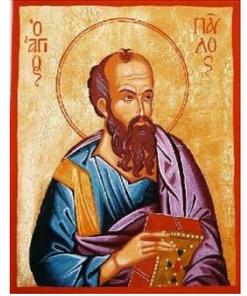


The Epistles of Paul

Week 1: I Thessalonians (Youth edition, to be done with Parent edition)

Who Was Paul?

Paul was one of the earliest followers of Jesus who was himself not an original disciple. Instead, he experienced a life changing moment when he was on the “Road to Damascus”. Paul helped establish many churches throughout modern day Turkey, Greece, and Italy, and helped those churches answer important questions by writing letters (epistles) to them. Paul was Jewish by birth and religion, but was a Roman citizen and converted to Christianity.



Purpose:

In week one of this series, we will be looking at the church in Thessalonica. This was a church doing the work of God but was also struggling to stay focused as they longed for the promised return and reign of Jesus. The Apostle Paul writes to them, helping resettle their hearts on the work of the kingdom even as they await Jesus. This is also one of the first congregations that Paul helped establish.

1. Have you ever read I Thessalonians before? Have you studied it?
2. When you consider the Apostle Paul, what images come to mind first?
3. Why was communication between these early Christian communities so important to faith and practice?

Key Verse of the Week, I Thess. 3:13:

“And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

Opening Prayer:

God of grace and peace, as we are gathered in this space where only a few are gathered, may we be joined by the great cloud of witnesses that has preceded us in faith. Open our minds and hearts to your word, given through your Spirit to the Apostle Paul, that we may be led in your way. Help us to understand the church at Thessalonica and what we can learn from their experiences. In the name of Jesus, who meets us where we are, we pray. Amen.

The Church at Thessalonica:

This is the earliest letter we have that Paul wrote. The church at Thessalonica was important to him. He had not only helped start it, but had raised up some strong leaders and followers of Jesus from within that church. Most proudly, Paul saw them as doing good work, following the way of Jesus, and being a strong community of faith. Sadly, Paul was unable to return to them as he was busy starting other churches. In our passage today, Paul admits he is sad at not being able to see them, but is glad they are doing the will of God. He even answers an important question about Jesus’ return, saying that all God’s people, whether living or dead, will see the return of Jesus whenever it happens.

1. Why do you think Paul felt so close to the community in Thessalonica?
2. Why do we take Paul’s teaching seriously?
3. As Paul addresses the community, he tells them to pray, worship, and rejoice. How is this teaching important?

What do Scholars Say?

Most scholars say that this letter was written sometime between 45 and 50 CE (probably the latter). This is about 15 to 20 years after Jesus died, rose, and ascended to heaven. Unlike other letters from Paul (Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians) this letter is deeply personal. There is only one real theological question that he addresses and most of the rest is uplifting and praising. There is another letter to the Church at Thessalonica also attributed to Paul (II Thessalonians).

Today's Focus Passage, I Thessalonians 2:13-20

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last. As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. What does it mean to you to believe that God's word is at work within you?
3. How do you proclaim Christ as your "glory and joy"?

Discussion:

In chapter 2, Paul applauds the church in Thessalonica for their "imitation" of the churches that are in Judea. He cheers them on as they endure separation and isolation from their former Jewish community, while also pointing out the dangers of being blind to the movement of God. Using the examples of the prophets and Jesus, Paul connects the difficulties he has faced to what the community in Thessalonica is facing. For them, they have both been cast out from their previous community, but have persevered the difficulties to do the work of God. The passage concludes with Paul apologizing for not being able to be with them in person, but proclaiming the power of God is their boast.

1. What does it mean to "imitate" Christ?
2. For the early church, leaving behind the Jewish or Gentile world, what feelings do you think they experienced?
3. How does their situation connect to the church today?

Conclusion:

In chapters four and five, Paul is asked a question regarding whether one who has already died will still bear witness to the return of Jesus. In resounding fashion, Paul declares yes! Moreover, Paul declares that we shall all see it, regardless of what state we are in when it occurs. That is the lesson of I Thessalonians. While we may have been excluded from other communities, while we may not have the easiest lives, while we may struggle on a day to day basis, we have a boast and promise in Christ Jesus our Lord. A new community has been formed and water by the Holy Spirit to breath live into those left out of other places. That is the power of the church. New life and new hope, even during loss and isolation. And we, the people of God, bear witness none the less to the continued promises of Christ.

Close in prayer