

Foundations of a Flourishing Church

The World Turned Upside Down (1 Thessalonians 1:1; Acts 17:1-9)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 3, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ With the start of a new year, we're starting a new series in the book of 1 Thessalonians that we're calling *Foundations of a Flourishing Church*. I think it's fitting to describe the church of Thessalonica as a "flourishing church". Based on this letter, this appears to be a church that's doing well. They've been growing in love and holiness. They've become an example to other churches in the area. And they've endured persecution without losing the faith.
 - Many of Paul's letters were written in order to confront theological or moral error in that particular church. But there's nothing like that in 1 Thessalonians. **The letter was written because Paul's stay in their city was abruptly cut short by persecution, and so he was worried that the fledging church would be crushed by the heavy wave of opposition.** So he had sent Timothy to check on them, and now after receiving a good report that they were still walking with the Lord, Paul penned this letter to express his appreciation for them and to provide some instructions that he didn't get a chance to pass on earlier.

- ❖ So what you get when you study 1 Thessalonians is a good look at a relatively healthy, flourishing church. **And one of the advantages of studying this book is that it offers a good example for churches today to emulate.** So that begs the question: What were some key characteristics of this church? What were the foundational elements that contributed to its flourishing, especially in the midst of opposition coming from the larger society? That's what we hope to explore in this series on the *Foundations of a Flourishing Church*.

- ❖ Now in today's introductory message, we're not going much into 1 Thessalonians beyond the first verse. Let me read it, "*Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.*" (1:1) This greeting tells us that the senders of this epistle included Paul and his missionary team, Silas (Greek equivalent for Roman name Silvanus) and Timothy.
 - The recipient is the church in the city of Thessalonica, which was the capital of Macedonia. That was once the ancient kingdom ruled by Alexander the Great. Now it was a Roman province, and its three principle cities were Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea. Those were three cities that Paul had visited on his second missionary journey.

- ❖ That's all recounted for us in the book of Acts – where going to spend our time this morning. We're going to consider the historical background of the church's origin by looking at Acts 17:1-9, which focuses on Paul's first visit to Thessalonica.
 - **What we're going to see is that one of the key characteristics of this church – one of its foundational elements – is the threat they posed to the larger society in which they resided.** The Thessalonian church did not fit comfortably in society. They didn't blend into the background.

- ❖ No, they were seen as a threat. **Because they had learned from Paul and preached to others a subversive message that was turning the world upside down.** At the heart of their faith was news about a Coming King who demands allegiance and accepts no rivals. This king and his decrees were a direct threat to the idols of their culture.
 - That's what elicited so much anger and opposition. **Their message about a Coming King threatened the foundational idols that undergirded the lives and livelihood of their fellow countrymen.** The church posed an existential threat.

- ❖ It makes you wonder if the same could be said of us. **Would Houston Chinese Church pose a threat to anyone?** Would the larger society be threatened by us? Would we be accused of turning the world upside down? Now I'm not suggesting that our church should try to be threatening or seditious. We shouldn't intend to do any harm or cause any offense.
 - But the point is that if we're a flourishing church – flourishing in our preaching of the gospel and flourishing in our discipling of others to observe all that our King has commanded – **then our flourishing faith will inevitably challenge the culture around us and pose a threat to society's false sense of peace and stability.**
 - That's what *should* happen. But more often than not, we just blend into the background. Our lives individually and our life together as the church are barely distinguishable from those around us. **We don't threaten the culture when we largely imitate the culture.**

- ❖ **Church, this morning I want to challenge us to become imitators of this flourishing church in Thessalonica.** Just as we're told they become imitators of Paul, Silas, and Timothy and the Lord most of all (1:6). Focusing on 1 Thessalonians in general and Acts 17:1-9 in particular, we're going to see four descriptions of this church – which can be four aspirations for our church. That, Lord-willing, we too will become a church that turns the world upside.

A Persecuted Church in Need of Encouragement

- ❖ The first description of the Thessalonian church that jumps out in Acts 17 is that it's a persecuted church in need of encouragement. We're told that when Paul and company arrived in the city, they maintained their usual custom of visiting the local synagogue to win a hearing with their fellow kinsmen.
 - **There we're told that, for three Sabbaths, Paul reasoned in the synagogue with his fellow Jews, using the OT to prove that the Christ (the long-expected Messiah) would come to rescue – not by conquering *over* his enemies – but by suffering *for* his enemies.** By dying and rising again from the dead. And his point was that the Jesus he preaches, who died and rose again, is *the* Messiah.

