

All You Need

SCOTT HOEZEE

Every once in a while, you run across a very ancient document that surprises you. You had no idea that people way back when already knew about various aspects of how the world works. For instance, many, many centuries before telescopes were invented, ancient people were able to distinguish the planets from the stars in the night sky. That is pretty impressive for folks from so long ago. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is like that, too, but in a theological way; and today on *Groundwork*, we will explore why. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are beginning here a five-part series on Paul's letter of 1 Thessalonians. There are two letters to the Thessalonians in the New Testament, and this series is going to focus on the first of them; and we are going to do it in five parts. Today, we will be concentrating on Chapter 1 of 1 Thessalonians; but before we get to that, maybe...we have done letters in various series on some of the epistles or letters, but it might be good to remind ourselves a little bit that there was sort of a standard letter-writing form in the ancient Near East that people like Paul and the other letter writers followed.

DAVE BAST

An ancient letter would begin with the name of the writer—the sender—and then the recipients where as we tend to sign our communications...we hardly write letters anymore, but e-mails or whatever...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

We tend to sign them at the end. In the ancient world, they started with that, so Paul would begin: Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, and whoever else happened to be with him, to the Church of God in Corinth or Rome, or wherever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That was sort of the standard opening, so you sign your name up top, address the people to whom you are writing, and then there is always an initial blessing; and in all of Paul's letters, and most of the letters in the New Testament, except notably Galatians, there is also a thanksgiving section, where the writer gives thanks for them, and praises God for their faith. We will see that in the next segment, when we read that. So, the opening has the signature, the people to whom it is written, a blessing, and a thanksgiving.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is often a blessing in the form of a greeting; so, it is sort of: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. That is one of the most common ones that Paul uses; and then, as you say, Scott, a thanksgiving. So, Paul always wants to get off on the right foot with these people. Most of the letters that he wrote were to people that he knew, because he had planted the church in these various places; so, he

is kind of following up from his personal ministry. Sometimes he is addressing questions, sometimes they are going to be difficult things that he is going to say to them, but he always wants to get off on the right foot, except, as you pointed out, in Galatians, where he is kind of hot...under the collar.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the opening is followed by what is called the body of the letter; and right, Dave; Paul or John or James or whoever was writing the letter would be aware of the issues—the questions—the controversies—that were going on in the church; and so, in the body of the letter, Paul would do two things: He would do a theological teaching on the questions at hand; and then usually follow that up with ethics: How do you live? Given that this is true, how does that change how you live day to day? That is the body of the letter. So, we have the opening, the body, and then, of course, the conclusion, where Paul often throws in some personal items: Oh, I forgot a book; can you bring me my book? I forgot my coat; can you bring me my coat? But then, it always ends with a benediction.

DAVE BAST

Right; and one of the things I think we should also point out about the body of the letter is that it tends, with Paul especially, to fall into two sections: The indicative, and then the imperative. So, Paul almost always begins by expounding on the great truths of the Bible...of the Gospel...of the life of Christ...of Christ's death and resurrection...this wonderful doctrinal section; and then, at a certain point...and often, it is quite identifiable, he will switch to the ethical...the imperative...the commands. What are the implications of these truths? There is a wonderful quote from John Calvin that I love. I used to have it hang on my office wall: The Word of God was not given to us to make us eloquent or subtle, but for the reforming of our lives. So, the truth of the Gospel is meant to change us, and Paul will always switch into that point of application, where he is spelling out the practical consequences: Now, live this way in light of this truth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, all of that works very well for us to learn from and to study today, but our usual reminder when we have programs here on *Groundwork*, where we look at the epistles is that we are still reading somebody else's mail. We are not Thessalonians. This letter was not written to Dave and Scott. It was not written to the Christian Reformed Church or the Episcopal Church, it was written long ago; and so, we have to interpret the letter carefully. Same thing as if you ran across an old letter in your grandma's attic. There would be some people mentioned, some situations just referred to that Grandma and the person to whom she was writing knew about, and we don't; and if we are ever going to find out, we will have to do a little studying—a little digging...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you don't want to move too quickly to just apply cut-and-paste style the truths of these letters. We need to understand what it meant then, so that we can then interpret what it means now.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and it can even be a little frustrating sometimes, like listening to just one side of a phone conversation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; you can only get so much.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you want to tell them: Put it on speaker. I want to hear everything that is going on. So sometimes, because we are only getting one side of the conversation in one of Paul's letters, we really would love to be able to ask more questions; but anyway, that is just some general information about reading the epistles.

