

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

Identifying the Elect, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2

Code: 52-1

This morning we come to an historic moment in the life of our church, in that we embark upon the study of a new book of the New Testament. It is our happy privilege to begin the study of Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians. Let me encourage you, if you will, to open your Bible to 1 Thessalonians. We embark upon a study which will, no doubt, be a great encouragement, a great enrichment to our life together.

In selecting the epistle that I wanted to bring to you after completing Philipians, I was drawn to Thessalonians because I really believe in my heart that this was a noble, wonderful, blessed church that brought great joy to the heart of the Apostle Paul and that the letter, for the most part, is so very, very encouraging that I thought it might be fitting for us because I believe Grace Community Church to be an especially blessed and especially wonderful church and certainly one that has brought great joy to my own heart. And in the study of this epistle I have already found many parallels between our own church and the church at Thessalonica. And as this letter must have come to them as a great encouragement, as they were an encouragement to Paul's heart, so I trust its truths will come to you as a great encouragement as you are an encouragement to my heart.

The European theologian Reinhold Niebuhr(???) once wrote cynically, "The church is like Noah's ark, if it weren't for the storm outside, we couldn't stand the stink inside." One thing for sure, he didn't go to church in Thessalonica. There was no stink there. In fact, there was just a sweet fragrance. This rich letter exudes sweetness of these precious people.

The Apostle Paul was for all practical purposes thrilled with what was happening to the believers in this assembly. And this wonderful letter reflects his joy over the fragrance of this church. Look at chapter 2, for a moment, verse 13. "And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the Word of God's message, you accepted it not as men but for what it really is, the Word of God which also performs its work in you who believe. 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 hand of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews."

He rejoices over their reception of the Word of God as the Word of God and how that they followed the pattern of other noble Christians in other assemblies even willing to suffer for Christ. At the end of chapter 2 in verse 17, again he says, "We, brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while--in person, not in spirit--were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. For we wanted to

come to you--I, Paul--more than once and yet Satan thwarted us, for who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation, or crown of joy. Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? You are our glory and joy."

In chapter 3, again we find the same kind of sentiments in verse 5. He says, "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 should 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."

Down in verse 9 he says, again commending them, "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?"

In chapter 4 and verse 9 he writes, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are 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."

In chapter 5 and verse 11 he writes, "Therefore encourage one another and build up one another just as you also are doing." And then in that same chapter and verse 26 his affection flows out as he says, "Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss."

It ought to be apparent just from reading those verses that this was a church that ignited the joy of the heart of the Apostle Paul. It is a letter of encouragement. It is a letter of exhortation to a people already living holy lives to excel even more. It is a letter that commends them.

But the real outburst of gratitude, the real grand commendation comes in chapter 1, for in chapter 1 we find Paul almost overwhelmed at the wonderful church in Thessalonica. Listen to what he writes them in chapter 1. "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 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, 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, just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 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 that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia, 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. 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 the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."

What a wonderful outburst of praise. What a commendation. And that is the heart of Paul throughout this whole letter. And it comes then as a letter of encouragement, and I trust it will be so to us.

In looking at that first chapter, I would note for you that the key verse to unlock its significance is verse 4. In verse 4 Paul says, "Knowing, brethren, beloved by God, your election," is what the text says, "Knowing, brethren, beloved by God, your election." He says, "You know what I see in you and what I know to be true about you confirms to me that you are indeed brethren, you are indeed sovereignly the loved ones of God, you are the elect." He knew that. He says...that I know, you're...you're wheat, you're not tares...you're sheep, you're not goats...you're doers, you're not sayers. He's talking to a real church, a true church. That is why in verse 2 he says, "We give thanks to God always for all of you because we know you're elect."

This was the true church. They were all redeemed in Christ. They were all members of the body. They were all true believers. They were all real saints. They were all the brethren of God's children. They were the beloved of God, sovereignly loved by Him and chosen for salvation. And only that kind of church could emit such a sweet fragrance and elicit such encouraging response.

The word in verse 4 "knowing" seems to express an intuitive knowledge. It was clear in the heart and mind of Paul, there wasn't any doubt in his mind that this was a true church. He could have well borrowed a phrase from John who wrote in 2 John 1 to a church which he called "the elect lady," for this too was an elect lady, this too was a truly redeemed church. "Brethren" is the common New Testament term for Christians, as we are kindred together as the children of God in Christ. "Beloved by God" is a perfect passive participle which states that we are the recipients of the sovereign love of God which continues to benefit us. And then he says "your election," we are the elect. That word means we've been chosen by God for salvation. And, of course, Deuteronomy 7:7 and 8 says that God chooses on the basis of His sovereign love.

