Thankfully for Paul, he states that he received a good report from Timothy as to the state of the church when he spent time with them. Paul heard nothing but good news concerning their faith and love. He was thrilled to know that they were constantly thinking of Paul and looking forward to seeing them once again. This news even helped for Paul to be comforted during his own times of distress and affliction. Even with their success, he still tells these brethren that he would still be continually praying that he might be able to come to be with them if it was the Lord's will that he be able to do such a thing. (**2:6-13**)
3. Then as chapter 4 begins, Paul continues to write to them concerning their need for furthered faithfulness and excellence in what they did. He specifically addresses their need for sexual purity and know how to control their bodies and desires (**2:3-7**), and then he further encourages them to continue to excel in their love for the brethren and their proper behavior towards outsiders. (**2:9-12**) These brethren were doing things well, and yet Paul still took time to encourage them to continue in their faith to the point of doing even better than they currently were. This might sound unnecessary to us, but Paul knew that this type of continual pressing on towards excellence would help for these brethren to stay the course in their faiths.

#### B. Paul reminds them of the promise of Jesus's return.

1. It was necessary for these brethren to stay the course because the return of Jesus was still to come. Paul writes a lot concerning Jesus's return in this letter and even addresses it again in his second letter to the brethren, but let's focus just now on the instances that it is mentioned in this first letter to the Thessalonians.
  - a) First mentioned in **1:10** following his words concerning them turning from idols to a living God.
  - b) It is mentioned again in almost passing **2:19** as Paul is discussing the place that these brethren had in his heart. Their faith stood as something for him to boast about even at the coming of Jesus.
  - c) Paul also mentions his desire to bless these brethren again before the coming of Jesus. (**3:13**)
  - d) He then really gets into what seems to be one of the issues at hand which was an apparent lack of knowledge on the behalf of these disciples concerning the state of those who had died up this point in Christ. (**5:13-18**) Paul wants for them to be comforted by knowing that upon the return of Jesus those who had "*fallen asleep in Jesus*" would be the first be raised up to meet Jesus in the air. Then it would be those who remained that would be called up to join the rest of the saved with their Lord.
2. Paul then concludes the letter by simply reminding these brethren that they would not know when the Lord would return, so they only needed to worry about being prepared for such a return. They could be prepared by being of a sober mind, taking upon themselves faith, love, and the hope of salvation. (**5:1-8**) God had not saved them just so that they could be destroyed in His wrath, so they needed to make sure they were working hard to live in such a way that they would all be saved and experience the ultimate salvation that was to be revealed at the coming of Jesus. The last few verses are Paul's usual laundry list of things that they needed to be doing in their lives so that they might be prepared for that great and awesome return. (**5:11-24**)

### V. Practical Points

#### A. Through our faithfulness to Christ we can become examples that will encourage others.

1. Each of us who are disciples of Jesus have the ability to encourage others to be strong in their own faiths. In fact, this is not just a suggestion, but Paul says that this is a responsibility that each of us have just as it was responsibility of the Thessalonians to do so. (**I Thessalonians 5:11**) We can be busy encouraging others in many different ways, and one such way is in what we are doing right now in gathering together as a church to worship with one another. (**Hebrews 10:24,25**) We can also encourage one another by speaking kindly to one another. (**Ephesians 4:29**)

2. But we can also encourage one another by the example we show in the way that we deal with the difficulties of life. This seemed to be what really helped the Thessalonians to stand out in their faiths. It wasn't easy being a Christian in Thessalonica, but despite the tribulation (**1:6**) and sufferings (**2:14**) they endured...they continued to press on in faithfulness to Christ. Therefore, I would strongly encourage those who have faced extraordinary difficulties to be the first people to reach out to others who might be going through difficulties of their own. It is one thing to express love and care for someone simply because you love them, but it is another level of help when we might be able to share some tidbit of advice that helped for us to get through the same kind of ordeal. To know that others have made it through to the other side and are willing to help us get there can do nothing but help and encourage us as we face the difficulties of life. It is what being a big spiritual family is all about.

**B. We must always be pursuing continued growth and excellence in our faithfulness.**

1. As I read throughout this letter of Paul's, I couldn't find a single word of rebuke against these brethren. In fact, every time Paul seems to be offering a rebuke he would quickly follow it up with something along the lines of, "*not that you're not doing this well already...*" (**4:1,9,10**)
2. What this tells me is that even the most faithful of Christians are in need of constant reminders of what God expects of them. The reality is that there are some people here in this audience that I might never introduce something new to from the pulpit. You have been around the block a time or two. You have heard just about everything. And yet, you continue to show up and listen Sunday after Sunday. You continue to read, study, and meditate on God's Word day in and day out. Why is this the case? Let me suggest that it is because Jesus expects for us to continue to work, work, and work until He returns just as the song we sing reminds us. If we stop putting in effort to remain sharp in our faiths then we shouldn't be surprised when we find ourselves less spiritually fit than we once were. These brethren were already walking well (**4:1**), but Paul knew that they could do even better and grow even stronger in their service. If it was true for these brethren, then it certainly can be and is true for us.

**C. That continued pursuit of faithfulness will leave us prepared for the day of Jesus's return.**

1. Finally, that pursuit of constant growth and improvement will only aid us in being ready for the day when Jesus returns. Like the Thessalonians, we do not know when that day is going to take place. Therefore, again like the Thessalonians, we must only be concerned with making sure that we are prepared for such a day to take place.
2. Thankfully, the way in which we can be prepared for such a day is the same way that these brethren could and would be prepared. We simply need to continue to pursue excellence in our faithfulness to God. We, too, need to take up faith, love, and the hope of our salvation as our tools and weapons in this spiritual warfare. (**5:8**) We, too, need to follow the admonitions of Paul from **5:11-22**. Nothing really has changed since their day. The judgment still remains in the future, and we still are responsible for being prepared.

Paul most certainly loved these brethren in Thessalonica. He longed so much to be with them so that he himself might encourage them to even greater heights of holiness and faithfulness. What a honor it must have been to have been thought so highly of by the Apostle Paul! While our aim is not to gain honor for ourselves, the reality is that such an honor is reserved only for those who serve our Lord in the highest levels of faithfulness. This ought to be our goal. We ought to be like these brethren in being fully devoted to serving the living and true God of heaven. As we go throughout this week, I want to encourage each and every one of us to make that our goal and aim. May we all keep in mind who we serve and the goal with which we are motivated: to be ready for the glorious return of Christ Jesus our King. May God bless us this week to live up to such a high and honorable standard.