

Mount Pisgah A.M.E Church

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Bible Study, Wednesday, November 18, 2015

Survey of the Bible

Lesson 54: 1 Thessalonians

The Book of 1 Thessalonians

The book of 1 Thessalonians is a letter of commendation and encouragement to a congregation that has stood steadfast amid criticisms and negativity. The congregation is in Thessalonica, a thriving seaport city in the region of Macedonia just west of Philippi. (Both cities were in what is now part of northeastern Greece.) The letter is written in response to a report to the author by a messenger (Timothy) that in spite of attempts to undermine the church and its founder, the membership has stayed together and has not fallen off.

Author

Paul is accepted as the author pretty much universally. External writings quote the letter by name and ancient scholars attribute it to Paul. Although there are not greetings to individuals by name as in some of Paul's works, the warmth of the letter indicates a great deal of affection and suggests a close pastoral relationship. The theological themes of the return of Christ, being "in Christ," and sanctification (growth in Christ) as brought about by personal purity were all important to Paul and are thus indicators of his authorship of 1 Thessalonians. The letter is thought to have been Paul's first canonical letter (i.e., the first letter that he wrote that is in the Bible).

The Times and context of 1 Thessalonians

Thessalonica was a city that was developed by the Macedonian king Cassander in the year 315 BC. He named the city after his wife who was the half-sister of the Greek military conqueror, Alexander the Great. In 168 BC, the Romans took it over and it became the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia.

Thessalonica was a thriving commercial city because it had a strategic seaport for trade, and was also on one of the major military roads from Rome (the Egnatian Way). This road still serves as one of the main streets for modern Thessalonica (now called Salonika). Some of the Roman arches and a portion of the Roman built city wall still remain intact. The city apparently had a fairly stable Jewish presence, along with a significant population of pagan idol worshippers.

Paul visited Thessalonica during his Second Missionary Journey (see Acts 17:1-10). After being directed around Asia Minor by a call by the Holy Spirit to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10), Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy went to Macedonia (in 49 AD) and eventually arrived at Philippi. After a ministry in Philippi that landed them in prison, Paul and Silas left and went to Thessalonica. They apparently determined that Thessalonica was strategic for evangelism. Paul began preaching in the synagogue there and a number of Jews and non-Jewish "God fearers" (believers in one God) were converted. However Paul apparently also was successful outside of the synagogue, as a significant number of "idol worshippers" were converted (chap 1:8-9). While Paul was there, he was evidently bi-vocational; he worked "so as not to be a burden to them." (chap 2:9). However eventually Jewish resistance drove he and Silas from Thessalonica to Berea. Paul and Silas found a receptive audience in Berea, but some of his enemies from Thessalonica came there and drove him by himself from there to Athens.

Eventually Silas and Timothy joined him at Athens, and after a frustrating ministry there, the team arrived in Corinth (50 AD) where Paul spent significant time.

While in Corinth, all of the resistance that had driven Paul so abruptly from Thessalonica made Paul concerned that the believers there might not be able to hold on to their faith, so Paul sent Timothy to check on them. Timothy returned with a glowing report of their steadfastness. This report prompted this letter of commendation and encouragement (in 51 AD).

Overview

Paul's delight with the Thessalonians' faith prompts him to write this letter. The note begins by indicating that he has heard the reports of how they have put into practice the faith that they saw modeled in Paul, even amid criticism. People from all over the region are talking about how God has changed their lives, some even turning from idolatry. Paul then reinforces the legitimacy of his ministry and how he was "a pastor" among them, and never tried to take advantage of them. Paul shares with them how he longed to see them but that he was prevented from doing so, however that Timothy's report of their faith has encouraged him greatly. Paul then turns to exhorting them to persevere and live holy, and to encouraging them with the promise of Jesus' return to judge the world and receive his own. In anticipation believers are to "be alert and self-controlled" as "children of light" who are destined for salvation and not destruction. Finally, Paul gives concrete advice on how to preserve their hope, and prays for their continued growth.