So the Thessalonians were the elect. They were the real Christians, chosen by God from eternity past for salvation and eternal glory. It's wonderful to note, I think, in the New Testament that the term "elect" is often used to refer to believers. In Matthew chapter 24 those who believe are called the elect, they're called the elect again in verse 24 and again in verse 31...three times in that one chapter those who believe in Christ are called the elect. In Luke chapter 18 we find our Lord speaking again and as He speaks of His own He says these words in verse 7, "And now shall not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night?" And again He identifies believers, brethren, the beloved of God, saints as elect.

In Romans chapter 8 and verse 33, after Paul has talked about the marvelous grace of God vouchsafed to believers in Christ he says that on the basis of God's justification, "Who shall lay any charge to God's elect?" Verse 33, and again he's referring to believers. We are called the elect. Once God has justified us, no one can charge the elect with any accusation of sin and iniquity that can result in their eternal judgment. And then again, Colossians 3:12, Paul identifies believers as those chosen by God, holy, beloved. We are the elect. In 2 Timothy 2:10, again believers are called the elect. "For this reason...Paul writes...I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory."

So, beloved, when we identify ourselves as Christians, we are identifying ourselves as the elect, chosen by God. Now someone might say, "Well, what does that mean?" That means that you're a Christian and I'm a Christian because of God's sovereign loving choice...independent of any choice that we could make for our choice without God's choice would result in nothing. God in eternity past apart from us, apart from any influences, sovereignly chose some to salvation...that is what the Bible teaches us. That salvation comes to reality and fruition through an act of faith, that too is prompted by the Spirit of God.

In John 15 Jesus said to His disciples, "You have not chosen Me, I have chosen you and ordained you that you should bring forth fruit." The disciples were chosen and all disciples who follow after Jesus Christ were chosen by God. In John 17:9 Jesus prays in His High Priestly prayer, "I ask on their behalf, I don't ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom Thou hast given Me." Those who come to Christ are the ones whom God has given Christ, for God has chosen them to belong to Christ by His sovereign love.

In Acts chapter 13 verse 46, a marvelous passage. "Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said it was necessary that the Word of God should be spoken to you first, but since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold we are turning to the Gentiles, for thus the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth.'" And then this, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the Word of the Lord and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." Believing is a result of God's sovereign choice. He appoints to eternal life.

In Romans 9 he says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." In writing to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 1:9, "God is faithful through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son Christ Jesus our Lord." It was God who called you into fellowship with Christ.

And then in 2 Thessalonians, one of the most clear verses about election, verse 13 of chapter 2, "We should always give thanks to God for you...why?...because God has chosen you from the beginning

for salvation." So we give God the thanks. He has chosen you from the beginning for salvation.

Second Timothy 1:9 says that, "He saved us, He called us with a holy calling not according to our works but according to His own purpose and grace granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity."

"We were predestined...says Paul to the Ephesians...we were predestined by God to be adopted as sons and He chose us before the foundation of the world."

In Revelation it says in chapter 13 and chapter 17 and both chapters I think it's verse 8 that our names were written in the Lamb's Book of Life from before the foundation of the world.

So, let's go back to 1 Thessalonians. When he says to them in verse 4, "Knowing your election," he is saying you're a real church, you're a redeemed church, you're converted to Christ, you're genuine. That's why the church is so fragrant to him. By the way, beloved, not all churches are like that and not all churches were like that. Do I need to remind you that there were some in the Galatian church that were teaching salvation by circumcision, salvation by law keeping, salvation by works righteousness, thus they were perverting the gospel and teaching what Paul would call elsewhere a damnable heresy? And obviously there were some in the Galatian church believing that and thus they were not among the elect. There were some in the Ephesian church where Paul left Timothy after his first imprisonment. There were some there who were teaching strange doctrines, some were teaching myths, some were causing people to be caught up in endless genealogies that had no significance spiritually. Some were thinking themselves to be teachers of the law and no doubt misrepresenting salvation by grace. Some were rejecting the true faith, shipwrecking it. There were leaders who had blasphemed God. And so, in the Ephesian church there were certainly some who following those false teachers and teachings would not be among the elect.

