

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-8

“A BRIGHT SPOT”

True blue football fans in Baltimore still grieve when they recall March 28, 1984. On that snowy night the unthinkable happened. One of the NFL's most storied teams, the Colts, snuck out of town in the middle of the night. The Colts were the team of football greats... John Unitas, and Raymond Berry, and Lenny Moore... as well as their legendary coach, Don Shula. Yet under the cover of darkness, Colts owner, Robert Irsay, hired the Mayflower moving company to clean out the team's offices, and drive their equipment to Indianapolis. The NFL's perennial powerhouse skipped town.

Irsay's clandestine operation to relocate the Colts was an attempt to avoid the negative firestorm that came later from the Baltimore media. Following the Colt's infamous move to Indianapolis, Irsay said, "People of the press were hounding my family for two years, and I wasn't about to take any more... hounding." The *Colts* were *dogged* out of Baltimore. In a sense this is why Paul and his pals left Thessalonica. Paul had spent just 3 weeks in the city, and his time there had been extremely successful. Yet like the Colts, Paul left town to avoid a firestorm of hostility.

Acts 17 tells the story... When Paul first arrived in the Greek city, he went straight to the Jewish synagogue. This was the pattern Jesus modeled - "the Jew first, then the Greek." Paul reasoned with the Jews from the OT. Their prophets had predicted Messiah would die, then rise again. In light of recent events, *Who could this be but Jesus?* After just 3 Sabbaths some of the Jews believed.

But Paul made his biggest inroads among the local Greeks – and especially among "*The Desperate Housewives of Thessalonica.*" Acts 17:4 tells us, "a great multitude of devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas." Apparently, there were Greeks in Thessalonica who had tired of their religion's polytheistic nonsense. These folks recognized the Greek pantheon of gods as silly superstition. They were seeking the truth – and they came to the synagogue for answers... *At least the Jews had narrowed it down to one God.* But when Paul preached Jesus, it all made sense. They could see that the predicted Messiah was none other than the Carpenter from Nazareth. Thessalonica was a place where the Good News had traveled fast.

But this is where the plot thickens. Verse 5 of Acts 17 reads, "But the Jews who were not persuaded, [became] envious..." Paul had more converts in 3 weeks than the Jews had in 30 years. The rabbis got jealous! Paul's success angered them, so the rabbis hired a few local thugs, and stirred up a mob. They stormed the house where Paul was staying. Thankfully, Paul wasn't there. But they grabbed the owner of the house. They had poor "Jason" arrested, and charged with harboring a criminal.

And what was Paul's supposed crime? The Jews said he violated Roman law by encouraging people to bow to a King other than Caesar! This was enough to set the whole city in an uproar. Everyone knew if word reached Roman officials that this kind of thought was being espoused in Thessalonica there would be dire consequences. Economic sanctions might be imposed... even martial law!

It had been a crazy few days in Thessalonica! And you've got to love the unintentional compliment Paul's enemies pay him. When the Jews, and their lynching mob, try to justify dragging an innocent man out of his own house, they explain to the town council, "These who have turned

the world upside down have come here too.” Paul and his pals flipped the world topsy-turvy! Christianity wasn’t just a *Jewish phenomena*, or a *Greek curiosity* – it took the whole world by storm.

There wasn’t a village in the Mediterranean world that wasn’t interested in the power and beauty of the Christian message. I like how one man puts it, “The Gospel faithfully preached meddles with everything else on earth.” It critiques every *political thought*, and *social structure*, and *lifestyle option*. It wiggles it’s way into every heart. It gets under everybody’s skin. There’s not a crevasse or opening that the Gospel doesn’t fill. It’s ramifications are so far reaching. *The Gospel changes people, and marriages, and relationships, and communities, and cultures, and nations*. The Gospel will turn your world upside down if you trust its message.

Finally, the wild day in Thessalonica ended when Jason posted bond and headed home. But it was obvious now that Paul’s future in the city was limited. He was a wanted man. It was best he leave quickly and quietly! And so verse 10 of Acts 17 tells us, “the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea...” Where the people “were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica.” Like the Colts, in the middle of the night - under the cover of darkness - Paul and Silas snuck out of town. The Christian Colts moved from Thessalonica to Berea. In the days to come, though Paul had been *run out of town*, his heart kept *running back to the Thessalonians*. He’d left behind a strong church. He’d been with them a paltry three weeks, but it hadn’t taken long for the power of the Gospel to have its effect - *a healthy church was born*.

