J. KYLE PAISLEY MEMORIAL FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Adult Bible Class Studies

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Read: 1 Thessalonians 1 ***An Introduction to the New Testament***

No.19, *1 Thessalonians*

FORMATION OF THE THESSALONIAN CHURCH

The record of the formation of the Thessalonian church is given in Acts 17: 1-9. The narrative presents to us various historical details. It was during his second missionary journey that Paul evangelised in Thessalonica and saw this church born. His initial approach was that of his usual custom of going into the Jewish synagogue to preach the Gospel, on this occasion doing so for 3 successive Sabbaths. Some Jews were saved, but the majority of converts were from the Gentile world. Acts 17: 4 refers to these Gentile converts in this way – "*and of the devout Greeks a great multitude*." Devout Greeks were Gentile pagans who had already left their heathenism to embrace the Jewish religion. But upon hearing the Gospel a great multitude of them were brought to embrace its truth. This awakening stirred the envy of the unbelieving Jews who predictably went into immediate action to oppose the Gospel, causing such a furore that Paul, for his own safety, was sent away, first to Berea and then to Athens. Before leaving Athens, however, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to ascertain the spiritual state of the church, anxious lest the Thessalonian converts had been overthrown by their trials, see 1 Thess 3: 1-5. Timothy returned with good news generally speaking, vs. 6-8; and it was this report that moved Paul to write this epistle – probably the first epistle that Paul ever wrote to a NT church.

REASONS FOR WRITING THIS EPISTLE

As noted, Timothy's report of the Thessalonian church was basically very encouraging, though there were a few matters that troubled Paul. Thus, there were various reasons for penning this epistle. Note them.

1. To commend & encourage the Thessalonians for their evangelism. The Thessalonians themselves had experience of the Gospel in a most marvellous way, ch 1: 5. The initial change it wrought in their lives then continued in the form of strong spiritual growth, v.3. Note here the three foundational Christian virtues of *faith, love & hope*, cf 1 Cor 13; with the Thessalonians manifesting these qualities, not only in their own walk with the Lord but in their evangelistic outreach. Note this well – the evangelistic ministry of a church will only be as effective as its own walk and testimony makes it. V.6 – from the very beginning they bore persecution patiently, a great testimony throughout the regions of Macedonia and Achaia. That testimony gave impetus to their evangelism so much so that Paul & his colleagues found their own ministry furthered and enhanced, vs.8 & 9.

2. Paul also wrote to defend himself and his ministry against the slander of the Jews. This is essentially the content of ch 2. Note in v.1 that he refers to the beginning of his ministry at Thessalonica; and says that it was not *in vain*. The word means "void" or "empty" and refers, not to result but to character. Paul's ministry was not devoid of principle and character. He did not set out to promote himself by flattery. He was not moved by greed for money. He had no desire for personal glory, etc. See v.10 – he could appeal to the Thessalonians' memory of how he and his colleagues had behaved themselves. Why did he have to write this self-defence? Simply because he & his ministry were being slandered by the unbelieving Jews, who were bent on drawing away these Thessalonians from Christ and the Gospel – a constant danger that every child of God faces.

3. Moreover, Paul wrote in order to encourage the Thessalonians in the walk of godliness. This is the theme of the passage from ch 3: 1- 4: 8. The key verse is 3: 13. The Thessalonians were former pagans, saved out of all that marks such a society and yet still living in the midst of paganism. Hence, they faced constant pressure to respond to the allurements of pagan carnal pleasures and return to that old lifestyle – and we must appreciate the intensity of such pressure. V.13 is essentially a prayer that begins in v.11. Thus, Paul shows us a pattern here: the pursuit of true godliness will only come as the result of earnest prayer for the Lord to deepen His work in our hearts. Moreover, we must keep in mind that no matter what the pressures are from society, God's will for our personal holiness or godliness has not changed, ch 4: 3a & 7. We live in an ever-increasing pagan society with its pressure to conform to its standards. But the will of God is clear – He calls us to holiness.

4. In addition to all of this Paul wrote to correct some erroneous ideas related to Christ's second coming. We should note that the subject of Christ's return is in every chapter, thus this was a vital matter to the Thessalonians. The passage that deals with this issue is from 4: 9-5: 11. There were three problems in relation to this doctrine.

(a) Some were treating this truth as an excuse for sloth. This is in view in 4: 9-12 – the thought obviously was that since the Lord was coming back they did not need to work but live off the kindness of those who did work. Hence, note the plea in v.11 – the point is clear: looking for Christ's return does not give an excuse for laziness and irresponsibility about the affairs of this life.

(b) Others were mistaken as to the status of deceased believers in relation to Christ's coming. See 4: 13; specifically the mistaken thought was that deceased believers will somehow be at a disadvantage as compared with believers still alive on this earth at Christ's return, v.15 – where the word *prevent* signifies "to precede" or "to have advantage over". But Paul assures the Thessalonians that the living believers will have no advantage over the deceased – instead, those who have died will have the advantage in that their resurrection will precede the transformation of the living, vs. 16 & 17. See 1 Cor 15: 52 where the same order is followed; although it should be noted that it all will happen "in a moment." The word for "moment" is *atomos* giving us the English "atom". The word literally means *indivisible* – such a brief space of time that it is incapable of being divided.

(c) The third error concerning Christ's coming was the notion that the timing of it all could be determined. See 5: 1 – the terms "times and seasons" *the time when and the time how long*; in other words some felt they knew the date of Christ's coming and thus how long it was until He would come. Paul's response indicates that he had dealt with this very issue during his initial visit, 1b & 2a; and that on that occasion he had told them what the Lord had taught – that time of His coming was unknown & would catch unsaved men by surprise, 2b & 3; but not the saved simply because they were ready for the event whenever it would occur, vs. 4 & 5.

5. **In the final section of the epistle Paul wrote to encourage good church order & discipline**. See 5: 12-28 – the Apostle wanted the Thessalonian church to be a company of believers in personal life and in church fellowship who would live out a godly life.

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