

WAITING FOR CHRIST'S COMING

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

The city of Thessalonica had a long history of prominence in the Macedonian region. In 42 B.C., the city sided with Octavian and Antony against Brutus and Cassius in the second civil war. For that reason she was granted a 'free city' status by the Roman Empire and enjoyed great privileges. Located on the famed "Via Ignatia," the city was a strategic trade center that could boast a population of about 200,000 by the time of Paul.

The circumstances surrounding the founding of the church in Thessalonica are recorded in Acts 17:1-10. Paul left Luke in Philippi and took Silas and Timothy with him to preach the Gospel in Thessalonica first to the Jews. Paul went to the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews from the Scriptures for three Sabbaths showing that it was necessary for Jesus to die and be raised from the dead to be their King, the Messiah. Some Jews were persuaded and received Jesus as their Messiah, but some strongly opposed Paul's message, so he took the Gospel to the Greeks. He must have spent several months preaching to the Greeks because the church in Philippi sent financial help to him twice during this time (Phil 4:15-16). Many devout men and women among the Greeks received Christ and were well taught to withstand persecution when the unbelieving Jews stirred up the city leaders against them. The brethren urged Paul and his partners to flee to Berea, where he found many Jews and Greeks that heartily received his message. However, when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that he was in Berea, they came and stirred up the people against Paul, so the brethren sent Paul to Athens to spare his life.

Timothy and possibly Silas joined Paul in Athens, but Paul was so concerned for the believers at Thessalonica that he sent Timothy back to them to learn of their spiritual condition (3:1, 2). Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth with a good report of the spiritual welfare of the believers in Thessalonica. Timothy's report greatly encouraged Paul and he immediately responded with his first letter to this church (3:6). This letter was written in the early 50's.

Paul's purpose in writing this letter could be expanded to five reasons: (1) thanksgiving; (2) vindication of his ministry and motives; (3) encouragement of the believers who suffered persecution; (4) exhortations for proper Christian conduct; and (5) instruction concerning the return of Christ. The entire first chapter is given over to Paul's expression of thanksgiving for their faith, love and hope, while waiting for the return of Christ.

In Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, he mentions five aspects of the coming of Christ as it relates to church saints. One aspect is found in each chapter. Faithful church saints wait for His coming (1:1); Faithful church saints are rewarded at His coming (2:19-20); all deceased church saints are coming with Him (3:13); all church saints receive incorruptible bodies at His coming (4:13-17); all church saints are saved from the great Tribulation at His coming (5:9; Rev 3:10).

I. Paul's Salutation – 1:1

1:1 – Note that Paul makes no reference here to his apostleship. Evidently this church had no problem accepting that fact or he would have mentioned it. His apostleship gave authority to his work.

"In God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ" – "Lord" emphasizes Jesus' deity; "Jesus" emphasizes His work as Savior (Mt 1: 21) and "Christ" emphasizes His Messianic office.

"Grace" – That special favor God voluntarily and freely dispenses to those who do not deserve it.

"Peace" – Emphasizes the idea of prosperity, wholeness, or welfare. Paul is reflecting the Hebrew concept of peace rather than the Greek concept of peace, i.e., tranquility or harmony. The Hebrew concept of peace is really the result of harmony because harmony makes and keeps prosperity.

By using "grace" and "peace" in his greeting, Paul was saying, "May you be the special recipients of God's favor and may you prosper!"

II. Paul's Thanksgiving – 1: 2-10

A. The Expression of Paul's Thanksgiving – 1: 2

1:2 – Paul's thanksgiving was expressed objectively and tangibly in the form of continual prayer. He thanked God "always."

Paul's thanksgiving was specific. He made mention of these believers in particular.

B. The Occasion of Paul's Thanksgiving – 1: 3

1:3 – "Work of faith" - It is that work which is prompted and motivated by faith in God (James 2:18).

"Labor of love" – It is that labor which is motivated by God's sacrifice of His Son for the believer's salvation. It is a strenuous toil that sacrifices personal comfort and pleasure to please God.

"Patience of hope" – It is that steadfastness in suffering which is made bearable by the assurance of God's precious promise. In this context that promise must have been the hope of the rapture (1:10; 4:13-18).

C. The Basis of Paul's Thanksgiving – 1:4-10

1:4 – Paul recognized that these Thessalonian believers were the elect of God by the special way that the Holy Spirit communicated the Gospel through him so that it produced an effective transformation in their lives. Note how closely in Scripture that election is tied to the love of God - cf. Deut 4:37; 7:7- 8; Rom. 5:8-9; 8:31-35; 9:13. By God's grace we are saved. We also see that election is tied to the foreknowledge of God - cf. Rom 8:29; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2. By God's complete knowledge of all things we are saved. Furthermore, election is tied to the choice of God - Rom 8:29-30; Jn 15:16. By God's sovereign act we are saved.