Yet because of the brevity of his visit there was much Paul didn’t get an opportunity to explain. He felt he’d left the believers under-equipped. So to shore up what was lacking in their discipleship, Paul sent Timothy and Silas back to Thessalonica. In the meantime, he departed Berea for the classic city of Athens. *(Probably to celebrate a big Bulldog victory!)* Six months later Timothy and Silas rejoined Paul. Now Paul is in the Greek isles - at the port of Corinth. His trusted assistants report to him on the status of the church in Thessalonica. And in response... From Corinth, around the year 52 AD - Paul sits down and pens a letter to the church he *knew only briefly, but loved ever so deeply*.

1 Thessalonians begins, as does most ancient letters, with a signature. In antiquity, letters came in the form of a scroll. If the signature was at the bottom you’d have to unroll the whole document just to note its author, so ancient letter writers were always careful to pen their name first. Here it reads, “Paul, Silvanus...” a Latin form of the Hebrew, “Silas,” “and Timothy...” Silas was Paul’s companion on his second missionary journey. They had left Antioch together. Timothy had joined them in Asia. The Thessalonians were probably more familiar with Silas and Timothy than they were with Paul. They had certainly spent more time with them.

“Paul, Sivanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...” Today, 2000 years later, Thessaloniki is still a well known Greek city. It’s is the second largest on the island. Thessaloniki has a population of well over a million people. It’s one of the few biblical cities to survive until modern times.

In the first century it was an important Greek city with an excellent harbor. It was originally named “Therma” for the hot springs in the area. Perhaps Thessaloniki’s most valuable natural resource was its location. It was on the Egnatian Way – the great road that linked Rome to the east. It was said of the city... “It lays in the lap of the Roman empire.” Prior to Paul’s visit to Thessaloniki the city had been steeped in paganism for 400 years. It’s a testimony to the power of the Gospel that after just three weeks among them Paul could now write... “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...”

And here again is Paul's customary greeting, "Grace to you and peace..." "Grace" or "charis" was the typical Greek salutation. When a Hebrew approached someone he'd use *the welcome*, "shalom" or "peace." Paul now combines Greek and Jewish greetings, and like apples dipped in caramel, he coats these two terms with thick, tasty theological meaning. He begins his letter as the Thessalonians began their life in Christ... "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

A conversation occurred on a bus one day. A woman was immersed in a religious book, when the person next to her asked, "What are you reading?" "It's a book a friend gave me. She said it changed her life." "Oh yeah? What's it about?" It was obvious the lady had just started the book. She had to flip to the table of contents and read off the chapter titles, "Discipline, Love, Grace..." The stranger stopped her. He asked, "What's grace?" The lady answered, "I don't know. I haven't got to grace yet!" This is the problem with many Christians today. For some reason they haven't gotten to grace! Yet in the Christian life *God's grace is first base!*

In some ways I understand our deficiencies in grace. It's such a foreign concept to us. The world around us is full of un-grace. From an early age most of us were loved with strings attached. Love was conditional. It was based on *our pedigree, or behavior, or compliance*. Love had to be earned. But not grace! Grace is love we can never earn or deserve. Grace is an exclusively Christian virtue. Only God loves this way. Only a God of grace could've dreamed up idea so liberating and revolutionary.

God handles His people with *grace gloves*. Receive His grace in the person of Jesus and there're no other conditions. His love is full and free. In contrast, the world we live in is all about performing, and achieving, and carrying your weight, and measuring up. There's little tolerance for failure. *Grace is just the opposite!* Under grace, Jesus carries our weight. He measures up. He performs and achieves. All we do is ride His coattails. *And when we fail at that...* His grace is more than sufficient to forgive. Our standing with God, and fruit in our lives - is the result of God's grace.

