

# 1

## A Church Is Born

A father took his son to a large city museum, thinking that the visit would entertain the boy. But for two hours the lad did nothing but sigh and complain. Finally in desperation he said to his father, "Dad, let's go someplace where *things are real!*"

Some people feel that way when they read the Bible. They think they are in a religious museum, looking at ancient artifacts that have no meaning for life in today's scientific world. *But they are wrong.* No book published has more meaning for our lives, and more relevance to our problems, than the Bible. No wonder William Lyon Phelps, for years called "Yale's most inspiring professor," said: "I believe a knowledge of the Bible without a college course is more valuable than a college course without a Bible."

We are about to study two of Paul's earliest letters, 1 and 2 Thessalonians. (It is possible that Galatians was written first.) These two letters were written to real people who were experiencing real problems in a world that was not friendly to their

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Christian faith. You and I can easily identify with these people because we live in a similar world and face many of the same problems. Once you understand the background, the burden, and the blessing of these two letters, you will see how up-to-date and practical they are.

### The Background

You can visit Thessalonica today, only the travel guide will call it Thessaloniki. (It used to be known as Salonika.) It is an important industrial and commercial city in modern Greece and is second to Athens in population. It served as an important Allied base during World War I. In World War II it was captured by the German army, and the Jewish population of about 60,000 persons was deported and exterminated.

It is an ancient city, originally named Therma from the many hot springs adjacent to it. In 315 B.C. it was renamed Thessalonica after the half sister of Alexander the Great. When Rome conquered Macedonia in 168 B.C., the city was made capital of that entire province. In Paul's day 200,000 people lived there, most of them Greeks, but also many Romans and a strong Jewish minority. Today it has a population of 300,000, and is one of the few cities that has survived from the New Testament era of apostolic ministry.

Dr. Luke explained how Paul came to Thessalonica and how the church was founded (Acts 17:1-15). Paul went to Macedonia in response to a "call" from a man in Macedonia who said, "Come over into Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy arrived first in Philippi where they led Lydia and her household to Christ and there established a church. Paul and

Silas were arrested on false charges, beaten, and put into jail. But God delivered them and they were able to lead the jailer and his household to faith in Christ.

After encouraging the new believers, Paul and his friends left Philippi (though Luke probably stayed behind temporarily) and headed for the important city of Thessalonica. They bypassed Amphipolis and Apollonia (Acts 17:1), not because they had no burden for the people in those cities, but because Paul's policy was to minister in the large cities and then have the believers reach out into the smaller towns nearby. It is about 100 miles from Philippi to Thessalonica.

Paul's commission was to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Ephesians 3:1-12), but he always started his ministry among the Jews. The local synagogue was the place where the Old Testament Law was known and revered. Paul could get a sympathetic hearing in the synagogue, at least until persecution began. Furthermore, there were always many Gentile "God-fearers" in the synagogues, and through them Paul could begin a witness to the pagan Gentiles. Add to this Paul's great burden for the Jews (Romans 9:1-3 and 10:1), and the historical principle of "To the Jew first" (Rom. 1:16), and you can see why Paul and his associates began their work in the synagogue.

It is interesting to study the words Luke used to describe Paul's public ministry in the synagogue (Acts 17:2-3). *Reasoned* means "to discourse using questions and answers." Perhaps "dialogue" would be a good synonym. *Opening* simply means "explaining." Paul would read a portion of the Old Testament Scriptures and explain their meaning with reference to Jesus Christ and the Gospel.

*Alleging* literally means "to lay beside." Paul put the Scriptures before them in an orderly manner, showing them how they harmonized. *Preach* means "to proclaim, to announce." Paul did not simply teach the Scriptures; he proclaimed Christ and urged his listeners to receive Him by faith.

We can learn much from Paul's approach to evangelism. He used the Word of God, and he declared the Son of God. He started where the people were and led them into the truth of the Gospel. (When Paul preached to Gentiles, he started with the God of Creation, since they had no knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. See Acts 14:8-18 and 17:16ff.)

He ministered in the synagogue for three Sabbaths, and the Lord worked in power. Many people believed in Jesus Christ and were saved, including a number of high-ranking women. However, the unbelieving Jews began to oppose the work, and Paul and his helpers had to leave the city. They went 40 miles to Berea and there had a good ministry; but the Jews from Thessalonica followed them and caused trouble. It was then that Paul left for Athens, and from there to Corinth.

How long did Paul minister in Thessalonica? Does the statement "three Sabbath days" (Acts 17:2) mean three weeks only, or that he preached *in the synagogue* only three weeks but continued in another place? We know that Paul was there long enough to receive two "home missions offerings" from the church in Philippi (Phil. 4:16). Also, Paul worked at his tentmaking trade to support himself (1 Thes. 2:9 and 2 Thes. 3:6-15).

