

1 Thessalonians – Growing Pains ::

A 6 part outline on 1 Thessalonians by Grant Thorp.

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When I was a kid I remember getting terrible pains in my legs. When I went to Mum she'd just say "Don't worry about it, they're growing pains." I guess she must have been right, I'm still here! Now that I'm a parent though I experience a different sort of growing pain. The sort that parents all over the world feel. The sort that causes you to ask: are the kids developing the way they should? Should he be walking by now? How many blocks should she be able to stack at this age? Why isn't he toilet trained yet? It was this latter sort of pain that Paul felt in relation to the church in Thessalonica.

The church in Thessalonica was founded through Paul and Silas' ministry in the city. It was made up of Greeks, Jews and a number of prominent women (See Acts 17: 1-14). But before Paul had time to thoroughly equip these believers, Jewish fanatics rounded up some thugs and drove Paul out of town.

Paul regarded the Christians in Thessalonica as his children (1 Thess 2: 7,11), so naturally he was concerned for their growth. Living in such a hostile environment he was concerned their faith might be unsettled by the trials they experienced (3:2), so he sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in their faith.

Timothy brought back a glowing report of the progress of the church, and chapter 1 is taken up with Paul's thanks for their faith. Timothy also reported how Paul's ministry had been called into question in his absence, and the second and third chapters are taken up with a defence of his ministry: what he did while he was there (Ch 2), and his pain at not being able to go to them again (Ch3).

Finally Timothy reported on a question the Thessalonians were concerned about – what happens to believers who die before the return of Christ? Paul deals with that question in 4:13-5:11. This section is preceded by a general encouragement to keep pressing on in their Christian lives (4:1-11) and is followed by some instructions on how to live together so that they may be blameless when Jesus returns (5:12-28).

Thessalonians is a terrific book to preach on because it reveals so honestly the tender heart of Paul towards the Thessalonians – his children in the faith. He ministered among them like a mother caring for her children, because of his love for them. He is at one time beside himself with worry that they might be unsettled: "when we could stand it no longer," and the next minute is overjoyed they are standing firm: "now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord." Of course like any parent, his primary concern is that they grow to maturity, and so while they are making good progress he urges them to do more and more the things that will lead to further growth.

1 Thessalonians is a passionate letter, and where our ministries and Christian lives lack passion, it brings a much needed and helpful corrective.

Preaching Plan

I simply preached through 1 Thessalonians from beginning to end. The book has a simple and easily discernible structure and lends itself to this approach well. Often when I preach on a letter I include an introductory sermon dealing with the founding of the church and background material. This could be included in the series using the material from Acts 17. I chose not to do this as there wasn't a lot of material there, and I thought it could be incorporated throughout the series.

Resources

The main commentary I used was Leon Morris's commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians in the New International Commentary on the New Testament. It is a careful and conservative work, which was at times helpful but rarely inspiring. I also read Gary Demarest in the Mastering the New Testament series. Certain things he said pointed me in fruitful directions of thought, but again it was a fairly basic work. I believe F.F. Bruce's commentary is helpful although I didn't use it. In the end 1 Thessalonians is a fairly straightforward book and the best preparation is a careful and prayerful reading of the text, with a good commentary to keep you on the right track.

Sermon Summaries

Sermon 1

A Model Faith, a Model Life 1 Thess 1

1. Models A couple of years ago I went to a Willow Creek Convention. There were literally thousands of people there all looking for a model to build their church on. If you asked the Apostle Paul for a model church he wouldn't hesitate in pointing you to the Thessalonians. He describes them as a model in 1:7. But what was it about them that made them a model for others? Two things they exhibited: a model faith and a model life.

2. A Model Faith (1v3) There were three things that were so impressive about the Thessalonians faith. They had a faith that worked, and while the Scriptures are crystal clear that we are saved by grace through faith, they are also crystal clear in teaching that a saving faith always issues in works. This faith led to a love that laboured. It's not always easy to love people. Sometimes it's just hard work. The Thessalonians worked hard at loving others. Their faith and love were also fuelled by a hope that endured. When I was at school I never thought twice about going in the 100m race. It was all over in 15secs! But I hated the Cross Country. The Christian life requires endurance, which only comes about as we look in hope to what God has done in Jesus.

