

God's Message to Us in First Thessalonians

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Introduction

This afternoon, we are looking at First Thessalonians in our “God’s Message to Us in Every Book of the Bible” sermon series.

- This letter is one of the earliest if not the earliest of Paul’s epistles that we have in the New Testament... written in AD 51 when Gallio was the proconsul.

Paul wrote it just a few months after planting the church with Timothy and Silas (who is also called Silvanus).

- They had come from Philippi and had preached in the synagogue.
 - There had been a wonderful response to the gospel, especially among the Greeks,
 - but this caused some of the Jews who did not believe to come after Paul with murder in their hearts.
 - Paul and his fellow ministers had to be taken away for safety.
 - This greatly distressed Paul because here were these new believers in a hostile environment without any ministry support to help them become established in the faith.
- He speaks of this in his letter to them, and explains that he had tried to come to see them time and time again, but had been hindered time and time again.
 - Finally, he and those with him decided to send Timothy to them, and Timothy had returned with a good report that the Thessalonians were doing well!
 - Paul was delighted when this news came.
 - He felt as though he could live again!
- Out of his great encouragement, he took up his pen and wrote this letter to them,
 - both to tell them how glad he was to hear that they were standing strong, and to add his encouragement and support to the ministry that young Timothy had had among them.

So what we get with this letter to the Thessalonians is a letter that teaches us about healthy new congregations.

- Let’s get underway. We will look at six things that are presented to us here pertaining to healthy churches, especially young ones.

I. First, we see that a healthy church is a church to thank God for, especially if it is a new church in a place of persecution!

A. After his customary greetings in the first verse, Paul says, in verse 2, “**We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.**”

1. Notice that he does not say, “I am thankful for you,” but he testifies that he actually thanks God for them in his prayers.
 - I think a lot of Christians today make the mistake of having thankful feelings about things without ever turning them into actual prayers.
 - And the truth us, a lot of the time, we are not really thankful to God who gave us the blessing.
 - When you pray for other believers and churches, it is good to actually thank God for them.

2. Of course you have to be careful of the opposite danger of getting in the habit of saying, “Thank you for so-and-so,” in a thoughtless manner.
 - You should say it, but you also need to actually be thankful.
 - Just think of it—here are people who were in the darkness, worshipping idols, on their way to hell, without any hope...
 - And now they are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, made alive by God’s Spirit, transformed to serve God, and promised an everlasting inheritance.
- B. You can see how Paul adds the particulars about them that had made him especially thankful.
1. In verse 2-6, he mentions how they gave evidence of their election by God by their work of faith, their labour of love, and their patience of hope...
 - They had received the word in much affliction, but that had not hindered them in the least—instead it had made their faith, love, and hope—especially their hope—shine all the more.
 - By continuing to serve the LORD under persecution, they showed that they were not living for this world, but for the eternal kingdom that God had promised them in Christ.
 - Paul thanks the Lord not only that this was true of them, but in verses 7-10 that their life as a church was having a powerful impact on other believers all around the region.
 - When Paul went to other places, he found that people were already talking about what had happened at Thessalonica, and how the Thessalonians had turned from their idols to serve Christ.
 2. That is what you ought to do in your prayers for other believers and churches...
 - Look for the particular things that God has done in them and give thanks, especially when they are doing well.
 - If they are an old church, thank God for keeping them through the years so that they have not lost their first love.
 - If they are a church that is not doing so well, thank Him that He has not cast them off, and pray earnestly for them to be restored.
 - In every case, the simple fact that here are people whose names are written down in heaven should be enough to fill you with thanksgiving and joy.

II. Next, in chapter 2, Paul tells us the kind of ministry that God uses to bring forth a healthy church.

- A. He makes it clear that one of the reasons the Thessalonians were faithful is because he and Silas and Timothy were such faithful ministers.
1. In 2:1-5, he explains how they preached the word of God to them without compromise even though they had suffered for doing so in the city of Philippi where they had just been ministering.
 - a. He says: **1 Thess 2:1-3: For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. ² But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict. ³ For our exhortation *did* not *come* from error or uncleanness, nor *was it* in deceit. ⁴ But as we have been approved by God to be**

entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

- They had been beaten with rods and chained up in prison at Philippi.
 - It would have been the tendency of almost anyone else to soften the message a little so as not to offend anyone.
 - This is exactly what happens over and over in the ministry with the devastating consequence that people do not turn from idols to serve the Lord... they are never confronted at all about their true need for Christ.
- b. Because Paul and his fellow ministers did not compromise the message, the Thessalonians were able to hear the truth and be saved.
- God in His grace sometimes uses compromised ministry, but it almost always leads to a weak church and in time to an apostate church.
- c. Of course it should be understood that faithful ministry does not guarantee faithful congregations.
- Paul had many whose hearts were hardened by his preaching because it was true. So did all of the prophets and even Jesus.
 - Faithful ministry does not guarantee faithful congregations, but it is nearly impossible for unfaithful ministers to raise up faithful congregations.
 - If they gospel is not preached to them, how can they be saved?
2. Paul also explains how he and his fellows toiled and laboured night and day for the Thessalonians.
- They did not make demands as apostles who should receive honours, but as verse 8 says, **“affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.”**
 - He summarises in verse 10: **You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; ¹¹ as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, ¹² that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.**
- B. It may seem a little odd to us that Paul is reminding them how faithful his own ministry was...
1. But his purpose and the purpose of the Holy Spirit was not to boast. I am sure of it. Paul knew that his ministry was all of God.
- His purpose is to give the Thessalonians, as well as us, an example, a model, of what ministry ought to look like so we can imitate it.
2. It would be easy to criticise Paul for boasting to ease the sting of what he says, but instead we all need to compare the kind of ministry we have to his...
- I need to do that as a minister, and our elders need to that; and so do all of you as you minister to your own family and your neighbours.
 - Do you really lay down your life for them?
 - Are you bold with the truth and at that same time gentle like a father and affectionate like a nursing mother?
 - It is unusual to have uncompromising truth and loving care in any ministry, but this is the kind of ministry that brings forth the best fruit.

- C. But such ministry would be of no avail if God did not work in those who receive it.
1. So, once again, in verse 13-16, Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians received the word of God as the word of God.
 - **1 Thess 2:13: “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”**
 - This is the thing that makes all the difference.
 - When those who hear the word receive it as the word of God, it transforms their lives so that they are willing to suffer severe persecution in following it.
 - When they receive it as mere human wisdom, it has little impact.
 2. All of this was God’s doing—both that that the word was faithfully preached and that it was faithfully received—
 - Paul thanks God because he knew that both the faithful preaching and the receiving of the word was all of God.

TRANS> Now let’s look at the third thing we are taught about a healthy young church in Thessalonians...

III. Third, Paul shows us that a healthy church needs ongoing ministry so that they might be established and encouraged in the faith.

- A. It is very stirring to see how eager Paul is to minister to them.
1. He and his companions had been torn away from the Thessalonian believers almost as soon as the Thessalonians had received the gospel.
 - In 1 Thessalonians 2:17, the word “taken away” is one that was often used to speak of parents being torn away from their children, leaving them as orphans.
 - Paul speaks with great passion, saying (2:17): **But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.**
 2. He speaks in verse 18 of how they had tried to come again and again, but had been hindered by Satan.
 - Satan works very hard to keep ministers of the word away people who want to hear the word—he is always busy trying to keep you from coming to church.
 - People who are perfectly healthy all week will become ill on Sunday.
 - Couples who generally get along with each other will have a big quarrel on Saturday night or Sunday morning.
 - There are a thousand ploys and we need to pray accordingly.
 3. As the passage develops, Paul goes on to describe his passion to get to them.
 - a. Chapter 3 begins with the words, **“When we could no longer endure it...”**
 - When we could no longer endure being apart from you because we knew that you needed our ministry...
 - He explains how they eventually arranged for Timothy to go to them... even though it meant Paul had to be left alone at Athens...
 - b. He even indicates that their lives were suspended until while they were waiting for Timothy to come back to them and tell them how the Thessalonians were doing.

- In verse 7 he describes how comforted they were, and then in verse 8 he says, (1 Thess 3:8): **“Now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.”**
- And in verse 9 he gives the glory to God for this: **For what thanks can we render to God for you for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before God...**

TRANS> There was an important reason that Paul was so concerned to hear about them.