One needs only to turn to another familiar territory to the Apostle Paul and that's the area of Asia Minor where there were a number of churches and the Lord Jesus Himself writes letters to seven of them in Revelation 2 and 3. And in looking at some of those churches we find some tragic conditions. Obviously some in the Pergamos church were not saved. Revelation chapter 2 tells us that some there were holding to the false teaching that was like the teaching of Balaam who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel to eat things sacrificed to idols, to commit acts of immorality. There were some who were holding the teachings of the Nicolaitans, another heresy. And the Lord has to say to that Pergamos church, "Repent or I'll make war with you out of the sword out of my mouth," that's not a church to be commended. That's not a church that's giving off a fragrance.

The same was true in the Thyatira church. Some in that church were not saved. Some of them were buying into the lie of that woman prophetess called Jezebel who was teaching people to commit acts of immorality and get involved in idolatry and of whom the Lord said He would judge...not only her but

all her children and pay them back according to their deeds. There was no purely sweet fragrance coming out of Thyatira either.

And frankly, most of the people apparently at the church at Sardis were not saved because the Lord says to them in chapter 3, "I know your deeds that you have a name that you are alive but you are dead, you better repent. And there are only a few people in your church who haven't soiled their garments and they'll walk with me in white for they are worthy."

And there was the church at Laodicea which probably had as wonderful a beginning as any church, but by the time the Lord wrote this letter at the end of the first century, He was ready to spit them out of His mouth. Not all the churches gave off the sweet fragrance of the Thessalonian church.

Even the Corinthian church unimaginably had people standing up and in the name of gifts of the Holy Spirit cursing Jesus Christ. The chaos and confusion of the Corinthian church must have encompassed some who did not know Christ and were not saved.

But what is so wonderful about the church at Thessalonica was it was a saved church. They were the elect. They were the brethren beloved by God. And Paul could say, "I thank God for all of you." There was nothing to detract. They were this pure real church.

We shouldn't be surprised, however, that not all churches are like that. The Lord said that wherever we sow the Word and the wheat comes up, the enemy will come in and sow the seed and the tares will come up. The Lord told His disciples in Matthew 13, "Don't even try to separate the true from the false, they're going to grow so close together you're not going to be able to tell them apart." We shouldn't be surprised that the church would be occupied by people who aren't really saved, especially when some of them are going to end up facing Christ with these words, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, done many mighty works in Your name, cast out demons in Your name? And then He's going to say to them, 'Depart from Me, I never knew you, you workers of iniquity.'"

But the church in Thessalonica was saved. They were brethren, beloved by God, elect. And in this opening chapter Paul just pours out thanks to God for that. They were such an encouragement to his heart. You know, remember when he said in his letter to the Corinthians that he was shipwrecked, that he spent time in the deep, that he had perils of robbers and all those other things, that he was beaten with rods, that he was beaten with whips? And at the end of that he said, "But the biggest burden I bear is the care of all the...what?...the churches." The man carried an unbelievable load of responsibility and it must have been exhilarating to find a truly elect church that was worthy of only commendation. That was this church.

And so I say verse 4 is the heart of this chapter because he says, "I know you're elect." Verses 1 to 3 and 5 to 10 give us the marks that made him know that. How did he know they were elect? How did he know that? Oh, it was their work of faith, their labor of love, their steadfastness of hope. It was that the gospel didn't come in word only but in power and the Holy Spirit. It was because they became imitators of us and of the Lord. It was that they endured tribulation. It was that they became an example to all the believers. It was that they proclaimed the Word everywhere. It was that they had a total transformation from idolatry and they were looking for the return of Jesus Christ. Now that is an elect group. Those are the identifying marks of the elect.

Now Spurgeon was right, we can't pull up people's shirttails and see if they have an "E" stamped on their back. But there are some identifying marks of election. Before we're through with chapter 1 we're going to find out what they are and how it is that Paul could so confidently say, "Knowing...knowing your election." I know you're elect. How did he know? How can you identify the elect? How do you know who's really a Christian? He's going to tell us.

But first I want to take you on a little trip back in time to Thessalonica and I want you to feel this church. The place was first called Therma and it was called Therma because there was some warm mineral springs and people went there just to enjoy them.

