

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

*Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

I know that some of you are asking the question, 'why this sermon series, why now?' (And also, why in the world begin with this passage?)

This is our 15<sup>th</sup> "Sizzlin' Summer Sermon Series", and it is really 'Part 2' from last year's series when we preached (without notes) through much of the book of the Acts of the Apostles. In actuality, this series could just have well gone first. These letters pre-date the message from Luke-Acts, which was composed a couple of decades **after** the letters the apostle Paul were written, delivered, read and cherished.

So let me ask again; why are we doing this?  
There is a very literal and straightforward answer. The first letter to the Thessalonians ends with a solemn command that these words be read to all believers in Thessalonica (5:27). Thus began the practice, continued to today (even now!), of reading from a letter as part of Sunday worship; words of faith, hope and love in the Lord.

So, why begin with **this** letter? 1 Thessalonians is the earliest document of Christian times.



Likely written in 41AD, this is the first evidence of the existence of a Christian community and the first pastoral words addressed to a gathering of believers. Even before the Gospels were written (which seems somewhat odd to us now), Paul and others were sharing the message of God's love through Jesus, and what it meant to live redeemed and forgiven lives anew. These words of instruction, guidance, encouragement and prayer were addressed to a



largely Gentile audience very new in the faith, who were searching for answers as to what it meant to live with belief and trust in a crucified Lord, a God who raised this Jesus from the dead, and a Holy Spirit who abides with those who believe. This was a very different world view and self-understanding for these Greeks (and is still a lot for us to understand, two millennia later!) Paul wrote for the purpose of building up the gathered body of believers and for those members to conform to the image of Christ.

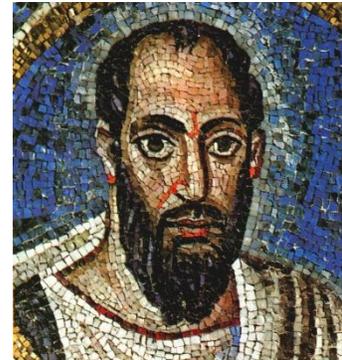
A brief biography of the apostle Paul will help get us started. Saul of Tarsus, a Roman citizen, was born a Jew in modern day Eastern Turkey. He was an avid student of a top-notch teacher named Gamaliel and an early persecutor of Christians. He unexpectedly encountered the risen Christ while on a trip to Damascus, on the way to persecute more Christians, and was literally blinded by the light of Christ, an experience that totally reoriented his life. Rather than persecuting Christians, he then spent the next three years following and learning from them (particularly Peter and James) in Jerusalem and then solo in the Arabian wilderness (Galatians 1:17). He mentions the length of this period to show that it roughly equaled the time the other apostles had spent with Jesus. Lest there be any doubt about the validity of Paul's apostleship, the original apostles confirmed his call and apostleship (Galatians 2:9).

The apostle Paul is surely one of the great figures of world history, a man who worked with his hands but wrote with the acuity of a Greek philosopher; a converted Jewish zealot who nevertheless enjoyed the rights of citizenship in Europe's greatest empire.

Paul was the first Christian theologian and established many of the keystones of the faith that we now take for granted, though there are those who argue that in laying out these ground rules, Paul obscures and separates us from the true teachings of Jesus. But perhaps the true sign of Paul's importance is that even nearly 2000 years after his death he still inspires passion; whatever you feel, it's hard to feel neutral about Paul.

There are clear images evoked just at the mention of his name. Take your choice as to how you see him in action....

- a persecuting Pharisee, struck by a vision of the Risen Christ, supremely self-confident with every word he says...
- a street corner evangelist on speaker's corner in Corinth...
- a tent-maker (literally), laboring from town to town, crafting coverings for festivals and village gatherings... working by day and visiting with house-churches by evening....



- debating Sceptics and other intellectuals on the Areopagus in Athens...
- shipwrecked on the island of Crete, healing a snake bitten man...
- languishing in prison, dictating letters to be sent to churches he visited...

In sum, these views of the Apostle, well known and often cited as representative of his character cast him as a 'virtuoso apostle', a soloist, a one man show with companions fading into the background and even the churches he founded becoming passive receptacles for his teachings which then gradually age and fade away. This is all very high regard for Paul, and admirable, but this view is incomplete and misleading.

Throughout his ministry, Paul was always part of a team (though the lineup often changed.) Working together with others, whether it be Silvanus and Timothy, Titus, Peter, Phoebe, Mary, Lydia or Andronicus and Junia, Paul was always part of a relationship that transformed both the evangelist and the evangelized; as part of a body that continually grew, changed, matured and developed into a living force in which we also are both participants and partakers.

