

Let's talk about Thessalonica.

Thessalonica as a city, continues to exist. It's now the Greek city of Thessaloniki. Today, it has a population of over 300 000 people (almost 2*Toowoomba).

And it's always been an important city. It's got a good harbour, and it's situated on what's known as "The Egnatian Way" (*Via Egnatia*) – the Roman Highway that extended out into the Far East. It was a very important trade route..

Now, when I was at School, I wondered why in our history classes, were we learning about the Roman Empire, but I now understand why. The Roman Empire had technology way ahead of its time, and its engineering feats long outlived the empire itself. The roads/bridges/buildings they built, were far superior to what was being constructed (in some places), 1000 years later.

And the great Roman Roads (highways) (in this case *Via Egnatia*), enabled travel like never before. And the Christian missionaries, often radiated out, travelling these Roman roads. And it was by travelling the Egnatian Way, that two missionaries (Paul & Silas) came to a place called Thessalonica.

It happened like this:

They were at Troaz, (across the Aegean Sea (in Turkey)) Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia, saying, "Come over and help us". So they hopped on a ship, and headed over to Macedonia.

They went to:

- Samothrace; and

- Neapolis; and
- Philippi

And there at Philippi, they preached the Gospel, and they had a few conversions, but they also met some severe spiritual opposition, and they were arrested and thrown in jail.

(Long story, short) when they were released, the magistrates asked them to move on. So they did.

They passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, and came to Thessalonica. So, he's just been run out of Philippi, and he comes to Thessalonica.

Now, Thessalonica, had a Jewish synagogue. "So what", you might say... Well, it was Paul and Silas' custom, that on the Sabbath day, they would go to the Synagogue, and teach from the Old Testament Scriptures, how it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and then rise from the dead. And (of course) that Jesus is the Christ.

Praise God, some of the Jews believed, but moreso, it was what's known as "the God-Fearers" – It was the God-fearing Greeks who believed.

So, what are the "God-Fearers"? The "God-Fearers", were Greeks who had rejected the "normal" Greek idolatry. You see, most Greeks worshipped a multitude of idols and believed they were gods. But the **God-Fearers** rejected this, **and** they rejected all of the immorality and spiritualism that went along with it, and they believed in YHWH (They were drawn to the God of the Jews).

So, they no longer worshipped idols. They now worshipped the One, True God. And so, they would attend the local Synagogue to be taught the Scriptures, but they hadn't done the full conversion thing, to become a Jew themselves... And so, they were still outsiders, as far as the Jews were concerned...

And when the **God-Fearers** heard Paul and Silas teach about Jesus, it all made sense. They knew it was true, and they turned whole-heartedly toward Jesus...

But the Jews didn't like that, and so they gathered a mob, to start a riot, and they said "These men – they've turned the world upside-down!!!"...

I love that, don't you??? *"They turned the world upside-down, wherever they go. And now they've come here, and they're going to turn it all upside-down here too..."*

How true it is. When the Gospel of Jesus Christ is being preached, and when some who hear the Gospel, respond by turning their whole lives over to Jesus,, The world **is** being turned upside-down.... But of course, for those who are being saved, we know we're being turned the right way up.

But from the world's perspective, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all upside down.

- The first will be last and the last will be first.
- Whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but if you lose your life for Jesus, you keep it
- The proud are humbled;

- The worldly wise miss the wisdom of God;
- While the lowly enter the kingdom...

From the perspective of the world, the Gospel of Jesus turns everything upside-down, but from God's perspective, what **is** upside-down, is being turned the right-way-up.

And praise God, that He is turning you and I, the right way up. Folly to the wise, but it's the wisdom of God.

Anyway, 3 Sabbath days, they managed to scrape in. They were there a whole 3 weeks, before the trouble happened, and they had to leave town again...

Now, if you and I headed out on mission together, and we are run out of one town, so we go on to the next, and we only manage to stay there 3 weeks before we're run out of town again,, would you consider you missionary journey a success???

