

1Thessalonians 12-02-17a

This is Friday, the 17th of February, 2012. We're in the Book of First Thessalonians, chapter one, and we resume this evening at verse five. We'll take a moment at the outset to square ourselves away individually and ensure that we're susceptible to the ministry of God's Holy Spirit so that our time of study will be fruitful.

Shall we pray? Father, it is a great comfort to us to recognize how reliant we are upon your grace and your provision for us. We are incapable of doing anything useful or meaningful or pleasing in your sight apart from what you have given to us. We thank you for our salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you that having saved us, you have made those provisions for us in grace, the presence of your spirit, the power of your word, the promises and the truths that sustain us and enable us to think and to prioritize, to set our goals and to spend our time in this earth productively and in a way that is potentially glorifying to you and to the Lord Jesus. We thank you for this passage of scripture that we look at this evening in the Book of First Thessalonians. We ask your blessing on us as we study it together.

Bless our conversation and our fellowship. May each one here be blessed and be a blessing to others. And may all of us together grow up into that standard of maturity that is reflected most fully in the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

And we pray it in his name. Amen. We have reviewed the origins of this letter, the situation in which it was generated.

Paul, in his second missionary journey, having seen the vision of the man from Macedonia and entering into this part of the world, travels down the Ignatian Road after leaving Philippi and passing through a couple of towns, stopping in Thessalonica, staying there probably just under a month. And this gave him three Sabbaths, as we know from Acts chapter 17, to preach in the synagogue. What is it that he preached? It's interesting to sort of try to get a grip on what the standard presentation was.

If you've ever catalogued, and I doubt that you have, but I have, I do it for a living, catalogued the preaching output of a particular pastor, you come to find out that most pastors who travel and do conference speaking or engagements of occasional nature in other parts of the country have kind of a standard traveling bag of sermons that they will deliver, and not unlike a gospel quartet. I used to think, I need to get my hands on every possible recording of the Statesman Quartet, because probably no two of them are exactly the same, and it's true that no two are the same, but if you've heard a concert in South Carolina, and you've heard another one in Fort Worth, and you've heard another one in Missouri or California or somewhere, they're very, very similar because they had a program that they would follow, and arrangements that they would sing, and

you're not missing a lot. If you've heard one of those concerts, you've heard most of them.

Same thing with some of these traveling sermons, and I am beginning to observe that the Apostle Paul had a pretty standard set of sermons, a standard presentation that he would make when he came to a new town. We've already seen he would find the synagogue, because this is where anybody who's interested in the God of Abraham would be found, or be communicated with. Maybe somebody might know somebody, they might not be there on that particular Sabbath, but hey, we've heard a man who is taking the Old Testament and bringing it to life, and showing us some new things based on it, and more people would come.

So this was a good nexus, a good assembly point for people who had an interest in the God of creation. So he would seek out the synagogue. It wasn't his intention to exclusively evangelize Jews, but he knew that interested Gentiles would be hovering in that vicinity.

So what was it that he would present once he got there? He comes to a new town, it's all fresh and unknown, so what is his subject matter? What would he typically cover out of his satchel of traveling sermons? Well, we actually have some information on this from the scriptures themselves. If you keep your finger at 1 Thessalonians and turn back to Acts chapter 9, this, as you may remember, is very shortly after his conversion on the Damascus road, which is given in the first part of chapter 9. You have the encounter with the Lord. If you've got a red letter edition there, you have Jesus himself talking to Paul.

Ananias lays hands on him and says, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Verse 18 of Acts 9, Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales. And this is not just his physical sight, but his spiritual sight.

All of his training as a Pharisee. He is steeped in the Old Testament. He knows the prophecies.

He knows the law. He's a Pharisee of the Pharisees. And the scales fall from his eyes, and it all makes sense.

He sees the connection, the fulfillment of all of these things in Christ. And it hits him like a freight train. And when he had received food, he was strengthened.

He spent some days with the disciples at Damascus, coordinating and refining and connecting the dots that are in his soul. Then look at verse 20. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues.

