

A Model Church

1 Thessalonians

13 Sep 09

Well let's take our Bible tonight and open to First Thessalonians. First Thessalonians. We're going to begin a study tonight of this great little letter. And I just want to read the first verse and then talk about some things kind of in an introductory nature to this book. First Thessalonians chapter one verse one, "Paul and Silvanus [or also known as Silas] and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace." Now let's pray as we come to God's Word.

Father we thank you again for Your grace in giving us Your word. How good and kind You are to give us this revelation, this word of truth. And Lord as we open up this book and begin to study it I pray that you'd give us great understanding. That You would help us not only to understand the meaning of what's written here but that that meaning would have an impact in our lives. That our thinking would be changed. Our living would be changed. That we'd be brought into greater conformity to our Savior as we study this section of Your word. So we thank You for it and pray that You would direct us as we study and we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Well as we begin this first message in First Thessalonians I want to just begin by looking at some introductory things and talking about the church and the city that it was in, kind of the background material before we get into the details of this particular book. I want us to take a look at the big picture here to begin with, especially regarding this church. So let me begin by giving you a little bit of background and history. Thessalonica, which is where this church was, was a very significant city. It was the capital of the region known as Macedonia. And it was a free city. It had been granted free status by Rome which meant that they had a great deal of their own freedom. There were no Roman soldiers there to keep the peace, they were on their own because they had reached that kind of a status with Rome. So they were a free city. They were strategically located, this city was, on a major east-west Roman highway called the Via Ignacia or the Ignacian Way. And also it was on the coast. It had a significant harbor only behind the harbors of Corinth and Ephesus was this one at Thessalonica. At the time that this letter was written, to this church in Thessalonica, the population of this city was around 200,000. So that is a significant city, especially in those days. That city still exists today as a significant city still with a population around twice as much, around 400,000 today. It's known as Thessaloniki today, or the older name was Selanika. So this is a significant city politically, strategically, economically, but it was also a city that had for that time a normal amount of idolatry and all of the immorality that went along with it, and we'll see that as we go through the book.

Well, into this significant strategic city comes the apostle Paul and his little missionary team. They had come to Thessalonica from Philippi and you might remember what happened in Philippi. We're told in Acts 16 that Paul and Silas were beaten and they were in prison, their feet being put into the stocks. After they were released they walked from Philippi to Thessalonica down the Ignacian Way. Would have been a 100 mile walk. Probably took them three days. Maybe longer considering the fact that Paul and Silas had been beaten so badly in Philippi. Now there was a Jewish presence in Thessalonica meaning

there was a synagogue there and that was Paul's first stop when he came in to the city of Thessalonica. And let's read about that. If you'll turn back to the book of Acts, Acts chapter 17. We'll read about their visit to the city of Thessalonica. Acts chapter 17 starting in verse one, it says, "Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica [so they left Philippi, they traveled through these two cities. These might have been their two stopping points along the way, Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica] where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the leading women, But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have upset the world have some here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the other, they released them. The brethren immediately went Paul and Silas away by night to Berea."

So there's the record of their stay in Thessalonica. You'll notice that for three weeks, three Sabbaths, Paul conducted an intense ministry there in the synagogue. It says that he reasoned with them, he explained and he gave evidence showing that Christ had to suffer and rise again and that Jesus is that Christ. No doubt he referred to Isaiah 53 which talks about the suffering of the Savior. And Psalm 22 that even depicts the crucifixion of the Savior. Psalm 16 that talks about the resurrection of the Savior. No doubt he went to these scriptures and he reasoned with them, and he explained to them. His presentation was clear, it was compelling and it was persuasive. And we're told that a large number responded to Paul's ministry there. Note it refers to them as God-fearing Greeks in verse four. Now these would have been Gentiles who attached themselves to the synagogue, they had been drawn to Judaism, they had been drawn to its monotheism as opposed to the idolatry of the culture, and the high ethical standards of the Jews as opposed to the immorality that went with the idolatry, but they didn't necessarily become Jews themselves. They're referred to as God-fearing Greeks who would attach themselves to the synagogue and attend the services there.