- ❖ According to v4, some of the Jews were persuaded and joined them, along with a great many God-fearing Greeks (Gentiles who worshipped in the synagogue) and many of the leading women in town. But v5 says that Paul's effective preaching stirred up the jealousy of the synagogue leaders. They formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of a believer named Jason, who was hosting Paul and company.

- ❖ But, for some reason, Paul wasn't there, so the mob ended up dragging Jason and some of the other brothers in the church before the authorities and accused them of conspiring with "*men who have turned the world upside down.*" (Acts 17:6) That's an interesting choice of words. **They were accused of social upheaval, of overturning social norms.**
 - Now the city authorities were disturbed by these charges, but they didn't imprison Jason and the others. Instead, they took money as security and let them go. Most likely, it meant they had to promise that Paul and his team would leave town and never return or else Jason and the others would be punished more severely.
 - **So after being torn away so abruptly, you can see why Paul feared that all this persecution coming at them so soon and so strong might result in their falling away from the faith.**

- ❖ He understands human nature. **He knows that when you're experiencing affliction, you're more susceptible to the lie that God must be angry with you.** When you're going through hardship, you're tempted to question the goodness of God or even his existence. Like the seeds that fell on rocky ground, they spring up, but since they have no root, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, they immediately fall away (Mk 4:16-17).
 - **That's why Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4, reminds them (and us believers by extension) that we are predestined for afflictions.** "*For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.*"

- ❖ That's what Paul would tell all the churches he planted. **He never sugarcoated the gospel. He never promised your best life now.** Acts 14:22 says he went around, "*strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*" In 2 Timothy 3:12, he wrote, "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" Not might be. Will be.
 - **Christian, do you understand that persecution for the sake of Christ is your birthright?** It's a sign of your identification with Christ and his apostles. It's not a reason to grumble. It's a reason for rejoicing. "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*" (Mt 5:11-12)

- ❖ **But what would it mean if we're not experiencing any persecution?** What if no one is reviling us or uttering any kind of evil against us? What if the world takes no notice of our church? I don't think we should feel blessed to have somehow avoided persecution. **We should feel ashamed – that perhaps we don't pose a threat to the culture because we've largely imitated the culture.** Let that not be said of us. Let's be a church defined by a message that turns the world upside down. Not one that fits comfortably in the world as is.

A Promising Church in Need of Instruction

- ❖ In fact, if you want our church to grow, then we should welcome persecution. **Because the testimony of Scripture and the experience of church history tells us that persecuted churches tend – not to flounder – but to flourish.** That was true of the Thessalonian church. We're told in chapter 1:7-8 that they, "*became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.*" Their reputation as a young, promising church preceded them.
 - That leads to our second description – **it was a promising church but one still in need of instruction**. As I mentioned earlier, Paul's primary reason for writing is not to correct any heresy or to confront any false teacher, like in other letters. **He's writing to continue discipling these believers – to give them further instruction in faith and godliness.** Remember, his discipleship lessons were cut short when he had to quickly leave.

- ❖ Now when we get into the letter, you'll see that whatever anxieties Paul had over their spiritual life were quickly relieved by Timothy's good report. **He's overjoyed to hear that they're flourishing.** So in the letter, there are a few times where Paul basically says, "I don't really need to write to you about this command since you're already doing it. Just keep doing what you're doing more and more." (Cf. 4:1-2, 9-10)
 - **What Paul realizes is that – while he might have been absent and unable to instruct them on how to walk in holiness and please the Lord – it doesn't mean they were deprived of godly instruction.** That's because the gospel had come to the church, not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1:5).

- ❖ To be deprived of a spiritual leader like Paul was a huge loss and potentially devastating for a young church. But what they had was more than enough. **They still had the gospel and the Holy Spirit – who continued their instruction and enabled the church to flourish.**
 - And by the end of the letter, in chapter 5:12, we see reference to "*those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord.*" In Paul's absence, the Holy Spirit raised up others from among the congregation to continue the work of ministry. **Apparently, you don't need a gifted, charismatic leader to have a flourishing church.**

- ❖ I know that makes no sense within American church culture. Because all the flourishing churches out there seem to be identified with a key leader. To be deprived of that leader – either through sickness, death, or a moral failure – would devastate that church. **But that's all the of more reason why a church should not grow too dependent on any one leader.**
 - The Thessalonians has become an example to all churches. They proved that, even in the absence of a key leader, a church can continue to flourish if the gospel of God is their foundational cornerstone and if the Spirit of God is moving mightily in their midst – personally instructing them and raising up others from among the congregation to equip the saints to do the work of ministry.

