

"I THESSALONIANS, WALK THRU THE BIBLE."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: I Thessalonians 1:1; 3:5-7; 4:1-4; 5:1-2, 8, 15-18

Introduction.

I have mentioned before that the letters of Paul are arranged in the NT by length, from Romans down to II Thessalonians, and then the three short personal or pastoral epistles at the end. That is why we have I Timothy after II Thessalonians, even though I Timothy is longer than II Thessalonians.

One thing that gets obscured by arranging the letters in this way is a sense of the flow of Paul's missionary journeys, of what comes first and then second.

Something we have not spotlighted as we talk about Paul's letters and the other books of the NT is how historical they are. They can all be located in time and space and history. The places are real places you can still visit. The names are real names of real people, some of whom are identified in secular histories.

The events of the Bible did not take place "once upon a time" or "long ago, in a galaxy far, far away." They happened in this world, in recorded history. Christianity isn't "true" in an abstract sense. King David was a real ancient warrior king. Jesus turned water into real wine, not just a spiritual metaphor. Lazarus was a real dead body that came back to real life. Christianity is a historical reality, with a beginning in Israel.

The core truth of Christianity is not built on abstract truisms or pieties, but history. It names a specific man—Pontius Pilate—who was a real Roman governor in Judea at a specific point in history. Every year, millions travel to Israel, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey to see where the events of the Bible took place. Bev Honcoop just got back from a Tulip Tour trip retracing Paul's travels in Greece (John Stonestreet).

Each year, more discoveries from the ancient world confirm the stories told in Holy Scripture. The science of archeology which has been practiced extensively all over the Middle East, Turkey and Greece has never once contradicted anything said in the Bible. This is real and true.

We know from the historical record of Luke recorded in Acts 17 that during Paul's second missionary journey he got to western Asia minor, or western Turkey when he received a vision of a man from Macedonia urging Paul to cross over from Asia to Europe, which he did. After a brief time in Philippi he was chased out by the Jews, so he went southwest to Thessalonica.

Paul was the first known Christian missionary in Europe. This was the beginning of when Europe would become Christian.

Thessalonica is in northern Greece, in a region called Macedonia. Thessalonica was then as it is today the second largest city in Greece with a population of over 200,000. It was an important city in the Roman empire, the capital of Macedonia. It was the home of Alexander the Great and was named after his half-sister.

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica was one of his success stories. He preached for three weeks in the Jewish synagogue there before getting the left foot of fellowship. From there he turned to the Gentiles where there was great fruit from his labor.

Acts 17:4 Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

Paul didn't get to spend much time in Thessalonica, before being chased out of town, but not before the Holy Spirit had made a huge impact on the lives of many. Paul journeyed south to Athens and then to Corinth.

While in Corinth in southern Greece, Paul was deeply concerned about the young church in Thessalonica. Paul sent Timothy back to check on them and encourage them. Timothy came back with a most encouraging report.

What Paul learned was that after he was run out of town, the persecution didn't stop. The new Christians continued to face fierce opposition. And as you can imagine for young believers they had questions, especially about what happens when they die and when will Jesus return.

So Paul wrote this deeply personal letter written to a church he deeply loves.

Letter.

This letter of I Thessalonians is the earliest written record of Christianity from around 50 AD. This was written before any of the other books in the NT.

God's Word to them is still God's Word to us.

I Thessalonians 5:27 I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

Purpose, theme

In these five short chapters there are three major themes.

First, Paul commends and confirms these young converts for how well they are doing, for their conversion and progress in the faith, especially in the face of persecution.

Their faith was being tested, under severe trial (2:14) and Paul says don't be surprised, expect this, you are destined for this (3:1-4).

2:14-15 For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out.

3:2-4 [I] exhort you in your faith, 3 that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 4 For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.

Second, Paul admonishes them and instructs them to persevere in holy living, warning them about idleness and sexual immorality.

Warning about slothfulness, laziness, shrinking from responsibility.

Some had gotten the idea that Jesus was coming back very soon, so they quit their jobs. As a result they were living on charity, and become idle busybodies stirring up trouble in the church.