It's true, the Christian life is designed for grace to come first... You need a firm confidence in God's grace, or everything else in your Christian life will grow crooked. You won't *get it*. You'll live confused and frustrated. The Christian life is *no sweat!* Jesus did the sweating! Our job is to rest in Him. Miss "grace" and you'll want to relate to God the way you relate to your boss, or your credit score, or a coach, or a demanding spouse, or a hard-to-please parent - you'll pluck the strings - and never know real "peace." This is why Paul is very intentional. It's always "grace" then "peace."

In verse 2, Paul begins the body of his letter, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers..." Remember, Paul had just met the Thessalonians, but he'd seen God work in their lives. The transformation that had occurred in such a short period of time was a testimony to *the power of the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit*. The report he'd received from Silas and Timothy had only reiterated the legitimacy of their faith. Paul thanked God for the Thessalonians - and even though he'd left abruptly he continued to support them in prayer.

And then he recalls what their early faith looked like... "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father..." The believers in Thessalonica were really a model church. They brought Paul great joy. There were churches that troubled Paul... the **Corinthians** were misfits and mischievous, they were the "*Christians Gone Wild*" -

Paul referred to the **Galatians** as “**My Dear Idiots**” – the **Colossians** were gullible to false doctrine - like a big-mouth bass they bit the lies hook, line, and sinker. But the thought of the **Thessalonians** brought Paul nothing but joy.

Paul notes three outstanding qualities this young church possessed... their “**work of faith,**” their “**labor of love,**” and their “**patience of hope.**” Author RC Lucas calls “**faith, hope, and love**” - “**apostolic shorthand for genuine Christianity.**” When the apostles wanted to describe healthy, growing, vibrant Christians they referred to their **faith, and hope, and love.**

First, Paul remembers their “**work of faith.**” In James 2:26 we’re told that “**faith without works is dead.**” A faith that isn’t active – that never rolls up its *sleeves* to act on what it *believes* – isn’t a real faith. But the reverse is also true, “**works without faith is also dead.**” Just doing stuff of God is of no value unless *effort* is coupled with *faith*. *God’s work* done in *our strength* will come up short. We need *His power*. We should always serve God with the anticipation that He’ll work through us. He’ll take our 5 loaves and 2 fish - and use them to feed the five thousand. We need faith in God’s ability *to multiply our meagerness.*

Second, Paul remembers their “**labor of love.**” When Paul started the church in Thessalonica, he had a nest full of eager beavers. These guys wanted to teach Sunday School, and usher, and play on the worship team, and clean the building. But here’s the kicker. *It wasn’t because Paul promised them free donuts and coffee in the Brook. No, no – holy donut, no!* It was because they loved Jesus and the folks He died to save. The believers in Thessalonica were motivated by love. I love what Paul wrote to the Corinthians. 2 Corinthians 5:14, “**For the love of Christ constrains us**” Some folks *shoot from the hip*. Christians *shoot from the heart!* You should never find a believer just going through the motions - serving out of duty. A Christian’s labor is spurred on by love.

And notice third, the believer’s “**patience of hope.**” For years I watched my dad endure work-related difficulties, turn down other job offers, and save up unused vacation days – *and why?* He was getting ready to retire. *A future hope* helped him endure *his daily stress*. This is how you live the Christian life... *What sustains us in the storm? What causes us to resist the devil’s temptations? What prompts us to sacrifice a temporary pleasure for the promise of a better reward?* It’s our hope *in heaven, in God’s blessing, in God’s faithfulness.* It’s just a patient, plodding, waiting, enduring hope! **Hope is our only hope!** In the tough times don’t panic. Don’t say, “**Here we go again**” - and capitulate to feelings of hopelessness. Have an enduring, battling, overcoming hope.