3. A Model Life (1:6-10) The Thessalonians model faith led them to lead a model Christian life. They clung to Christ in spite of severe suffering. If you look at the background in which the Thessalonian church was formed (Acts 17:1-11), this was a quality they needed but one we need no less. The Lord's message also rang out from the Thessalonians (1:7), and their words were backed by the integrity of their life. All over Macedonia and Achaia people were talking about how they had turned from idols to serve the living and true God. Finally they lived their lives waiting for Jesus to return. When you're waiting you're really focussed on what you're waiting for. I find if I'm waiting for something, I'm not much good for anything else. The Thessalonians were focused upon Jesus and while this was a bit of a problem, as we'll see later on, it's a good attitude to have.

4. Models and You We all have models, some good and some bad. But if you want a model for your faith and for your Christian life you could hardly do better than the model the Thessalonians provide.

Sermon 2

Ministering God's Gospel 1 Thess 2:1-16

1. Introduction In 1 Thess 1 we saw the model faith the Thessalonians exhibited, and the model life it led them to live. But how did they get to that point? Chapter 2 tells us how and it can be summed up in one statement: God's message requires God's messengers, using God's methods, to achieve God's results.

2. The Message Paul identifies the message as the gospel: not good news, but momentous news. The gospel is that in response to our sin, God has sent his Son Jesus to be the sacrifice for sin. That on the cross, Jesus soaked up the right judgement of God against sin, so that, as we trust in him, we can have new life. The gospel is very good news for those who trust Jesus, and very bad news for those who don't!

3. The Messenger It's clear as you read these verses that Paul is defending his ministry in Thessalonica from attack. In doing so he appeals to their knowledge of what really happened (2:1,2). He firstly states What he wasn't: he wasn't like the travelling teachers of the day who tried to trick and con people (2:3-5). Instead, his ministry to them was straight up and down. Honest and open.

He then goes on to say what he was among them: he was a faithful steward (v4), a gentle mother (v6b-8) and an urging father (v11).

4. The Results The result of this ministry was that the Thessalonians accepted the message "not as the word of men, but as it actually is the word of God which is at work in you who believe." (2:13). As they accepted the word and allowed it to go to work in their lives it loosened the stranglehold of sin over them, it toppled over the idols they had been serving and flooded their hearts with a newfound joy. They became the model Paul was happy to hold up to other churches because they allowed the word to do its work in their lives.

5. Paul's ministry, God's Word and Us. As we seek to minister the word to people we need to follow Paul as our example. We don't need to resort to tricks and schemes, to win the gospel a hearing. Rather we must pass it on with faithfulness and integrity.

As we hear the word we need to accept it into our lives as the very word of God and allow it to do its work. If we do we too will become like the Thessalonians. There was nothing special about them. They simply allowed God, through His word, to work in their lives.

Sermon 3

Out of Sight, Not Out of Mind 1 Thess 2:17-3:13

1. Paul's Passion Back in 1995 the world was shocked to hear what Susan Smith had done to her two small boys in the town of Union South Carolina. On a mild moonlit night, she drove them down to the edge of the John D John Lake outside town. They were strapped into their baby seats

asleep. She parked the car on a gravel ramp going down into the water, got out, disengaged the handbrake and watched the car slip into the murky waters. Both boys drowned! It is a scandalous thing when a mother stops loving her children.

As we've seen earlier in this letter Paul's ministry was questioned in ways that obviously hurt him, but the charge that hurt him most was the one he answers in this section of the letter: "he doesn't love you anymore-otherwise he would have been to see you." In answer to this charge Paul speaks of his passion for the Thessalonians. His being "torn away from them" v17 was as if a death had occurred in the family. The term "torn away" literally means bereaved. He also speaks of his "intense longing". This word really means lust and although Paul would normally not have used it he resorts to it to convey how intensely he felt towards them. Paul was passionate about the Thessalonians, but he was also concerned.