I Thessalonians 2:9 For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

I Thessalonians 2:12 We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

I Thessalonians 4:11-12 To aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Warning about sexual immorality. 4:2-8

Almost every letter Paul wrote included strong warning, admonition about sexual immorality. You must know by now that in the Greek and Roman world there were no sexual boundaries or rules. Everything goes and everything did. There was no moral restraint for rampant sexual immorality and degradation and abuse.

Christianity came into this world and for the first time there was a new ethic, a new morality, a new way of living in community and in relationship with each other. There was now a contrasting point of view. It was a challenge for new converts to reorient their lives and behavior and live so counter-culturally.

I Thessalonians 4:2-8 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not in the passion

of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ...7 For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

We are not to be like the godless pagans who abuse and twist God's good, pure, holy gift of sexuality. We are not to fall into the practices of our culture and the way the world tries to press us into its mold. All sex and sexual expression are to be kept pure and holy within the beautiful private boundaries of marriage between one man and one woman. Anything else is sin, and a despising and rejecting of God.

Third, Paul gives them correction concerning the doctrine regarding the return of Christ and how they should be comforted and encouraged by this truth.

Warning about wrong thinking about the second coming.

We can thank the Thessalonians for their concerns and questions and fears concerning the second coming because they caused Paul to give us two letters which give us the most information about the second coming (eschatology).

Over a quarter of I Thessalonians and nearly half of II Thessalonians deal with this issue. It is mentioned in every chapter of I Thessalonians. This is the first record of the Christian view of the second coming of Jesus. If you want to know more, turn here first.

We are well aware of how easily people can become fixated on end times and trying to figure out when Jesus will come again. And as often happens, when people become so otherworldly minded or heavenly minded they can neglect or even compromise their present duties, obligations, responsibilities.

Then as now some have gone so far as to quit their jobs, or become lax or compromised in ethical matters, morality. Paul addresses all of this directly, without mincing words. This is godly exhortation and admonition.

He begins don't want you to be uninformed (4:13-18)

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ... 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 ***Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.*** 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

I Thessalonians 5:1-2 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

Warning about misunderstanding and misapplication of this doctrine continues to this day.

Paul deals with the ***when*** of Christ's return, but mostly he unequivocally affirms that Christ ***will*** return. Of that he has no doubt. The Christ who came, will come again.

The second coming is not just some far away, pie in the sky event that holds little or no impact for us today. In fact it should make a difference in our lives here and now, it has personal and practical implications for every follower of Jesus.

Can you think of what some of those implications might be?

Security as we look forward to our salvation.

In view of judgment to come our response should be confidence. Christians are destined not for wrath but for salvation at Jesus' coming.

I Thessalonians 1:9-10 ... [as we] wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Joy in the midst of suffering and hardship.

I Thessalonians 2:19-20 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

Purification, being made holy, seeking and striving for holiness.

Christ's return should have a purifying effect in every area of our lives.

I Thessalonians 3:12-13 May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, 13 so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Hope.

Jesus' death and resurrection and return are the basis for the Christian's hope. There is comfort for the bereaved in particular and for all living believers.

I Thessalonians 4:13-18 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may ***not grieve as others do who have no hope***. ... 18 ***Therefore encourage one another with these words.***

Be prepared for the suddenness.

I Thessalonians 5:1-3 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord

will *come like a thief in the night*. 3 While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Sanctification.

I Thessalonians 5:23-24 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

What do you think about the second coming? Do you think about it? Is it the farthest thing from your mind? Are you complacent, lukewarm, wavering between two opinions, not settled in your commitment to Christ? Are you harboring secret sin, little sins, holding off taking Jesus at His Word, thinking there will be time enough later to repent?

What do you think about those words “as a thief in the night?” Are you prepared, will you be caught off guard?

A significant part of our Christian faith is an active waiting for Jesus’ return. We should think about it, meditate on it, pray for it, and prepare for it.

Implications and application.

Jesus is coming soon. That is obviously more true today than then. It was true then, true now. Paul believed and lived as though it was imminent and so should we. We are in the last days, the last stage of history. There is only one more step, one thing left to be done. We are in end times.

So follow Jesus more and more.

I Thessalonians 4:1 Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you *do so more and more*.

I Thessalonians 4:9-10 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10 for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to *do this more and more*.

More and more until Jesus returns. Maranatha, come quickly Lord Jesus.