

## **THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF A HEALTHY CHURCH**

### **1 THESSALONIANS 1:4-10**

**I. March 6 was the 160th anniversary of the Dred Scott decision. That was a famous, or infamous, Supreme Court case involving slavery. Dred Scott was a slave who was taken to Illinois and Minnesota by his owner. He ended up in Missouri. When the wife of his master refused to release Dred Scott when he sought to buy his freedom, he sued. His lawyers argued that because he had lived in states that outlawed slavery, he should be freed.**

**The whole case was complicated. But at the heart of it was the opinion of the court authored by Chief Justice Roger Taney, in which he declared that African Americans could not be citizens of the United States. He wrote that they are "regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." Many legal scholars regard this as the worst decision that the Supreme Court ever made.**

**At the anniversary of this decision two weeks ago, Charlie Taney, a descendant of Roger Taney, and Lynne Jackson, a great-great granddaughter of Dred Scott, had this meeting in front of the statue of Roger Taney by the Maryland State House. Charlie Taney apologized on his family's behalf, to Scott's descendants and African Americans in general for the "terrible injustice of the Dred Scott decision." In turn, Lynne Jackson accepted the apology on behalf of "all African Americans who have the love of God in their heart so that healing can begin."**

**It strikes me that this is a beautiful illustration of the principles that we identified in the beginning of our study of 1 Thessalonians two weeks ago that are essential to a healthy church. There is faith, love and hope. At least**

**Lynne Jackson recognizes that such virtues are rooted in the God who is really there. They also relate to grace and peace, the greeting with which the apostle Paul began this letter in v.1. For grace is necessary for the establishment of real peace, or shalom, as the Jews called it. It was grace that resulted in a peaceful reconciliation here.**

**As we began our study, I pointed out that Thessalonica was a key city in Greece on an arm of the Mediterranean Sea. It was a seaport and the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and a center for shipping agricultural goods and a stop on the Egnatian Way that stretched from Italy on the west to Constantinople on the east.**

**Paul came to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. Acts #17 tells us that he preached the gospel for three Sabbaths in the synagogue there. Then the Jews kicked him out. He stayed in the city for a while after that. Then the Jews organized a riot, and Paul was forced out of town.**

**From Thessalonica the apostle went to Berea. He was involved in starting a church there. Again he was run out of town. Then he went to Athens. The sophisticated people there were not receptive to his message. So he moved on to Corinth, probably at the end of 49 AD, or early 50 AD. A few months later Paul's coworker Timothy showed up from Thessalonica with a report that the new church there was doing well. That prompted Paul to write and send this letter to the Thessalonian Christians.**

**Last time, I pointed out from v. 3 of 1 Thessalonians #1 that the Christians in that city were commended for their faith, their love and their hope. I suggested also that faith has a certain concern for the past. Christian faith is based upon what happened in past history, especially when Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead. Love has about it a concern for the present. Christian love is focused on serving God and serving other people in the here and now. Hope has a concern for the future. It has a focus on the promises of God concerning heaven and what He will eventually bring about upon the earth. The meeting of the descendants of Roger Taney and Dred Scott is a beautiful illustration of those principles in**

action. In the remaining verses of #1, there is a further development of these three themes.

II. In vv. 4 & 5 of #1 we learn about **THE HEALTHY CHURCH'S FOUNDATION IN A WORK OF FAITH**. In v. 4 the Apostle Paul writes, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you..." This work of faith involves belief on our part. But its origin is with a choice of God.

Notice first that Paul calls the Christians at Thessalonica "brothers." Fifteen times in this short epistle he calls them that. He is including women within that designation as well as men. Most of the congregation was comprised of Gentiles. Paul was Jewish. But he was not just Jewish, he was a Pharisee by training. Like Roger Taney, he was trained to be a racist. For we know from the writings of the Pharisees that they said that the Gentiles were inherently unclean. Pharisees were not to eat with Gentiles. They were not to enter their homes. That is one of the reasons they did not like Jesus. For Jesus hung out with sinners and sat down with a Samaritan woman and welcomed Gentiles.

Furthermore, Paul describes these Thessalonian Christians as "beloved by God." In some of the writings of the Pharisees Gentiles are described as being hated by God. The apostle describes the Christian Gentiles as being loved by God.

