

# Who Would Have Ever Thought

*First Things*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4  
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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to two very specific places in the New Testament, we're going to be in 1 Thessalonians 1, but toward the end of the message we're going to find ourselves in the book of Isaiah 42. So today, primarily 1 Thessalonians 1 but we are going to spend some time in the Old Testament in Isaiah 42. And if you were not with us last week, I want to welcome you to a journey not just through a very specific book of the Bible that we know as 1 Thessalonians, but more importantly, a journey through the first letter that the Lord gave the church through whom we know as the Apostle Paul, and the reason that this is important, the reason that this is critical is because today there is a whole lot of dialog, there is debate, there is discussion on what the church should be, who the church should be, what should the expression of our faith be, and there's all kinds of opinions, all kind of perspectives, and all kinds of preferences but as we walk through 1 Thessalonians, one of the things that we're going to notice is what were the first things that not only the early church dealt with but the first things that God spoke to and communicated to them. Those of you that were here last week, we did kind of a 30,000 foot flyover of 1 Thessalonians and it wasn't just what is there, we expect to hear about salvation, we expect to hear about sanctification, we expect to hear about the Second Coming, but more importantly what was not there. So much of the divisions and the debate of even the modern church were just not present there because they were interjected later by humanity's preferences and, shall we say, personal desires.

So today as we open up to 1 Thessalonians 1, we're going to read the first four verses, really a true introduction here and the question is who would have thought, who would have thought that a group of believers that two decades earlier were huddled up in the Upper Room, fearful for their physical lives would be in the position that they are in 1 Thessalonians 1. Beginning in verse 1 it says,

1 Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of

love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; 4 Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.

This is the introduction, this is the beginning of the first things that God gave the early church and so I think we should do our due diligence, if you allow me to say it, to kind of peel the layers away what is actually being communicated here. These are the first things of the first things.

So today, I just want to address kind of the basic questions of life that really set the scene for the what and the why. In verse 3, we have what the church was, and in verse 4, we have why it was that way, but just as a means of an elongated introduction, let's answer some other critical questions. When did the Lord give us what we know as 1 Thessalonians? Well, if you want to look at it biblically, it's in Acts 17. Now you look at the book of Acts, kind of a study and a history of the early few decades of the church, Acts 17 is critical. As I mentioned earlier, just two decades earlier these early believers, frightened for their physical life, in fact, the Bible says 120 plus the women were in the Upper Room waiting on Acts 2, they had no idea what it would look like when the Holy Spirit descended. They had no idea the grace that would be available and the victory that would be possible. They had no idea that they were days away from seeing the numbers go from 120 to 3,000. They had no idea they were years away from counting in multiplication instead of addition. And when you get to Acts 17, you're in the town of Thessalonica, the believers have begun to spread themselves out and there in Acts 17 we meet a young man by the name of Jason, and as he interacts with those early believers, it says there in verse 6 that these are they that have turned the whole world upside down. In just 20 years they have gone from being scared physically of their own life to not desiring if their life is taken from them because the world is being turned upside down by the gospel of Jesus Christ. So when we begin 1 Thessalonians, you need to understand that this is a time of revival, this is a time of awakening, this is a time where the gospel is going forth in an unprecedented manner.

So who is it that the Lord is using to "turn the world upside down"? Notice what it says in the very first phrase, "unto the church." Now today, let's be honest, we're a little bit tainted; when somebody talks about church or where they go to church or we went to church, we pretty much know what that means, but you understand that that's not a word that we find in the Old Testament. The word "church" by strict definition just means "an assembly of believers," okay? So when we talk about the church, it really just means an assembly but the thing that I think is important is that Jesus Christ himself prophesied what you and I know today so commonly as the church.

Let me take you to the scene. It's in Matthew 16. It's an area called Caesarea Philippi, right at the base of the Golan Heights on the northern end of Israel. If we're to be honest with ourselves, it was pretty much a place that in today's terminology kind of was like a Coexist conference. I want you to imagine every faith known to man, every belief system, every perspective, every expression of religiosity was there in Caesarea Philippi and Jesus asked this very strategic question, "Who does the world say that I am?" Now think about the setting. You've got the entire world of belief systems and the disciples

began to respond, "Well, some think you're Jeremiah. Some think you're John the Baptist come from the dead. Some of them think you're just a prophet." And then Jesus asked this very strategic question, "Who do you say that I am?" And there Simon Peter stood up and he said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus responded by saying, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father which is in heaven." And then you get to verse 18 of Matthew 16 and Jesus makes this profound statement, he says, "and upon rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail."

