

Message #1

Acts 17:1-6

Have you ever planned something and had it fall apart? You make plans to do something or go someplace and then all of a sudden something happens and it all changes. That is exactly what happened to Paul and that is exactly how the Gospel actually came to the United States.

We who know the Lord and have experienced the grace of God have done so because God directed one man to go into Europe in order to evangelize it. That one man was the Apostle Paul. Paul took the Gospel of grace to Europe and eventually that same Gospel came to the United States. The interesting thing is Paul never intended to go to Europe. His original plan was to go into Bithynia, but a vision appeared to Paul telling him to go to Macedonia and preach the Gospel (Acts 16:9-10) and fortunately for us, Paul responded to the call.

Less than 20 years after Jesus Christ had died on the cross, the Gospel of the grace of God fanned out from Jerusalem all the way to Macedonia, which is Europe. One of the first places the Gospel reached was a city named Thessalonica. Thessalonica, in Paul's day, was a free-wheeling city and it was a place that featured all kinds of religions.

When Paul and his entourage of Silas, Timothy and Luke first got to Europe, they got off a boat on the Aegean Sea and traveled about ten miles inland to a city called Philippi. There a church was formed. After Paul left Philippi, he traveled southwest on the famous Roman military road called the Via Egnatia way. According to Strabo, this 500 mile road was a very sturdy road, well kept and safe and actually had milestone markers much like we do on expressways.

After Paul left Philippi, he traveled on that road for about 32 miles and he came to a city known as Amphipolis. The next day he traveled another 32 miles and came to Apollonia. The next day he traveled 36 more miles and came to his target city which was located 100 miles from Philippi and about 320 miles north of Athens. The city was the strategic city of Thessalonica, which sat near the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea. Cicero called Thessalonica the city that was located "in the bosom of the empire." This city is so strategic that during WWI all allies began their campaigns there. During WWII the Nazis took 60,000 Jews from the city and executed them and the city suffered great damage.

At the time Paul traveled there it was a large, progressive, heavily populated, rich commercial city. Its population has been estimated to have been as large as 200,000 people. To put that in some perspective, the population of Grand Rapids is 189,815. The population of Kalamazoo is 74,743; Portage 46,624, which equals 121,367. So Thessalonica was larger than Grand Rapids and larger than Kalamazoo and Portage combined.

It was the capital of one of the four Roman districts of Macedonia. It was a city with a large Jewish population which featured, as one writer said, a "militant Judaism." In fact, according to one estimate made in the mid 1800's there were 20,000 Jewish inhabitants who lived there because of the great business opportunities (Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, p. 1079).

Thessalonica was and still is a very impressive city. Today it is called Salonica and is the second largest city in Greece, with a metro population of over one million people. It is considered to be the cultural capital of Greece today. It is a city known to produce textiles, leather goods, machine tools and cigarettes. It sells commodities like tobacco, livestock, wheat, cotton, silk and vegetables. It is a commercial port and is a “major transportation hub for the rest of southeastern Europe.”

But the most impressive thing about the city is that two inspired letters in the Bible are addressed to the believers who lived there and in the next weeks we would like to take you through one of those books called I Thessalonians.

QUESTION #1 – Why study I Thessalonians?

We would like to present four simple reasons why studying this book is critical.

Reason #1 - Because it is one of only 66 inspired books given by God in the Bible.

I Thessalonians was probably the second letter Paul wrote after Galatians. In the earliest days of the Christian church, after an apostle wrote a letter and sent it to a congregation, copies were made so other churches could have it. These were all hand-copied manuscripts. God, in His sovereignty, preserved these manuscripts and there are many that are preserved from I Thessalonians. In fact, the evidence that I Thessalonians is an inspired book of God is overwhelming.

The Greek manuscripts known as the Chester Beatty Papyri (A.D. 250) contains I Thessalonians. There are a total of 220 leaves of papyrus paper measuring 10 by 8 inches and 86 which measure 11 by 6 ½ inches and 30 of those leaves are owned by the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

All the canon listings of books of the Bible list I Thessalonians - Marcion (A.D. 140); Muratorian (A.D. 170); Apostolic (A.D. 300); Cheltenham (A.D. 360); Athanasius (A.D. 363).

Many individuals quoted from it or said it was a book in the Bible: Ignatius (A.D. 110); Polycarp (A.D. 110-50); Hermes (A.D. 115-40); Didache (A.D. 120-150). Irenaeus named it as authentic around A.D. 180. Plus, so did Justin Martyr (A.D. 150); Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 170); Tertullian (A.D. 200); Eusebius (A.D. 325); Jerome (A.D. 340) and Augustine (A.D. 400).

Plus all of the church council meetings declared it to be an inspired book: Nicea (A.D. 325-40), Hippo (A.D. 393), Carthage (A.D. 397) and Carthage (A.D. 419).

All of this says I Thessalonians is an inspired book of God and the manuscript evidence supports it.