Why were they loved by God? Was it because they chose to trust in Christ? They did make that choice. But notice here that Paul says that "he [God] has chosen you..." In what sense has He chosen them? The next verse speaks about the gospel. So it would seem that his choice has to do with becoming Christians. The origin of this work of faith, the Apostle indicates, was not in the choice of these Thessalonians, not even with the preaching of Paul, but in God's choice of them.

In the Gospel of John in #6 v. 44 Jesus told the disciples, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." In Ephesians,

which we studied here not too long ago, we saw the same Paul write in vv. 4 & 5, "...He [God the Father] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ..."

Some Christians avoid discussion of this doctrine of election, or predestination. It seems too hard to grasp, and it seems to be controversial. But we need to keep in mind that Paul was only in Thessalonica for a couple of months. Yet he had already explained this doctrine to the new Christians there. His words here assume that the Thessalonian Christians are familiar with his teaching on the subject.

Part of our difficulty with this doctrine, I suspect, is that we like to think that we are all deserving of God's grace and God's salvation and God's heaven. But the truth is that we are not deserving of these things. We are by nature sinners. We are rebels against God. We don't deserve these good things. It is only because of God's gracious love toward us that we have the experience of His salvation.

Paul is confident that the people in the church at Thessalonica are among God's elect. For he has seen evidence of a genuine faith. He has seen these people demonstrate faith, love and hope, all of which are rooted in a relationship with Christ.

In v. 5 Paul makes reference to the coming of the gospel to them. He says, "...because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."

Paul identifies three elements that were involved in their evangelistic outreach. First, he says that the gospel came with power. The Greek word is *dunamis*, from which we get our English word "dynamite." If Paul had used the plural form of the word, it would be translated as "miracles" or "signs." But he does not use that plural form, and there is no indication in

**Acts or in these two letters to the Thessalonians that he had healing services there or did any spectacular miracles. It is possible that he did miraculous signs, but it is not recorded. So what was the nature of this power? Was it power resident in the message, or was it power displayed in the presentation by Paul and his coworkers? Or was it both?**

**The text is not clear. My guess is that it had to do with the boldness of these missionaries in the face of much opposition. In Acts #1 v. 8 Jesus promised His disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and that they would become witnesses to the rest of the world.**

**Paul makes reference here to the Holy Spirit. He says that the gospel came to them in the Holy Spirit. Jesus in John #16 said that when He went away, He would send the Holy Spirit, who would convict people of their sins. Perhaps Paul has that in mind here. These Thessalonian Christians were convicted by the Holy Spirit of their sinfulness when they heard this bold presentation of the gospel.**

**The second element in this evangelistic outreach identified in v. 5 is that this gospel came to them "with full conviction." Paul and Timothy and Silas preached boldly and with much conviction. Their past personal experience with the gospel showed them the radical change that God could make in the lives of individuals. Their experience of preaching the gospel gave them confidence that many would respond positively to their message.**

**Paul, thirdly, makes reference to the kind of men whom they proved to be among them. Their lives backed up their message. As we shall see in #2, there were a few people at Thessalonica who were criticizing Paul and his friends. They were questioning their motives. Paul is reminding the believers who know him what kind of people he and his cohorts proved to be.**

**The primary lesson here for us is that healthy Christians in a healthy church need to share the gospel with confidence, knowing that it has the power to change lives. It has changed our lives. It can change the lives of others. We do this sharing with the awareness that God has chosen to draw some around us to Himself. We don't know who they are. Our job is simply to make the message known and pray for the people in our sphere of influence. The Holy Spirit will convict some of their need for Jesus. Our responsibility is to share the message, and strive to have a life that backs it up.**

**III. Then in vv. 6-9 we come to THE HEALTHY CHURCH'S RESPONSE OF A LABOR OF LOVE. Paul writes in v. 6, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit..."**

**The only Christians that these new believers at Thessalonica initially knew were Paul and Silas and Timothy. It was only natural that they imitated the way of being of these three missionaries. As they heard more about Jesus, they also began to pattern their lives after Him. This imitation was a sign of love for Jesus and for the missionaries. We tend to imitate people whom we respect and admire.**

**It is important to also notice that these conversions came in the midst of much tribulation. According to Acts 17, the missionaries were initially allowed to preach in the synagogue. But after three Sabbaths, they were kicked out of the place. The Jews began to react angrily toward Paul and his companions. Acts 17 tells us that some of the Jews did decide to follow Jesus. These Jewish converts faced ostracism from their fellow Jews. They were no doubt expelled from the synagogue. Some of them may have lost their jobs.**

**Acts 17 says that a mob of Gentiles joined the Jews in causing a riot against this Christian movement. Gentile Christians as well as Jewish believers apparently faced persecution. Acts 17 says that a number of**

leading Gentile women believed. Perhaps their unbelieving husbands made life difficult for them.