Outline

- I. Paul's Personal Reflections on The Thessalonians (1:1-1:10)**
 - A. Salutation: Grace & Peace from the Team (1:1)
 - B. Thanksgiving For the Thessalonians (1:2-1:10)
 1. Thanks by Praying for them (1:2)
 2. Thanks in remembering them (1:3)
 3. Thanks in knowing their labors (1:4-10)

- II. Paul's Vindication Before The Thessalonians (2:1-3:13)**
 - A. Preaching "in spite of" (2:1-2:2)
 - B. Preaching with the right motives (2:3-2:4)
 - C. Pastoring with the right heart (2:5-2:12)
 - D. Vindication through their immediate response (2:13-2:16)
 1. Acceptance of the Word (2:13)
 2. Endurance against Evil (2:14-2:16)
 - E. Vindication through their Stability (2:17-3:13)
 1. Separation – Paul's heart for them (2:17-2:20)
 2. Reports of their stability (3:1-3:10)
 3. Prayer for them to hold out in love (3:11-3:13)

- III. Paul's Instructions to the Thessalonians (4:1-5:28)**
 - A. Instructions for Growth (4:1-4:12)
 1. Increase in desire (4:1-4:2)
 2. Purity and devotion to God (4:3-4:8)
 3. Brotherly love (4:9-4:12)
 - B. Instructions for Assurance (4:13-5:11)
 1. Assurance about the dead (4:13-4:18)
 2. Assurance about the Day of the Lord: Believers and unbelievers (5:1-5:11)
 - C. Instructions for Preserving Hope (5:12-5:22)

1. Respect leadership (5:12-5:13)
 2. Loving/exhorting neighbor (5:14-5:15)
 3. Personal attitude and conduct (5:16-5:18)
 4. Conduct in public worship (5:19-5:22)
 5. Prayer for preservation (5:23-5:24)
- D. Final Instructions (5:25-5:28)

Some Keys to understanding The Book of 1 Thessalonians

- In 1 Thessalonians, Christ is seen as the believer's hope of salvation both now and at His coming. When He returns, He will deliver, reward, perfect, resurrect, and sanctify all who trust Him.
- Throughout the letter, there is an unmistakable emphasis upon steadfastness in the Lord and a continuing growth in faith and life in view of the return of Christ.
- Paul wants to emphasize not JUST the returning of Christ, but also the life of the believer in every practical relationship, each aspect of which can be transformed and illuminated by the glorious prospect of Christ's return.
- In 1 Thessalonians, Paul differentiates among three components of a person's being: Spirit, soul and body. When we accept Christ, our SPIRIT is regenerated, but our soul is in process. The process of the molding and shaping of our soul is called sanctification. Thus our soul is "being saved." Eventually, when Christ comes back, we will be saved spirit, soul AND body, however our body will be a NEW body.

Some Lessons from 1 Thessalonians

- It is important not just to receive good teaching, but to imitate strong faith. In this we put the teaching into *practice* and thus grow strong, so that we are able to endure opposition. We should not require the preacher/teacher to be present to demonstrate our faith to others.
- The right heart AND conduct in ministry work builds strong believers. Not just right teaching, but right behavior. This includes doing everything possible not to distract people's attention from your message.
- Even if you are prevented from personal contact with other believers – PRAY FOR THEM. We should be praying earnestly particularly for new believers, so that deception and distraction will not cause them to be uprooted from their faith. Ultimately it is The Holy Spirit that does the stabilizing, not us.
- We ought to never be satisfied with where we are spiritually, but always desire to please God more and more. Not that we are to live in constant anxiety about "not being godly enough," but rather in ever increasing love and desire to draw closer.
- In this sexually charged society, we need to figure out what is necessary in order for us to "unplug" from the culture's overemphasis on sex, and plug into the Holy Spirit, who is the one who sets us apart for God's purposes. Pursuit of the Spirit can "crowd out" the ever present need to satisfy the old nature and its desires. "Replacement therapy" = replacing energy put into satisfying the old nature with pursuit of God.
- Understanding of the promises of God helps to remove fear and anxiety, especially about our most aching fear, which is death. According to the Bible, death for a believer is "resting in the Lord." The return of Christ promises a reunion with all who have "gone on before." In light of that hope, we ought to conduct ourselves in THIS life with a sense of expectation, not a sense of dread.
- Give thanks IN every situation. (Not necessarily FOR every situation.) Attitude determines altitude. God's will is found in that which perfects our character.

- Be OPEN to what the Holy Spirit might be doing in worship, and in life. However, TEST everything against principles that can be supported by scripture. God may be doing a NEW thing, but God will not violate God's ageless Word to do it.