B. He explains in this same section of chapter 3 that his zeal to get to them was because of their need to be established and encouraged in their faith.

1. He was concerned that with all the pressure they were under because of persecution, and with people trying to discredit the gospel,
 - they might have fallen away from the faith.
 - While it is not possible for a true believer to lose his faith, it is possible for those who have professed their faith to end up rejecting it.
 - That is what the parable of the sower, which we looked at this morning, teaches us.
 - There are those who receive the word with joy and then fall away because of persecution and depart from Christ.
 - They would not do that—at least not permanently—if they were truly born of God’s Spirit, but sometimes when a person professes their faith they are not yet truly regenerate—that is why people fall away.
 - Paul had experienced the painful reality of this in his ministry... for example, with some of the Galatians who received the gospel, but then rejected the faith and followed the Judaizers.
 - So Paul shows in Thessalonians that faithful ministry is not only necessary for bringing people to profess faith,
 - but also for keeping them in the faith.
 - God makes hearing the word faithfully taught an integral part of both coming to Christ and of continuing in Him.
 - Paul was very aware of this and that is what made him so concerned about leaving the Thessalonians before they had been properly established and encouraged in the faith.
2. Take a look at how he expressed this in this passage...
 - a. At the end of chapter 2, he declares what his hope and joy and crown of rejoicing is...
 - It is that, when Christ returns, Paul will see the Thessalonians in our glorious Lord’s presence as those who truly belong to Him.
 - **1 Thess 2:19-20: For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.**
 - He was concerned that unless he and his ministry companions returned to them to establish and encourage them in their faith, they would fall away.
 - b. He makes this quite clear in chapter 3 when he speaks of his reasons for sending Timothy.

- Timothy was sent, as he says at the end of verse 2, **“to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith.”**
 - And the reason was (v. 3) that **“no one should be shaken by these afflictions,”** like the stony ground hearers in the parable of the sower...
- That explains why Paul was so thrilled when he found out from Timothy that they had not been shaken by their afflictions.
 - If they had, Paul’s labour among them would have been worthless—as he says at the end of verse 5—it would have been in vain.
- So we conclude that ministry was essential... not only to bring them to an initial profession of faith in Christ, but also to keep them in the faith.
- 3. But just what was this work that Timothy was given of establishing them and encouraging them in their faith? What does this work entail?
 - Establishing and encouraging are the things that Paul always did when he returned to minister to those who had received the gospel.
 - We see him doing that, for example, in Acts 14, where he returned to all the congregations that had been started on his first missionary journey to establish and encourage them.
 - It gives us a pattern of what ought to be done for new churches.
 - a. *Establishing them* included appointing elders among them—often these would have been those who already knew the scriptures of the Old Testament and now knew that Christ was the Messiah.
 - They would teach and admonish the congregation in the faith and stay in touch with the apostles.
 - During this time, before the scriptures were complete, they were also given special gifts of prophecy to help them.
 - Establishing the church also included catechising them to make sure that they understood the basics of the faith.
 - The New Testament speaks much of catechising.
 - b. In addition to *establishing them* in their faith, they also *encouraged them* by warning them that we must endure much tribulation in our service to Christ.
 - Paul wanted to make sure that they all knew that following Christ involved many hardships, and that this is part of what it meant to follow Him.
 - As Paul says at the end of 3:3, we have been appointed to this. Verse 4: **“For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.”**
 - This was something that Paul always emphasised with new churches.

TRANS> So we learn from this that new congregations need to be established and encouraged, and that all Christians need ongoing ministry from the church.

- Our Westminster Confession of Faith even says that there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside of the church.
 - It adds the word ordinary because of course there are times when believers are cut off, but even then they often have their brothers and sisters praying for them.
 - We all stand in need of ongoing ministry.

- And that brings us to the fourth thing we learn about healthy churches in First Thessalonians.