Now we come to Thessalonians...1 Thessalonians in particular...a very interesting book, and significant for a number of ways, but just a reminder, if you know anything about your New Testament history or the book of Acts, Paul brought the Gospel to the city of Thessalonica in northern Greece, during the course of his second missionary journey—his second great tour—where he set out from Antioch in Syria, and walked across Asia Minor, what today is Turkey, the Aegean Sea at its northern end; started in Philippi, and then from Philippi went to Thessalonica, which was the major city in Macedonia, or the northern part of Greece. It was the capital of that province...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The port city, I think, right?

DAVE BAST

The port city. It is modern Thessaloniki. It is the second largest city in Greece. It was a much more important place than Philippi, which was a Roman colony. Thessalonica was a Greek city; so Paul deals differently there. In Philippi, there was no synagogue, because it was mostly Roman colonists...ex-soldiers who were settled there; so, he shared the Gospel on the riverbank with Lydia, and just a small group; but in Thessalonica, there is a synagogue, because it is a major center; and so, Paul spent three different Sabbaths preaching the Gospel in the synagogue, until trouble broke out and he had to leave.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as was always true, once Paul left a place where he had planted a church, he would write a letter to it later. We think...and this will be very significant for what we are going to look at next...we think...scholars think that 1 Thessalonians is Paul's first letter; maybe written around the year 50 A.D., or so; maybe a little earlier even; but we think it was maybe the first Christian thing that was written down. The Gospels were written much later. All of the letters came first. This might be the earliest letter we have; and that is really significant for reasons we are going to take up in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are beginning a series on the letter of 1 Thessalonians, and we want to do Chapter 1 here in this program, so let's get right to it. It is a fairly short chapter, just ten verses. Here it is.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; grace and peace to you. ²We always thank God for all of you, and continually mention you in our prayers. ³We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁴For we know, brothers and sisters, loved by God, that he has chosen you; ⁵because our Gospel came to you, not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit; ⁷and so, you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia. Your faith in God has become known everywhere; therefore, we do not need to say anything about it. ⁹For they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell us how you turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God; ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

DAVE BAST

So, there it is; 1 Thessalonians Chapter 1; and Scott, you mentioned in our opening segment that this could very well be Paul's earliest letter, which would make it the first part of the New Testament ever to be written...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because the letters were written before the Gospels. The Gospels come a decade or two later, or even later perhaps. So, this is extremely significant because of what we find here already in this very early Christian document, and you know, Paul begins with this wonderful thanksgiving, where he mentions their faith, hope, and love—that great triad, which will continue to sound throughout the New Testament. So, already those are the hallmarks of Christian believers—of followers of Jesus. They have faith in him, they love one another, and they have hope for the future.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is remarkable here then, Dave, is that a lot of...particularly in the last couple of centuries...a lot of critics of the Christian faith, and of Christian theology claim that all of the theology and the doctrine of the trinity and the atonement, all of that was developed centuries and centuries later, and it all messed up what they call the Jesus of history. I mean, there is a current writer, very popular, named Bart Ehrman. He wrote a book called *Misquoting Jesus*, and then he wrote another book: *How Jesus Became God*; and the idea is, the theology that the Church developed centuries later has nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth. That was all much, much later. They made that stuff up. Well, here is 1 Thessalonians...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From the middle...not that long after Jesus died and was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven, and look at all that Paul's got in here already then.

DAVE BAST

You know, it has been a tendency of liberal critics to pick at the New Testament, and they have been doing it now for quite a while, easily 150 years or more; and one of the earliest suggestions was that Paul hijacked the simple religion of Jesus...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, right.