So they had a great response to this ministry. You can see that the unbelieving Jews became jealous of their success, especially impacting so many of the Gentiles in the city and so they eventually got some wicked men from the marketplace, started a mob, brought false accusations against them. Dragged this poor guy Jason out of his house who had been apparently putting up Paul and his friends and they made him give some kind of a pledge that says that these guys are going to leave town and not come back. And so that's what they did. Paul, Silas, and Timothy move on.

Now some people think that Paul just spent three weeks there in Thessalonica because it says he was there for three Sabbath days. And they see the development of this church as absolutely incredible and amazing that all of this happened in just three weeks. But he undoubtedly spent more time than just the three week there. Apparently there's a gap between verse four and verse five. And you ask, well, how

do you know that? Well, if you go back to First Thessalonians in chapter one verse nine, in describing the conversion of the majority of the people in the church there, he says that they turned from idols to serve a living and true God. So that means that they're impacting more Gentiles than just were at the synagogue, because the ones who were at the synagogue have already turned away from their idols. So they're having an impact in the city large to those who are following idols, to those people turning away from those idols, and turning to the true and living God. So it must have been more than just their ministry in the synagogue there in the city. Also when we get in to chapter two you are going to see Paul was intensely involved personally with these people. And it would be hard to imagine him being that personally and intensely involved over just a three week period. It seems to be describing a lot more than that. In chapter two verse nine he talks about working there day and night. Well if he was just there for a short stay he would not necessarily need to work like that. Another indication that they were probably there more than those three weeks. Probably the best indication is found in Philippians 4:16 where it says the Philippians sent more than one gift to Paul while he was in Thessalonica. Would have been hard for them to do that in just three weeks.

So the estimates are that Paul was in Thessalonica probably three to six months. From Thessalonica we see that he went to Berea. From Berea Paul went on to Athens but he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. From Athens Paul went to Corinth and according to Acts 18:5, Timothy rejoined Paul there in Corinth and in response to Timothy's report about what's going on in Thessalonica Paul writes this letter to the church in Thessalonica.

In fact why don't we look at that. First Thessalonians chapter three verses one through ten. He says, "Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly, that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?"

So you can see as they had to move on Paul was concerned about what was going on in Thessalonica. How were these new believers doing? How are they handling the pressure, the suffering, the persecution? He sent Timothy to find out. Timothy comes back with a great report about how they're doing. There in Thessalonica. And you can see that Paul by what he heard from Timothy, what we see here in the Thessalonians is a commendable church. In many ways the Thessalonian church is a model church. And that's what I want us to look at tonight as kind of an overview. That's what we're going to

see in particular as we study through this book. We're going to see a church that really was a model church.

What are the marks of a model church? At least as we see them presented in the Thessalonians. That's what we're going to look at tonight. But first I want you to take note of what we're not going to see. As we read about a commendable church we're going to read a number of things that were true of this church but there's a lot of things that Paul's not even going to mention about that church. For example, we have no idea how many people were in that church. There is absolutely no reference to numbers. There's no mention of how many people were a part of that church.

There's no mention of their facilities that they met in. What kind of facilities, how good were the facilities, how strategically located was their facility? What was their advertising plan? You're not going to read anything about that. In fact there's no talk of their ministry plan at all. But there's no mention of their programs, we don't know if they had AWANA in Thessalonica. We don't know about if they had a Little Lights and a Wee Lights and a Bright Lights. We don't know what kind of youth ministry they had. Did they have a really hot band for the high school kids? We don't know. We're not told about any men's ministry. Did they have men's retreats going on, or women's Bible studies, were they happening? We're not being told about any of that. None of that is mentioned. There's no discussion of their worship services. We're not told anything about the type of the length of their sermons that were preached there. Or what kind of music they sang. Not mentioned at all. There is none of this stuff that we usually talk about when we describe a church. None of it. You're not going to find any of it in First Thessalonians. What Paul comments on are the spiritual realities. And that ought to tell us something really important.

What is most important is where the church is at spiritually. When God looks at a church, when He takes the temperature at a church, He is looking for spiritual reality, not all the stuff that we tend to look for. Because if that aspect is right, the spiritual life of the church, if that is right, all this other stuff will work its way out. All this other stuff will take care of itself. If the spiritual aspect is not right, then all the other stuff really doesn't matter at all. A lot of churches are focused on the other stuff. So let's take careful note of what Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit zeros in on. These must be the things that really matter. So let's take a look at First Thessalonians. You know I started off with a really long list of things, positive things about this church and I whittled it down a little more and I thought man this is still too long. So I whittled it down some more and I came up with three predominant characteristics of a model church. Three predominant characteristics of a model church.