2. Paul's Concern Paul was concerned about them for two reasons. Firstly, that they might be unsettled by trials that came upon them (3:3). Secondly that they may have been tempted by the tempter and Paul's efforts end up being useless. Paul knew that the devil would follow him and seek to undo the work that had been done and he was concerned.

3. Paul's Answer Paul knew that what they needed to withstand these trials and to stand up against the tempter was strengthening and encouraging in the faith. He had barely begun to ground these believers in the gospel when he was forced to leave. He knew they weren't as equipped as they should be which is why he says in 3:10 that he prayed most earnestly that "we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith." We shouldn't be surprised therefore that he says the reason he wasn't able to visit them was "that Satan stopped us" (3:18). The devil's strategy is to cut people off from the teaching of the Bible because he knows it will strengthen and encourage them.

Because of Paul's concern for them he didn't just leave the matter there. He sent Timothy (3:1,2) and he wrote this letter to them and he prayed for them (3:11-13).

4. God's Word and Us We see in this passage how important it is to be serious about the Scriptures if we are going to be strong in the faith. Our attitude to the word is a very important indicator of our spiritual health. If we want to be in the Christian life for the long haul, and not unsettled by trials, or by the tempter, then we need to be having a quiet time, going to a Bible study and being a part of a church where the Bible is taught.

Sermon 4

Building a Champion Christian Life 1 Thess 4:1-13

1. The Making of a Champion What is it that makes a champion? The answer is simple. They are never satisfied with their current level of achievement. Champions are always raising the bar, always striving to do better. This attitude is not reserved for the sporting field or the boardroom though, Paul says it's the attitude we should bring to our Christian lives. Twice in these verses Paul urges the Thessalonians to do what they are already doing but "more and more." (4:1; 10)

Most commentators who look at this passage deal with three main topics: sexual immorality (v3-8), brotherly love (v9-10), and attitudes to work (v11-12). If you look carefully, though, Paul is dealing with godliness in all three areas: personal godliness in v3-8, godliness in relating to the family of believers v9-10, and godliness relating to those outside the family of believers v11-12.

2. Controlling yourself v3-9 Paul speaks here about sexual immorality because it was a big problem back then, as it is today. After noting in general that it is God's will that we be sanctified he goes on to give several reasons the Christian shouldn't be involved in sexual immorality. Sexual immorality is always using another person (v6); it goes against the call God has placed upon our lives (v7), and it offends the Spirit who lives within us v8. The reasons Paul gives here for avoiding sexual immorality apply equally to every other area of sin. We must seek more and more to be godly in our personal lives. It is God's will for us!

3. Loving the Brothers v9-10 Paul deals next with how we are to relate to our Christian family and his command is simple: we must love them. Although the Thessalonians were already labouring in this (1:3), he urges them to do it more and more. In a hostile world we need the love of our Christian family. That love in turn is a powerful witness to the hostile world we live in.

4. Winning the Respect of Outsiders Finally, Paul deals with how we are to relate to those outside the Christian family. He offers a guiding principle: we must live in a way that wins their respect v12. The particular example Paul deals with here is work, because this was a problem in Thessalonica, but the principle is more wide ranging than that. In every area of our lives we need to be careful not to dishonour Christ.

5. A Champion Attitude There is no time in the Christian life to stand still. We mustn't ever get to the point where we think our level of godliness, or love, or witness is good enough. We need to keep on putting in the hard yards and raising the bar because that's the attitude that breeds champions and that leads to the sort of life God looks for in those who follow him.

Sermon 5

Living with the End in Sight 1 Thess 4:13-5:11

1. Ignorance is not bliss There's a saying that ignorance is bliss, and we probably all know people who live their lives in blissful ignorance. But not everyone does. For the comedian ignorance is a joke – "So what's the speed of dark?" For the student it's a challenge to be met with study. But for those going through difficult times all sorts of questions are thrown up that require answers.

When Paul left Thessalonica they expected Jesus to return in their lifetime. But as they waited some of their number died and this raised all sorts of questions for them: would the fact that they had died mean they missed taking part in that great day they had longed for? Was the fact that they had died a sign of God's judgement on them? Had Paul misled them making them think Jesus would return so soon? When would he return anyway?

