



1 THESSALONIANS

living in hope

INTRO TO 1 THESSALONIANS

Sunday 9 October 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

>> *Read 1 Thessalonians chapter 1.*

Paul wrote a large portion of the New Testament. Some are deep, logical and theological, like Romans; and some letters are just full of admonishments and correctives for wayward churches, like Corinthians. But Thessalonians is neither. This little 5-chapter letter – which many scholars believe to be the oldest New Testament writing – is dripping with delight, joy, relief, thankfulness, and hope. It's both a timeless letter and a specific message to us today. Listen to the tone:

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-3)

Now today, before we dive in, let's rewind. In Acts chapters 16-20, Paul has a vision of a 'Man from Macedonia' inviting him to come, so he with Timothy and Silas heads to Philippi, a Roman colony, where he preaches for several days, meets and stays at Lydia's house, heals a demon-possessed girl, causes a riot, lands in prison, leads the gaoler and his family to faith, and they are kicked out of the city. Good times! Next stop: Thessaloniki, another Greek city and Roman colony, as mentioned in Acts chapter 17. Paul stays at the home of Jason, preaches in the synagogue, reasons with them about Scripture, and people come to faith – some Jews, many Greeks, and some prominent women. A small house church is born. They're off to a great start! But, true to form, another riot starts. Jason and the church plant are implicated in Paul and Silas' trouble-making reputation and, in the chaos, Paul and Silas are forced to leave the city

and their new converts to the mercy of mob, to a culture violently opposed to the message of the Gospel. Chapters 1-3 of 1 Thessalonians include heartfelt expressions of Paul's longing to get back to them in person and how it just became too hard. So when Paul couldn't stand the anxiety of not knowing their fate any longer, he sends Timothy back to the city to find out about their faith and, if the church was still there, to strengthen and encourage the church amid the persecution. Timothy goes and returns with the good news that the church is alive and thriving - and immediately Paul is so overjoyed he sits down and writes this letter, just as we read it today.

And that's what this letter feels like - it's just so joyful, so hopeful, so thankful because Paul, I suspect, assumed the worst and so he was delighted to hear that the opposite was true...

The occasion of this letter is anxiety turned to joy. Why would Paul be so anxious for them? Again, I want you to see the cultural setting in which Paul was planting churches to understand why it seemed this was an impossible situation. The culture was one steeped in idolatry, dominated by superstition and fearful spirituality. Idolatry was woven into the very fabric of the Greco-Roman world.

- All business deals done included a trip to the temple of the appropriate god...
- If you had a journey to take, you would go to the temple of the appropriate god...
- If you wanted a child, you'd go to the temple of the appropriate god...
- If you were sick, you went to the temple of the appropriate god...

This was how life was done. But there was another god who was not Greek but Roman, and his name was Caesar, the Emperor. The 'gospel' was his reign. Loyalty to Caesar was demanded to maintain peace. Cults were established and oaths were instituted swearing allegiance to Caesar for life, in all of life, and "I will report any sedition and defend the Caesar with my life."

This is life for the residents of Thessaloniki. It sounds like a cross between Vagas and Pyongyang, or Panem in Hunger Games, or any other dystopian plot. Then Paul, Silas and Timothy tell you another subversive story, of one true Creator God above all the local temple deities and one true King above the Caesar. The 'true Caesar' that is not to be feared but to be loved. That's not just controversial, that's offensive, dangerous, treason.

When we read Acts chapter 17 we find out how outraged the culture was by the message of Paul. Bad characters from the marketplace formed a mob and started a riot. When they couldn't find Paul and Silas, they implicate the newly converted Jason and his friends, dragging them before the city officials... *"These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."*

(1 Thessalonians 1:6-7)

How about that, Jason? A new convert, he puts his own standing in the city in jeopardy just by associating with the message of the Gospel. How much more does he sacrifice by giving up the gods of the city. That made life really hard. You would be socially cut off, outcast, disowned by family and friends, people may not sell you goods and services, your business may be boycotted – he had a lot to lose!

I think we live in a time today where the culture is increasingly becoming more like the first century than it has been in centuries. We live in a time where being a Christian who actually believes in the teaching of the Bible and attends a church is starting to attract the same intense hostility.