DAVE BAST

Paul is the bad guy—Paul is the heavy. Jesus was this gentle, nice teacher. He went about doing good and he told people some things about God, and then he died, sadly; but then, Paul came along and he brought all this theology on it, and he kind of turned Jesus into the Son of God. Well, these words that we just read were written roughly fifteen years after the crucifixion and resurrection. So, this is not a long period of development when Greek ideas are pulled into this early faith, and they completely distort it and twist its original meaning. This is what the apostles preached and taught right from the start...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what people believed.

DAVE BAST

On the day of Pentecost is where it started, with Peter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, let's just make a quick little list of those ten verses we just read...

DAVE BAST

What's in here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is in here, or what are some of the building blocks, indeed, of doctrine that came? Well, the trinity. We have clear references to God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit. The idea that God has gathered his Church and it is founded upon the Gospel; that is right in here. There is a theology of the Holy Spirit going on here. The Holy Spirit is the active power of God in the Church and in the preaching of the Word. You receive the Word with power, Paul says, because it was not just a sermon—it wasn't just human words—it was the power of the Spirit. There is a notion of divine election here. God chose you. The doctrine of the resurrection is in here...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And even thoughts on what we call the *parousia*, or the second coming of Christ, and there will be more about that later in the letter, by the way; so, the idea that Jesus is coming again...it is all right here in 1 Thessalonians 1.

DAVE BAST

And the idea that they have embraced this. There is conversion here. Paul says: You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. This radical break with their old life; and how did it happen? It happened because they heard the good news about Jesus, and they believed it; and through the power of the Holy Spirit, who, of course, opens hearts to receive this, they were converted and turned, and embraced the good news in the power of the risen Jesus Christ. So, it is all there, really; the outline of later Christian theology, here fifteen years after the events.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you have to assume that when this letter was read in worship, which we think happened with all of the epistles, that there was one copy and somebody read it as part of the church service, maybe as the sermon for that week. When it was read, the Thessalonians must have found this to be familiar. It is like: Yes, that is what Paul talked about when he was here; that is, indeed, the message we heard; but not only that, Dave, the message on which they have staked their lives.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They received this out of severe suffering and more persecution followed. You know what? If you don't really deeply believe something, you are not going to suffer for it. They did.

DAVE BAST

You know, Paul says here: Their faith...the reports of their faith has gone out everywhere—all over northern Greece (Macedonia); all over central Greece—that is Achaia that he refers to—the center of Greece where Athens was still a leading city. So, everywhere their faith has been talked about, because they were willing, as you say, to stake their lives on it...to even suffer persecution. Paul himself suffered persecution in Thessalonica. The fact that so many were turning to embrace the Gospel, aroused the hostility of many of the Jewish population there, and they created trouble, and actually went to attack the place where Paul was staying; and so Paul kind of had to hustle out of town...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

Which is another reason maybe why he wrote this letter. He didn't have a chance to stay as long as perhaps he had wished; but yes, there it is: The story of faith and the way it transforms lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is all very interesting history, of course, and the history of our belief and the history of our doctrines, and so forth; but we might wonder: Okay, that is historically interesting, but what about today? And I think we can ponder that as we close out this program.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are digging into 1 Thessalonians Chapter 1; and we are doing it, as always, to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we were just saying, Dave, that from a sheerly historical perspective, 1 Thessalonians 1 is a most remarkable chapter. As you said earlier in the program, Dave, this might have been the first Christian document ever written down in the First Century. Long before the Gospels, long before Romans or the letter of James or the epistles of Peter or the book of Revelation or Hebrews, 1 Thessalonians; and if that is so...and scholars are pretty sure it is...if that is so, then how amazing to see how much doctrinal, biblical, theological faith development had already taken place; because in the previous segment, Dave, we listed a whole series of foundational things. I mean, it is all like the basis of the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed to this day; and so we said, historically speaking, that is remarkable. What does that mean for us today, in our lives and in the church today?