In the year 315 B.C., Before Christ, the city of Thessalonica was founded at that place called Therma. The place is in northern Greece, once known as Macedonia. We know Greece is one country, it used to be Macedonia and Achaia. Macedonia was in the north, Achaia was in the south. The city was founded in 315 B.C. by a general, a Greek general under Alexander the Great whose name was Cassander. He chose the place because of its thermal springs, he also chose it because it was the crucial northernmost point on the Aegean Sea. He also chose it because it was right where the highway from the Orient to the West came. He chose it because the Oxious(?) River flowed into that harbor area. It was a tremendously strategic place.

Where did it get its name? Cassander happened to have married Alexander the Great's half sister...her name was Thessalonica. So he named the city after his wife, the half sister of Alexander the Great.

Thessalonica was one of three key cities in Macedonia, the other two being Philippi and Berea. Paul visited all three. In Achaia, the southern part, there were two key cities which Paul visited, Corinth and Athens. When the Romans conquered the Greeks and they came in, they supplanted Greek rule in the year 168 B.C. They took that northern part, Macedonia, and they divided it into four quarters. They made Thessalonica the capital of one of those quarters and twenty years later they blurred out the division and had one Macedonia and made Thessalonica the capital. In fact, from 146 B.C. on, Thessalonica was designated the capital of the whole province of Macedonia and had the nickname, "The Mother of Macedonia." It was a very strategic city.

It was declared a free city, given self-government and complete autonomy.

Acts 17:6 said it was ruled by "politarchs," some group of political men who worked in some committee fashion to lead that city. And it grew at the time of Paul to about 200,000 people. So it was a very strategic place.

It was along, what I noted a moment ago, the key east-west highway. The only way to get to the east, of course, if you didn't go on the Mediterranean Sea by water and you wanted to go on foot was just to walk along the northern coast area there and that was called the Egnatian Highway from the west to the east, to the east to the west. It became a military road for the transportation of all the troops. It became a trade route for from east to west. And it went right across the top of the Aegean Sea and right through the city of Thessalonica.

As a result, that city became a trade center. Not only that, it was the northernmost port on the Aegean Sea. It was a totally sheltered harbor, had a great river, as I said, the Oxious River, and so it became a very thriving seaport. The town was filled with soldiers. The town was filled with businessmen, travelers, traders. The town was filled with sailors. It was a booming place. It became famous for vice, famous for sexual perversion, prostitution was rampant and well organized. History tells us that people built their homes in Thessalonica with no windows because crime was so rampant and out of control. They would literally build a house with only a door.

Also, one of the characteristics of Thessalonica was that they would paint obscene paintings on the walls of their houses. It was a very lascivious city. Divorce was very frequent. Babies were continually abandoned. That was the old form of abortion, you just had your baby and let it die. Murder was common. And it was in that sewage pipe that the church lived in Thessalonica and I think that's part of the reason in chapter 4 why the Apostle Paul tells them in verse 3 to abstain from sexual immorality because they were in the middle of it.

Now because it was a thriving trade area, the Jews came there in great force, always enterprising. They showed up in mass in Thessalonica. In fact, there was so many of them that they had a very large synagogue in that city. And that became the starting point for Paul's evangelism. That is, by the way, unlike Philippi. You remember when Paul went to Philippi there weren't even enough Jewish men to constitute a synagogue? Well there were in Thessalonica because that was the hot spot for trade, for business, for commerce.

You might be interested to know that the city still exists today, it is called Salonica and it has about 300,000-plus inhabitants. You might also want to know that the Jews remained there throughout all the centuries until World War II when Hitler went to Salonica, took 60,000 Jews out of that city and executed all of them. So the city has had a fascinating and long, long history.

The Emperor of Rome at the time that Paul arrived, which would have been 350 years after the city was founded, the Emperor was a man named Claudius. Claudius didn't deserve to be the Emperor, he didn't deserve to be a leader of anything. He only became leader because his Uncle Gaius was murdered. They say, about Claudius, all kinds of things, we can't be certain exactly what was true. Some writer say he was epileptic. Some say he had fits and seizures. Some say he was crazy. All agree he was a stuttering, slobbering man who had total incompetency. But he was in charge of the Roman government.

So into this world and into this city came Paul in about 49 A.D. to plant a church. How did he get there? Well he had been moving west and he came to the Aegean Sea and he wanted to go south, you remember this in Acts 16?, and the Holy Spirit said, "No, you can't go south into Asia." So he wanted to go north into Bithynia and the Holy Spirit said, "No, you can't go north." So if you can't go north and you can't go south, and you've already been east, where you going to go? You've got to go west. And so there Paul was on the edge of the Aegean Sea and the vision came to him in that night and he saw a man from...where?...Macedonia. And God then used that moment and that vision to take the gospel from Asia to Europe. He jumped, as it were, the Hellaspont(?) and the gospel went into Europe. The evangelization of Europe began.

