

**THE BEGINNING OF A HEALTHY CHURCH
ACTS 7:1-9; 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-3**

I. Many of us evangelical pastors in Boulder City have been frustrated at times at the difficulty we have had in seeing our churches grow in numbers. We have tried a variety of different programs and outreaches, but none of us have grown significantly in size. One of the biggest parts of our congregation is the prisoners that we have reached through Bible studies and correspondence courses. But for some reason they don't show up here on Sunday mornings. Just last year another evangelical church was started in town as a result of a church split.

We pastors were curious a few years ago to see how one evangelical church would do when it moved into town. It was a church that had grown greatly in size in Henderson. It started out in a school and soon added multiple services and additional staff. It got its own beautiful building and continued to grow. I have been to the church a couple of times and have heard the pastor speak, and he is a good preacher. I have met a couple of the staff, and they seem like good people. Several years ago they had the opportunity to take over an abandoned church building in Boulder City and started a new congregation.

They anticipated a similar kind of growth, but it did not happen. They fired the first pastor when growth projections faltered. The second pastor later resigned. The current pastor continues to be a bi-vocational pastor. I have had lunch with him, and he seems like a fine guy. But they have not had the same kind of membership success that the mother church had over the hill.

Perhaps none of us Boulder City churches will become large in size. That, of course, does not excuse us from reaching out to our community and seeking to win disciples and being faithful to the Great Commission. But I have also noticed that the Apostle Paul never criticized a church in any of his letters for not being bigger in size. In the messages of Jesus to the

seven churches in the Book of Revelation He does not criticize any of them for not meeting growth expectations in terms of numbers. In all of these addresses to churches in the New Testament, however, there is much that is said about spiritual health. So I wonder if perhaps we are better served by focusing on spiritual health, on developing and maintaining a church that is spiritually healthy.

So today we are beginning a study of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. The church that was started in Thessalonica was seemingly a healthy church. It was a new church, and probably a relatively small church, but it was a good church. By the things that were happening there, and by Paul's directions to them, we can learn lessons that apply to us, both corporately as a church, and individually as Christians who are part of a local congregation.

II. So let's begin by considering THE FOUNDATION OF A HEALTHY CHURCH. To do that we are going to look at the New Testament Book of Acts in #17, from which Jack read to us earlier. It is on p. 926 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, if you would like to follow along.

Thessalonica was a city in what we know today as Greece. It was founded three centuries before the time of our story by one of the four generals who took over the country after Alexander the Great died. General Cassander named the city after his wife, who was also Alexander the Great's half-sister. A couple of centuries later the city was conquered by the Romans. They made it the capital of the province of Macedonia. It was still serving as a Roman provincial capital at the time of our story in the first century AD.

After Julius Caesar was killed in 44 BC by Brutus and Cassius, there was a fight between them and the forces of Marc Antony and Octavian, who later became the Emperor Augustus. The decisive battle happened up the coast near Philippi. The people of Thessalonica sided with Marc Antony and Octavian. That was a fortunate choice, because those guys won. As a reward Thessalonica was made a free city. That meant that its people were

given the right to self-government. At the time of our letter to the Thessalonians the people there continued to enjoy the rights of a free Roman city.

Thessalonica had a number of things going for it. It was a port city that had a good harbor on the sea. Further inland there was a fertile plain that produced lots of agricultural goods that were suitable for being shipped around the world. The city was also located on the Egnatian Way, which was a major Roman road that went all the way from Italy in the west to Constantinople in the East.

Being a Roman provincial capital, there was a significant population of Roman citizens who were present. Being a trade center, there were Jewish businessmen around. Being a seaport, there were sailors in town. There were tradesmen of other backgrounds and blue collar workers and slaves. In the time of Paul it is estimated that there were as many as 200,000 people in the city.

The vast majority of people in Thessalonica were polytheistic. They worshipped Greek and Roman gods. They might have a favorite god, perhaps related to their trade or work, but they generally respected other gods as well. The worship of some of these gods involved temple prostitutes and wild, drunken orgies. The low moral and ethical standards of these religious groups prompted some Gentiles to seek out spiritual truth in the synagogue. The Jews were a small minority of the total population, but belief in one God and the higher standards of Judaism were attractive to a few of the Gentiles.

The city of Thessalonica is still around today. It is known by the Greeks as Thessaloniki. It has a little over 300,000 people. In our last congregation we had a college student around who came from Thessaloniki. It was fascinating to find out from him about the place. Unfortunately, there are very few evangelical Christians in the city. The prevailing religion is Greek Orthodoxy.