All of this brings us to our passage for today. The reason I've chosen this particular passage from Paul's earliest letter is because these words address a pressing concern as to why he wrote in the first place. Paul wrote to support and encourage them, as a small group of people living counter-cultural lives within the Roman Empire, but also to allay their fears and answer their questions about the End Times.

The presenting issue seems to be this; some members of the young church in Thessalonica have recently died, and this has both upset and confused them. They are upset that friends have died without having experienced Jesus' imminent return, and they are confused because they don't know what to think about Jesus' return, either. Believing that Jesus will return again, they wonder how and when will it happen, and what happens to those souls no longer with them in the body? This was a pressing existential problem. This is all very new to them, and they don't know what to think. They are the first to ask this question. Jesus was resurrected perhaps eight years before, and he appeared to Paul maybe five years before. We may have to make a leap of imagination to appreciate their conundrum, but it's a good place for us to start, and I can tell you why. This very question can still come alive for us today.



Here's my story for today about this... (and those in the recent confirmation class can attest to it.) Amy asked me to teach a confirmation class session back in Advent last year, and the theme of the 'End Times' came up. (Well, I brought it up.) After all, the word 'advent' means arrival, and the scripture passages used that time of year always have double-references; that of the expectation of the arrival of God in our lives and our world as well as anticipation of our celebrating Jesus' arrival once again on Christmas Day.

As I remember it, I was trying to emphasize the unknown and unpredictable nature of the 'Second Coming' and may well have cited some of the key phrases used in 1 Thessalonians. I may have mentioned 'the sound of God's trumpet,' or being 'caught up in the clouds in the air' or that the day of the Lord 'would arrive like a thief in the night.'

I was simply trying to recount scripture references that fit the theme. I definitely did not expect the reaction I received.

To put it bluntly, these words seriously scared some of our confirmands pretty badly. “What do you mean, Jesus is coming? I won’t finish High School?” “I love my life, I don’t wanna die!” “Are you kidding me, is this for real?” That was just the beginning.

I have to thank Elder Julie Callahan who was with me, a voice of calm and reason, who talked some of these kids down off a cliff of desperation.

Apparently, I went a little too far too fast in citing scripture out of context, assuming they were familiar with the notion of the Second Coming. I was wrong, and Julie helped to calm the waters and talk them out of the potential despair that the kids might not experience another day in their young lives. Quite a story. Lesson learned!

But back to the Thessalonians and the apostle Paul. Unlike these days (maybe), the first century was rife with apocalyptic warnings, messages that were truly unpredictable and frightening. This genre of literature can be found in different places in the Bible. Perhaps the scariest is in the apocrypha (non-canonical, ‘extra’ writings, from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.) In 1 & 2 Esdras you can find images much more terrifying than what the Book of Revelation later brings us, scenarios that render humans utterly hopeless in the face of cataclysmic disasters with no hope beyond the horizon. All this is to say that while Paul was familiar with this ‘popular’ form of literature, and also conversant with the belief that Jesus would indeed return at some unknown time, he had a very different and more positive approach to Jesus’ earthly return than is normally recognized. The ‘apocalypse’ in Paul’s view is not a call to throw up one’s hands at the end times but is a call to action in the manner of Jesus’ love, caring and compassion.

The apostle Paul encouraged people to welcome Jesus’ return to make responsible behavior a matter of importance. Rather than resigning oneself to passivity at the thought of the world coming to an abrupt end, Paul understood that if Jesus was going to return, he would want to see us doing good, not living hopeless, or even lawless lives. (So, as the saying goes: “Jesus is coming soon; look busy!”) The bottom line of belief in Jesus’ arrival in our lives, whether it be in the last days, or whether our last day is today or tomorrow is this: we are assured that we are already children of God, there is nothing more we need to do to earn or prove it, so now in that light we are encouraged to live accordingly.

Paul himself lived with an unshakable confidence that God is God and the powers of the world would not have the last say. This is God’s world and living in light of the crucified and risen Lord is the best image and guidance we can be given.

So it is that Paul shares words of confidence and hope in the benedictions he uses in his letters. And so it is that I customarily end each of our services with the words the Apostle shares to conclude his

letters. They are words of hope and promise, faith and encouragement, and an abiding message we can carry with us through the week, from the mercy of God, through Paul, to us...

Go out into the world in peace.

Have courage.

Hold on to what is good.

Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint hearted, support the weak, help the suffering.

Honor everyone.

Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing with the power of the Holy Spirit in your life.

And may the Love of God, the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

and the Joy and Fellowship of the Holy Spirit

be with you now, and always. Amen.