Now let me picture that scene for you just a moment. I want you to imagine Jesus is teaching there, the disciples were in front of him, they're answering these questions, they're dialoging. I think it's important the verbiage that Jesus used. He does not point to Peter and say, "upon that rock I'll build my church." He doesn't point to the disciples and say, "upon that rock." He basically addresses himself and he says, "upon this rock I will build my church." So when we get to 1 Thessalonians 1, this is not just the fulfillment of what Jesus prophesied but I want you to think about it in these terms of all the things that exist in the world, of all the things that we see and we hear and we can touch, what you and I know as the church is the only thing that Jesus shed his blood for. That's it. Jesus Christ only spilled his blood, he only shed his blood for the church. So it's not just prophesied, we see how precious it is. In fact, in Acts 20:28 it talks about shepherding the flock, the church, which God shed his own blood for.

So here we have 20 years later a group of individuals who are now the instruments by which the Lord is turning the world upside down and why? Because this is the entity, this is that which Jesus said the gates of hell will never prevail. And then there's the "where." It's in Thessalonica and you can go and do the research and one of the things that you'll discover is that Thessalonica was actually named after a relative of Alexander the Great, just kind of one of those interesting historical facts. But here's why it's more relevant. Thessalonica wasn't just in Greece, this isn't just Paul's second missionary journey, this is a major thoroughfare for the world. The world is being turned upside down and there in Thessalonica where it's being turned upside down, it is now going literally to all the rest of the world.

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul makes this profound statement about himself. He says, "I am the apostle to the Gentiles." Now before we get to the "what" and the "why," I want you to understand the gravity of this. When he declares himself through the Holy Spirit as the spokesman to the Gentiles, when he is the one whom the Lord uses in Thessalonica first and foremost to communicate his message to the church, what we have here in 1 Thessalonians ought to be the springboard, ought to be the beginning of the rests. In other words, we're able to filter all of our doctrines, all of our perspectives, all of our preferences through what took place two decades after the tomb was discovered empty when the world was being turned upside down.

So the question is what was it about these people? What was it about this early church? What were the attributes they possessed? How are they described? I think it's interesting that in verse 3 of 1 Thessalonians 1, there are three descriptors that are given. These three descriptors should set aside all demarcations and lines of distinction. These are, for lack

of better terms, these are the marks of his church. What's the first one? He says, "I know your work of faith." Now he did not say, "I know your works." He didn't say, "I know your endeavors." He didn't say, "I know the things that you do." It's important how it's phrased here. What he is saying is that the person who comprises the church is one whose faith then produces a life that has been changed by Jesus Christ. It begins by saying that Christianity is not just an assertion of cerebral facts. In fact, in James 2:19 it says that the devils believe there is one God and they shudder.

So one of the struggles that we have in our culture today is that on one side of the proverbial cliff you have a group of people that just will agree with the facts, with the data, and with the information, and think that because they agree with truth and history, somehow, somehow they're part of the church. And on the other side, you've got a group of people that think if you just do enough good deeds, somehow that makes you right in the eyes of God. But that's not what 1 Thessalonians says. He says, "I know your work of faith." The book of James 1, it says to not only be hearers of the word but be doers. I think this is best illustrated by a parable that Jesus spoke in Matthew 13. It's a famous parable called the parable of the sower. In fact, Jesus when he's giving the interpretation to the disciples he says, "If you can get this, you can get all of the parables." I'm sure you're familiar with it. The story goes a little something like this, that a man goes out into the field and he begins to toss or to sow seed. They land on four different types of ground. One is immediately taken up by the fowls of the air and never gets below the depth. One springs up very quickly but dries out in the summer heat. One bears fruit for a season but then has a struggle. And then there is that one that bears some 30, some 60, some 100 fold.

Allow me very briefly to analyze this parable in light of this statement, "I know your work of faith." The first seed and the last seed are pretty easy to discern. When the first seed is taken up by the fowls of the air and never gets to the ground, we know they're just lost. There is no relationship with the Lord. There is nothing of faith that is present. The last seed, that's pretty easy, if it's bearing some 30, 60, and 100 fold, they're good. They're in the right place. They are who they were designed to be. It's those middle two that we struggle with and hopefully I can help you this morning. That second one, it says it springs up quickly. In other words, there was an agreement with the facts and with the data. There was a fervor. There was a zeal. But do you know what Jesus said? It died out, listen, because it had no root. And then the other one says that it bore fruit but the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches crept in.

Why is this important? Because when 1 Thessalonians 1:3 talks about the works of our faith, it is describing what we might say biblically as fruit, that the seed of the gospel was planted into our lives, it was watered according to Ephesians 5 with the water of the word of God and it began to grow. And you know and I know that when you plant a seed in the ground, you usually don't see a whole lot of fruit for a couple of years. And then we know there are seasons due to conditions and environment and oftentimes things we can't control where trees will bear more fruit one season than they will another, or they'll even go season where there's not much at all and then they'll make a vibrant comeback. What's important to note is that one of the very first things that is shared with the church is if you

want to know who the church is, it's not just those that agree with the facts, it's not just people running around saying the good stuff outweighs the bad stuff, it's those who the gospel has been planted in their life and they have been changed, the fruit that is borne of them.