This is how he begins, and this is how he ends. Whenever he goes to a town, what does he do? He goes to the synagogue, and he preaches Christ. And what does he preach? What does it tell us in that verse? That he is the Son of God.

Jesus Christ is... It doesn't say the Messiah. It doesn't say the suffering servant. It doesn't say the

conquering king.

It doesn't say the netzer, the root shoot of the stump. What does it say? The Son of God. The deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and all that thereunto pertains.

He preached the Christ. Of course, this is Messiah. That he is the Son of God.

All who heard were amazed and said, Is not this he who destroyed those who called on this name? Verse 22. Saul increased all the Moor in strength, confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. And you notice Jesus is in italics.

Proving that this is the Christ. Everything he was pulling out of the Old Testament. So, to answer the question, when Paul comes to a new town, such as Thessalonica, and goes into the synagogue, what is he going to do? What's he going to open with? He's going to take the Old Testament scriptures and say, See this prophecy.

See this picture. See this type. Here is the fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

He is the Christ. He is the Son of God. He is the Son of David.

He is the Son of God. Messiah. Son of David.

Son of God. Second person of the Trinity. The one who fulfills all of this.

So, that's point one in his traveling bag of sermons. Because we want to know, what did the Thessalonians hear? Because Paul has already told them some things, and now he's writing a letter. So what have they already heard? They got that.

Turn over to Acts 23-24. You can start at 23-23. No, let's see.

It's 24-23. I wondered if my memory was going to be right about that. Because Paul is talking to Felix, right? And he came and is preaching to Felix and to his wife Drusilla in verse 24 of chapter 24.

After some days, Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and heard him concerning faith in Christ. That's what we just saw that Paul began with.

Who is the Christ? It's Jesus of Nazareth. Now, as he reasoned about three things. Righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come.

Righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come. Faith in Christ. What does that have to do with anything? Well, it has everything to do with righteousness.

Once you have believed in Christ, what is the goal? Personal holiness. Righteousness. Righteousness by faith.

You enter into Christ's righteousness positionally at salvation. Now you can achieve experiential righteousness. You can bear fruit.

Righteousness by faith. And there is a judgment to come. What follows the judgment? The millennial kingdom, right? So, if you turn a few pages over to the end of the book of Acts, what do we find? The last historic notation about Paul from Luke.

In chapter 28, verse 30, Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house and received all who came to him preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, all boldness. No one hampering him. No one forbidding him.

The kingdom, preaching about Christ. So, these are Paul's topics. And by the way, when you look at his extended teaching sections in Acts, the records of what he said when he was before the authorities and so on, this is very typical.

You can look at his letters and he refers to these things. When I was among you, did I not speak of these things? Righteousness, self-control, judgment to come, the Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom. This is very helpful to us now as we come back to Thessalonians because, now think about this, I'm about to broach a subject that we haven't talked about recently and you might not have thought of at all or at least not thought of in a while.

Let's put ourselves, just stop everything now, pretend like you are a Greek person living in the free city of Thessaloniki and you've been interested in God, you've been kind of like a moth around the flame of the synagogue there, coming in, kind of listening, talking to a few of the Jews. Well, so there is just this one creator God, Moses and the children of Israel and King David and so on. So, there is just this one God.

It's not this pantheon and not these capricious, basically larger-than-life flawed humans on a grand stage with Peyton Place and all kinds of drama and intrigue and messed up. It's not just the caprice of this pantheon. There is one God with a plan and a purpose and He's righteous and He's holy and He doesn't change.

That's really interesting. I am drawn to that. That resonates with a truth that I have suspected in my soul, which was, of course, the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the eternity that God puts in people's hearts.

So, we are those people and we've been kind of, the synagogue is not quite there and when they start getting into the rules and regulations and don't eat pork and I'm not real sure about that, but this idea of God really seems to resonate. Here comes the Apostle Paul to the synagogue and he just blows everyone's mind because he pulls this Old Testament truth out and proves these things that we've just seen from the book of Acts, that Jesus is the Christ, that He is the Son of God, that there is an absolute standard of righteousness, that people are enjoined and required and expected to determine their own destiny, to have self-control. Not just self-control, but self-

determination is almost a better understanding of that.