The Thessalonians had all three: the **work of faith**, the **labor of love**, the **patience of hope**. And to Paul this was proof of God’s work in their lives... He writes in verse 4, “**knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.**” The OT reserved the term “**beloved of God**” for a special few. But in the NT everyone who’s in Christ has this special status. There’s no such thing as a second class Christians. Unlike US Airways, the flight to heaven isn’t divided into **couch** and **first class**. We’ll all arrive as “**beloved brethren.**”

I love Paul’s gracious heart. He’s known these folks just a short time. He was a Jew – a Pharisee – he’d spent his whole life in Temples, Yeshivas, and synagogues. These Thessalonians were Greek – pagans – they’d spent their whole lives in brothels, before idols, and in stadiums. Paul and the Thessalonians came from radically different backgrounds, yet he calls them “**beloved brethren.**” Such is the power of the Gospel. What happens to us in Christ - *the status we receive, the glory we share, the love we’re shown* – obscures everything else that could divide us. Polar opposites, even mortal enemies, end up “**beloved brethren!**”

And notice what makes this possible... verse 4, *“your election by God.”* You should know that the Bible teaches two seemingly contradictory doctrines: *predestination* and *free will*. *God chooses*, but *man has a choice*. God elects some people to be saved - and the saved elected God. *Well, which is it?* The biblical answer is both.

The Bible is clear, Ephesians 1:6 and a host of other verses, teach us that God *“chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.”* Yet when you study the life of Jesus and His interactions with people every time He offered eternal life He made it a matter of the person’s own choosing. *The woman at the well had to decide to drink... The rich, young ruler faced a choice... Nicodemus was told, “whosoever believes in Him...”* Jesus’ own disciples had to take up their cross and follow Him.

When Jesus encountered folks He required them to make a choice, but as soon as they chose to follow, He assured them God had chosen them. Understand, we get into trouble trying to reconcile what God never reconciles. Apparently, *getting it all figured out*, is not as important to God as *having faith!* I’ve heard it said, *“Try to explain election and you’ll lose your mind. But try to explain it away and you might lose your soul.”* This is what the Bible teaches... It presents *“election”* as a *comfort* not a *cop out*. You can’t say “God didn’t choose me.” God gave you a choice! If you haven’t chosen God, maybe you weren’t chosen, but you can’t blame it on God. The Bible is clear, *“whosoever will may come...”*

Salvation is like a two-sided coin. From our viewpoint it’s all up to us. *Better choose correctly.* But from God’s perspective it’s all up to Him. When we get to heaven the front of the gate will read, *“Whosoever will may come.”* But when we walk across the threshold and look at it from heaven’s side it’ll read, *“Chosen before the foundation of the world.”*

Here’s what God’s election of the Thessalonians meant to Paul... He’d spent 3 weeks with these folks. Not a long time by any one’s standards. *It takes more time to grow tomatoes.* Paul hopes to grow mature Christians. Yet his confidence is not in his own efforts. He knows God has a stake in the Thessalonians – He chose them before the foundation of the world – He had plans for them before they were born, and He’ll complete His work. This is what makes me so hopeful about you... You may be new to CC. Perhaps you’ve only been coming 3 weeks. *It takes far more than month to get grounded in the faith*, but God is at work in you. He chose you – you’re His project. And God will always see to it that what He starts, He finishes.

Paul remembers his time in Thessalonica, verse 5, *“For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.”* Prior to Paul’s visit to Thessalonica he’d been in another Macedonian town, Philippi. There, miracles accompanied his ministry. He delivered a slave girl from a demon. After being *falsely accused and illegally beaten* an earthquake shook up the prison that was holding Paul. *Bars rattled, locks sprung open, gates unhinged, a jailor was saved...* No doubt, word of such phenomena spread. It paved the way for his arrival in Thessalonica. I suppose after a few miracles people are a little more interested in what you have to say. The supernatural can garner attention and draw a crowd. Rubberneckers and ambulance chasers all come out for a miracle.

But I like what Paul points to as a source of *“much assurance.”* *It was the character of the messengers that brought credibility to the message.* Paul reminds them, *“you know what kind of men we were among you...”* And this is what’s needed in today’s church. Sure we’d love to see more miracles. But far more important are more men and pastors with integrity.

There's a troubling disconnect in today's church. We've separated *the message* from *the messenger*. We have a lot of *characters*, but not much *character*. We've got pastors with bling... *Righteousness is not as sexy*. Here's a major problem... *Church goers are more attracted to ability than integrity*. The *entertaining personality*, the *clever presenter*, the *celebrity spokesman* - draws a larger crowd than the *faithful servant*... Just because a guy puts buns in the seats shouldn't qualify him to lead.