In the midst of this tribulation the new Christians experienced joy. How is it possible to experience joy in the midst of great tribulation? Missionary doctor Paul Brandt had his medical internship in London during the Battle of Britain in World War II. Nightly air raids and physical destruction made life difficult. Death was close at hand. Dr. Brandt remarked, "Yet I have never lived among people so buoyant." Years later many Londoners who lived through the war remembered the Battle of Britain as the happiest period of their lives. How could that be? Because they were convinced that they were part of a great cause.

This is what energized the new Christians at Thessalonica. They became part of a great cause that was worth living for and dying for. Moreover, the text says that they experienced divine joy that came from the Holy Spirit. Happiness can be viewed in one way as an emotion that is dependent upon circumstances. Joy is dependent upon our relationship with the living God.

Paul adds in v. 7 that these Christians became imitators of them and of Jesus in the midst of tribulation "so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." They became an example of love for God and love for others in the face of trying circumstances.

Macedonia and Achaia were the two Roman provinces that included what we know today as Greece. Achaia was in the south and included the cities of Athens and Corinth. Macedonia was in the north and included Thessalonica and Berea and Philippi. Christians in new churches planted in these other places heard about the church at Thessalonica and came to regard it as a good example, as a model of a healthy church.

The word for "example" in Greek is *tupos*, or "type." Originally the word referred to a hit, or a blow, or a punch. Then it came to refer to the mark, or indentation that was left by that blow. Then it came to refer to the image, or

**the pattern, that was formed. Here in our passage it is used in the sense of a pattern, or model, to be followed.**

**This is the only time that Paul uses this word in the New Testament to describe a church. He is calling the Thessalonian church a model, a type, of a healthy church. It is not a perfect church. Wherever you have sinners, even Christian sinners, there will be problems. But it is a healthy church that has responded well to sometimes difficult circumstances. It is worthy of imitation.**

**Was it worthy of imitation because of its building program? Because of its youth ministry? Because of its innovative style in its worship services? Because it had a gifted preacher? No, Paul does not even talk about style or details of methodology. He is more interested in virtuous behavior in the face of trials. He is focused on their faith and their love and their hope. These qualities always take precedence over style and mechanics.**

**Paul adds in v. 8, "For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything."**

**A few commentators suggest that it is the reputation of the Thessalonian church that has gone out to surrounding areas. But it seems more likely that it is the word of the Lord itself, the gospel, which has gone out. The Thessalonian Christians themselves have been spreading the gospel. The exact method that they have used is not described. It is not the key issue.**

**Probably they were using a variety of methods. They were telling family and friends about the spiritual change that they had experienced. They were also in a strategic location. There were sailors and traders and merchants in Thessalonica. Acts #17 specifically mentions that a number of leading women in the community had come to faith in Jesus. All of these people were spreading their stories about what happened as they moved**



about the region. Verse 6 implies that this was done in the face of opposition.

As they did this, the good news "sounded forth." The original word means "to ring out." It is like the signal that an amplifier receives and sends out even more loudly.

This was truly a labor of love, love for God and love for the unsaved. Whenever we share the gospel with people around us, we are demonstrating love for God and for people who are spiritually lost. Some of our efforts also ring out beyond our own local area. We bring kids in the church van from Henderson and Las Vegas. We also have prison ministry that has involved volunteers among us doing Bible studies in jails and correcting Bible correspondence courses for inmates in Nevada prisons. We get requests from prisoners in northern Nevada for copies of our sermons. The women's prison looks forward to having our choir sing there a couple of times a year. These are things, it seems to me, that characterize a healthy church.

