

“Holy Anticipation”
A Survey of 1Thessalonians
October 3, 2021

Scripture reading: Acts 17:1-10

This morning we begin a new series in the book of 1Thessalonians, entitled “Holy Anticipation: Living in Holiness, Hope, and Love Until Jesus Comes.”

Normally we work our way through a book of the Bible passage by passage, and that’s what we will do in Thessalonians beginning next week. Today, however, our goal is to see the big picture, to introduce us to 1Thess by walking through a survey of the book as a whole.

Our Scripture reading from Acts 17 helps us understand the historical background for the church in Thessalonica. Paul had just been released from prison in Philippi (Acts 16) and made his way along with Silas and Timothy to Thessalonica. The Holy Spirit worked powerfully through Paul’s preaching of the gospel and many Jews and God-fearing Greeks were converted to Christ. But as you know, persecution arose so severely from the Jews that Paul had to leave Thessalonica in the middle of the night.

You can imagine Paul’s concern for the believers in Thessalonica. Would they persevere in their faith under such hostility? To alleviate his concern, Paul sent Timothy to check on the Thessalonians and he brought back a wonderful report of the believers’ faithfulness to the Lord and love for Paul. However, there is some confusion among the Thessalonians concerning the second coming of Christ and the believers needed to be encouraged in their struggle against sin. So, Paul wrote this letter to encourage them to keep living countercultural lives of holiness and love with unwavering hope in Christ’s return.

Paul’s aim in 1Thessalonians is *holy believers, living in love, and persevering with readiness in the hope of Christ’s return*. It may be helpful to keep in mind that the church age (from the cross to the 2nd coming) is an age of persecution. We need our faith to be strengthened so that we will not be disturbed by present, momentary afflictions, knowing that we have been destined for such testing during this present church age (3:3). The question is, how are we to respond to such pressure? The answer in a word, of course, is

counterculturally. More specifically, we are to respond to the pressure and persecution of the world with holy living, loving relationships (in the church and the world), and the persevering hope of Christ’s return. The message of 1Thessalonians is very relevant for believers today: *Living in an age of persecution requires holiness, love, and unwavering hope in Christ’s return, all of which result from the Spirit’s work in us through God’s Word.*

For our purposes today, I’m going to divide the book into two major sections:

- 1) Paul’s *commendation* for how well the Thessalonians have begun (chapters 1-3).
 - Celebrating the Spirit’s work and their response to the gospel
 - Celebrating their reception of Paul’s ministry and message
 - Celebrating their endurance of persecution
- 2) Paul’s *concern* for the Thessalonians to finish well (chapters 4-5).
 - Challenging them to excel in moral purity
 - Challenging them to excel in love for others
 - Challenging them to hope in Christ’s return
 - Challenging them to godly Christian living

Interestingly, these two major portions of 1Thess are marked off by 3 prayers (like buoys in the water). One at the beginning (1:2-3), one in the middle to divide the two major sections (3:11-13), and one at the end (5:23). What’s interesting about these 3 prayers, is that they highlight Paul’s key themes of hope, love, and holiness—the strongest thread being the hope of Christ’s return.

***Prayer of Thanksgiving: [1:2-4]**

1. **Paul’s commendation for how well the Thessalonians have begun** (1Thess 1-3).
 - a. **Celebrating the Spirit’s work and their response to the gospel [1:5-10]**

Notice 4 movements of the Word of God here:

- i. How the Word came (vs. 5): *In power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.* The Spirit and the Word always go together.
- ii. How the Word was received (vs. 6):
 - *“In much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”*

- Paul goes on to say in 2:13, “*we constantly thank God that when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the Word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God which also performs its work in you.*”

iii. How the Word was broadcasted beyond (vs. 8): “*The Word of the Lord has sounded forth from you...in every place your faith toward God has gone forth.*” The Thessalonians not only received the word of God, they themselves shared it with others everywhere they went.

iv. How the Word transformed their lives (vs. 9-10): “*you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.*”

b. Celebrating their reception of Paul’s ministry and message (2:1-12)

In Chapter 2 Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his character and the integrity of his ministry. While Paul’s primary concern is to defend the authenticity of His apostleship in the face of persecution, I want you to notice a number of qualities implied for true spiritual leadership:

Six qualities of authentic spiritual leadership:

- i. A commitment to courageously uphold the Word of God [2:1-2]
- ii. The integrity and accountability of walking in the Fear of God [2:3-4]
- iii. A spirit of humility rather than a spirit of self-seeking [2:5-6]
- iv. Gentle and affectionate servanthood *like that of a mother* [2:7-8]
- v. Selfless, godly character displayed in daily life [2:9-10]
- vi. Loving leadership like that of a spiritual father

[2:11-12]

c. Celebrating their endurance of persecution (2:14-3:10).

Chapter two concludes with Paul’s deep concern over the Thessalonians’ suffering and in chapter 3 he reminds them not to be disturbed by their afflictions, knowing that they were destined for this (3:3). He then goes on to express his joy and encouragement at hearing from Timothy how steadfast the Thessalonians had remained in the face of persecution. [vs. 7-10]

Paul’s overflowing thankfulness and affection for the Thessalonians launches him into the central prayer of the letter in [vs. 11-13].

