

"THE MODEL CHURCH" READ 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3:13

NIV MEMORY VERSE: 1 Thessalonians 1:3

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

➔ "Listen up Child, I have something to tell you about life. I'm your dad and I have only your best interest at heart." Those are words I heard often while growing up. Due to my parents' divorce, my dad did not live with us. He did live and work nearby, and Dad had the kind of job that he could pick us up from school and drive us home from time to time. We'd always go for an ice cream and talk. Thrifty's or Fosters' Freeze were his favorite places for ice cream. ... I learned a lot about life during those talks. I had no idea at the time that Dad was equipping me for success in life.



➔ In the same way, my husband and I spend time with our boys, only the communication process is different today. I imagine that you are doing the same thing with your adult kids. Instead of after school talks over ice cream cones, it's texting and Facetime calls on our iPads. I don't know about you, but my thumbs are getting really flexible on a small keyboard. Right? At our house we live for those evenings

when our younger son sits down to ask a question about something that happened in his day or our weekly morning phone call with the son in Texas. ➔ That son is learning how to be a parent to a little boy of his own who is now walking and has discovered stairs!



Thessalonica was a young church that Paul established during his second missionary journey, in about 51 A.D. In the same way Honey and I listen and guide our sons, Paul wrote this letter to encourage the young believers there. He wanted to assure them of his love, to praise them for their

faithfulness during persecution, and to remind them of their hope - the sure return of their Lord and Savior. ... The only thing different in Thessalonica was there was no ice cream cones and no smart phones.

→ Paul begins this letter with a note of affirmation, thanking God for the strong faith and good reputation of the Thessalonians (1:1-10). Then Paul reviews their relationship

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- how he and his companions brought the gospel to them (2:1-12),
- how they accepted the message (2:13-16), and
- how he longed to be with them again (2:17-20).

Because of his concern, Paul sent Timothy to encourage them in their faith (3:1-13).



→ Paul and his companions probably arrived in Thessalonica in the early summer of 50 A.D. They planted the first Christian church in that city, but had to leave in a hurry because their lives were threatened (Acts 17). At the first opportunity, probably when he stopped in Corinth, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the new believers were doing. Timothy returned to Paul with good news: the Christians in

Thessalonica were remaining firm in the faith and were unified. It was then that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. He wrote 2 Thessalonians a short time later.

But the Thessalonians did have some questions about their new faith. Paul had not had time to answer all their questions during his brief visit. So Paul wrote this letter to answer their questions and to commend them on their faithfulness to Christ. Silas accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 15). He helped Paul establish the church in Thessalonica as well.

→ Thessalonica was the capital and largest city of the Roman province of Macedonia. The most important Roman highway (the Egnatian Way), extending from Rome all the way to the Orient, went through Thessalonica. This highway, along with the city's thriving seaport, made Thessalonica one of the wealthiest and most flourishing trade centers in the Roman Empire. Recognized as a free city, Thessalonica was allowed self-rule and was exempted from most of the restrictions placed by Rome on other cities in the empire. However, with its international flavor came many pagan religions and cultural influences that challenged the faith of the young Christians there.



➔ The Thessalonians had stood firm when they were persecuted. Paul commended these young Christians for their:

- Work produced by faith,
- Labor prompted by love, and
- Endurance inspired by hope.

These characteristics are the marks of effective Christians in any age.

(1:3) "We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Why did Paul write these two letters? First, he wanted to assure his friends of his love and concern. He had left the city hastily at night, and he did not want them to think he had deserted them. Also, Paul's enemies were attacking his character and telling the new believers that their leader was really a greedy charlatan who preached religion in order to make money. There were plenty of itinerant rogues in Greece who did just that, and some were spreading the word that Paul was one of those. Here, Paul assured his readers of his love for them and his honesty in ministering to them.

Second, Paul wanted to ground them in the doctrines of the Christian faith, particularly with reference to Christ's return. It appears the church was going through severe persecution, and this is always a time of temptation to compromise and give in to discouragement. By reminding them of the truths of the Christian faith and what God had done for them in Christ, Paul encouraged them to stand firm and maintain their strong witness.

Personally, and in hind sight, this was the content of those "ice cream talks" with Dad when I was in junior high and high school. It was a great challenge for this young girl (me) to navigate the struggles of adolescence, let alone cope with the loss of our family unity through divorce. I had to listen to many verbal attacks from my mother in justifying why she felt divorce was the only solution to their marital conflicts. Dad kept reminding me the truth of my faith and how to lean on that during times of persecution. He was more concerned for my emotional survival than for his own. It was years later when I more fully understood the emotional "prison" that he was living in. And it was no surprise to learn how Dad's thinking was influenced in his personal study of Paul.