Well, maybe it would depend on what happened in those 3 weeks... And in this case, it **was** a success.

No, they didn't stay long enough to:

- get a church properly established;
- give them a comprehensive theological education;
- establish a firm base of operations...

But it was a success, because when Paul and Silas left Thessalonica in the dead of night, it was "The Brothers" who encouraged them as they departed... We would probably say

“Brothers and Sister”, because it included at least one woman named Lydia, who had been their host.

3 weeks of preaching, and there were some who had been turned the right way up.

And I pray for that sort of thing to happen here. For more people who don't know Jesus, to become brothers and sisters in Christ...

So, that's a fair lump of an introduction. Let's look at the letter itself.

It's a letter from Paul, Silvanus (the formal name for Silas) and Timothy.

And the address is: **To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

That sounds a bit odd... Wouldn't we normally say “To the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, in Thessalonica...” But he's said it the other way around: **To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

And what this tells me about being a Christian, is the importance of “Who we are”, and “Where we are”. Let's start with where we are.

If I am a Christian, it does not matter:

- if I'm in the bustling city of Thessalonica, or whether I'm in a little place called St George in Rural Southern Queensland, where I am, is in Christ.
- whether I'm in a good season, or in the midst of a drought, where I am, is "In Christ".
- whether I'm in a place of peace and safety, or whether I'm in a land of war, danger and strife, where I am, is "in Christ".
- Whether I am in good health and fine fitness, or whether I'm in sickness; living in pain, where I am, is "in Christ".

If you are a disciple of the Lord Jesus, where you are, is in **God the Father and [in] the Lord Jesus Christ** and where we are, makes all the difference.

But the other part, is "**who** we are". Who are we? We are the church of the St Georgians... Or at least a small part of the church of the St Georgians...

And this is important. Some folk feel, "*I'm a Christian,, I just don't want to be part of a church... or "I'm a spiritual person, I just don't want to be a part of an institution/organised religion..."*"

Huh... What a crazy concept that is...

Jesus' design, is for His Disciples, to become this thing called, "The church"... The church, is the gathered community of Christ. The Greek word is ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia) assembly/meeting/congregation... Jesus didn't design it for believers in Jesus to be separated from one another. When He described "Christians", He described us as "His gathered ones" "His assembled ones" "His people who meet together"...

Jesus told us that He's returning for who? The individuals? He's returning for His church. It is the Church – the assembly, who will be presented to Him as a bride, pure and holy...

This is why we meet together. Look around. I'd like to introduce you to your brothers and sisters in Christ. – our brothers and sisters in whom we delight – our brothers and sisters with whom we share eternity...

And so Paul says, to this gathered group of Christians, two of the most beautiful words: **Grace to you and peace.**

And unless one is a Christian, those words may not mean a whole lot.

Grace / graciousness / favour. John Newton explained it so well in His wonderful hymn:

*Amazing grace,
how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost,*

*but now I'm found,
was blind, but now I see.*

If you want to know what grace looks like, cast your eyes upon the cross. Our Lord Jesus Christ died, that we might live. We didn't deserve it. It is His graciousness and His mercy, by which we are saved.

And by Grace, we have peace with God.

In Romans 5, we confront the opposite of that. It talks about how at one time, we were enemies of God... Why were we enemies of God? Because we rejected Him. But in Christ, we can be reconciled to God, and have peace.

Even in the midst of troubles and hardship, we have peace.

Righto:

Now, we get to the bit where we see just how successful, those 3 weeks were, before Paul and Silas had to flee in the dead of night...

I've read this letter several times over the last week. And every time I do, what really comes through to me, is the Pastor's heart. You know, sometimes we read Paul's letters, and for some, it might come across to them as being, "Oh, he's being a bit hard"... But here in this letter, we cannot help but see his Pastor's heart...

He loves these people so much. *And I get this... I'm probably not so good at sharing this, but I hope you guys know, "I love you, so much."*...

He prays for them all the time. He gives thanks for them, in his prayers.

He remembers their:

- work of faith;
- labour of love;
- steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And He gives thanks to God for these things...