Characteristic number one, they were wholeheartedly gospel centered. Wholeheartedly gospel centered. Paul and Silas and Timothy, they brought the gospel to Thessalonica. They proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And these people in that Thessalonian church, they had been transformed by that message. The fact is that this church was made up of people who were evidently and obviously chosen by God because the gospel had come to them in power. If you look at chapter one verses four and five Paul says, "Knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Gospel came in full power and had an impact. The word of the gospel did a work in their hearts. They received

and accepted this word. If you look at chapter two verse 13, it says, "For this reason we also 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 your who believe." The gospel came in power. They received it in to their hearts and it was doing a powerful work in their lives. In fact that's what he says in chapter one verse nine when he says, "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." Now that's talking about a complete transformation. The gospel came, it came in power that was received by them and it was doing a transforming work in their lives. Their lives were totally turned around. They had been running in one direction going after their idols but now they're running in the opposite direction. They're serving the living and true God. That's a perfect picture of real repentance. Something that can only be accomplished by the power of the gospel.

That's the way it is today as well. When the gospel comes in power a person's life is turned around. Whereas they were chasing idols, the idols of pleasure, the idols of power, the idols of prestige and all the things that go along with these passions that people have. All of that's replaced by a passion for God. But the gospel not only works in a person it works through a person. Verse eight of chapter one says, "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything." That is a phenomenal statement. From this little church, this new little church in Thessalonica, the word of the Lord has sounded forth throughout Macedonia, which is the region which they were, which also is where Philippi was, and into Achaia which is where Athens and Corinth were, but everywhere else, I mean the whole talk of the Mediterranean was, did you hear what happened in Thessalonica? Man the gospel came to that city and people were transformed. That message is going everywhere. These new believers were busy telling everyone else about the Savior. They were spreading the gospel. They were wholeheartedly gospel centered. The gospel was transforming their lives and that was all they could talk about. And that message was spreading everywhere and from Thessalonica it could quickly spread throughout the region because of all the people coming and going through that strategic city. It would be easy for the message to spread from there because of its location and because of the activity in that city. Those who have been powerfully affected by the gospel have a passion to tell others. And they can't help but talk about the word of the Lord.

Same thing happens today. Those who have been humbled and blessed and changed by the gospel, they can't keep themselves from telling others about their Lord. The Thessalonians were a church from which the gospel sounded forth. And you know these Thessalonians they were eager to see their Savior. This One that had changed their lives. They were eager to see the One who is at the very heart of that gospel message. Chapter one verse 10 talks about how they wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead that is Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come. They were anxiously waiting to see the One who had rescued them. They lived with a sense of joyful anticipation that someday we're going to get to see our Savior. Now if you were the kind of church that said Amen every once in a while, this would be one of those times when you'd say we get to see this Savior? Amen! This is exciting stuff. It's something to be joyfully anticipating. The One who came and died, rescued us from the wrath to come, we get to see Him. Now, the Thessalonians has a little confusion on this particular issue which Paul will

address in chapter four verses 13 through 18 when he instructs them on the rapture of the church, but I want you to notice something very interesting. Today when we talk about the rapture we talk about those who are left behind because of the popular series by that title. The Bible doesn't talk about those who are left behind. The Bible's emphasis is on going to be with the Savior. And in fact look at chapter four verse 17 where it says, "Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up [or raptured up, snatched up] together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord." That's the exciting thing about the rapture, not that I get out of this really bad thing that's coming up next week that I really hope I get raptured out of. That's not what to get excited about, it's seeing the Lord, being with the Lord, and I'm always going to be with the Lord. That's the emphasis here. The One we've learned about through the gospel, the One we love, that's who we're going to get to go see and be with. And that reality brings comfort because verse 18 that says, "Therefore comfort one another with these words." What words? Words that we're going to go someday and be with our Savior and be with Him forever. So you are an Amen kind of a...okay.

Thessalonians provide a model church. A church that was wholeheartedly gospel centered. They had been transformed by the gospel. Their lives had been turned around. They couldn't stop speaking about the gospel. And they were joyfully looking forward to the time when they would see the Lord that they loved. That's a mark of a model church. Wholeheartedly gospel centered.