If Paul were there only three weeks, he certainly taught the new Christians a great deal of basic Bible doctrine. As we study these two letters, we

will discover that almost every major doctrine of the Christian faith is mentioned.

Even though Paul's ministry in Thessalonica was not a long one, it was solid enough to leave behind a thriving church. When he left for Athens, Paul told Timothy and Silas to remain there and help the new church and then to join him later. When they did meet again, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage the Christians and assure them of his love and concern. (He had tried to go back twice, but was hindered; 1 Thes. 2:17-18.) It was when Timothy rejoined Paul at Corinth and gave him the report on the new church that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. He wrote 2 Thessalonians just a short time later.

All of this background teaches us several helpful lessons. Obviously, *God uses people*. God did not send angels to evangelize Thessalonica; He sent a converted Jewish rabbi and his friends, including a young man who was part Jew, part Gentile. God still uses people—dedicated people who will obey His leading and share His message.

Here is a second lesson: the Gospel is still "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). It did not require years to set up a church in Thessalonica. God's power was effective in changing lives and a church was founded in less than a month. Paul reminded them that the Gospel came to them not "in word only, but also in power in the Holy Spirit" (1 Thes. 1:5).

Finally, Satan still opposes the Gospel and persecutes God's people; *but persecution can be a means of growth*. As we study these two letters, we will see that God's Spirit strengthens and encourages suffering saints as they go through the difficulties of Christian life and witness.

## The Burden

Why did Paul write these two letters? First, he wanted to assure his friends of his love and concern. After all, he left the city hastily at night, and he did not want them to think he had deserted them. Also, Paul's enemies were attacking his character and telling the new believers that their leader was really a greedy charlatan who preached religion in order to make money (1 Thes. 2). There were plenty of itinerant rogues in Greece who did just that, and some were spreading the word that Paul was one of them. In this letter, Paul assured his readers of his love for them and his honesty in ministering to them.

He had a second purpose in view: he wanted to ground them in the doctrines of the Christian faith, particularly with reference to Christ's return. It appears that the church was going through severe persecution, and this is always a time of temptation to compromise and give in to discouragement. By reminding them of the truths of the Christian faith and what God had done for them in Christ, Paul encouraged them to stand firm and maintain their strong witness.

He also encouraged them to live holy lives. Keep in mind that temptations to immorality were rife in the cities then, and that sexual sins were not condemned by most people. These letters emphasize purity of life—a concept that needs to be emphasized in our churches too.

The new Christians were confused about the return of Jesus Christ. Paul had told them that the Lord would return in the air and take them home, but some of their number had died. The bereaved ones wondered if their Christian dead would be included in the "catching up" of the church. Paul

explained this in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

But there was a second confusion. Because the persecutions were so intense, some of the believers thought that "the Day of the Lord" had arrived. (It is possible that a forged letter contributed to this confusion. See 2 Thes. 2:1-2.) Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to explain this doctrine and to assure them that the Day of the Lord had not yet arrived.

Finally, in this letter, Paul sought to correct some weaknesses in the church. Some members were not respecting and honoring their spiritual leaders as they should (1 Thes. 5:12-13). Others were refusing to work, arguing that the soon-coming of the Lord made this the logical thing to do (2 Thes. 3:6ff.). There was some confusion in their public services that also needed correcting (1 Thes. 5:19-21).

Confusion still exists about Bible prophecy, with radio and television preachers contradicting each other (and the Bible) and upsetting the saints. Is the coming of the Lord near? Must any signs take place before He can return? Will God's people have to go through the Day of the Lord (the tribulation) before He can return? Paul answered these important questions in these two inspired letters.

And what about the matter of *practical holiness*? It is not easy for Christians to avoid the pollutions of the world. The sex promoters offer their wares at almost every newspaper stand and drug store. Immorality and infidelity are common themes of radio and television programs as well as of popular music. The bad examples of famous people make it easier for young people to say, "Everybody is doing it!"

In addition to being more cautious in daily living, we also need more order and respect in our local churches. I have discovered that lack of respect for spiritual leadership is the main cause of church fights and splits. What Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 is greatly needed today.

In all fairness to church officers, I realize that some pastors do not deserve to be followed. They are not spiritual; they do not pray; and they have no concern for the lost. They are merely using the ministry to make an easy living. A pastor must not *demand* respect; he must *command* respect, as did Paul, by his dedicated life and sacrificial ministry.

