

## **What's Missing from This Church?**

A Bible Study from I Thessalonians

Sunday, November 15, 2020, Aledo UMC

**New Testament Lesson**, selections from 1 Thessalonians

**Sermon**, "What's Missing from This Church?"

From mid-October through mid-November, the Revised Common Lectionary has suggested readings from the oldest book in the New Testament, the book of First Thessalonians. This morning I would like to take a deep dive into that letter written by Paul just twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But let me warn you: There's something is missing from the church at Thessalonica. And it's not easily discoverable. Yet it's critical to our understanding of the Gospel and the plan of God for the ages. So let's dig in.

**<sup>1</sup> Paul, Silas and Timothy,**

**To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:**

**Grace and peace to you.**

**<sup>2</sup> We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup> Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.** [Note verse 3 is from the King James Version].

Several years ago I was involved in a youth Bible quiz program which focused on one book of the New Testament each year. One particular year the designated book was 1 Thessalonians, and the fundamental question of that program was, "What three things did Paul remember before God?"

The answer, of course, is the Thessalonians' "work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope."

That's an important triad and it's not unique to this book. We also find it in 1 Corinthians 13 where love is described as the most important of the three.

I'll take it one step further: that triad is the key to understanding the book of 1 Thessalonians. However, as you read the first chapter, you'll discover these passages are filled with praise, an indication of Paul's affection for the church. Unfortunately, this will make it more difficult to get to the bottom of the situation at Thessalonica.

Drop down to the middle of verse 9 and we'll begin trying to discern the problem at Thessalonica:

**<sup>9</sup> for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.**

Most scholars agree that I Thessalonians is the oldest letter of the New Testament, written at about 53 AD, only 23 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Early believers were very much aware of the fact that Jesus, after describing the signs of the end of the world in Matthew 24 said, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (v. 34). And so it is in v. 10 that we find the Thessalonian faithful “waiting for his Son from heaven.”

Let’s move on. In chapter 2 verse 17 we read—

**<sup>17</sup> But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. <sup>18</sup> For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way.**

Apparently, Paul had heard some reports out of Thessalonica which troubled him. So he wanted to go back to build them up—but somehow Satan prevented him.

Chapter 3—

**<sup>1</sup> So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. <sup>2</sup> We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.**

There it is! The problem in the Thessalonian church! They were being shaken by persecutions. Our problem in understanding those persecutions is that we tend to think of persecutions only in terms of violence or abuse. However, the Greek word for persecutions is pretty broad. Persecutions may have included social ostracization, various assaults or verbal abuse. Or persecutions may have simply been the struggle of the believers in the absence of their founder, Paul. Or persecutions may have simply been the result of their unresolved theological disagreements with other Christian groups. Persecutions could have even been their grief at the death of loved ones.

Paul in order to get to the bottom of these persecutions, Paul dispatches Timothy to Thessalonica to investigate and bring back a report. (It sounds kind of like a church conference with the district superintendent who then reports back to the bishop).

Timothy’s report is found in chapter 3 verse 6—

**<sup>6</sup> But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.**

That sounds like a good report: Timothy tells Paul the Thessalonians’ faith and love is strong. In fact, in chapter 1 verse 8, Paul writes that their faith is so strong “that we have no need to speak about it.” And later, in chapter 4 verse 9, he says their love likewise is so strong that “you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.” In other words, Paul is saying, “I don’t have to waste any ink on you because of any lack in your faith or love.

But something’s missing in Timothy’s report, but what? What’s missing?  
Remember our opening triad? It’s *hope*. Hope is missing.  
Now why is that such a big deal? The answer is found in chapter 4 verse 13—

**<sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of humankind, who have no hope.**

That verse is important for two reasons. First, that verse gives us Paul’s definition of a non-Christian: a non-Christian is someone who has no hope. Conversely, a Christian is a person who *has* hope. And in the next verse we find the source of our hope as Christians. Incidentally, verse 14 gives us the earliest recorded proclamation of the gospel—

**<sup>14</sup> For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.**

Back to verse 13: Here we see just how important hope really is: if the Thessalonians lose their hope, then Paul says they’re really not Christians any longer.

We also get a clearer picture of the problem at in the church: the Thessalonians were struggling with the death of their fellow believers. We don’t struggle with the issue they way they would have. But put yourselves in their sandals for a moment: Paul comes to your town and tells you about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Then he tells you that Jesus is coming back soon. Then you find out that Jesus spoke about the signs of the end and said, “Truly this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

At first, the Thessalonian church was a young congregation. But then a few years pass and one of the charter members of the church—who always expected to live until the Second Coming of Christ—dies.

Why? Was it a lack of faith?

And then another dies. And another. Pretty soon the Thessalonians begin to wonder, “Will the dead share in the resurrection?” The Thessalonians were faced with a situation in which human experience seemed to contradict the gospel message. The real question becomes, “Does death invalidate the gospel?”

Paul addresses those concerns in chapter 4 verses 15 through 17—

**<sup>15</sup> According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.**

**<sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.**

The purpose of that passage is not to give a formula for the return of Christ so much as it is to privilege the dead. You see, Paul is reassuring the Thessalonians that those who have died will share in the coming of the Lord--in fact, they'll rise first.

Paul makes it clear that the gospel holds up even in the face of death. The grave does not invalidate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, if we die, we will meet Christ sooner than if we had lived. **“Therefore encourage one another with these words,”** Paul writes in verse 18. Don't let death shake your hope in the gospel, which is to say, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For—

**<sup>4</sup> ...you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup> You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness (1 Thess. 5:4-5).**

As such, we are not subject to the wrath of God, but to the grace of God, as Paul writes in chapter 5 verses 4 and 5. Let us continue with chapter 5 verse 8—

**<sup>8</sup> But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.**

Those of you who ride motorcycles know it may not matter what kind of a shirt or jacket you wear as long as you wear your helmet. Why? Because your helmet protects your head.

Paul tells the Thessalonians to make faith and love their breastplate but make hope your helmet. Hope will protect your head. Hope will protect your thoughts from depression. Hope will protect your mind from despair.

Hope is arguably the central theme of the 1994 movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*. In one of the key exchanges, Andy Dufresne says simply but confidently, "Hope is a good thing, may be the best of the things. And a good thing never dies."

In 1 Thessalonians 5:9, Paul writes —

<sup>9</sup> For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup> He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. <sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Thanks be to God.