He came first to Philippi where, as I said, there weren't enough Jews to have a synagogue. You remember what happened there, don't you? He got thrown in jail. God let him out, saved the jailer and his whole household. But under tremendous pressure in Philippi he had to leave. And he left and he went to Thessalonica which would have been 100 miles away, usually about a five-day trek. And I imagine it was somewhat painful because Paul had had his legs and his arms in stocks for a length of time. We can assume it was a very difficult trip. But he got to Thessalonica. And when he got to Thessalonica he wanted to do the work of God there in the way that it was the priority way for him and that was to go right to the synagogue. And there was a flourishing big synagogue there. Acts 17 tells us what happened when he arrived there.

Let me just read you the first four verses. "When they had traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia, they didn't stop there, they went right through. God was pointing to Thessalonica and that was the place. 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." Now why did Paul go to the synagogue first? Because he had obviously Jewish credentials as a Jewish teacher and being Jewish and understanding them and all of that he knew that that would be a good place to start. He also knew that if he went to the Gentiles first, he couldn't come back to the Jews because they would think he had abandoned Judaism for some Gentile religion. So he had to go there first. He also knew that if he could lead some of them to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, he could evangelize the Gentiles with a larger force of people. So this was his strategy.

He went to the Sabbath three times in the synagogue and he reasoned out of the Scriptures. And what was his message? "He explained and gave evidence that the Christ, or the Messiah, had to suffer and rise from the dead and said also, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'" Now if you want to really confront the issue, you go into a synagogue and preach that Jesus is the Messiah. That's a direct approach, very direct. And he went in and proved, first of all, to them that the Messiah had to die and rise again because that was always a stumbling block to the Jews. And then he proved to them that Jesus was the Christ. So for three Sabbaths he evangelized the Jewish synagogue.

Verse 4, "Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas along with a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks, that is Greeks who had come to believe in the true God and attached themselves to the synagogue, and also a number of the leading women." And, of course, that posed all kinds of problems in that culture because women just didn't make those kind of decisions without their husbands.

Now we can assume also that as a fruit of that kind of thing there were many Gentiles who came to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and that's certainly implied in 1 and 2 Thessalonians when he writes back to them.

So Paul went in there for three Sabbaths. Now do you say, "Did he only stay in Thessalonica three Sabbaths?" No, I think that he was in the synagogue three Sabbaths, but I believe there's ample reason to assume he was in Thessalonica some weeks longer than that. And you say, "Why is that so?" Well because it's evident that he involved himself in work. Chapter 2 of 1 Thessalonians verse 9, "You recall our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God." He must have opened up his tent-making or his leather-working business to some degree and actually functioned in some work capacity, which he would not have done if he was only there two weeks with a Sabbath on each end and one in the middle.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:8 he says, "We were working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you." Well they wouldn't have been a burden if they were only there two weeks. So he must have spent three consecutive Sabbaths in the synagogue. And then from there moved out of the synagogue and continued his labor of evangelism.

Verse 5 of Acts 17 tells us how the Jews reacted. They became jealous, taking along some wicked men from the marketplace. They went down to the local corner and bought some hoods, formed a mob, set the city in an uproar and eventually, just to hurry it down to verse 10, drove Paul and Silas out of town. They left and they went to Berea. And they arrived there. They did the same thing they did in other cities, they went right to the synagogue, went through the same process and proclaimed

the same message and the noble-minded Bereans received the Word with eagerness, examined the Scriptures to see whether they were so and many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. But the Jews of Thessalonica found out the Word of God was proclaimed by Paul in Berea so they came there, agitated, stirred up the people and immediately the brethren sent Paul out of there and Silas and Timothy stayed. So you get a little bit of the flow.

They came to Thessalonica. God used them to establish a church but it's a baby church. And think about that church, think about that church...they're coming out of lifelong Judaism. They've got all that Judaistic baggage. Or they're coming out of paganism. And it's a brand new baby church and he's only there at most a few weeks and they're living in a city that is just drowning in vice. And how are they going to be matured? And Paul and Silas and Timothy are gone...and Silas and Timothy are down in Berea where it's a little easier to stay and even there Paul couldn't stay and he left and went to Athens. And from Athens he went on to Corinth and stayed there for 18 to 22 months and established the church there and strengthened the church there and ministered there for a prolonged period of time.

