

# *The Epistles of Paul*

## *Week 1: I Thessalonians*

### **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.*

### **Introduction and Background:**

The first epistle to the Thessalonians is generally considered to be the earliest of Paul’s writings. Depending on the scholar and source, the date is somewhere between 45 and 50 CE. This date range places the writing of Thessalonians some 15 to 20 years before the Gospel of Mark (65-75 CE). Moreover, this is an era in which most of the disciples are still alive in and around Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and other areas in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The letter was likely written while Paul was working in Corinth and is an intimate letter rather than a broader one. Paul was aware of their concerns and issues, directly writing to address them. In contrast to later letters (Corinthians and Romans especially), it is not overly theological, but rather is a practical exhortation to do the work of God. While most of the letter is uplifting and encouraging, even seeming apologetic for not being able to be present with them again, the final two chapters shifts to a real theological question.

The letter ends with a closing proclamation for the community to pray without ceasing, to rejoice always, and worship God with all they have.

1. Why do you think Paul felt so close to the community in Thessalonica?
2. What can we learn from Paul writing even before the Gospel writers? 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?

## **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 in spite of the difficulties to continue 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*