A second characteristic, predominant characteristic, of a model church that we see here in Thessalonica is that they were patiently enduring suffering. Patiently enduring suffering. Any church that is wholehearted about the gospel is going to face some opposition from a largely gospel rejecting world. You understand that? Thessalonians, they knew that right from the beginning, because the guy that brought them the gospel got run out of town by people who wanted to kill him. So they understood right off the bat that following the Lord, boy, this would be dangerous. This could bring suffering in to my life. Obviously Paul didn't preach a prosperity gospel. Following Christ could cause you to lose everything. And these Thessalonians, they knew that. Chapter one verse six says, "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." So see, there's the two things on the outside, it's tribulation, I mean it's opposition, it's persecution coming against us, but on the inside there's the joy of the Holy Spirit. I can certainly relate to this. The day that I was saved I went to be with some friends that very afternoon and started telling them what had just happened to me, how I had just been saved. And immediately the opposition started and they started putting it down and saying, yah, yah, yah, just ignore those Jesus freaks they're always around, just ignore what they are saying. So on the outside my friends, I'm all excited telling them about something I don't even know what I'm talking about yet, they're trying to put the whole deal down. But I had the joy of the Holy Spirit and somehow I was able to say to them, I think what they told me was right. And I'm sticking to it, forget you guys. The Thessalonians, they felt that opposition and they wouldn't back down. They patiently endured. Chapter two verse 14, says "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews." They were facing the opposition but they were enduring.

Paul had been concerned about them, that the persecution might overcome their new faith. And you remember that's why he sent Timothy, to see how they were doing because he was concerned about that, about what kind of impact this opposition was going to have on these new believers. And you know we read the report there in chapter three about how Timothy came back and told him that they were standing firm. Timothy found a church that was standing firm according to verse eight of chapter three. They didn't run away. They didn't abandon the faith. They didn't compromise the gospel. They patiently endured. That's a sure mark of a model church.

Many churches start off passionate about the gospel. But at some point they start giving in to the culture, to the pressure. And they begin to water down the truth so that it's not so offensive. And that's because they would not patiently endure the suffering. Others just go in to isolation. They hold on to the truth but they just don't make it known to anybody so they don't get any flack because nobody knows what they believe anyway because they isolate themselves from everybody. They are a non-factor in their community because the community doesn't even know they exist for all practical purposes. Everybody knew about the Thessalonian church. In fact you remember we read in Acts 17 that the charge against Paul and Silas and Timothy is that they were guys who were turning the world upside down. These guys who were turning the world upside down, they've come to our nice little city and they are doing the same thing and they got all these people following this stuff, we can't allow that. Everybody knew about the Thessalonian church and they were afraid they were going to get turned upside down just like everywhere else. But the Thessalonians, their lives were so impacted by the gospel that they held on tight for that truth and they patiently endured the opposition. That makes them a model church. Because not many churches hang in there. Not many churches patiently endure. Especially churches that are known, that are out there. You can go in to isolation, nobody cares. Churches that are wholeheartedly gospel centered, well people are going to know about those churches. Opposition is going to come. A model church will patiently endure that suffering.

And not only that here's a third predominant characteristic of a model church: They were extravagantly loving others. Extravagantly, I like that word, extravagantly loving others. When Timothy brought back this report Paul, because of what he did, really caused a lot of trouble for these Thessalonian believers. And because of what he had taught them and what they were doing, it brought a lot of opposition in to their lives. They might have been unhappy with Paul but they weren't. In fact chapter three verse six he mentions their faith and love and that "You always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you." That's critical because Paul, as we're going to see when we get in to chapter two, was being viciously slandered there in Thessalonica. But these believers were always thinking kindly of him, longing to see him. They weren't blaming Paul for any of their problems. They loved Paul. But notice these words in chapter four verses nine and ten. He says, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves were taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more." Those verses are amazing on a number of levels. First of all we're told it is a characteristic of Christians to love others because God teaches us. We don't need anybody to tell us. God teaches us to love one another. But what was noteworthy here was that this love was evident at an extravagant level amongst the Thessalonians. Because in deed verse 10, you do practice it, love, toward,