Sometimes we preachers are fearful, to preach the whole word of God. Do you know why? I suspect the trouble is, we “good protestants”, sometimes we become allergic to words like “work” and “labour”... Why? Because we don’t want anyone to accuse us *“Oh, you’re just a legalist – it’s all about works...”* I want you to notice, Paul is not shy of these words, and nor should he be... We know, that we are not saved **by** doing good works, but we are **absolutely** saved (by grace), to (thereafter) **do** good works... (very big difference)...

And the reason Paul has cause for giving thanks, is what he sees in the Thessalonian church.

Their:

- work of faith;
- labour of love;
- steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

These things, are all evidence of a deep faith commitment to Jesus. These things are evidence of the Holy Spirit, working out through the life of a believer.

- work of faith;
- labour of love;
- steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If I could pray for one thing in the life of this church, it would be for this.

For an increase in:

- work of faith;
- labour of love;
- steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's put legs on this. What does that look like?

Their work of faith, begins with their response to the Gospel. When Paul preached the Gospel, they believed / had faith / received Jesus. But it's more than that. It's also the good works they do, as a result of their faith.

What about their labour of love?

Their labour of love, is loving one another. And sometimes it's hard work, to love another Christian. There are some Christians (like me), who are difficult to love... It can be a labour "to" love. But this is a labour "of" love. We serve/labour, because we love.

- We love God, so we worship;
- We love His word, and so we study it;
- We love the unsaved, and so we preach the Gospel;
- We love our brothers and sisters in Christ, and so we serve one another;
- We love our neighbour, and so we serve in the community...

Are you with me? It's a labour of love – something we do, because we are filled with love.

I don't know if Robyn's kept a record of the hours, but she's just completed a cross-stitch for our granddaughter Annie. It was a labour of love, wasn't it Robyn... We do things for those we love...

And the steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, is about never giving up. And we're going to see it coming through in this letter, that it was not an easy thing, to be a Christian in 1st Century Thessalonica. But with steadfastness of hope, we know that no matter how tough things get, Our future is assured, in Jesus Christ our Lord... And we know it's assured, because where are we? Where are we? We are in Christ.

And so, we have steadfastness of hope.

Now, Paul uses here, language of "belonging"... He was only there for 3 weeks, but he knows he's writing to "brothers". Three things happened, while he was in Thessalonica. There was:

1. Something God did;
2. Something Paul & Silas did;
3. Something the Thessalonians did.

1. What did God do?

- God loved them; and
- God chose them.

Before the beginning of time, the Lord knew that man would sin. It was no surprise to God, that His creation rebelled

against Him. But God loved... **John 3:16** "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

That's how much we are loved by God. He gave His only son, to die, that we might be saved. And so, God loved the Thessalonians.

And He **chose** them. God determined, right before the beginning of time, that come judgment day, there would be two groups of people.

There would be those who:

- believe in the Lord Jesus Christ;
- repent of sin; and
- continue on in the faith,,,

These would be saved – These would be presented as the bride of Christ...

And the other group, which will vastly outnumber the saved, will be subject to judgment...

So, how did Paul know that they were part of the chosen?

It was because they:

- believed in the Lord Jesus Christ;
- repented of sin; and
- continued on in the faith,,,

and we'll see more of that shortly.

2. Secondly, what did Paul and Silas do?

Well, for a start, they turned up.

Remember, The Lord gave Paul a vision of a man in Macedonia, begging him to come to Macedonia and help them... Now, Paul could've kept on with his own plan; He might have already had his own goals and objectives set out – he could have persisted in achieving his plans... But he stopped what he was doing, and obeyed God. He sailed to Macedonia.

When he was jailed at Phillippi, he could have lost heart. But he didn't. He kept on going, and he ended up at Thessalonica.

And so Paul could say to them: “Our gospel came to you”...