First Thessalonians is a letter from a spiritual father to his children. Paul pictured the church as a family (the word "brethren" or "brother" is used 19 times in the first letter and 9 times in the second), and he reminded them of what God did for them through his ministry. From this viewpoint, an outline of 1 Thessalonians would look like this:

### **I. PAUL REMEMBERS—chapters 1—3**

1. How the church was born—chapter 1
2. How the church was nurtured—chapter 2
3. How the church was established—chapter 3

### **II. PAUL EXHORTS—chapters 4—5**

(How the church should walk)

1. In holiness—4:1-8
2. In harmony—4:9-10
3. In honesty—4:11-12
4. In hope—4:13—5:11
5. In helpfulness—5:12-28

The second letter was written to correct certain

wrong ideas—and wrong practices—relating to the doctrine of the Lord's return. We will deal with the details of this letter in later chapters; but for now, a simple outline of 2 Thessalonians will be helpful:

**I. ENCOURAGEMENT IN SUFFERING—  
chapter 1**

1. Praise—1:1-4
2. Promise—1:5-10
3. Prayer—1:11-12

**II. ENLIGHTENMENT IN TEACHING—  
chapter 2**

1. How the man of sin appears—2:1-7
2. How the Son of God appears—2:8-12
3. How the child of God should live—2:13-17

**III. ENABLEMENT IN LIVING—chapter 3**

1. Obey the Word—3:1-6
2. Follow our example—3:7-9
3. Discipline the unruly—3:10-15
4. Closing benediction—3:16-18

We have seen the background of the letters, and the burden that motivated Paul to write them. We shall now consider the blessing of these letters and discover what they can mean to us.

## The Blessing

Each New Testament letter has a special message, or blessing, that is uniquely its own. Romans, for example, emphasizes the righteousness of God and shows that God is righteous in His dealings with both sinners and believers. First Corinthians focuses on the wisdom of God, and 2 Corinthians on the comfort of God. Galatians is the freedom letter and Philipians is the joy letter, while Ephesians

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stresses the wealth that we have in Christ Jesus.

What is the special blessing in the message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians? *It is the message of the return of Jesus Christ and how this vital doctrine can affect our lives and churches and make us more spiritual.* Every chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with reference to the coming of Jesus Christ, and each reference relates the doctrine to a practical aspect of Christian living. Here is a summary:

1:10—salvation and assurance

2:19-20—soul-winning and service

3:11-13—stability in Christian living

4:13-18—strength for sorrow

5:23-24—sanctification of life

In other words, Paul did not look on this doctrine as a theory to be discussed, but as a truth to be lived. These letters encourage us to live "in the future tense" since Jesus could appear at any time. We are to practice the promise of His return in our manner of life.

Turning to 2 Thessalonians, we discover additional truth concerning future events and the church. Keep in mind that the second letter was written to correct the confusion regarding our Lord's return. Some believers thought the Day of the Lord (the time of tribulation) had arrived, and they wondered when the Lord would appear. Perhaps the best way to grasp the major messages of the two letters is by contrast:

### **1 THESSALONIANS**

Christ comes in the air  
for His church  
(4:13-18)

### **2 THESSALONIANS**

Christ comes to the  
earth with His  
church (1:10)

A sudden secret rapture that can occur at any time	A crisis that is part of a predicted program
Can occur today	Can occur only after certain events hap- pen
The Day of Christ	The Day of the Lord

I realize that godly men differ in their interpretations of prophecy, particularly the matter of the church escaping or entering the time of Tribulation. My own position is that the church will be taken to heaven before the Tribulation, and then will return to the earth with the Lord to bring the Tribulation to a close (Rev. 19:11ff.). I see 1 Thessalonians emphasizing the rapture of the church and 2 Thessalonians the revelation of the Lord with the church when He comes to judge.

However, the practical spiritual lessons of these truths should not be lost in debates over interpretations. I am encouraged to read what Dr. Leon Morris wrote in his excellent commentary on the Thessalonian epistles in *The New International Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 152.

In his discussion of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3, Dr. Morris faced the matter of whether believers will escape the Tribulation or be left on earth to pass through that terrible event. "The language of this chapter could be understood either way," he stated, and then affirmed his own position that the church will go through the Tribulation. Then he added: "But I fully recognize that other interpretations are possible, and suggest that it is not wise for any of us to condemn those who see such passages differently."

In other words, we can disagree without being

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disagreeable. My own conviction is that we shall be delivered from "the wrath to come" (1 Thes. 1:10 and 5:9-10). I believe the Lord wants us to live in the constant expectation of His coming. I have studied carefully the excellent defenses of the other positions, and I respect the men who hold to them. But I must lovingly disagree with them.

Paul did not write these letters to stir up a debate. His desire was that these letters bless our lives and our churches. The doctrine of the Lord's return is not a toy to play with, or a weapon to fight with, but a tool to build with. Believers may disagree on some of the fine points of Bible prophecy, but we all believe that Jesus Christ is coming again to reward believers and judge the lost. And we must all live in the light of His coming.

Your study of these letters should give you assurance for the future, encouragement in witnessing and walking with the Lord, comfort in the loss of Christian loved ones, and stability in a world that is very unsure of itself. Practicing what Paul wrote in these two letters should help you to **BE READY!**