1:5 – Their election was shown by the power of the Gospel among them. Notice how the message was communicated unto them "in power." The message of the Apostle Paul left a powerful impact upon Thessalonica. The Gospel itself is powerful, even if the messenger is not (Rom 1:16). The message Paul preached was not with empty words and vain rhetoric, but it was the dynamic power of God. It was preached in the energy of the Holy Spirit with much assurance.

This verse deals strictly with how the message was communicated. Paul and his associates experienced the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit as they preached and thus they enjoyed great assurance that their message was being made effective by God. The rest of the verses in this chapter tell how the message was received.

1:6 – The attitude of their reception of the Gospel was to rejoice in suffering for Christ. Paul reminds them of circumstances when they received the Gospel. They received the Gospel in much affliction. First, they patterned their lives after the missionaries, and then they learned to pattern their lives after the Lord (the typical missionary pattern). This pattern of receiving the word was done with joy in the midst of great trials. Just as the sufferings, which Paul experienced and accepted with joy, so these Thessalonians developed the same attitude toward their sufferings - cf. 1 Peter 4:13; Phil 2:29. Note the example of the apostle Paul in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:22-25). These believers discovered the same joy Paul had during suffering - a joy which springs from the Holy Spirit - cf. Jn 7:38. These Christians found joy in the midst of their sufferings. Sufferings could not destroy it because its source was from God.

1:7-8 – The testimony of their reception of the Gospel was evident in their lives and by their words. It was a testimony to the world of the power of the Gospel.

"Example" – They were an example, an image, a pattern, of how believers ought to live.

"Word" – They "sounded out" the Gospel. This Greek word is used for the "ringing peal of the trumpet" or "the rolling of thunder." They let everyone know what Jesus Christ had done for them loudly and clearly. They did not originate the message, but magnified it and declared it to others, so that it spread like a wild fire.

1:9-10 – The character of their reception of the Gospel was their changed lives. The historical fact is that they "turned to God from idols." "Turned" as understood in the Greek indicates their change was real, a crisis experience which was deliberate. It implies repentance.

The results were twofold. First, they had an immediate purpose "to serve" God who is living and genuine (in contrast to the idols that were inactive and false). Second, they had a future expectation "to wait" for God's Son. This has the idea of looking forward to some event with patience and confidence. That event, of course, would be the rapture of the church. Christ will come for His Bride, the Church, and take her to Heaven to keep her from the "hour" of Tribulation (cf. 4:13-18). The Tribulation is not designed for the purification of the Church. It was purified by the blood of Jesus Christ (Eph 5:25-27).

The Tribulation is designed to cause Israel to repent and receive Jesus as her Messiah. Gabriel gave Daniel a prophecy pertaining to Israel about seventy weeks of years (Daniel 9:24). Each week of years is seven years making a total of 490 years. When Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, sixty-nine weeks of years were fulfilled. After this a gap is in the prophecy, which has not yet been fulfilled. The last week of years is the "hour" of the Tribulation. Since the first sixty-nine weeks of years were fulfilled by Israel, the last week of years will be fulfilled by Israel. At the end of the Tribulation, Israel will finally repent, receive Jesus as her Messiah and be cleansed of her rebellion against Him (Zech 12:8-13:1).

So Jesus Christ will come for His Bride before the Tribulation to marry her in Heaven and then take her to His home on earth in Mount Zion after the Tribulation to rejoice with all believers at His marriage supper (Rev 19:7-9; Mt:25:1-13).

The resurrection of Christ is mentioned in verse 10 to give assurance to believers that Jesus Christ is alive and will keep His promise to return to save believers from the wrath to come when He judges the unbelievers (cf. Acts 17:31).

An examination of verses 9-10 provides a clearer meaning of three phrases found in verse 3. First, they "turned to God from idols" explains the "work of faith." Second, they "served the living and true God" reveals the meaning of their "labor of love." Finally, to "wait for His Son from heaven" gives the meaning of "patience of hope."

"The wrath to come" – This phrase gives a clear reference to the Lord's judgment in the Great Tribulation, which comes shortly after the rapture of the believers - cf. 5:9; Isa 13:9; Jn 3:36; Rom 5:9; 6:23; Rev 6:17; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19.

1 Thes 5:9 – "For God has not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ."

Isa 13:9 – "Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He shall destroy the sinners on it."

Jn 3:36 – "He that believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he that believes not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Rom 5:9 – "God commends His love toward us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Rom 6:23 – "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Rev 6:16-17 – "And they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, because the great day of Their wrath has come! And who is able to stand?"

Rev 14:10, 19 – "He will also drink the wine of God's wrath, which is mixed full strength in the cup of His anger. He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the sight of the holy angels and in the sight of the Lamb . . . So the angel swung his sickle toward earth and gathered the grapes from earth's vineyard, and he threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath."

Rev 15:1, 7 – "I saw another sign in Heaven, great and marvelous: seven angels holding the seven last plagues, for in them is filled up the wrath of God . . . One of the four living beings gave unto the seven angels seven golden vials full of the wrath of God."

Rev 16:1 – "I heard a great voice out of the temple, saying to the seven angels, "Go your ways, and pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth."

Rev 16:19 – "Great Babylon came to remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath."