

# WEEK 1 – FAITHFULNESS DESPITE OPPOSITION

Some of this week's devotional content was obtained from the Church of the Resurrection, and a sermon by Adam Hamilton, May 2021.

## MONDAY – How the news of Jesus came to Thessalonica



**1 Thessalonians 1: 2-3 (NIV)** *We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Wonderful praise, in what is believed to be the oldest surviving letter by Paul (±AD50). But did Thessalonica really matter in those times and were these achievements by its early Christians all 'plain sailing'?

'(T)he city was crucial for sharing news of Jesus: (Its) supreme importance lay in this — it straddled the *Via Egnatia*. Its main street was part of the very road which linked Rome with the East. If Christianity was settled there, it was bound to spread east along the Egnatian Road (into) all Asia ... and west until ... even the city of Rome. The coming of Christianity to Thessalonica was crucial in making it into a world religion.' (COR, 2021)

What happened to Paul and Silas in Thessalonica – and even

thereafter - after initial fruits of their ministry is described in Acts 17: 1-15 and summarised in excerpts from the NIV introduction to 1 Thessalonians: *Thessalonica was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. Paul established a church there after he left Philippi. Soon, however, there was opposition from Jews who were jealous of Paul's success in preaching the Christian message among the Gentiles (non-Jews) who had already become interested in Judaism. Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica and go on to Berea. Later on, after reaching Corinth, Paul received a personal report from ... Timothy about the situation in the church at Thessalonica. Paul wrote (1 Thessalonians) to encourage and reassure the Christians there.*



**Prayer:** Gracious God, Your great redemptive story reached its central turning point in Jesus. When that story took root in Thessalonica, it was on its way to my life. Thank You for that. Help me to find ways to pass it along. AMEN

## TUESDAY – Thanking God for faithful believers



**1 Thessalonians 1: 4-5a (NIV)** *For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy spirit and with deep conviction.*

We often use the word 'church' for a building or a religious denomination, but the apostle Paul called his converts 'the church'. The word *ekklēsia* appears 114 times in the New Testament – its first use by Paul is in 1 Thessalonians 1: 1 *To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ - NI*). Paul has in mind an actual gathering of the Thessalonian Christians. For Paul, 'church' was people.

Adam Hamilton at times says: "If the building burns down, and the preacher leaves town, what you have left is the church". A church in the USA gave their members T-shirts. On the front, they said, "I don't go to church". The back said, "I AM the church".

### Reflection:

What helps you understand that you may 'go to' the theatre or a sporting event, but 'church' is who you are, not somewhere you go?

The believers in Thessalonica were not the church on their own. They were the church because of their connection to God. Paul sends this letter to the church of the Thessalonians which is in God and the Lord Jesus Christ. God was the very atmosphere in which the Church lived and moved and had its being.

### Reflection:

How can you make God the 'very atmosphere' in which you live and move? And will it always be easy?



**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as John Wesley's covenant prayer put it, "thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it". Make that a living reality in my life today. AMEN

## WEDNESDAY – You will face opposition, even when serving



**1 Thessalonians 1: 5b-6 (NIV)** *You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.*

In the Roman Empire, there was nothing harmless or casual about calling Jesus “Lord”. To let ‘the message about the Lord’ ring out meant denying the Empire’s religious as well as political claim that Caesar was ‘Lord’. People who chose to live as committed followers of Jesus Christ, the anointed Lord, risked their social standing, and sometimes their very life.

The ‘traditional’ Jewish church of that time, usually led by the Pharisees, were often even greater critics of the new Christian church than the Romans, reacting against it with vehement verbal and even violent physical opposition.

The believers in Thessalonica accepted the good news about Jesus with joy in spite of great suffering. Adam Hamilton emphasises that the Thessalonians refused to give up in the face of criticism and adversity. They

remained faithful and displayed perseverance.

The church will not only face opposition as an institution, but **you** as a ‘representative’ of Christ’s true church will also at times face criticism and attacks. In your life, you will also experience other (non-religious) examples of unfair criticism, untruths, attacks etc – but does your response still identify you as a true part of Christ’s church?

### **Reflection:**

After nearly two years of pandemic fears and limitations, we all have a clearer sense of what suffering feels like. Did you learn any habits or practices to access the spiritual strength God offers you so that you can have inner joy and resilience, and not let any challenges you face crush you?



**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, Your light is so much brighter than mine. Help me learn how to get out of Your way, to let You shine forth from my life to brighten the lives of others around me. AMEN

## THURSDAY – Trying to please God, not people



### Read 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-16

How do you respond to religious (and other) opposition? Especially if it is invalid, based on untruths and hurtful criticism? 'Fight or flight'? Your own ego is bruised? Trying to be a 'people pleaser'? Give up? Or accept it with grace – 'Thank you for bringing that to my attention'? Respond by learning, growing and improving where necessary and possible?

What helps you to resist the urge to make people impressed with you, and instead introduce them to your Lord (also by your actions and reactions)?

Paul spoke of the courage it took to preach in Thessalonica after he had already suffered and been publicly insulted in Philippi (see Acts 16:12-40). Paul didn't yet have a copy of the gospel of Matthew, but he got to live out Jesus' principle about meeting insults and harassment with joy and trust.

Later, Paul wrote, "*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone*" (Romans 12:18, NIV). Yet like prophets before him and many godly leaders since, like his Lord Jesus himself, Paul often found himself hated and harassed. (Even John Wesley's drive for spiritual renewal and his sermons, in the 1700s, were often met by abuse and physical harassment.)

#### Reflection:

In our seemingly more tolerant age, what forms can 'persecution' take? How did Jesus call us to respond when (not 'if') that happens?

In what ways does Jesus' presence in your life create an inner 'climate' in which you can find God's joy and peace even in conditions that otherwise would produce only anger or depression?



**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, some of Your most faithful servants have focused on pleasing 'an audience of one'. Even as I work to live at peace with all people, keep me aware that it is You I most want my choices to please. AMEN.

**FRIDAY** – “We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.” (1 Thessalonians 2:4b, NIV)



**1 Thessalonians 2: 6, 11 (NIV):** *“We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. <sup>11</sup>For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory.*”

Paul compared himself to a loving dad. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “The question for all Christian ministers [and all Christians] is: if we were to describe ourselves like this, would anyone recognize who we were talking about?” (Quoted in COR, 2021)

Paul gently invited people to a breath-taking serious goal, as quoted above in verse 11: “lives worthy of God”. God didn’t seek a few trivial changes. God asked for their whole life. Paul lost no opportunity to explain to them that the living God wanted living human beings to reflect His glory, and that He had called them, summoned them, bidden them to this utterly demanding, but utterly

rewarding, way of life - also when facing opposition! How are we answering that call?

Paul served God by preaching the gospel and planting new churches. When Paul wrote this letter, Timothy served God by checking on the churches, nurturing them and helping to relieve Paul’s concerns...

**Reflection:**

Is your heart willing to serve in any role needed that fits your gifts in God’s kingdom, where ‘the last shall be first’ and God values every member of the body equally? What would a careful observer learn about God by ‘reading’ the letter you are writing with your life?



**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, ‘fellowship’ is not a church cliché. It’s the path to Your kingdom that Your servant Paul modelled and called all of us, including me, to follow. Thank you for including me in Your family. AMEN