But then there's this beautiful picture. He says not only your works of faith but your labor of love. You know, if there is a word that has been twisted and turned in our culture more than any, it is the word "love." Have you ever caught yourself, guys, that you declare that you love your spouse, you love your dog, and you love dinner, all within the same hour? And yet we know that we mean different, shall we say, expressions thereof.

Labor of love. The biblical word for "love" means that you care more about another's needs than your own, that you're selfless. In other words, the early church didn't just have a changed life, it's that when they interacted with each other the picture you have isn't they gathered and said, "Hey, I need you to know what I prefer. I need you to know what is my flavor." They said, "What will help you more than even I personally need for myself."

It was a labor love, in fact, you get to the end of 1 Corinthians 16, there's this incredible description of those believers in Corinth. It says, listen to this in verse 15, "They have become addicted to ministry." In other words, they are so passionate about helping those around them, they are so passionate about other's needs even over their own preferences.

And so when we talk about the early church, we're talking about people with changed lives who are more interested in helping others than having themselves served, and then there's a prophetic element. Notice what it says in verse 3, it says, "and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus." Now that phrase "of hope" is critical. You may have heard the old adage and it's absolutely true, do not pray for patience. Do you know why? Because in James 1 it says the only way to get patience is to go through trials and tribulations. So if you say, "Oh, I'm just praying for patience," then the Lord's going to say, "Fine, here's the trials, here's the tribulations. Let's have some patience."

But notice what it says, "in patience of the hope of the Lord Jesus Christ." Last week when we did kind of a survey of 1 Thessalonians, 20% of this first letter deals with what you and I would call the Second Coming and in Titus 2:13 it talks about us anxiously waiting for the hope of the return of Jesus Christ. So prophetically, you not only have these people whose lives have been changed who are selfless in their actions and their behaviors, but they are more interested in their heavenly investments than their earthly rewards. They see what is around them for what it is.

I've heard this adage before, if you struggle with the things of this earth, take a sticker, put it on everything that you own and write on the sticker, "Soon to be burned," because everything that we possess, everything that we've attained will one day vaporize according to scripture but eternity, our relationship with the Lord, and his one day, as we read in chapter 4, his coming for us to catch us up with him and then one day return with us is that which will last for all of eternity. Their hope was they patiently endured all that

this world has knowing that one day eternity would far outmatch anything that they could have experienced in this temporal earth.

The church was identified as changed people with an incredible expression of love who were more interested in the return of Jesus than they were in pursuing their own earthly endeavors. Why? The why factor here. Why is this so critical? Verse 4 of 1 Thessalonians 1 uses a phrase that for some reason has caused a whole lot of discussion and a whole lot of debate, "Knowing this, your election of God." What does that mean? Well, I want to introduce you to something that you may have never heard of before, it's called the law of first mention. You say, "Well, what is that?" Well, when you're studying scripture whether it's a word, a phrase, a concept, a doctrine, whatever it may be, one of the best ways to truly grasp what that means is to go back and look at when it was first used.

So I want to invite you to go all the way in the Old Testament to the book of Isaiah 42. If it says that we are changed, we do love with a labor of love, and that we are excited and wait with the patience of the hope of Jesus' return, the "why" is because of verse 4, knowing your election of God. What does that mean? So in Isaiah 42, I want to introduce you to the very first time, and by the way, in a moment the second time, that we see that word used in your Bible. Isaiah 42:1 says, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles." So when we use that word "elect," when we talk about election, you cannot separate it from the person that is Christ Jesus the Messiah. The very first time that word is utilized in scripture it is prophesying that the Messiah will one day come. We know him as Jesus Christ. He was the elect. He is the one that would be the means of our salvation and the forgiver of our sins.

So anytime we talk about this word, we cannot separate it from whom Jesus Christ is. He is the person by which all things encompass and revolve around. But I want you to see a picture. Turn a few pages to the right to chapter 45. There is a statement that is made here in verse 4 that is just amazing. Verse 4 of Isaiah 45 says, "For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me." I want to really briefly show you how important verse 4 of Isaiah 45 is, Jacob my servant, Israel mine elect. Let me peel the layers there. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham. This was that messianic lineage that was talked about in chapter 42 that the Messiah would come through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the famous 12 tribes, and eventually whom we know as Jesus Christ. Jacob is the servant, that's what it says there, right? And Israel, you do realize that Jacob was renamed Israel, correct? And Israel is a corporate term. Israel is a collective term. Jacob was an individual. Israel is an entity. Israel encompassed all of those that are a part of what God was doing. In fact, when you get to Romans 2 it says, whoa, just because somebody's been circumcised doesn't mean they're of Israel. They can go all the way and trace their family tree to Abraham if they want, but if they have not been circumcised in the heart, if they have not embraced what God is doing, they may have a servant's name but they are not a part of Israel collectively.