Reason #2 - Because it shows how Paul built a church on careful teaching and doctrine .

Now when we examine what happened in Acts 17, when Paul first went to Thessalonica, there are certain words that describe his ministry. He “reasoned from the Scriptures” (17:2); he “explains” (17:3a); he “gave evidence” (17:3b) and he “proclaimed” (17:3c). These words teach us that Paul went after people in Thessalonica who knew how to think and the way he went about reaching them was to not to try to entertain them or manipulate them, but carefully teach them the Word of God. Paul’s approach was to challenge a person’s mind by carefully and accurately opening up the Scriptures.

Now most believe, chronologically speaking, that I Thessalonians is the second letter Paul wrote after Galatians. It was written very early in his apostolic writing career and one thing that leaps out from this book is that Paul was not interested in shallow, feel good Bible studies in which people meet in a room and all discuss what they think about religion. He taught them.

It is obvious when you read I Thessalonians that Paul was a tremendous theologian and one thing he developed and taught them was doctrine.

He taught them that God the Father was the “living and true God” (1:9). He taught them that Jesus Christ was equal to God and also the Lord and Son of God (1:3, 10). He taught about the power and convicting work of the Holy Spirit (1:5). He taught about the doctrines of election (1:4; 5:24); the resurrection (1:10; 4:16); sanctification (4:7). **And he also taught them about biblical prophecy .**

It is very probable that Paul stayed in the home of a man named Jason when he was in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-6). There is some good speculative evidence that Paul spent quite a bit of time in Thessalonica. For example, we know he stayed there long enough to receive several financial gifts from the church of Philippi which was about 100 miles away (Phil. 4:16). However, all we actually know for certain is that Paul spent one month in Thessalonica teaching the church. **It is quite obvious from reading the epistle that in one month’s time he taught plenty of critical doctrine.**

This fact certainly goes against the grain of the shallow church mindset that promotes happy-clappy fun time. Paul was given to carefully teaching the church doctrine and never is that point more clear than in I Thessalonians.

Reason #3 - Because it shows the importance of precise eschatology.

Robert Thomas, who has written a good commentary on I Thessalonians said: “far and away the largest theological contribution of the Epistles lies in what they say about eschatology” (*I Thessalonians*, Vol. 11, p. 233).

The great passage on the Rapture of the Church appears in I Thessalonians 4:13-17. Now there are many people who do not think it really matters what you believe about end times, but I Thessalonians suggests otherwise. **Let me be so bold to suggest that if your eschatology is wrong, your godliness will be lacking.** Apparently, as we will discuss in a moment, a true eschatology is a great preventative against immoral, lustful thinking and behavior.

Paul did not shy away from teaching biblical prophecy to this church in Thessalonica and he was very specific in what he taught. In every chapter of I Thessalonians the Lord's coming is thematically prominent. **In fact, every chapter of I Thessalonians ends with a prediction concerning the future coming of Jesus Christ (1:10; 2:19, 20; 3:11-13; 4:13-18; 5:23-24).**

Dr. John Walvoord said that the theme in **chapter one** is Christ's coming as it relates to salvation; **chapter two**, Christ's coming as it relates to Christian service; **chapter three**, Christ's coming as it relates to sanctification; **chapter four**, Christ's coming as it relates to surety and **chapter five**, Christ's coming as it relates to safety (*I & II Thessalonians*, p. 16).

In Paul's view, having a proper eschatology is critical to godliness. The Thessalonians had turned from idols to serving the living God (1:9) and one of the critical doctrines to help keep them on this course was the realization that Jesus Christ was coming back (1:10) and could rapture them at any moment.

The doctrine of the imminent return of Jesus Christ is critical to our Christians lives. It is a key part of keeping us on track.

Reason #4 - Because it shows the importance of living a pure life in an impure world.
4:3, 7

It is pretty obvious that Thessalonica was filled with a bunch of people who refused to work, who were given over to immoral behavior. This city had its share of lazy, immoral bums. It wasn't that there weren't job opportunities; it was that many didn't want to work (II Thess. 3:11).

We are living in a lustful world totally devoted to vile and evil sexual immorality. I Thessalonians promotes living a pure life in the midst of a very immoral and corrupt world. Paul specifically says that God has not called us into His family so we can pursue impure things, but sanctified things (I Thess. 1:7). In fact, to reject this is to reject God, Himself (I Thess. 1:8).

QUESTION #2 – Who wrote I Thessalonians?

William Hendricksen said there will always be someone who will disagree with the unanimous opinion but **there is no doubt that this book was written by the Apostle Paul** (*I Thessalonians*, p. 18).

There has really never been much of a debate about this point; **I Thessalonians was written by Paul**. All ancient testimony says Paul wrote it. In fact, one writer said that the Pauline authorship of I Thessalonians has not been successfully challenged by anyone. Even today, if one visits Thessalonica, it is pointed out that Paul wrote two letters to the early church there.