According to v. 9, "For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God..." Paul and Silas and Timothy were getting reports from people in Greece and the wider Roman Empire about how Christianity had come to Thessalonica. How specifically were they getting these reports? According to #3 of this book, we know that Timothy had just come to Paul from Macedonia. So he brought some of these reports. Silas had come from Philippi. He was talking to Paul about the things that he had heard. There may have been other sources as well.

Notice how the reports are worded: "...how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God..." This suggests that most of the people in the congregation are Gentiles. Jews did not worship idols. Acts #17 says that there were a number of Gentile proselytes who had been coming to the synagogue. Many of them were drawn to Jesus. They had probably already given up idol worship when they started attending the synagogue. The

**implication is that the gospel spread quickly beyond people who had a connection to the synagogue to pagan Gentiles who came more directly from a background of idol worship.**

**The religious culture at Thessalonica was polytheistic. The Gentiles worshiped many gods. They might have had one or two favorites that were the special object of their devotion. But generally they accepted the idea that there were other gods who had various powers. These pagans were willing to accept the notion that there were other gods whom they did not know about. It would have been acceptable to them if the Christians wanted to add a Jesus temple to the religious buildings in Thessalonica. But what would have gotten them worked up was the claim that their idols and the gods they represented were nothing and that there was only one true God and that the only way to Him was through Jesus. That would have upset them.**

**It was, in some ways, similar to the religious culture in our society. The prevailing attitude, at least among the cultural elite, is that there are many paths to God. If Jesus works for you, that's fine. But there are other ways as well. When you Christians start claiming that Jesus is the only way to God, then you are going to have trouble. Even some who call themselves Christians buy into this philosophy.**

**Joseph Hough was the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City for nine years. He wrote, "For Christianity, the claim that salvation is possible only in Jesus Christ is, in the end, dismissive of other religious traditions and inherently divisive. If Christians are to be instruments of the peace of God, we must develop a new Christian theology of religions that will enable us to see God's revelation in Jesus Christ while at the same time rejecting any claim to exclusivism. .... The various religions... become specific paths of faith.... [They] constitute a true saving faith to those who are believers and who practice faithfully the best of their traditions."**

**That is not the message that the Thessalonian Christians heard. That is not what they were proclaiming to others. It was only in turning from false gods to the one true God that they found joy and meaning and purpose in life. It was that exclusive and divisive message that also drew the flack from others, and it is what draws flack to us sometimes today.**

**Notice how Paul describes this spiritual transformation as turning "from idols to serve the living and true God." There are some strains of evangelical Christianity where the focus has been placed upon getting God to serve us. If we know the right formula and have the right kind of faith, we can get God to make us happy, healthy and prosperous. The true Christian life, however, is not about figuring out secrets and formulas to get God to serve us. It is about learning to serve Him.**

**We live in an entertainment culture and in a metropolitan area that some regard as the entertainment capital of the world. This entertainment culture has an effect on how we Christians approach Christianity and church. We are tempted to approach church services or Bible studies or Christian meetings and focus on how our needs are met. We want to hear a good message and quality music in a pleasing environment. We don't want the whole deal to be too long. If what we experience pleases us, then we have been satisfied, perhaps even entertained.**

**The first century Christians at Thessalonica were focused on serving God, not on being entertained. They had come out of religions that appealed to people's baser instincts, that encouraged people to be involved in drunken orgies and to visit religious prostitutes and to stuff themselves on feast days. Now they wanted to get serious with the living God. They wanted to serve Him.**

**Is that your interest? Serving in the church is not the only way to serve God, but it is one way. We always are on the lookout for help with children's church and vacation Bible school and women's ministries and volunteers who are willing to witness and teach behind bars and chaperones who are willing to help with our van ministry and people with**

good backs who are willing to help our music leader move. The first century Christians at Thessalonica were committed to a labor of love to serve God and serve others. That is a mark of a healthy church.

IV. Finally, in v. 10 we come to THE HEALTHY CHURCH'S DEMONSTRATION OF HOPE. Paul says that the Thessalonian Christians turned from idols to serve God "and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." This healthy church demonstrated faith, love and HOPE.

