

The Year of St. Paul

The First Letter to the Thessalonians



So we conclude our study of St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, a community he loved so much, a community that he founded through the grace of Jesus Christ. But let's review this love letter before we move forward and discuss his letter to the Galatians during the month of October.

Thessalonica was a seaport city and hub of trade and commerce. So people of many religions and backgrounds were found there at any given time. This gave cause for the practice of a wide variety of faith expressions from pagan worship, to magic, to Jewish tradition, and now, to the Christian faith. Paul and Silas encounter all of these in bringing the message of Jesus Christ to those living in this city.

THE MAJOR THEMES

Selection was important. That Paul, Silas, and the Thessalonians were called to a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ was no mistake. The promise of salvation was theirs by divine plan. Their pasts did not matter. What was laid ahead, did matter as it meant eternal salvation or eternal separation.

Each of us is called to eternal salvation. This call is irrevocable since it is gift from God. However, it remains our choice to accept. God's action was and remains pure and perfect love. Our response to God's action must come to be the same.

Community Living and Support were seen as fundamental to the success of the community and its faith. Paul encouraged people to look beyond their own personal wants for the betterment of the whole. Their lifestyle and fortitude in light of the various backgrounds of individuals, as well as the persecution that was also occurring, meant people needed to be strong in faith and supportive of one another if, indeed, that faith in Christ was going to last.

We've seen that our own choices can help or hinder the growth of the community. The more times that choices are made for individual purposes, the more the opportunities arise for division in the Church today, particularly in our parishes. There is as much or more divergence among people in our society today as there was in Thessalonica in the time of Paul. Prejudice, bigotry, greed, hate all are reasons for the Body to be divided. The New Age movement

has dropped from the spotlight of a new religion, but remnants remain in various forms in our culture, including witchcraft and satanic worship. Our brothers and sisters in other Christian expressions struggle among themselves to

determine if the scriptures need to be interpreted in a new way separate from what tradition has handed

down. We too can become victims of false interpretation, which leads to us changing the plan of God.

Belief in the Resurrection wasn't necessarily a new tenant of faith. Jews were divided by this teaching. The necessity of our resurrection being uniquely joined with that of Christ's was essential. The dead rising with Christ, in resurrected oneness, took on a new perspective, offering hope without end.

So often today, people do not look at the resurrection and what it entails for the believer. Society has such a grasp on people believing they can have whatever they want, that it has crept into our faith experience, creating false expectation of what God "should" give a person, rather than what a person must do to recognize fully the salvation won through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Christ's Second Coming seems to be one of imminence for Paul and the Thessalonians at this time. This happens as the early Christians are being persecuted for belief in Jesus Christ. The reader should understand that the second coming of Christ should be seen at the end time, but also will occur immediately when an individual dies. Being prepared for this is the vigilance needed by each person of faith and structures all of Paul's teaching.

How shocking it is when a person dies before reaching old age. Yet it happens more and more. This does not bode well for those who have placed God on a shelf. Expecting to live a long life provides a false security that a change of lifestyle can take place before death comes knocking. Vigilance in faith

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and its lived-out experience is required at all times.

The Body is something that is a major theme throughout St. Paul's teaching, although not directly dealt with in his letter to the Thessalonians. However, St. Paul will emphasize selection of the individual as selection of the person to conform his body, mind and spirit, into oneness, first with Christ, and second with the Church, the body of Christ manifest in the world.

This is shown when he speaks of the selection of the people living in Thessalonica, and the important God has placed on them in becoming witnesses not only to each other, but also to the world. This second element requires the configuring of body, mind, and spirit into oneness with Christ, and then joining with the faithful in complete service in holiness of life. Jesus Christ will provide for this and draw us into oneness in himself within the believer, and within the community of faith.

This teaching, which again will become a major theme in future letters of St. Paul, causes us to reflect and then grasp the reality that our faith is not, and has never meant to be a personal, lock-in-the-closet, faith. Our faith must be witnessed morning, noon, and night, in our homes and our daily activities. Work and play are not excuses to separate life from the call to be the body of Christ in the world.

The Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and love are central to St. Paul's life, and as scripture scholar Daniel Harrington, SJ, has shown in his own outline of St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians,

Overview of First Thessalonians

Opening (1:1)

Faith (1:2-2:12)

Thanksgiving for the community's good condition (1:2-10)

Remembrance of Paul's presence in Thessalonica (2:1-12)

Love (2:13-4:12)

Thanksgiving for the community's steadfastness (2:13-16)

Timothy's mission and report to Paul (2:17-3:10)

Prayer for the community (3:11-13)

Exhortation to holiness and love (4:1-12)

Hope (4:13-5:22)

The coming of the Lord and those who have died (4:13-18)

Exhortation to prepare for the day of the Lord (5:1-11)

Exhortation about ongoing community life (5:12-22)

Closing (5:23-28)

Outline taken from "Meeting St. Paul Today" by Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, Loyola Press

they are part of the early Church creedal formula. To us, this is critical, as it shows what the Church was professing from the time of Pentecost right to the time of Paul.

These theological virtues have not changed in the passing of time. They are the linchpins of faith in the modern world. But they all

point to Christ, to the full reality of God in our lives — always present. As in the time of the early Church,



which professed these so well (they had to have since they lasted through persecution), they provide for us today.

Faith in something beyond a changing, passing world allows for purpose in our lives other than to see what all we can gain in the here and now.

It calls us to be what we sometimes fail to see as the call from God. Hope then gives us the opportunity believe that God's word and purpose for us will come to completion if only we hold out

till the end. And love is that binding force that allows us to realize our faith and hope being brought to perfection in our lives even as we seek that perfection in and through Jesus Christ. What more could we ask for or desire?

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Every writing of scripture is capable of standing on its own. That's why it is included in our bible. It's important for us to also see that what St. Paul says in this first letter to the Thessalonians also ties into further teaching found in his other letters, the tradition of the old testament (the Hebrew Testament) and the gospels. All of it is the Word of God that never changes or loses its power and message.

Concerning the opening address (1:1):

also see Rom 1:1-7; Acts 15:40; 16:1-3, 19; 2 Thes. 1:1-2

Concerning the first account of the theological virtues (1:3) also see 1 Cor. 13:13; 2 Thes. 1:3

Concerning Imitating Christ (1:6)

also see 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 2 Thes. 3:9

Concerning Selection (2:4):

also see 2 Cor. 10:17-18; 2 Thes. 2:13

Concerning persecution and Paul's own background (2:15-16) also see Rom 9:1-5; 10:1; 11:3;

Phil 3:4-6)

Concerning Wrath or judgment of God (2:16):

also see Rom 1:18-2:5)

Concerning being "caught up" (4:17):

also see 2 Cor. 12:2; Rv. 12:5; Mt 24:40-41; and Lk. 17:34-35

Concerning Children of the Light (5:5):

also see Jn 12:36

Concerning charismatic gifts (5:19-21):

also see 1 Cor 14:2; 2 Thes. 2:1-15; 2 Pt 3:1-16