Eusebius, who is the father of Church history, said: “Paul...was obviously and unmistakably the author of fourteen epistles...”. He goes on to say that some questioned whether or not he wrote Hebrews (*The History of the Church*, p. 108). Now this speaks to the integrity of Eusebius because he admitted some questioned the book of Hebrews. But what is evident is that around the year A.D. 325 he had never heard of anyone who had ever doubted the fact that I Thessalonians was written by Paul. He had heard of some who questioned Hebrews, but not I Thessalonians.

The canon listings of Marcion and Muratori say Paul wrote it. Early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, say it is Pauline and they said that around A.D. 190-200. Actually Tertullian wrote a letter against the heretic Marcion and in that letter he alludes to the fact that Marcion considered I Thessalonians as being a book written by Paul. Plus, the first verse of the text says Paul wrote it (1:1), as does the assumptive statement of 2:18.

Furthermore, the Greek linguistic style is clearly Pauline. More than 4/5ths of the words used in I Thessalonians are found in other major Pauline books such as Romans, I & II Corinthians and Galatians.

Just like Leon Morris said, “...it is Pauline both in language and in ideas” (*I Thessalonians*, p. 27). As William Hendricksen said, this epistle is way “too Pauline” in its resemblance to other Pauline epistles (*Ibid.*, p. 19).

QUESTION #3 – Where was Paul when he wrote I Thessalonians?

We know that when Paul got into Europe on his second missionary journey, he went first to Philippi (Acts 16:11-40), then to Thessalonica, then to Berea, then to Athens (Acts 17) and then to Corinth (Acts 18).

We know that he was in Athens for a short time alone, but when he gets to Corinth, Silas and Timothy arrive from Macedonia (18:1, 5). We know that when Paul writes I Thessalonians, Silas and Timothy are with him because he mentions them in the opening verse (1:1).

We know that when Paul writes I Thessalonians, he had been in Philippi (2:2) and we know that when he wrote it he mentions that he had been in Athens alone (3:1) and that Timothy had just arrived (3:6).

The obvious conclusion we draw from this is that Paul is writing I Thessalonians while he is in Corinth.

QUESTION #4 – When did Paul write I Thessalonians?

This is one of the easiest and most precise books to actually date. We may recall that while Paul was in Corinth, he had to appear before Gallio (Acts 18:12-17).

In 1909, an inscription was found at Delphi, on gray limestone which gives the name of the emperor Claudius in a letter he wrote to the citizens and it contains the name of Gallio as the proconsul. Claudius dated the year “in the 12th year of his tribunical power.” The twelfth year of his power extended from January 25, A.D. 52 to January 24, A.D. 53. This inscription indicates that Gallio was already in power of the proconsul which means he was in power in A.D. 50-51. So Paul’s appearance before Gallio was probably around A.D. 51.

Since I Thessalonians was written shortly after he arrived in Corinth, because Timothy had just arrived (3:6), we believe that we are very precise in saying **I Thessalonians was written in A.D. 50 or 51.**

So I Thessalonians is one of his earliest writings. It is probably the second letter he wrote after writing Galatians. The significance of this point is that we learn the deep doctrine that Paul taught to the church. He taught the church rich doctrine and rich doctrine is very practical. What is even more amazing is that when Paul wrote I Thessalonians to the believers in the church, they did not have any New Testament. These are new, young Christians and they are immediately exposed to deep and wonderful doctrines.

QUESTION #5 – Why did Paul write I Thessalonians?

The purpose of I Thessalonians is detected by the content of the letter and it is obvious that there were specific reasons why Paul wrote:

Reason #1 - He wrote to express joy concerning the good news that the Thessalonians were steadfast in their faith and in the grace of God. 1:2-3

Reason #2 - He wrote to refute slanderous charges being made against him and his teaching 2:1-12

Reason #3 - He wrote to assure them that he had not abandoned them but wanted to come and fellowship with them again. 2:17-3:5

Reason #4 - He wrote to promote living a life of pure morality in an immoral world. 4:1-12

Reason #5 - He wrote to stress that the church needs to stay focused on the future and specifically that Jesus Christ will come in the air to rapture His Church. 4:13-5:6

In fact, this gets very close to the theme. **Dr. John Walvoord observed that 23 of the 89 verses in I Thessalonians have to do with the future.** This represents 26% of the book (*I & II Thessalonians*, p. 15). He wanted these believers to be very precise in their understanding of prophecy (i.e. 5:1-6).

Reason #7 - He wrote to establish the importance of church involvement. 5:12-22

Church life is critical to God and to Paul. It is impossible to worship God properly without a church connection. In church there needs to be proper respect for leaders, there needs to be unity, there needs to be discipline and there certainly needs to be the promotion of a life of holiness.

QUESTION #6 – What is the theme of I Thessalonians?

Every believer needs to keep his focus on the return of the Lord and that focus becomes the basis for understanding precise doctrine, remaining steadfast in faith, living a life that is pure and godly and staying involved in proper worship at church.