Many of you students of the Bible will remember that the Apostle Paul was involved in taking three different missionary trips from his base in Antioch in Syria. On Paul's second missionary journey the Apostle was sent out by the church at Antioch. This was about 49 AD. He brought with him Silas, who was a Jewish Christian from Jerusalem. Like Paul, he was a Roman citizen. The two men visited churches that they had started in Asia Minor on Paul's first trip. In Lystra young Timothy joined Paul and Silas. As the group was approaching the western end of Asia Minor, Paul had a vision.

Luke tells us in Acts #16 vv. 9 & 10, "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." Thus Christianity made its entrance into Europe.

This little missionary group made its first stop at Philippi. They started with a small group of Jews. A church got started, but after a couple of months, there was a riot. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into jail. After an earthquake they were freed. The authorities found out that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. They realized that they could be in trouble for treating Roman citizens in this way. They pleaded with Paul and Silas to leave town, which they did. Their next stop was Thessalonica.

We pick up the story then at the beginning of #17 in Acts. In the first four verses, we read, "Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women."

Notice that there was a significant number of Greeks who were attending the synagogue. Many of them responded to the gospel. I expect that Paul's message included the explanation that one could become right with God without becoming Jewish. That must have found an especially responsive audience among these Gentiles.

Then, according to vv. 5-9, there was trouble: "But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go."

It isn't clear exactly what this security was. Apparently Jason and some of the other new Christians had to put up money that would be forfeited if the missionaries were found to be a source of contention in Thessalonica. Verse 10 adds, "The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue."

If we had only these verses to understand what happened in Thessalonica, we might get the impression that after three weeks of preaching in the synagogue, there was a riot, and immediately the missionaries were forced out of town. But we will find out in this letter that we are studying that Paul was in the city long enough to do tent making work. Also he and Silas were there long enough to receive at least one gift from the Philippian Christians, who heard that Paul was working there. Most importantly, these missionaries got a church started there. So probably after Paul and Silas were forced out of the synagogue, they did additional preaching to Gentiles in the city, and they spent time teaching the new Christians about Jesus. This continued to irritate the Jews. After perhaps a couple of months, they organized this riot that did force the Christian leaders out of town.

Their next stop was Berea. After a while, they would again be run out of town. Christians facing such circumstances today might well conclude, "Clearly this can't be God's will for my life. Things are too difficult. Doors are being closed. God must want me to do something else." But Paul and Silas and Timothy were right in the center of God's will for their lives. Timothy seems to have been with them, too. Problems and difficulties do not necessarily mean that we are not doing what God wants us to be doing. Significant things done for the Lord usually encounter opposition and problems. Furthermore, people did become Christians, and churches got started.

We have friends who went to Thailand about thirty years ago. They spent a couple of years learning the Thai language. Then they moved to a remote part of northwestern Thailand among a tribal group known as the Pwo Karen people. They spent a couple of more years learning their language. When they were at the point of beginning to explain the Bible in their language to these people, the husband came down with a bad case of malaria. At about the same time, a Buddhist priest showed up in their village, encouraging the people to turn to Buddha. Nobody could remember when a Buddhist priest had last been in that village. Then rebels from a conflict in Burma to the west came over the border, and the government asked the missionaries to leave the area for a time.

Finally, our missionary friends started explaining the Bible to these people. After a couple of years, a church got started in that village. Then the first New Testament in their language was produced. The church in their village grew, and the Christians began to plant churches in other nearby villages.

Whenever we seek to do something for the Lord, whether it is teaching Sunday school, or doing music in the church, or serving on a church board, or sharing the gospel, or starting a Bible study, or going overseas as a missionary, we should expect challenges and difficulties. For the Bible says that we are involved in a war against spiritual beings who do not want the cause of Christ to move forward. But if there is a Biblical basis for what we are doing, we can be confident that God will use our efforts to

accomplish good purposes, among which will be promoting a healthy church.

III. Let's consider next THE OCCASION FOR THE LETTER TO A HEALTHY CHURCH. What was it that prompted the Apostle Paul to send this letter to the Thessalonians? After Paul was run out of town at Thessalonica, he went to Berea. After planting a church there, he was again run out of town. From there he went to Athens. The people in Athens were too culturally and philosophically sophisticated to buy into the Jesus thing that this strange Jewish guy Paul was proclaiming.

So Paul went on to Corinth, probably in late 49 AD. We can date these events within a year or so because Paul had an encounter there with the Roman governor Gallio. We know from Roman history that Gallio came to Corinth in 51 AD and stayed only a brief time. Toward the end of Paul's stay in the city, according to Acts #18, he had a meeting with Gallio.