Paul doesn't want them to be ignorant about these questions (4:13 & 5:1) and so he sets about answering them.

2. The Coming of the Lord. a. Based on the resurrection of Jesus Paul firstly point out that the Thessalonians didn't need to mourn for those who had fallen asleep like the heathen mourned for their dead-without hope. There is a life after death for those who trust in Jesus, and it is based on the sure foundation of Jesus death and resurrection.(4:13,14.)

b. What will happen He then goes on to tell them what will happen when Jesus returns. Four steps will be involved: Jesus will return v16; the dead in Christ will rise first v16; then those who are alive will go to meet Jesus in the clouds v17 and we will then be with the Lord forever v17. Paul

says encourage one another with these words. Those who had fallen asleep in Christ would be involved in that great day, and when it happens we will be re-united with them and united with the Lord. The Second coming is a great cause for encouragement. But when will it happen?

c. When will it happen Jesus uses two images to show that Jesus' coming will be unexpected: a thief in the night (5:1) and a woman in labour (5:3). We don't know when he will come but despite this the speculation abounds. What Paul is interested in though is how we live as we wait.

3. Living with the End in Sight Paul firstly says to believers don't be indifferent because the day is secure (5:4-8). Although we have nothing to fear on that day we shouldn't cruise towards it. Rather we need to be alert and self controlled, arming ourselves with faith hope and love. We must live out our faith with passion and fervour as we wait.

But Paul also addresses the unbelievers and he says to them: don't be fooled because today is calm (5:3) Most people live their lives on the assumption that tomorrow will be like today, but one day it won't. One day tomorrow will be the day Jesus comes, and unless people are trusting in him they will be destroyed.

Sermon 6

Joy in the Journey 1Thess 5:12-28

1. Look Where You're going One of the subjects I did at High School was Tech Drawing, and I always remember our teacher telling us how to draw a straight line free-hand. He said "the secret is to look where you're going." That's also the secret to the Christian life, and in the closing section of Thessalonians, Paul shows us where we are heading: we want to be "blameless in Christ" on the last day, and much of the advice he gives in this final section is designed to help us get where we're going.

2. Advice to get you where you're going i. Responsibilities towards leaders v12-13 We must respect our leaders and hold them in the highest regard, not because of who they are but because of what they do. They work hard, are over you (in other words lead) and admonish. If we don't respect them we won't receive their admonishment which is designed to keep us on track.

ii. Responsibilities towards one another v14-15 Paul tells us we also have responsibilities towards one another. We are to "warn the idle" (literally those out of step), we must encourage the timid. These are the quitters. We need to strengthen them so that they don't give up. We must also "help the weak," those who are weighed down with burdens and overcome by tragedy. Finally, we must "be patient with everyone." It's not easy to be patient when you keep on warning those who are out off step to get back in line and they never do! Or when the quitters keep on wanting to quit despite all the encouragement you give. Despite that we need to be patient, because God has been very patient with us! We are to help one another to make it the end-and stand blameless before Christ.

iii. Responsibilities to God v16-22 Paul also reminds us of certain responsibilities we have in our relationship with God. We must "be joyful always." Being miserable is not an option for people who know God's goodness in Christ. We must also "pray continually". This doesn't mean that we do nothing but pray, but, as Matthew Henry said, that nothing we do should hinder our prayers. We must also give "thanks in all circumstances." We can only do this as we realise God can work through even the bad things that happen to bring about good for us. And finally we must not treat

prophecies with contempt. Rather than fob off the encouragement given to us from Scripture, we need to accept it and allow it to keep us heading toward our goal.

3. Will we ever make it? v24 When you look at all the advice Paul gives here, you wonder if anyone will make it! Paul leaves us with a word of encouragement: “The one who calls you is faithful and HE will do it” (5:24). This doesn’t mean we do nothing and let God do it all. It does mean that we are not alone in the journey. God is with us. He wants us to stand blameless before His Son on the last day, and he will do everything in his power to see that we do. There is no greater encouragement, or joy in the journey than this!

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