- ❖ The members of our church should be aware that we've been developing a **Vision Proposal** that, Lord-willing, will give us guidance for the next five to ten years. It's gone through a lengthy process, and now we've recently shared it with members along with a detailed Execution Plan. They'll be a churchwide Q&A session online next Sunday evening, which we invite you all to attend to learn more about the vision.
 - **But one component I'd like to highlight is our objective to establish an equipping culture in our church – a culture that doesn't depend on one key leader but values ministry apprenticeship and replication.**
- ❖ That's where everyone serving, at every level of ministry, is not trying to preserve their power and influence – but to give it away. To delegate it to others; to equip others to serve; to empower others to influence. **We want to develop a culture where everyone serving in the church sees it as their responsibility to raise up their own replacement.**
 - And that starts with leaders like me and any other pastor in our church. **Let's be intentional not to imitate the celebrity culture around us.** Instead, let's imitate the example of the Thessalonians. A church that flourishes – not by depending on the personality of a gifted leader – but on a gospel faithfully preached and on the power of the Holy Spirit working through the ministry of many in the congregation.

A Pagan Church in Need of Sanctification

- ❖ So we've seen that the church in Thessalonica is a persecuted church and a promising church. Thirdly, it can be described as **a pagan church in need of sanctification**. By pagan, we mean that it was mostly comprised of Gentile believers. If we look back at Acts 17, we recall that the Jewish community in Thessalonica largely rejected Paul and his gospel. **There were some key converts among the Jews, but we can deduce from the letter that most of the church members were from a Gentile pagan background.**
- ❖ **From what we know of ancient Thessalonica, based on archeological evidence, their society was greatly influenced by Greco-Roman religion.** Researcher have unearthed a number of statues depicting gods like Athena, Artemis, Aphrodite, Demeter, Hermes, and Dionysius. And we know what kind of religious practices took place in these pagan temples. They were sexually explicit in nature and included wicked practices like cult prostitution.
 - So keep in mind that most of these Thessalonian believers had been converted out of a life and lifestyle where it was socially acceptable and normal to feast with friends at a temple dedicated to a goddess; and to have sex with a temple prostitute as a supposed act of worship; and then return to your household to spend the rest of the evening with your wife and children. That was acceptable behavior among pagans.
- ❖ **That's why Paul felt it necessary to remind them of God's will for their holiness.** Listen to 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, *"³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God."*

- **This church – existing in a pagan society awash in immorality – needed a strong reminder that God’s will was for them to be different.** That’s what it means to be holy, to be sanctified. It literally means to be set apart. To not be conformed to the social norms around you, particularly to the sexual norms of a pagan society.

- ❖ Church, do you recognize how similar our context is to the Thessalonian church? **Though we exist in very different cultures – yet both of our cultures have elevated sex and the passion of lust to a god-like status.** Where it’s revered with unquestioned authority. Where you’re not allowed to criticize anyone’s pursuit of sexual fulfillment. Do you see that the pagan society in which the Thessalonians existed is the same kind we’re living in today?
 - So that means it’s also God’s will for us to be holy. **Now that doesn’t mean he wants us to be a church full of prudes – of priggish people who have never struggled with sexual brokenness and look down at people who do as weak-willed perverts.** Sadly, that’s what people think when they hear Christians talking about being holy.

- ❖ But that’s not a holy church. **No, a holy church is a set apart church filled with broken people, including sexually broken ones. But we’re those who have been changed into new people by the power of the gospel.** The good news that Jesus died for sins and was raised to life to give us new life – that gospel liberates us from the bondage of sin, including sexual sin. Which results in a very different view of sex, a distinctly Christian sexual ethic.
 - Now many assume that means a negative view of sex. They think Christians are anti-sex. That our goal is to suppress sexual desires. **But actually the Christian sexual ethic is unashamedly sex positive.** Assuming we understand sex as a gift from God to be enjoyed as he designed it within a monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

- ❖ **What the Christian sexual ethic opposes – and what a holy church must confront within its members – is the elevation of sex and the passion of lust to an unquestioned god-like status and authority.** Where someone’s identity can now be defined by their sexual desires and preferences. Where the only rightful bounds of sexual expression are the bounds of our imagination. Where the only meaningful ethic is the ethic of consent. **That’s the prevailing view of sex in our society – the unquestioned, unimpeachable sexual ethic of our day.**
 - Church, it is the will of God for us to be sanctified, set apart. That we abstain from sexual immorality and maintain a distinctly Christian sexual ethic. There’s no doubt that runs directly counter to the culture. **Biblical teaching on sex and gender isn’t just dismissed by the larger society. It’s increasingly viewed as bigoted and hateful.** And we’re bound to experience greater pressure to bend the knee and bow to the idols and ideology of this pagan society in which we exist.