IV. Healthy churches need to keep on growing.

A. It is striking to see how Paul responds to Timothy's report that the Thessalonians were doing well.

1. Instead of saying, "Oh good, now we can direct our prayers and concerns elsewhere," he describes how he steps up his prayers even more!
 - After describing their joy in hearing the good news, in 3:10 he says: **"night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith..."** vs 11-13 goes on: **Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we *do* to you, ¹³ so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.**
2. Far from slowing his prayers, the report that God was working powerfully among them gave him more zeal than ever to pray for them!
 - We often pray for places that seem far from God... and so we should...
 - But we should never suppose that a place where He is working powerfully does not need our prayers...
 - We should pray all the more where we see God at work.
3. You see the content of his prayer
 - Verse 12: **that they would increase and abound in love to one another and to all,**
 - And verse 13, **that God would establish their hearts blameless in holiness.**

➤ Because he found that the Lord was so obviously at work in them, he earnestly prays for more and more growth... and not only that...

B. He also *urges and exhorts* them to abound more and more in doing God's will.

- That is how chapter 4:1-3 opens: **Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; ² for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification...**
1. Sometimes you hear Christians talking about finding the will of God...
 - They want to know what God's will is about where they should work and who they should marry and many such things...
 - But the thing that you need to focus on most of all is sanctification.
 - You know from God's word that it is His will for you to abound more and more in your obedience to His commandments.
 2. Paul mentions two things in particular that they needed to abound in.
 - a. One was in sexual purity, that each should know to possess his own vessel (husband or wife) in sanctification and honour instead of running around with multiple sexual partners...
 - First Corinthians ⁷ also speaks of a kind of ownership of each other in marriage, and speaks of how we are not to defraud our husband or our wife in this matter by withholding our body from them,
 - and in no case are we to have sex outside of marriage.

- Paul mentions sexual immorality because the Greeks saw little wrong in it.
 - The preferred relationship for men was with young boys under 12.
 - They had marriages by which they had legitimate offspring, but they found pleasure with mistresses and young boys and nobody thought much of it.
- Our society is becoming more and more like that.
 - First, we began to accept sex before marriage, then alongside of marriage, then homosexual relations, and now we are increasingly accepting sex with children.
 - And in one way, we are even worse than the Greeks—in that we don't see the importance of a committed marriage for our children.
- Paul makes it clear that for the believer, there is to be no compromise regarding sexual purity—even our words should be pure and holy.
 - In 4:6, Paul says that the Lord judges this sin, and in verse 8 he says that those who reject this commandment reject God and His Spirit!
 - We run into this sort of warning in almost every epistle.
 - Sexual immorality is proof that we have rejected Christ as our Saviour and God as our God.
- b. The other specific thing that Paul mentions that healthy churches need to abound more and more in is love.
 - The Thessalonians were already doing quite well at loving one another,
 - but Paul tells them that they need to do even better.
 - As believers, we should never think that we are loving each other enough.
 - As those who are forgiven by Christ, we can freely admit that we come very short of what God requires, even when we have made great progress.
 - One of the best things about the Christian life is that there is always room for a lot more progress—we never hit the ceiling.

V. The fifth thing we learn in Thessalonians about a healthy church is that they have every reason to look forward to the return of Christ.

- Paul addresses this in chapter 4 verse 13 to chapter 5 verse 11.
- A. In chapter 4, he addresses a concern they had about those who had died in the Lord that was causing them much grief.
 - In 4:13, he says: **“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.”**
 - 1. He begins with words that ought to stir us up to yearn for the return of Christ.
 - He speaks about how, when He appears, all who believe will go to meet Him in the air, beholding Him in all His glory.
 - Paul had taught the Thessalonians about this when he was with them, and they were very eager for that glorious day to come.
 - Paul talks about it all the time—even as we saw at the end of chapter 2 where he described his hope and joy and crown as seeing them with Christ in that day.
 - This enthusiasm had reached the hearts of the Thessalonians.
 - I am concerned that it is not nearly as much a part of most of us as it ought to be—perhaps because we are not under persecution like they were.