And it wasn't simply a matter of words. As they preached, **God** was at work. **our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.**

If the gospel being proclaimed, is merely the words of man, where's the power? But when the Gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit gives those words, Power... And you may feel that you are totally inadequate to share the message of Jesus with another person,, but when you step up, and be a witness for Jesus, the Holy Spirit will take those words, and give them power...

And when the word of God is proclaimed, does the preacher believe it??? The Gospel has power, when the one who is preaching it, is fully convinced of its truth...

BTW, “with full conviction” has nothing to do with style of presentation ... (fluent / loud / entertaining) “full conviction” is a preacher, who truly believes, what he proclaims... Are they genuine??? And Paul and Silas were fair-dinkum – they were the genuine article. Their manner of life bore witness to that.

They didn’t have false motives. They truly believed.

And let me tell ya, “being a pastor of a church, is not an easy thing”... And I don’t know about other pastors, but I certainly wouldn’t be doing what I do, if I wasn’t fully convicted that “Jesus is alive, and the Gospel is absolutely true...” And I wouldn’t be doing what I do, if I wasn’t certain that it was “a calling of God”...

Anyway, Paul was able to say: our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

Who could resist that???? Well, many... Most...

Sometimes, those

- who hear the Gospel being proclaimed in power;
- who hear Holy Spirit inspired preaching;
- and get to hear it from someone who is completely genuine in their faith,,,

sometimes (often), those who hear that, will scoff...

The words that should bring life, are like water off a duck's back...

Think of Jesus:

Matthew 11:20 Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹ "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

How did Paul know that the Thessalonians were not only loved by God, but chosen???

It's because of what **the Thessalonians** did.

3. They became imitators of Paul and Silas.

Now, that doesn't mean they were pretending to be like Paul and Silas. It's more about "the faith of Paul and Silas became their faith. They **received the word**

And they became imitators of Jesus... Once again, that doesn't mean they were pretending to be like Jesus. They took on the very nature of Jesus – Christ-likeness...

God's children, become like their Father. Disciples of Jesus, take on the nature of our Lord... How can something like this happen? How can I/you be changed, to become more like

Jesus??? We surrender ourselves totally to Jesus; Believe in Him, and He will fill us with His Holy Spirit.

The mark of being a Christian, is the Holy Spirit moves in to take up residence in the life of a believer. And there is always evidence of this. It's called "the Fruit of the Spirit". And Paul could see the Fruit of the Spirit in the Thessalonians....

An example of this:

Although they were being persecuted for their new-found faith, they were filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit...

That's a pretty sure sign of genuine faith. When one is being persecuted for being a Christian, and suffering affliction for it, and yet they're filled with joy... That's genuine faith.

And their faith was evident for all to see. It became known, right throughout the region. What was evident? The change in their life.

When you become a Christian, you will leave behind your old sinful life, and take up the new... For these Greek Thessalonians, this was a big deal. Once upon a time, they worshipped idols, but from the time they gave their hearts to Jesus, they began to serve the true and living God.

They:

- believed;
- repented – they turned from their old ways, and turned toward God;

- were transformed;
- were filled with the Holy Spirit;
The fruit of the Spirit was evident **by**;
 - their transformation;
 - joy (under persecution);
 - witness
- They didn't hide their faith.
Even though they were persecuted for their faith, the genuineness of their faith became known throughout the whole region.
- served; and
- endured. In faith, they waited for Jesus to return...

When it came to their salvation:

- Some of the things, Paul and Silas did;
- Some of the things, the Thessalonians did,,,
- But overall, it was a miracle of God... God's hand was in it, all the way through.

So, what do we do with this???

In the church of the Thessalonians, there was overwhelming evidence of a deep faith commitment to Jesus.

If the Apostle Paul was to visit, would he see that same deep faith commitment to Jesus in you and me?

As I read this first chapter of Thessalonians, I'm like Paul. I too, want to give thanks to God, for the deep faith commitment to Jesus, I see evident in His church...

But I also pray that you and I, will grow:

- deeper in faith;
- deeper in love;
- deeper in service;

- more like Christ; and
- unashamedly, be witnesses for Jesus.

For His glory,

Amen.