Let me draw the picture for you, is that it is the person of Jesus Christ, it is the Messiah who was prophesied and projected to come for the sins of humanity, but it was the entity of Israel that would be the highway, that would be the path, can you allow me to say, would be the plan by which God would utilize to bring the Messiah to humanity. Why is this so important? What is so prophetic about this? When you go back to 1 Thessalonians 1 it says that you and I, the church, the prophesied one, the precious ones that Jesus shed his blood for, we're to have a changed life, the works of faith. We're to have a different picture of things, a labor of love. We're to hope for Jesus' return. And why, why is this? Knowing your election of God. I want you to hear what that little statement means, that the plan of God didn't start just 20 years earlier in Pentecost. They don't have the right to go, "It's been a good two decades. I hope God keeps this up." They couldn't even go back half a century from what we know as the famous Christmas story when Jesus Christ came in the flesh and he lived a sinless life, he died a sacrificial death, he rose a victorious resurrection. They couldn't even go back 50 years. Do you know what this statement means? That they and you and I have to go all the way back to the book of Genesis 3 when it says that humanity fell into sin, and there in verse 15 God said, "And I will bring from the woman a seed that will crush the serpent." That declaration, that prophetic statement was in the garden of Eden when humanity could fit in a two-door sedan as far as their numbers.

God said, "I'm going to save the world through this. You've rebelled but he's going to come." He called Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the tribe of Judah, we go all the way through the Old Testament, we make our way to his birth, his life, his death and his resurrection, and when you get to this little statement in 1 Thessalonians 1, I want you to hear the important "why" here. Here's what God is saying: when you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you're not just becoming a part of a local church, you're not just becoming a part of an entity that's been around 2,000 years, you are becoming a part of that which God had designed for humanity ever since the garden of Eden. And when you realize what you're a part of being so much greater than you are, it changes how you look at things, it changes how you see things, it changes everything about your life. When he makes this statement, he said on that day where you repented, you confessed your sins and you believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, you didn't just get in on the latest fad or trend, what you did is you believed upon that which the Lord has been doing ever since humanity rebelled. And when you see it from that perspective, it changes everything.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe this morning you're that individual, maybe you're here on our campus, maybe you're watching online, or maybe even listening on the radio, and today you realize that what we know as Christianity and church and believing in Jesus is more than just the sticks and bricks of a local congregation, it's more than just the "thou shalt and thou shalt nots," it's about our depravity and our propensity to rebel against God and his willingness to love us, forgive us, and save us in spite of ourselves. Maybe today is that day where you embrace that concept for your own life and you just follow what the Lord said in Romans 10. He said whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, not whoever becomes a Baptist, not whoever joins this local church, not whoever does this, stops that, whoever calls out will be saved. Maybe today is the day where you cry out not necessarily out loud, not

necessarily using the words or the phrases that I or somebody else would use, but just your heart's cry confessing your sin condition and your belief on the Lord Jesus Christ. If you're that person today, can I encourage you just to cry out to God. Maybe your heart's cry would go something like this. "God, today I realize what you've known about me my entire life. I've got a sin condition. God, I've rebelled against you. I've been places I should have never been. I've done things I should have never done. God, you know I've allowed things to be spoke out of my mouth and thoughts between my ears that should have never been there. And God, I believe your word when it says the result or the wages of my sin is death but, God, I also believe the next part of that verse, it says but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So God, today I believe, I believe I've got a sin condition that only Jesus can fix and, God, today I want you to know I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf, he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that when he allowed himself to go to the cross on Mount Calvary, he was taking on the pain, the infliction, the punishment of my sin. And God, I believe that three days later when he rose victorious from the grave, he made it possible, he made it feasible for my sins to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to the issues, the struggles, and the problems of this life, but there's one thing I know, that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. The best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me and, God, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who cried out to God to be saved and forgiven. In a moment, I'm going to pray for us, then we're going to stand and sing together. We want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We've got a whole team set aside who just wants to hear your story, to pray with you and to pray for you. Or maybe there's another decision that the Lord's weighing heavy, maybe following in believer's baptism, maybe being a part of this incredibly biblically grounded church, or maybe you just need to be prayed for. But today as we prepare for this time of decision, it's not just for those who need to be saved, it's for those of us who are saved, maybe not stepping out and stepping forward but maybe walking out of this room in a moment with a completely different perspective of what church is supposed to look like. It's all about him and it's not about us.

*Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, thank you that we have those words of John the Baptist who said that you must increase and he must decrease. God, help us today in our own respective lives to have that same attitude. Lord, may what you've called us today increase and may what we personally desire decrease. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*