Righteousness, self-determination. Self-control means I'm going to decide what I'm going to do. I'm not going to be blown about by every emotion or every wind.

And there is a judgment. This is the same thing Jesus said. When the Holy Spirit comes, He will convict of sin and righteousness and judgment.

Sin and righteousness, we decide, we choose. So, this is really powerful. Now, here's my question.

Here's what I think we haven't really thought of in a while. I'm a person in Thessaloniki and here comes Paul and he is preaching this stuff. Now, when he says Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, what do I know about Jesus of Nazareth? Specifically, how much of the content of the Gospels have I ever known or been exposed to? Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Are these books in existence? No, they are not. There are some oral traditions floating around, but these books are not out, they're not in circulation. Paul, the apostle, never quotes a Gospel story, never says, as our brother Matthew or our brother Peter through Mark or our brother John, never any references to the Gospels.

Which is what? The birth and the life and the death and the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ, right? None of that is independently witnessed at this time. Paul, the apostle, is going out, think about this. Are you with me? Paul, the apostle, is going out to groups of Gentiles and saying, Jesus is the Christ, you need to believe on him for salvation, there's righteousness, there's judgment, there is a coming kingdom and he is the king.

And there is no Gospel witness saying, Jesus was born in a manger and angels announced it and shepherds and temple at twelve and baptism in the Jordan and John the Baptist and parables and miracles. None of that, none of that. It does not exist, they've never heard it, they've never seen it, it is not yet in circulation, if it has been written at all.

So they're getting this from one human witness, right? And even in the Jewish mind, it takes the mouths of two or three witnesses for a thing to be established, right? So who's the other witness? Paul comes in and says, hey, let me tell you, this would be like somebody coming today and saying, there's a man named Yeshua over in Israel and he's the second coming of Jesus. And you say, well, says you, you know, is this on CNN? Is there anybody blog this or take a picture of it or somebody besides you that I can get some independent confirmation? So Paul is going to refer to this in the first chapter and he is going to say in verse five, our Gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit. The power is a witness, the Holy Spirit is a witness.

And these two or three witnesses together confirm in the minds of the Thessalonians because

they don't have anything else. None of the other apostles or disciples have showed up. Now here's something else sort of related to this.

It's not directly related to the Thessalonians, but as I was chewing on this, it occurred to my mind. Do you remember the disciples who are later the apostles? Most of us would have trouble getting an accurate list of all 12, right? You get Peter, Andrew, James and John. That's pretty easy.

Philip and Bartholomew. You're halfway there. And then, you know, it seems like there was another Simon and another James and Nathanael slash Bartholomew and Thaddeus.

And then we start kind of flaking off the edge, right? Here's my question. Jesus chose these 12 disciples. What happened to the rest of them? Peter wrote a couple of books.

John wrote a couple of books. James got martyred. Andrew, don't really know what happened to him.

There's all of these church traditions that Andrew was crucified on a cross shaped like an X. You've got these almost fable legend things about guys being killed with a spear. There's Thomas, doubting Thomas. If you think about it long enough, you can piece almost all of them in.

Matthew, Levi. But really, you figure you could get the whole New Testament out of John and Peter and Paul. Right? All except Jude and James.

Pretty much the whole thing you get out of those three. So when Jesus gave the Great Commission thing and when he was talking to the disciples after his resurrection, what did he say? In the first chapter of Acts, 20th chapter of Matthew, what does he say? You shall be witnesses unto me. Right? As you go make disciples of all nations, you shall be witnesses unto me.

So how was Thaddeus a witness? How was Bartholomew a witness? I have scratched my head over this for years because I think, well, maybe they just had some converts or maybe they did this mythological travel that church tradition says they made. Some guy ends up in Madras, India. Thomas supposedly went to India and got killed down there.

James, the son of Alphaeus, lived to be 90 and then was clubbed to death according to church tradition. Man, if I was going to be clubbed to death, I'd rather have it happen as a young man. I think at 90, that would just be excessively painful.