how any of the brethren? In how much of Macedonia? All of Macedonia. That's extravagant love. These believers were marked out and identified by their extravagant love. They were suffering but they weren't just thinking about themselves. They loved all their brethren. And that is extravagant because I can guarantee you that not all of those brethren were totally loveable. I mean they weren't like Believer's Fellowship! This church was known for their love. There's something about the power of the gospel combined with the opposition of the world that produces a profound and extravagant love for other believers. When you're committed to the gospel and you're feeling the heat of the world boy you really appreciate those times of fellowship with other believers. Those times are sweet. Those times are refreshing. Those times are energizing that help keep us standing for the glorious gospel no matter what the world throws at us. And so you can imagine how encouraging it was to hang to with these Thessalonians and to get a little of that extravagant love shown towards you. This church was a model church characterized by the fact that they were wholeheartedly gospel centered. They were patiently enduring suffering, and they were extravagantly loving others. Let me put it to you another way. They were characterized by faith, hope, and love. Does that sound familiar? I didn't make that up. That comes right out of the Bible. Faith, hope, and love. Faith in that they were wholeheartedly gospel centered. Hope in that they were patiently enduring suffering. And love because they were extravagantly loving others. Faith, hope, and love, the three characteristics of a model church. And they're identified by Paul regarding this church right at the very beginning. In chapter one verse two and three he says, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father."

Faith, hope, and love. Those are characteristics of any church. They were manifest in the church at Thessalonica. And as we as a church study through this letter of Paul to the Thessalonians we'll be given this example week after week of a model church that we can compare ourselves to and line ourselves up with. This kind of church, it's pleasing to the Lord. We want to be that kind of a church. We can be that kind of a church because we have the same Savior that they had. We have the same Bible that they had. In fact, we have the completed Bible which they didn't have. We have the same Holy Spirit that they had. We have the same gospel that they had. But let me encourage you to think about this in conclusion. We're talking about them at the church level. This is what the church was like. But you need to understand that churches are what they are because the people in that church are who they are. It's one thing for me to want Believer's Fellowship to be a model church patterned after the one in Thessalonica, but am I personally committed to following that pattern? That's what makes the difference. It's as the people in the church follow the example that we have a model church. So the question to ask is: am I wholeheartedly gospel centered? And if I'm not, why not? And I, are you, wholeheartedly gospel centered? Am I patiently enduring suffering? If not, why not? And am I extravagantly loving others? If not, why not? That's the question for each of us to ask individually because the church is only a reflection who we are as individuals. It's not like you can form the church into being something and the people in it can be anything else. The church is what we are. We are the church. So may the Lord help us as we study this book, may we be transformed so that together we follow the model that's provided for us by the Thessalonians in this letter. Let's ask God to help us to do just that.

Father, we thank You for this letter. We thank You for this church that is so commendable in so many ways. Lord, what a delight and a refreshment it will be to our hearts and to our souls to be able to, week after week, just go through this book and to see what Your word says. Lord, I pray that as we do, it would have an impact on each one of us individually and therefore have an impact on us as a church. That these things that we see that are exemplary in the church, that they would become true of us as well, and become manifest in us as well to the degree that it was in Thessalonica. Lord, this church is a powerful testimony to the working of Your word, to the energy that the gospel can bring in to a person's life to change and transform that person, and how even though in a relatively short period of time dramatic change can take place. Lord, I pray that that would encourage each one of us to know that change can happen in our lives because of the power of Your word to its work within us. Lord, we know that there may be times when we hold back from following You like we could and like we should because we're intimidated by the opposition we might get from those around us. We know that that was Paul's fear, his concern for the Thessalonians. Lord, may our love for the Savior grow and be so great that it would overcome those kinds of fears. That we would patiently endure. And even more than that Lord, that we would be known as people who extravagantly love others. That we love our brothers and sisters. We care about them. That we demonstrate that love towards them. And in a way that's evident, not to show off but in a way that's just naturally evident and has an impact on people around us. Lord, I pray that you'll help us as we study, that we might be conformed to a greater degree to this model, this example. We know that this would please You and we want to please You. We want to please You because You're our Savior. You're the One who rescued us from the wrath to come. You're the One that's preparing a place for us right now in the Father's house. You're the One that's going to come and take us to be with Yourself forever. Lord, we want to please You. Help us Lord to do just that. I pray this in Our Saviors name. Amen.