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**Day 332 - November 28**

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## **Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)**

### ***First Letter to the Thessalonians***

**Readings: *1 Thessalonians 1:1-5:28***

#### ***Reflections:***

- **First letter to the Thessalonians:** This letter was probably written in early 50's, some scholars speculate around 51 CE. Although Acts only records a three week visit with Paul primarily focused on debating with the Jewish leaders, this letter makes it clear that a significant component of the church community in this city was Greek. This letter stylistically is very similar to Galatians, Romans and the Corinthian letters and scholars agree that it was written by Paul personally.
- **Salutation:** Paul opens by naming Silas and Timothy. We see that this was likely written during one of his journeys. "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" are all key titles that carried deep theological meaning. "Grace and Peace" were the combination of both Hebrew and Greek greetings and also served well as hooks for key theological insight into the Good News of grace (love replacing religion) that brings peace (restored relationship).
- **Thanks for their faith:** Paul introduces his triad of faith, hope and love in the opening verses. These three capture the essence of what it means to live in restored relationship with God. We also see here Paul make it clear that the Holy Spirit was changing them from the inside out and in turn was using them to serve as models for other Christ-following communities. We also see how as the message is proclaimed, people are called out of religion ("turned from idols") and into true community. Paul also emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus and the hope of his return. No doubt they were expectant of Jesus' return in their generation.
- **Paul's ministry among them:** Paul shares about his calling and includes themes we will see over and over through his writings: suffering, serving God rather than people-pleasing, authenticity, not wanting money. Paul describes his leadership in clearly parental terms. He describes himself as both a spiritual mother and father emphasizing his sense of ownership, deep love, total investment, and desire to bring out the best in those he serves. Paul's self-description is very nurturing and relational, qualities not often associated with strong leaders.
- **Eager reception appreciated:** Paul celebrates the fact that this church focused on receiving God's word and were willing to suffer as a part of responding to what God was saying. It is not important we follow human leaders but that we follow God's voice and what God says.

Only as we know what God will say to us can we then count the cost of what comes with obedience. It is God's word that works in us through the Spirit to change us from the inside out. The Spirit connects us with God's love and brings to us his word (truth). Hearing God speaking to us and feeling his love deeply secures our heart and casts out our fear. It is his word (truth) that then, as we meditate on it, renews our mind and enables us to think his thoughts and to align our lives with his purposes. Paul also points out that those that rebel and reject God are in danger of his coming wrath.

- Desire to be with them: Paul wants to be with this community again and he sees them as his wealth and legacy. They are his crown and joy. Again these are terms that parents often feel towards their children. We also see that Satan stopped Paul from coming. In some way, probably through persecution, Paul feels the spiritual battle with Satan's forces is hindering his free and easy movement.
- Timothy's mission: Paul explains how he sent Timothy to ensure that Satan (the tempter) has not done spiritual damage to their community. This reminds us that we are in a battle and need to be prepared for spiritual warfare when seeking to complete the purposes of God.
- Good news comforting: Paul's love shines through as well as his constant, free flowing communication with God.
- Paul's prayer for them: Paul inserts a prayer that gives his readers a sense of what he is praying for them. It is not enough to say you are praying for people. Praying with them and/or writing out prayers is a key part of them hearing God speak through you as they hear or read what you are praying.
- Exhortation to chastity: There was a widespread practice of prostitution within the Greek religious system. Paul warns the Christ-followers not to use the grace of God to continue to feed a sexually promiscuous life but rather through the Spirit learn self-control and how to truly honor other people. The term "brother" is a generic term that should probably be understood as "brother or sister". The Spirit of God is called the "Holy Spirit" because of its function to set us apart, change us from the inside out and bring the true qualities of love and holiness into our lives.
- Exhortation toward love: Paul emphasizes the centrality of love and the importance to live lives of personal integrity, hard work and serving others. This way of living is how we demonstrate the good news through our lives. Proclamation of the good news only makes sense when it is backed up with the demonstration of the good news.
- Nature of the resurrection: Paul takes time to respond to a key question about the resurrection. We see here that Paul uses the image of the body sleeping as we await the return of Jesus. This does not mean that people's spirits also sleep. As we will see, as the body sleeps our spirits reside with God until Christ returns and all who follow him are given new bodies and he completes the restoration of the new earth. When those who are alive at his return meet him in the clouds, they are not going to join him in a journey back to heaven

but rather the image is of people going to meet a returning king and welcoming him home. Those who meet him in the clouds will join him as he returns to heaven triumphantly. How will this actually take place? Is this a spiritual vision or will people actually fly up into the sky? It is hard to know but the vision is of people welcoming Christ as a returning king. What an awesome vision to meditate on as our hope!

- Readiness for second coming: Paul challenges his readers to be constantly on guard and ready. He introduces the concepts of spiritual armor that he will later expand on in his letter to the Ephesians. Our awareness of the story of God and the spiritual battle should keep us alert and ready.
- Various exhortations: We see many of the key values of community expressed here by Paul – support and honor for leaders and those who are serving, unity of relationship, ownership for each other’s spiritual growth, the strong helping the weak, and even enemy love. Paul then shifts to more personal encouragements to be filled with joy, continually commune with God, encourage hearing God through the Spirit speaking by honoring prophetic words even as you test them in community, pursuing the best God has for you. These community and personal encouragements remind us how consistently the early church focused on living in relationship with God and each other with a view to God transforming our lives from the inside out.
- Benediction: Paul normally ends with a prayer and here Paul emphasizes in his prayer complete confidence in God completing within their lives the work he has begun. We are not changing ourselves from the inside out (or sanctifying ourselves) but rather submitting to and partnering with God to see him change us. Our transformation into all God wants us to be in and through Christ is God’s work from start to finish. We can trust him for our lives and the lives of the people we love and serve. Paul encourages the holy kiss, a cultural practice, the kiss of greeting similar to what Judas used when betraying Jesus. Today it would be a holy hug or handshake. A reminder that living in unity extends from the smallest gesture up to the biggest sacrifice. May God so permeate our lives that his love is expressed in a thousand and one ways in all our relationships and interactions!