- It is part of a healthy Christian to be eager to see Christ in His glory!
2. But the concern that the Thessalonians had was for those among them who had already departed to be with the Lord.
 - They were concerned that they would be left out when Christ returned and this added to their sorrow whenever a believer among them died.
 - They believed in the resurrection from what we can tell, but they were concerned that their brothers and sisters would miss the glorious appearance of Jesus in the clouds and our going to meet Him.
 - They thought these departed saints would not be raised again until after Jesus got here, and they did not want them to miss this great event.
 - But you can see how Paul teaches them otherwise in 4:16-17: **For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.**
 - They won't miss out at all!
 - He tells them to comfort one another with these words.
- B. And then in chapter 5, he speaks of the time of Christ's return.
1. The truth is, we simply do not know when He is coming, nor are we meant to know.
 - He comes as a thief in the night. Thieves do not publish their schedules.
 - In 5:1-2, it says: **“But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. ² For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.”**
 - A lot of embarrassment could have been prevented through the centuries if only Christians had accepted this instead of making false predictions.
 2. After stating this, Paul then encourages them to be always ready and always full of joyful anticipation. **“For,”** as he says in verse 9-10, **“God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that whether we wake or sleep, we may live with Him.”**
 - What a marvellous truth that is for healthy churches who truly know Christ!
 - God has appointed that we will be completely delivered and will live with Him—with the Son of God in His Father's house—forever and ever!
 - Healthy churches need to keep that glorious hope alive among them!
 - It is my duty as a minister to continually set this hope before you and it is your duty (and joy) to cherish this hope in your hearts.
 - If you would do this, many of your problems would be resolved.

TRANS> And now for the last thing about a healthy young church...

VI. A healthy young church must learn to live under the care of faithful elders.

- Paul speaks here about the mutual responsibilities of both the elders and the members in their relationship with each other.
 - Most likely, when Timothy had visited them, he had helped them in ordaining elders—some of them were likely elders in the synagogue who had believed the

gospel—and there was probably one or two that had the gift of prophecy and teaching who were appointed to preach among them.

- So now Paul is giving them instructions about how to live in a way that pleases God in this relationship.

A. First, he urges the congregation to respect their elders.

- In 5:12-13, he says: **And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.**

1. To *recognise* does not mean simply to be able to identify who they are, but to accept the place that God has given them and to honour them as spiritual leaders.

- This might have been challenging where some of the Greeks who believed were prominent people in the community—they would not have been used to submitting to anyone.
 - This is hard in our society where we look at submission of any kind as a very demeaning thing—and regard anyone who exercises authority as suspect in their motives (and I suppose with good reason—so many who have authority use it selfishly).
 - Yet, it says that the elders are over us in the Lord—exercising the authority of God that God has given to them.
 - Those who refuse to join a church do not have any elders over them.

2. Ruling elders have been appointed by God in the church. It is not for us to modify the government that God has appointed.

- Our sister church in Sydney Mines has compromised in this matter and we are trying to rectify that—they have replaced their session with a church council that includes women and does not answer to a Presbytery.
 - They are following models that are more acceptable to our present society instead of following the scriptures.

3. God has called the elders to admonish us.

- That word means to put you in mind about things... and in the case of elders, they are to put you in mind about the Lord—
 - to comfort you with His promises, to warn you with His warnings, to keep you in mind of His commandments and your calling... all of such things...
 - It is a very important office.
 - Therefore, you are to esteem them very highly for their work.

B. Next Paul exhorts the elders, to: **“warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.”**

- The elders are to be all that Paul said he and his fellow ministers had been when they ministered among them...
 - Uncompromising in the truth, but at the same time tender and affectionate like a father to his children and like a nursing mother.
 - These new elders needed to be diligent to provide that sort of care for the flock over which that Holy Spirit had made them overseers.

C. Paul goes on to give a few more exhortations about rejoicing and giving thanks, praying without ceasing, being careful about how they receive prophecy (neither despising it nor gullibly accepting what is not of the Lord).

- All these are things which promote the purity and peace of a healthy young church.

Conclusion: He ends the book with the very encouraging reminder that God will continue the work that He has begun in the Thessalonians.

- 1 Thess 5:23-24 says: **Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** ²⁴ **He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.**
- How this kind of encouragement is needed lest we be discouraged!
 - God is the one who enables us to continue growing in our walk with Him.
 - Paul began by thanking Him for the conversion of the Thessalonians...
 - Then midway through this letter, he thanked God for keeping them...
 - And he ends the letter by assuring them that God will continue to sanctify them so that they can indeed abound more and more in their calling.
- Let us give thanks to God for His work in us and let us ask Him to continue the work that He has begun so that we might abound more and more in our love for Him and for each other.