Third, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to live holy lives. Keep in mind that temptations to immorality were readily available in the cities then, and that sexual sins were not condemned by most people of their day. (This sounds pretty contemporary to me.) These letters emphasized purity of life - a concept relevant to our world today.

The message of salvation, though welcomed with great joy, brought the Thessalonians severe suffering because it led to persecution from both Jews and Gentiles. Having believed the gospel message and accepted new life in Christ, many Thessalonians

believed they would be protected from death until Christ returned. Then, when believers began to die under persecution, some Thessalonian Christians started to question their faith. Many of Paul's comments throughout this letter were addressed to these believers.

➔ vs. 1:9-10 - "... You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."

All of us should respond to the Good News as the Thessalonians did :

- Turn to God,
- Serve God, and
- Wait for his Son, Christ, to return from heaven.

We should turn from sin to God because Christ is coming to judge the earth. We should be fervent in our service because we have little time before Christ returns. We should be prepared for Christ to return because we don't know when he will come.

➔ Each New Testament letter has a special message or blessing that is uniquely its own. The special blessing in the message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians is the message of the return of Jesus Christ and how this vital doctrine can affect our lives and churches and make us more spiritual. Every chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with reference to the coming of Jesus Christ, and each reference relates the doctrine to a practical aspect of Christian living.

- 1:10 - salvation and assurance
- 2:19-20 - soul-winning and service
- 3:11-13 - stability in Christian living
- 4:13-18 - strength in sorrow
- 5:23-24 - sanctification of life

(Carol will lecture on Sanctification as the topic of our next lesson in 2 weeks following the Thanksgiving holiday.)

In other words, Paul did not look on this doctrine as a theory to be discussed, but as a truth to be lived. These letters encourage us to live "in the future tense" since Jesus could appear at any time. We are to practice the promise of His return in our manner of life.

➔ vs. 2:14-15 - "For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and also drove us out."

Just as the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted by other Jews, so the Gentile Christians in Thessalonica were persecuted by their fellow Gentiles. Persecution

is discouraging, especially when it comes from your own people. When you take a stand for Christ, you may face opposition, disapproval, and ridicule from your neighbors, friends, and even family members.

➔ Why were so many Jews opposed to Christianity?

1. Although the Jewish religion had been declared legal by the Roman government, it still had a tenuous relationship with the government. At this time Christianity was viewed as a sect of Judaism. The Jews were afraid that reprisals leveled against the Christians might be expanded to include them.
2. The Jewish leaders thought Jesus was a false prophet, and they didn't want his teachings to spread.
3. They feared that if many Jews were drawn away, their own political position might be weakened.
4. They were proud of their special status as God's chosen people, and they resented the fact that Gentiles could be full members within the Christian church.

The church at Thessalonica was closer to the New Testament ideal than others. At least three times in this letter Paul gave thanks for this church and the way it responded to his ministry. So what characteristics made it so ideal and such a joy to Paul's heart.

- ➔ They were an **Elect People** - Paul stated that he knew the Thessalonians had been chosen by God. (vs. 1:4) "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you."
- ➔ They were an **Exemplary People** - From the inception of this church, Paul looked to them with joy and gratitude as Christians worthy of the name. They were examples in several areas of their lives. They received the Word. They followed their spiritual leaders. They suffered for Christ. And they encouraged other churches.
- ➔ They were an **Enthusiastic People** - Their "work of faith and labor of love" expressed itself in their sharing of the gospel with others. They were both "receivers" of the Word and "transmitters" of the Word.
- ➔ They were an **Expectant People** - Their work of faith made them an elect people, for they turned to God from their idols and trusted Jesus Christ. Their labor of love made them an exemplary and enthusiastic people as they lived the Word of God and shared the gospel. Their patience of hope made them an expectant people, looking for their Savior's return.

➔ In chapter 1 we met Paul the evangelist. In chapter 2 we are introduced to Paul the pastor, for it explains how the great apostle cared for the new believers in the churches that he founded. Just as God uses people to bring the gospel to the lost, so He uses people to nurture the babes in Christ and to help lead them to maturity. In chapter 2 Paul reminded them of the kind of ministry he had as he taught and cared for the young church. Paul was:

- The faithful steward,

- The loving mother, and
- The concerned father.