But who is taking care of the Thessalonians? I mean, a tiny little church with no leadership and no help, so young in the Lord, weeks old and in a sea of paganism and trying to come out of the massive encumbrances of Judaism...we could well understand that Paul would be deeply concerned. When he left Thessalonica and traveled about 50 miles or two and a half days walk to Berea and had a good reception there, he probably thought in his heart, "I'd like to go back to Thessalonica, we need to go back when it cools down." But it didn't cool down. The heat from Thessalonica came to Berea and forced him out of there, forced him to Athens and God wasn't working in Athens and he went from Athens to Corinth and there the Lord worked and he ministered.

Before he had left Athens, Timothy had come to join him. And now by the time we get him into Corinth, he's kind of settling down a little bit and it's probably the spring of A.D. 50, just a few months since the church at Thessalonica was founded. And he has been so concerned to find out about them, he sends Timothy back. And Timothy goes back and Timothy comes with a report and the report is what caused the letter because Timothy comes back and says they're doing super...they're elect...they're elect. You've got an elect church, it's going to be okay. They're redeemed. They're pure. And that's why Paul in chapter 3 is so exhilarated. He says in verse 6, "Now that Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news of your faith and love..." and then in verse 7 he says, "That's why we're comforted. Ah, this was an elect church, a church that could contribute all of its success to the power of God, the grace of God. For God's own purposes, He had kept this church wonderfully pure in the midst of the morass of pagan filth, in the midst of theological confusion, in the midst of traditions...this little group was true and pure. And so then he writes these words, verse 1, "Paul and Silvanus," that is the Roman equivalent of Silas, his Jewish name, "And Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul, we know about him, the great Apostle. But do you notice he doesn't identify himself here as an Apostle? Apparently in Macedonia his apostleship was never in question. He wrote two letters to the Thessalonian church which is in Macedonia, he wrote one letter to the Philippian church which is in Macedonia and in none of those three letters did he identify himself as an Apostle. Apparently that was not an issue, the church never questioned his authority and they had not been besieged by someone who had and thus become confused about it. So he simply says, and I love the simplicity, "Paul." There's something humble about that. And then he links with himself as if they're all equals, "Silas," who was a Jewish coworker with Paul, a faithful servant of the Lord, a wonderful instrument. And then he mentions Timothy, a young man that he had met in Lystra, Acts 16 tells about it. He had helped him in Philippi and later come to Thessalonica. He was Paul's son in the faith. He was the one to whom he would give the mantle as at the end of his life he wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to him.

So, it's the three of them and they all know about the Thessalonians. Timothy has gone and gotten a report. Paul was there when it started and Silas is with Paul and so the Thessalonians are precious to all of them. And so Paul sort of collects them into this wonderful introduction and says, "This letter comes from us to the church of the Thessalonians."

One little thought about the word "church," ekklesia. It's a word related to the Greek word kaleo which means to elect...ek kaleo, to elect. This is the elect. The word "church" means the called out ones, the elect ones. And so again the emphasis is there. "Paul and Silas and Timothy to the elect ones of Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." That's a very unusual expression for Paul, but a very wonderful one.

What does he mean? IN God the Father, IN the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, that identifies their vital union with God and Christ, that they are inextricably bound together in union with God and Christ. In verse 14 of chapter 2 he notes that the churches of God are in Christ Jesus. In 2 Thessalonians, writing the second letter to them, he says almost the same thing, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ..." The only difference is he elongates the salutation a little bit..."Grace to you," and further. But he notes that they are IN God the Father, they are IN the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what does that mean? It means they have a living participation with the very life of God and the life of Christ. Any student of Pauline theology knows that Paul loves to talk about being IN Christ...IN Christ...IN Christ. We don't just believe about Christ, we are in Christ. We are not just linked to Christ in some common enterprise, we are IN Christ. "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me, He in me and I in Him." "Your life," says Paul to the Colossians, "is hid with Christ in God." There is an indivisible union between the believer and Christ where the line is blurred because the life of God is in the soul of man, we share the very life of God, the life of Christ. Down in verse 6 we might even add the Holy Spirit. "You received the Word in much tribulation with the joy of

the Holy Spirit." So there was the Holy Spirit inside of them producing joy. They were in God, in Christ, in the Spirit...God was in them, Christ was in them, the Spirit is in them. Beloved, that is the great mystery of what it is to be a Christian, that God and Christ and the Spirit live within us and we live in them...an inexplicable and incomprehensible mystery.