Paul hadn't been in Thessalonica very long, but for the time he was there he lived among the people. They witnessed his life firsthand... *How he treated people, and handled money, and carried himself around town*. Always remember, the Gospel of God's grace is truth, regardless of who presents it - but it's easier to *believe*, when the messenger is *believable*!

Notice verse 6, "*And you became followers of us and of the Lord...*" At first glance that sounds a bit arrogant on Paul's part. "*You became followers of us and of the Lord...*" But think it through. When a new believer comes to Christ how much of the Bible does he know? *Probably not much*. His immediate influences come from the Christians around him. Whether we like it or not, folks do follow "*us and the Lord*." This is why we need to live godly, faithful lives. Newer Christians do watch and learn.

Never shrug your shoulders and say, "*Better do as I say, not as I do*." That's the attitude that gives Christianity a bad name. When we call ourselves Christians people have the right to expect something from us. Here's a rhyme, "*You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day – by the things that you do, and by the words that you say. Others read that gospel, whether faithless or true – Say! What is the Gospel according to you?*"

Paul continues, "*You became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.*" In a very short amount of time the church in Thessalonica had gained a regional influence. They'd developed a reputation. Thessalonica was a city within the province of "*Macedonia*." "*Achaia*" was the province to the south. Paul was writing from Achaia, in Corinth. Thessalonica was still the buzz 200 miles away. It was a happening church. It was a divine hotspot.

And notice what caught everyone's attention. They "*received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit...*" The hostility against Christianity was intense in Thessalonica. When the Jews arrested Jason they dragged the guy through the streets. *All he did was offer Paul a room!* They were treating him as if he were "*Macedonia's Most Wanted*." This church in Thessalonica was made up of **wartime babies**. As in London in WW2, Germany's bombings didn't stop babies from being born. And so it was in this church. It was growing while under attack. But even their "*much affliction*" couldn't overshadow the "*joy of the Holy Spirit*."

This is what makes Christianity so unique and powerful. Our faith doesn't promise the absence of conflict. To the contrary, in John 16:33, Jesus guaranteed us, "*In the world you will have tribulation...*" Tough times will come. If they persecuted Jesus they'll do it to you. If what you're looking for is a *smooth ride* and *calm seas* don't sign up for *the Christian cruise*. Christianity is about peace and joy in the midst of conflict. The Holy Spirit brings supernatural joy, independent of circumstances.

I love how Jesus finishes His promise in John 16:33, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” **Despite the trouble... “be of good cheer...” Take your joy from Jesus!** I’ve heard it put this way, “Jesus promised three things to His disciples... First, they would be ridiculously happy... Second, they would be completely fearless... And third, they would be in constant trouble...”

Paul says in verse 8, “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth...” Literally, a trumpet blast had carried the news of their triumphant faith. “...not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place.” And I love what Paul says next, “Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.” *Their lives said it all!* Even though they’d been Christians just a short time, everyone knew their faith was real!

I heard of a renown chef who resigned his prestigious post. He worked as the personal cook for the royal family. When asked why he quit such a lucrative position, he replied, “When dinner is good the Boss never praises me, and when it’s bad he never blames me. It’s just not worthwhile.” Isn’t that interesting, when it got right down to it, the chef didn’t care whether he was *praised* or *blamed*. He just wanted what he did to matter. This is what the Thessalonians had found in Christ. All of a sudden their empty lives counted. They carried great weight... Though they were under the gun – their persecution came with great joy! They were being a witness for Jesus to both their friends, and throughout the surrounding regions. In the beginning, Paul may’ve had to leave this church in the middle of the night, but there was nothing shady about the lives they were living now. In the Kingdom of God, the Church at Thessalonica was a bright spot on the map. I hope the same can be said for Calvary Chapel (C 316)...

Do we rest in God’s grace?

Are we known for our work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope?

Do we consider one another as “beloved brethren?”

Do we receive the Word, even in the midst of affliction?

Are we characterized by the supernatural joy of the Holy Spirit?

And does the life we live speak louder than the words we say?

Paul slipped out of Thessalonica on a *dark night*, but the church he left behind became a *bright light*. May we also be a *bright spot* in a *dark world!*