A Political Church in Need of Courage

- ❖ But that leads to our fourth description of the Thessalonian church and the kind of church we should strive to be. We see here **a political church in need of courage**. Now I realize we just came out a very divisive political season, so to speak of a political church can be confusing and needs further explanation.

- ❖ **I'm going to argue for a categorical difference between a political church and a partisan church.** A partisan church is a church that has cozied up with one or the other political party. Whose preaching and teaching has become indistinguishable from that party's platform. Who insist that all serious-minded Christians will support this party or vote for that candidate. That's a partisan church, and that's not what we want to be.
- ❖ We're talking about a political church. **And I'm going to argue that every church comprised of serious-minded Christians will be a political church. Because the gospel we preach is a political statement in itself.** It doesn't just offer private instruction for how to conduct your devotional life. It doesn't restrict its commands to what goes on within the four walls of a church building or in the privacy of your home.
 - **No, the gospel is, first and foremost, news about a king and his kingdom.** It's about what this King did to make peace with rebels by taking their punishment upon himself. It's about his kingly authority and his laws that are to be taught to and observed by all his kingdom citizens.
 - **This is all political speech.** Not partisan speech. We're not shilling for any earthly candidate or party. **But we are speaking on behalf of a King and calling you to pledge your allegiance to him.** That's highly political stuff.
- ❖ The synagogue leaders in Acts 17 recognized political speech when they heard it. They knew this was not speech limited to the private sphere. **They recognized that these Christians were speaking into the public square and were turning the world upside down.**
 - They had abandon social norms. They weren't feasting in temples anymore. They weren't engaging in sexual practices outside of their marriages. They had altogether rejected the civic deities. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul mentions how the church was known for having, "*turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*"
 - **Ironically, because they rejected idols, these early Christians were considered to be atheists.** They didn't believe in the gods. And that's partly what made them a public threat. They were often blamed for natural disasters, which were attributed to the gods. Christians had incurred the wrath of the gods by their disbelief, and everyone was paying for it.
- ❖ But that wasn't the most threatening aspect of the church. Let me read v9 again and continue into v10. The church was known for having, "*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 delivers us from the wrath to come.*"
 - **One of the key themes in 1 Thessalonians is the second coming of Christ.** In fact, we're going to see how every chapter in this book ends with a reference to the coming of Christ (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:17; 5:23). That word for "coming" (*parousia*) is actually an official term for an imperial visit. **So this basic Christian belief that Jesus is coming again is a subversive doctrine. It's a political statement.** Christians believe the King of kings is coming on an imperial visit to establish his kingdom over against the claims of all rivals. That's turning things upside down!

- ❖ The synagogue leaders definitely picked up on this political statement. Listen to their accusation, *“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”* (17:6-7)
 - Christians were viewed as traitors who refused to bend the knee to Caesar. **They wouldn’t bow to the will of the prevailing culture. They didn’t condone what everyone condones or celebrate what everyone celebrates.** They formed a political church that was propagating a socially subversive faith. It was turning the world upside down. That’s how the church was viewed and why it posed a public threat.

- ❖ Now on one hand, it’s a serious mistake to see the church as a threat. **Christian make excellent citizens in any country because it’s our duty to be conscientious, law-abiding citizens** (Rom 13:1). The church has no mandate or mission to overthrow earthly governments through acts of sedition.
 - But on the other hand, that duty to submit to governing authorities is a duty imposed on us by our King. So inherently, it implies that we serve another king, another authority. **If you say Christ is King, that is political speech. That claim has unavoidable political implications.** If you mean it, then you must refuse to give any ruler, any government, any ideology your ultimate allegiance. That belongs to Jesus.

- ❖ **Brothers and sisters, we are living in a secular age that grows ever more hostile to the Christian faith.** The non-believing world is starting to realize that Christianity can't be tucked away in our homes or in our hearts. **It's become more apparent that the gospel is a political statement – claiming the rightful rule of a coming King.** Christians have a view of the good life – the kind of life that contributes to a flourishing society – that is distinctly different from that of the prevailing culture.
 - Our gospel says Christ is King, and the King calls for ultimate allegiance and obedience to his Word. That is now considered a socially subversive message. It’s now considered a public threat.

- ❖ **So what a political church like ours – that preaches that very message – what we most desperately need right now is courage.** Courage to stand firm. Courage to stand on the right side of God – and not to fear the accusations that we’re on the wrong side of history. We have to remember that our God reigns throughout history and over history.
 - This is what you'll find in the foundation of a flourishing church. **The testimony of Scripture and the experience of church history tell us that the churches that flourish in the long run are not the ones who take their cues from the culture.** The flourishing churches are the ones courageous enough to preach a socially unacceptable and subversive message – one that can turn the world upside down.