Now I'm not talking about Acts 17:28 which talks about the basic created order living and moving and having its being in God, that's talking about the created order being sustained by the power of God. We're talking here not about the created order, but the sphere of new life in regeneration.

So this was a fellowship of believers who not only are gathered in a place called Thessalonica, but are gathered or enfolded into the trinity. This is the richness of salvation. We are in God, we are in Christ, we are engulfed in the life which is their life. We died with Christ, buried with Him, we rise to walk in newness of His own life, the life of God, the life of the Spirit. The New Testament just over and over and over majors on this thrilling and marvelous reality.

I'm thinking of Colossians chapter 1 as one among many verses. Verse 2, "To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ," in Christ. And if it were not enough at the end of that chapter, he says in verse 29, "For this purpose I labor, striving according to His power which mightily works within me." So he says I'm in Christ and He's in me and that is the mystery of union with the living God in salvation.

Just a footnote while you're there in 1 Thessalonians. Would you notice one preposition occurs "In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," not "In God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ." Combining God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ behind one preposition emphasizes equality..equality. And we would want to emphasize that, wouldn't we? For God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are equal in essence, in deity. We should note that Paul uses the full title of our Lord, the word "Lord" meaning creator, redeemer, the one who made us, the one who bought us, the one who rules us, the one to whom we owe all our allegiance. The word "Jesus" is His humanity, the name means Jehovah saves. The word "Christ," Messiah, anointed one, chosen by God to fulfill the divine purpose of redemption. This One is equal to God. This One and God and the Spirit lives in us and we in Him. What a glorious truth.

"Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, the elect of Thessalonians whose life is hid with Christ in God, grace to you and peace." That's a common greeting. Those are the two most wonderful words, you know that? The most wonderful words. Why? Grace is God's favor to the sinner, Peace is the result, right? Grace is God's favor to the sinner, Peace is the result. And what he is saying here is "I wish for you grace and peace."

You say, "Well they already had grace at salvation, they already made peace with God at salvation." Yes, and Paul is wishing that they would continually experience the fullness of God who giveth more grace and whose unending peace always passes all understanding. And I wish for you more grace

and more peace. They just draw out of him such exuberant love. This grace and this peace which came to us initially at salvation has become our daily portion. We have grace for our sin and peace for our guilt, grace for our sin and peace for our guilt. And that will flow and flow and flow and flow as a lifelong privileged blessing until we enter into the place where all is glory and reward.

No wonder verse 2 says, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers." What does he mean by that? That when we make mention of you in our prayers it is primarily to give thanks to God for all of you. We thank God continually whenever you come up in our prayers because you are elect. And we thank God because God is the one who elected you. God is the one who loved you. God is the one who made you brethren. And we always do this, he says, we always thank God, it's uninterrupted, and we always thank God for all of you. They were like the Jerusalem church, you know, 3,000 people believed, 3,000 people were baptized and 3,000 people continued. They were all Christians, they were all real. Living for Christ in the middle of difficulty because they were the elect.

Well, how did he know they were the elect? That's for next time. Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, our hearts rejoice as we've taken a little trip in time to touch the life of a little church, an island in the sea of paganism, a clean place in the sewage of depravity. We've touched ever so gently the life of a man named Paul and his two friends, Silas and Timothy. And we have felt the joy of their hearts as they have seen what You did in Thessalonica. We thank You, Lord, for this encouragement, that we have in our own hearts, too, because of what You've done here at Grace Community Church, for this too is Your church, a church of which I can say knowing, brethren, beloved by God, Your election, a church of which I can thank You continually as I make mention of them in my prayers...for they too are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, I thank You for the joy that ministry among Your true people brings and we thank You for the grace that is given us who can so labor in a place where the elect have been called together. The joy of Paul becomes our joy. We thank You that in the midst of all of his struggles and trials and difficulties and the pain of all the difficulties that he saw in the churches there was a Thessalonica that could cheer his heart and give him such joy. Father, we thank You too for this place, our church, may we continue to know that joy of being Your brethren, beloved, Your chosen. Keep us pure, Father, that we might be a great encouragement to Your own heart. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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