DAVE BAST

What we pointed out is that, at least in outline form, the basic rudiments of the Gospel are all here already, in this early chapter—1 Thessalonians 1. So, there is faith, hope, and love right off the bat. There is the content of the Gospel message itself, which is the good news about Jesus. He rescues us from the coming wrath, from punishment for our sin; and the implication is, if you know the whole story, he does that by dying in the cross. He has been raised again by the power of God—the resurrection from the dead. The Holy Spirit brings this home. God chose the Thessalonians in election to come to faith; and they have turned to God from idolatry, and they are willing to suffer for their newfound faith. So, all of that is packed in here, and surely, that is significant for how we understand the nature of the Christian faith itself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is so interesting, Dave, as we record this, I am just finishing up a little book that I have been writing about why we listen to sermons, and how should we listen to sermons, and what happens every week in millions of churches around the world when people preach; and it all comes down to the Holy Spirit, and it is all right here in this passage; that sermons are never just words—they are never just, you know, vibrations on air. Sermons have oomph because the Holy Spirit loves working through preaching, and he worked in these peoples' lives, and he still works in our lives; and what we hear from the Spirit is that basic message of the Gospel, that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ raised him from the dead, forgave our sins. He called us into the forgiveness of new life, and that Jesus is coming again to bring in his kingdom fully. It is so simple, in a way, you know. I mean, today, two thousand years later, the Church is huge, right? The Roman Catholic Church alone is this huge conglomerate globally, but every denomination has agencies. You can go to any church...you and I are guest pastors sometimes, Dave, and you look at any church's bulletin...boy, there is a lot going on. There are clubs, and there are youth groups, and there are food pantries—great stuff; a lot of activities, a lot of levels of even church bureaucracy and organizations and agencies; but, at the end of the day, all of these millennia later, that simple message that grabbed the Thessalonians...that made the

Thessalonians swoon in love with the Gospel, that is still our core.

DAVE BAST

And it comes because the Spirit of God still chooses to bless the simple act of sharing the Gospel verbally. It is an amazing thing, when you stop and think about it. What is preaching? In one sense, it seems presumptuous; why should one person...one man or one woman...get up in front of a whole group of people and make them sit still for 20 or 25 or 30 minutes while that person talks about the Bible? You know, it seems like an antique form of communication. Wouldn't we be better off...and some preachers have tried this...go to multimedia...show video clips, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, do a drama.

DAVE BAST

Yes, have them interact with your phone...give them a survey; but, I think of something I read many years ago in a book by J. Gresham Machen, who was a redoubtable old theologian of the early 20th Century, who said: You know, you might expect that God would change people by moral exhortation; just tell them to be good...tell them what to do...urge them to do this; but it doesn't work; it never has worked. What does work...what transformed the Thessalonians...was when a man told them a story about Jesus dying on the cross, rising from the dead; and the Spirit took that and used it to totally transform their lives...turned them from idolatry to the worship of God...created in them a faith and a hope and a love that saw them reaching out to others. They were transformed through the hearing of a story, and it still happens today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It still happens today. All through Church history, and certainly in more recent times, Dave, you mentioned media and so forth, there have always been people who have been predicting the demise of preaching: Oh, it is going to get replaced someday. Nobody wants to listen to that anymore. Actually, in some of the most successful churches of the last twenty-five years, sermons have had a tendency to get longer. People who used to listen to 20-minute sermons now sit through 45- or 50-minute sermons because the Spirit is doing something; and it all comes down to that basic, simple truth of...you know...the old, old story of Jesus and his love. It is really so simple. We have Word, water, and a little bread and wine. In fact, there was a church in Canada that had a major lawsuit brought against it some years ago. They lost the lawsuit; they lost most of their property; some people thought it was all over; but I remember one of the leaders of that church... A reporter came up and said: Wow, you've lost your money; you've lost most of your church buildings; what are you going to do now? He said: Well really, all we need is a little water, a table, a little bread and wine, and the chance to tell the story. We will be fine—we'll be fine.

DAVE BAST

Yes; what do you really need in the Church? If you've got a book and it is the Bible, and you've got someone to declare it—to proclaim it; and you've got the Spirit; and you've got the sacraments; that is it, basically. That is all you need for life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what they had in the year 50; and maybe when Paul was there it was in the 40s, even earlier. Now here we are in the 21st Century. It is still really all we need.

DAVE BAST

So, things haven't changed all...and don't buy anything from somebody who says: Jesus became God, you know, three hundred years later. I just don't buy it and neither should you.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture today on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study 1 Thessalonians Chapter 2, and Paul's commentary on the role of pastors and Christian community.

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