After arriving at Corinth, Paul sent Timothy to check up on the church at Thessalonica, and he sent Silas to Philippi to check up on the church there. Probably in early 50 AD they came back to Paul in Corinth and gave him a report about the Christians in these two cities. In Acts #18 v. 5 we are told, "When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus." Macedonia was the Roman province where Thessalonica and Philippi were located.

This was the situation that prompted Paul to write this letter to the church at Thessalonica. He got a good report from Timothy about the church there. He found out that the young Christians were doing well in spite of challenges and problems. So he wrote this letter to encourage the Christians, to address problems that needed to be confronted and to explain key points of Christian doctrine, one of which had to do with the Second Coming. The return of Christ will prove to be a central theme of this short little book.

IV. So let's look at the first three verses of 1 Thessalonians, which are found on p. 986 in the black Bibles. The theme here has to do with **THE ENCOURAGEMENT FOR A HEALTHY CHURCH**. In v. 1 Paul writes, "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace." In v. 18 of #2 we see that Paul is indeed the author. Timothy and Silvanus, or Silas, are with him when he is writing this.

Paul used the basic form of a greeting of a first century letter from the Roman world. But he gave his letters a couple of distinctive Christian twists. Compare the introduction of his letter with this greeting in a letter from a Roman in the first century to his mother: "Antonis Langus to Nilus his mother, many greetings. And continually do I pray you are in health. I make intercession for you day by day to the Lord Serapis."

Serapis was a pagan god also worshipped in Thessalonica. The style of the opening of this letter is similar to Paul's greeting. The Roman identifies himself and the reader. He sends greetings. He indicates that he prays for his mother.

The Greek word for "church" in Paul's greeting is *ekklesia*. It was used by Greek-speaking people to refer to many public gatherings or associations. Paul uses it consistently to refer to the Christian community.

He says that these Christians are "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This was perhaps the second New Testament letter written by Paul. It comes only about 17 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. Already we see clear teaching that God exists in the person of the Father and of Jesus Christ. In v. 5 he will also make mention of the Holy Spirit. The term "Lord" was used in the Greek language by the Jews to refer to the Hebrew YHWH of the Old Testament. By calling Jesus Christ "Lord," Paul is saying that Jesus is YHWH, as is God the Father.

This is one of the reasons that many of the Jews reacted so negatively to Paul's preaching. They could not buy the idea that Jesus was YHWH. They could not accept the notion that Jesus was the Messiah and that He was God in the flesh.

It is still a problem for religious Jews today. It is a problem that Jehovah's Witnesses and other cults have as well. It is a major obstacle for Muslims. But the idea of the Trinity is an essential Christian teaching, which we see reflected in this verse.

The Roman citizens also did not like it that the Christians called Jesus "Lord." That was a term, in their view, that was supposed to be reserved for Caesar. There is an evangelical theologian and historian of considerable reputation in the theological world by the name of N. T. Wright. He says, "The emperor was the *kyrios* [that's the Greek word for 'lord'], the lord of the world, the one who claimed the allegiance and loyalty of subjects throughout his wide empire. When he came in person to pay a state visit to a colony or province, the word for his royal presence was *parousia*." That is another Greek word which we will find is going to be used in this letter by Paul to refer to the return of Jesus Christ to earth.

In Acts #17 v. 7 the charge brought against the missionaries before the civil authorities in Thessalonica is that "...they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." That was the charge that stuck against Jesus before Pontius Pilate. You can have other gods in their appropriate place. But there is only one Lord, who is Caesar. That is still an issue that is in dispute today. Who has first loyalty? Who is Lord? Is it Caesar, or Jesus Christ, or someone else?

You Christians can do what you want in your churches and in your homes. But when you refuse to bake cakes or arrange flowers for weddings of gay couples, then there is a problem. If you Christian pharmacists refuse to provide morning after contraceptives for women who want to get rid of unwanted babies, then you are going to pay. If you Christian psychologists try to help minors fight against their same sex attractions, then you are

going to lose your license. For the government is lord. Such is the challenge that we Christians face in an increasingly secular society where government seeks to gain more control of our lives.