The focus of this hope was the Second Coming of Christ. Some Christians find the Bible's references to end time events to be too difficult to understand. For some, it is too controversial. Yet Paul taught about these things during his brief stay at Thessalonica. He regarded this theological subject as appropriate, and even necessary, for new Christians to understand. We will find that each chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the Second Coming of Christ. According to one commentator, one of every thirteen verses in the New Testament makes reference to the Second Coming.

So it is a topic that warrants our attention. Paul indicated that the prospect of Christ's return was a good motivation to help Christians to persevere in the midst of hard times. It was a source of hope.

When I think of longing for a loved one's return, I picture our dog Princess. Princess was a standard poodle that we had in our family. She was a mama's dog. When Suzy left the house, she typically perched herself on the couch at the front window and looked outside, waiting for her return. Sometimes she would not move from that perch for a couple of hours. When she did spot her car coming, her tail would begin to wag. Princess would start barking, and she would run for the front door. I wonder if that is something of the attitude that the Lord wants us to have toward His Second Coming.

**Paul in our text speaks of longing for the return of Jesus to deliver us "from the wrath to come." We may not like to think about God being wrathful, but the Bible teaches that wrath is an aspect of His character. Because He is holy and righteous, He is also wrathful against unrighteousness and evil. This wrath of God is displayed in various ways and at various times in the Bible. It is displayed upon Egypt and its pharaoh in Exodus when the Egyptians resist God's order to let the Hebrews go. It is displayed in famines and wars when God brings judgment upon Israel for its waywardness. This wrath is displayed when Ananias and Sapphira lie to the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts.**

**Was Paul here thinking about a specific time when God's wrath would be poured out, or was he talking about an outpouring of God's wrath on unbelievers in a more general sense? Because of his reference to the return of God's Son from heaven in v. 10, it seems more likely that the Apostle is making a reference to the seven year period of tribulation that precedes that Second Coming and that is described in more detail in the Book of Revelation.**

**In #4 Paul speaks about the rapture of the church. I suspect that such is the deliverance that he has in mind here. A more particular question debated among evangelical Christians has to do with the timing of this rapture. Are we delivered from this wrath to come in the sense that we are kept from having to go through it, or are we delivered from it in the sense that we are taken out of the world in the midst of it, or at the end of it, or that we are somehow protected during it?**

**In Revelation #3 v. 10 the Apostle John quoted the message of Jesus to one of the churches in Asia Minor, saying, "Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from--- same preposition--- the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth." The reference appears to be to the coming seven year Tribulation, during which God will display His wrath upon rebellious mankind. On the face of it, the Lord seems to be saying that Christians will not have to experience this hour of testing.**

**In our passage, the return of Christ was regarded as something to which the Thessalonian Christians could look forward. If Paul was intending to teach Christians that they would have to live through the Tribulation, that Second Coming might not seem to be so inviting. But here the Second Coming is presented as a motivation for Christians to persevere in the midst of suffering. It involves a hope that Christ might return at any time.**

**Likewise, the return of Christ should be a source of hope for us. Jesus will come back. It could be at any time. He will not only deliver us from the time of Tribulation, but He will also reward us for our faithfulness.**

**The Thessalonian church was new and small. It had problems and difficulties. But it was a healthy church. For the Christians there exhibited faith, love and hope. They had a commitment to serve God, and they became an example to other Christians.**

**There were a number of refugee camps to which Afghans fled during the difficult years when the Taliban took over in Afghanistan. One of the worst of these camps was in Peshawar in Pakistan. Plastic sheets were used as tents in the midst of a field of mud and dust. One Christian group came in and brought 5000 sandals. The Christians who brought these shoes insisted upon washing the feet of the people to whom they were given. Many of the feet that they washed were not just dusty and dirty but also bloody and covered with sores.**

**Sometime later a little girl was in a school in the refugee camp when the teacher asked, "Who is the best Muslim?" The little girl raised her hand and said, "A kaffir" (which is Arabic for "unbeliever"). After the teacher got over her shock, she asked, "What do you mean?" "The Muslims in the Mujahedeen killed my father. The Christians washed my feet."**

**Like the church in Thessalonica, we may not be a large church. But we can be a healthy church--- if we will focus on the basics, if we will demonstrate faith, love and hope, if we will display the kind of humble service**

**demonstrated by these Christians who came to Afghanistan, if we will emulate the kind of response that the first century Christians in Thessalonica had to the gospel. May that be true of us.**