Did you catch the story this week of Andrew Thorburn? One of the proudest days of his life was on Monday when he was offered the role of CEO of the Essendon Football Club, who he has followed since he was a boy. It was a profound honour. Thorburn spent just one day in the role and was forced to resign, not because of scandal or incompetence, but after it emerged that he was the chair of City on a Hill Church – an Anglican church in Melbourne that one of my good mates was Executive Pastor of for several years. The media want to cast this church as having radical abortion and same-sex marriage beliefs. But actually, they aren't radical at all – they simply hold conventional biblical views. But we are living in a culture where the authority of Scripture, the divinity of Jesus, the biblical vision of healthy human sexuality and marriage, or the inherent worth and significance of life is no longer seen as reasonable (optional) beliefs, but radical, dangerous, homophobic, bigoted in of being stamped out... *"causing trouble all over the world"*.

Andrews made an interesting statement: "Despite my own leadership record, within hours of my appointment being announced, the media and leaders of our community had spoken. They made it clear that my Christian faith and my association with a Church are unacceptable in our culture if you wish to hold a leadership position in society..." Thorburn was being pressured by the media, club members, and the Premier to either give up leadership in the church or give up his leadership of the football club on the false assumption that his faith was incompatible with his work. And they were actually surprised when he put his core beliefs and allegiance to his church over his career! He said "My faith is central to who I am. Since coming to faith in Jesus 20 years ago, I have seen profound change in my life, and I believe God has made me a better husband, father, and friend. It has also helped me become a better leader."

So this is a very current example of exactly what happened to Jason and the church at Thessaloniki: a mob mentality, with ulterior motives, twisting the truth and pressuring a believer to compromise and fall in line with the mob. Now, I think the worst thing we can do is play the surprised-victim-card in these kinds of moments. Please don't get all offended at this kind of thing. Jesus forewarned in Matthew chapter 5 that we should expect that the way of the world will clash with the way of Jesus. Paul and the

Thessalonians certainly understood this... We aren't surprised and we aren't victims. We are living in the messy tension of living in one kingdom yet being citizens living in hope of another... Not victims, but ambassadors! Listen to the tone of what Paul says next:

"For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6)

In this pressure cooker context, Paul now knows that in spite of the cost they welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps Paul was so anxious because deep down he was thinking, "Our work was all in vain, the culture was too strong, I couldn't even stay as a visitor in the city... How will they live as residents?" Paul is delighted to hear of their flourishing – a word we might use today is 'resilience' – in the midst of severe suffering. For Paul, as we read, this reveals seven characteristics:

Deep Calling – a sense of being chosen and called by God, in the family of God.

Deep Revelation – they received the Gospel (the radically Good News of Jesus, King over all kings, who lived, died and rose again) which came by words and power.

Deep conviction – a sincerity of heart and repentance.

Deep imitation – "*us and the Lord we lived among you...*" – they didn't just go to church once a month, they devoted themselves to being transformed; being with, becoming like, and doing what Jesus did and how Paul lived.

Deep suffering – life got harder, not easier... They experienced severe suffering. Come to Jesus and your life won't be awesome – this is normal.

Deep joy – in spite of all they may have lost from a cultural perspective, people who can have joy in suffering are an incredible witness.

All in by and through the **Holy Spirit**. *The spirit is the power to enable it all.*

"And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere." (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8)

Paul, in joy, says, "Because of your deep calling, revelation, conviction, imitation, suffering and joy in the Holy Spirit – you are the real deal! A model church to all the believers.

A church of very imperfect people together exhibiting a resilient faith and infectious joy and a living hope in Jesus."

I love this expression of a **model church**. It's not the church with the best 'churchee' stuff, staff and ministries. It's not about fancy buildings, bulging budgets, and crowds of people delivering the best Sunday experience in town. A model church in any culture or context is a community of imperfect messy people you call brothers and sisters (Paul uses that phrase more to this church than anyone else in all his writing), who have a deep sense of faith hope and love, who are deeply convicted by the gospel and God's calling on their lives above all the other idols and 'Caesars' of our day, who are committed to the daily imitation of Jesus, the worship of Jesus even in the mess that comes from being a community, and being a distinct community in the wider culture.

I know our church has been through a lot over the past few years, like most around the world. And if people come back, what will they find? Or, Covid aside, say someone goes to live in another state or country for a decade and they come back, what will they find?

A church that has crumbled under the weight of trouble, cracked with crisis, melted under the madness of having to please everyone, compromised on its core beliefs and values, that is inward-looking and focused on maintaining or surviving?

OR, a people deeply convicted, deeply committed, galvanised in faith, joyful in affliction, still worshipping, still being a community together, serving our city in ways that make a difference?

What letter would Paul write to us? Would a letter written to us be in the tone of joyful affection or stern discipline? I pray it would be, "You are a model church to all the believers across Sydney and Australia, in fact - your faith in God has become known everywhere!"