A steward owns nothing, but possesses and uses everything that belongs to his master. The message of the gospel is a treasure God has entrusted to us. We must not bury it; we must invest it so it will multiply and produce "spiritual dividends" to God's glory. Faithfulness is the most important quality a steward possesses. He may not be popular in the eyes of men, but he dare not be unfaithful in the eyes of God.

The emphasis of the steward is faithfulness, but the emphasis of the mother is gentleness. As an apostle, Paul was a man of authority, but he always used his authority in love. The babes in Christ sensed his tender loving care as he nurtured them. He was indeed like a loving mother who cared for her children.

Paul considered himself a "spiritual father" to the believers at Thessalonica, just as he did toward the saints at Corinth.

➔ (1 Cor. 4:15 NASB) "For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel."

The Spirit of God used the Word of God in Paul's ministry, and many people in Thessalonica were born again into the family of God.

The father not only begets his children; he also cares for them. As he defends his own work against false accusations, Paul pointed out his duties as the spiritual father to the Thessalonians:

- His work (vs. 2:9),
- His walk (vs. 2:10), and
- His words (vs. 2:11-12).

Before a child can walk, he must learn to stand. Usually the father and mother teach the child to stand and then to walk. Paul was "spiritual parent" to these believers, but he was forced to leave Thessalonica. How then, could he help these young Christians learn to stand in the trials of life? (I believe this was the worry that my father had when he was forced to leave our home. How was he to parent his daughter to stand in the trials of life. Thus those ice cream chats were born.)

In the first two chapters, Paul explained how the church was born and nurtured. Now he dealt with the next step in maturity: how the church was to stand. The key word in this chapter is 'establish'. The key thought is expressed in vs. 3:8; "For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord."

➔ Paul explained three ministries he performed to help these new Christians become firmly established.

➔ **Paul sent them a helper** - When Paul and his friends left Thessalonica, they went to Berea and ministered the Word. But the troublemakers followed them and stirred up opposition there as well. Paul left for Athens while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. Further, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to help the young church that was going through tribulations. The factors that influenced Paul to send Timothy included his concern for the young church, Timothy's character, and the church's conflict.

The trials and testings that come to our lives as Christians are not accidents, they are 'appointments.' We must expect to "suffer for His sake." Persecution is not foreign to the believer, but a normal part of the Christian life. We must warn new believers that the way is not easy as they seek to live for Christ, otherwise, when trials come, these babes in Christ will be discouraged and defeated.

Of course, behind these persecutions is Satan, the enemy of the Christian. He is the tempter and he seeks to ruin our faith. Note the emphasis on 'faith' in chapter 3. As a roaring lion Satan stalks believers, and we must resist him "steadfast in the faith" (1 Peter 5:8-9).

➔ **Paul wrote them a letter** - Timothy reported that the new believers were standing firm in spite of persecution. They did not believe the lies that the enemy had told about Paul, but they still held him in the highest esteem in love.

Paul's response was to write them this letter, and the two letters to the Thessalonian church are a part of God's inspired Word. This suggests that God's Word is one of the best tools for establishing new Christians in the faith.

2 Thess. 2:15 - "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."

➔ **Paul prayed for them** - The Word of God and prayer should go together. Jesus prayed for his disciples, just as Paul prayed for the Thessalonian Christians, that their faith would not fail. Paul prayed for three specific requests.

- First, he prayed that their faith might mature (3:10). Faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. God tries our faith, not to destroy it, but to develop it.
- Second, Paul prayed that their love might abound (3:12). Times of suffering can be times of selfishness. Persecuted people often become very self-centered and demanding. What life does to us depends on what life finds in us, and nothing reveals the true inner man like the furnace of affliction. Some people build walls in times of trial and shut themselves off. Others build bridges and draw closer to the Lord and his people. This was Paul's prayer for these believers, and God answered it!
- Third, Paul prayed for their holiness of life (3:13). Again, it is the return of Jesus Christ that motivates the believer to live a holy life. Our Lord's return is also a source

➔ of stability in the Christian life. Where there is stability, there can be sanctity, and where there is holiness, there is assurance. The two go together.

So Paul's prayer teaches us how to pray not only for new believers, but for all believers. We should pray that their faith will mature, their love grow, and their character and conduct be holy and blameless before God.

And isn't this what we hope and pray for, for all our spiritual children? I know this is what my own Dad hoped and prayed for me ... and me for my two precious sons.

It seems fitting to close with the blessing from Paul to the young church.

➔ (vs. 3:12-13 NLT) "And may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow, just as our love for you overflows. May he, as a result, make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before God our Father when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people. Amen."

Now, *may you enjoy an ice cream chat with someone precious to you.*