***Prayer for Endurance (3:12-13)**

This prayer is the very heart of Thessalonians. In it, Paul highlights 3 themes that he will go on to emphasize in the remainder of the letter as Christian responses to persecution: 1) love for one another and all people, 2) a life of holiness before God, and 3) the hope of Christ’s return. I would suggest that 3:12-13 are the key verses in 1Thessalonians (along with the final prayer in 5:23-25).

2. Paul’s concern for the Thessalonians to finish well (I Thess 4-5).

The Thessalonians have started well; now Paul challenges them to keep growing until Jesus comes. [4:1-2] Twice in chapter 4, Paul uses the phrase “*excel still more*” (4:1, 10) to emphasize two key focal points that the Thessalonian church could not overlook on their journey to holiness. First...

- a. **Challenging them to excel in moral purity [4:3-8]**
- b. **Challenging them to excel in love for one another [4:9-10]**
- c. **Challenging them to hope in Christ’s return [4:13-18]**

Note the landscape in these last two chapters:

- 4:13-18 establish *the facts of Christ’s return.*
- 5:1-11 admonishes them to *be ready for Christ’s return!* “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (5:2) and so Paul calls them to “be alert and sober” (5:6),

living as though we are indeed destined for salvation and not for wrath—always living as though we are in the presence of the Lord.

- 5:12-22 instruct *how to live until Christ returns...*

d. **Challenging them to godly Christian living (5:12-22)**

Paul exhorts them to pursue godly living with a string of 12 practical instructions in vs. 12-22.

1. Appreciate servant-leaders who administer God's Word to you (5:12-13). Throughout 1Thess we are going to see this kindred spirit and mutual love and affection among those who delight in God's word—appreciating those who teach, but also love for those who are being taught, receiving God's word for what it truly is.
2. Admonish the unruly (vs. 14)
3. encourage the fainthearted (vs. 14)
4. help the weak (14)
5. be patient with everyone (vs. 14; *including the unruly, fainthearted, and weak*).
6. don't return evil for evil but seek one another's good (15)
7. rejoice always (16)
8. pray without ceasing (17)
9. in everything give thanks for this is God's will (18)
10. don't quench the spirit or despise prophetic utterance (19-20)
11. examine all things and hold fast to that which is good (21)
12. abstain from every form of evil (22)

***Prayer of Hope (5:23-24)**

Finally, Paul closes His letter with a prayer of benediction or blessing that summarizes all that He wants this letter to accomplish: Holy believers, ready and hoping in Christ's return. **[5:23-24]** Paul's prayer is that when Christ returns, believers will not be standing in the camouflage of the world, but rather living distinctive, blameless, lives of holiness, love, and hope.

It's worth noting that Paul's prayer (both here and in 3:12-13), acknowledges that sanctification requires *a work of God* in our lives. A holy life will be a life of dependence on God—a life in which the Spirit of God is doing a

supernatural work of change in our hearts. Yet it's also evident throughout 1Thess that we have a *personal responsibility* to uphold in this work of sanctification. God changes us within, as we take necessary steps of faith and obedience. (Ben: What does God want to change in me through this passage?) → Study and *pray* our way through 1Thess.

So, the message of 1Thess is for us today; a challenge to *respond to this age of affliction and persecution with holiness, love, and unwavering hope in Christ's return, all of which result from the Spirit's work in us through God's word.*

Communion:

As we prepare for the Lord's table, remember where we began in chapter 1 (1:9). The Gospel came to you in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that you could turn from every idol to serve the true and living God. At the Lord's table...

- *we look back* to the crucifixion of Jesus where all our sin was atoned for at the cost of His own life.
- *We look forward* to Christ's return, proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes, when our redemption will be complete. For when we see Jesus, we will be made like Him, forever free of sin. Yet as we wait...
- *we look inwardly*, seeking to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pursuing holiness through faith and obedience, having our hearts established without blame, ready for Jesus to come.

The love of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the cleansing power of Jesus blood, make it possible for you to live a God-pleasing life of faith, purity, love, and hope.

As we come to this time of renewal at the Lord's table, I urge you to pray in response to these prompts from 1 Thess (on the screen):

- ❖ Lord, give me faith to believe Your word so that it will perform its work in me (2:13).
- ❖ Lord, awaken me from the slumber of the world (5:6), and awaken in me a genuine desire to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (2:12).

- ❖ Lord, show me every idol in my heart and give me the grace to turn from it to serve You as the only true and living God (1:9). I specifically confess that I have served _____ as an idol in place of You.
- ❖ Lord, strip my heart of all selfishness that keeps me from excelling in love. I specifically confess my sin against _____.
- ❖ Purify my heart from lust, impurity, greed, and every evil desire in a fully surrendered life to Jesus (4:1-8; 5:14). I specifically confess...
- ❖ Father begin a new work in me whereby the love of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the cleansing blood of Jesus establish my heart in a renewed pursuit of holiness. The power of Your grace to sanctify and set me free is greater than the power of my sin to corrupt and enslave me. Work the miracle of Your grace in my heart, in Jesus' name!

“How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit! When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to Thee, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”; And Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:1-5).

Bread: 2Cor 5:21—“*God made Christ who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*”—that our hearts might be established without blame in holiness before God (1Thess 3:13).

Cup: 1Thess 5:9-10—“*For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.*”

Benediction: 1Thess 5:23-24