Paul then finishes the greeting of his letter with the words, "Grace to you and peace." The normal Greek word used by letter writers was *charein*, "greetings." But Paul used a different form of this word, *charis*, which means "grace." This term had a special meaning to Paul and to all Christians. Grace is foundational to the gospel. It is the unmerited favor by which God has provided for us forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

"Peace" is the equivalent of the Hebrew "shalom." Peace to the Greeks and to us usually has a connotation of the absence of conflict. But to the Jews it meant much more. It referred to "wholeness" and "general well-being." Paul was convinced that this wholeness came only as the result of God's grace. Thus it is that though the terms "grace" and "peace" appear together frequently in the New Testament epistles, "grace" always appears before "peace." For the grace of God is necessary for us to experience wholeness and peace. In using a familiar Greek term and a familiar Hebrew term Paul is also showing sensitivity to his audience, which is composed both of Greek and Hebrew Christians.

Then in v. 2 Paul says, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers..." It was the regular habit of Paul to thank God for all of the Christians at Thessalonica. His first and primary thought about his fellow believers was appreciation. This appreciation was expressed through prayer.

Keep in mind that these were all new Christians. Many of them came from rough backgrounds. At times they still displayed sinful habits. I expect that some of them had personalities that could be irritating. Yet Paul's basic attitude was positive. He seemed to appreciate all of them. Perhaps there is a lesson here that we can learn about appreciating one another in the body of Christ, even those who may irritate us. To have and maintain a healthy

church we need to maintain a thankful attitude toward one another, which is reflected in regular prayer.

When the people at Thessalonica came to his mind, Paul prayed for them. In particular he gave thanks for them. What was it that caused him to give thanks for them? According to v. 3 he was "remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul and his two fellow missionaries remember their work, their labor and their steadfastness. These three things are the reflection of their faith, their love and their hope. Faith, love and hope--- do those three virtues ring a bell? They are a common subject in the epistles. In 1 Corinthians #13, for example, Paul says, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

He speaks in our passage first about "the work of faith." "Work" was a general term. Sometimes Paul describes work and faith as being at odds with each other. In Romans he stresses that eternal salvation comes apart from works. But Paul also says that genuine faith produces good works. Here in 1 Thessalonians Paul will make mention of missionary work in #1, general good behavior in #4 and loyalty to Jesus in the face of persecution in #3. Perhaps Paul had these ideas in mind when he spoke of "the work of faith." Genuine faith results in good works.

Paul then mentions "the labor of love." The term for "labor" has a stress on extraordinary effort, upon wearisome toil. In the New Testament the word is used of financial sacrifice, of spiritual service and of spreading the gospel in the face of opposition. The idea of self-sacrifice is involved in this labor of love.

Then there is "steadfastness of hope." The need for hope in the midst of a dark generation is a theme that I stressed in the conclusion of our study of Elijah and Elisha. "Steadfastness of hope" involves patient endurance. It is

gritty determination in the face of difficulty. Paul seems to have in mind the idea of hanging in there in the face of trials, especially trials related to persecution. In 1 Thessalonians this hope is focused on the Second Coming of Christ. As we saw last week in 2 Kings, Biblical hope also involves a belief in resurrection from the dead.

Faith, hope and love. There is about faith for Christians a certain focus on the past. We have a belief that Jesus Christ lived and died in history. We believe that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and that He rose again from the dead and that He ascended into heaven. We believe that faith in these past events and in the Christ who lives today will bring us to heaven.

There is about love a certain focus on the present. We believe that we are responsible to love God in the present with all of our heart and mind and strength. We believe that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

There is about hope a certain focus on the future. We have a confident hope that Jesus Christ is returning to earth some day. Because of that, we have confidence that we likewise will rise from the dead. We also have a confident hope that our faithfulness in the face of trials will result in a future reward in heaven.

There are some people who live only in the past. They focus on what life was like when they were young. Some athletes live through what they accomplished in their early days. In some parts of the East people worship their ancestors. Others live only for the present. We call these people "hedonists." Their philosophy is "eat, drink and be merry; for tomorrow you will die." Other live only for the future. These are the idealists and the dreamers. They may accomplish little or nothing in the present, but they have big dreams for the future.

We Christians are realists. We have, hopefully, a balanced perspective on the past, on the present and on the future. We have a right view of reality. We recognize that the past, the present and the future all have value.

Next time we will see how Paul develops these themes of faith, hope and love. But now we are about to move into an observance of the Lord's Supper. In this ritual we see the elements of the past, the present and the future all brought into play. We are to observe this Lord's Supper because Jesus told us to remember what He has done for us on the cross. That is the element of faith and the past. We are also to participate in this because of our present fellowship and love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Participation in this is also intended to reflect an active fellowship with fellow Christians. Then also in our participation we express hope in the future. For Jesus at the Last Supper said that He would not drink of the cup again until He comes in His kingdom. So there is about our celebration of the Lord's Supper an expression of hope in the Second Coming. Faith, love, hope. The past, the present, the future.