But I don't know. I just think being 90 and being clubbed to death is just... Those two concepts. You're in enough pain, I think, when you're 90.

They could probably just push you with a finger and you'd do the same thing. Several of them, according to tradition, were crucified and so on. But from a scriptural point of view, in terms of impact today, where are the other nine disciples out of the original crowd? The majority of them

seem to have not really written any scripture or had this lasting witness.

So what is the deal on this? This is my new theory. This is my little light bulb. Jesus said, you shall be witnesses unto me.

What is the surviving witness to the Lord Jesus from those disciple days, from his earthly ministry? What is the remaining witness? It is those gospels, right? Especially the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. During the time that Paul is doing these missionary journeys and writing these early letters, this is the first or second letter that he ever wrote. In terms of scripture, this is one of the first pieces of New Testament scripture ever.

And there's nothing in it about the birth of Jesus or his boyhood or his early life or his ministry, the details of his arrest and crucifixion and resurrection and ascension. That's not in here. The vast content of all of those gospels and all of those chapters isn't in here and this is scripture.

And by the way, the preaching of Paul that we saw in Acts. How much of that, when he went to the synagogues and preached the boyhood of Christ? He went to the synagogues and preached the nativity. He went to the synagogues and preached the virgin birth or preached the boy at the age of 12 or Jesus casting the money changers out.

None of that. Paul does not apparently preach the biography of Jesus at all or the verbal teachings of Jesus. He went to the synagogue and preached the Sermon on the Mount.

No, he didn't. Didn't even exist on paper at this point, so to speak. So, what's going on? Here's what I think.

There's all of this synoptic question and the more you study it, the more convoluted it gets. Is it the priority of Mark? Which one wrote first? Did Luke and Matthew plagiarize Mark? Which one was first? Because there are many identical passages. And it goes back to this idea of multiple witnesses.

Do you know why the Gospels are not yet in writing? So, think about this. When Thessalonians is written, this is probably 59 AD. We can narrow this down pretty closely.

And this is autumn of 59 when Paul and Silas visit Thessalonica. And then in 60, he's gone to Athens and then he goes to Corinth. He has sent Timothy.

Timothy has come back. And so, within a year of his autumn visit, in less than a year, he's writing this letter. So, this is roughly 60 AD.

Now, Jesus left circa somewhere between 27 and 33 AD, right? So, how many years has it been? Thirty-something years. And the Gospels aren't circulating in writing yet. And you look at those Gospels and the details of the words of Jesus and all that, and you think, so this stuff is getting set down by Mark and by Luke.

Remember, Luke is a companion of Paul. And Luke writes the Gospel of Luke. And we know he wrote that thing.

And look at the distance, in decades, from the actual words of Christ. So, I say all of that to say this. Stay with me here.

How do we know that they didn't just make it all up? Well, when people start setting down their recollections, when Peter starts saying, this is what I heard the Lord say by the Sea of Galilee, this is what I heard him say in the Sermon on the Plain, this is what I remember him talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. First of all, people had wonderfully better recollection back then than we do now, because they didn't have, most of them couldn't write anything down. So they had trained their memories from childhood.

They didn't have to write down a grocery list. They didn't have to write down a list of names of people that they had to go visit to collect invoices or whatever for fish deliveries. They kept this stuff in their head.

They had very good memories. Secondly, they would sit around and talk. But here's the main thing.

You know why Jesus picked Bartholomew and Thomas and James the Less and Simon and the other sort of unknown disciples? These guys are the second and third witnesses. And when John and Matthew and Peter start saying, I'm going to put this stuff down on what Jesus said. Remember when we were in the boat and that storm came up? And Jesus said, all you waves, be quiet.

And Thaddeus says, that's not what he said or whoever was in the boat. He said, peace be still. Remember? Oh, yeah.

And their collective memories, Jesus said, you will be witnesses unto me. I think the witness of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke in particular, are a collective recollection. And the reason they are so consistent and so similar across the gospels is that these recollections were passed around amongst all of the original disciples and they all witnessed.

They all said, oh, and remember he said this. And Peter says, oh, you're right. And he adds that in or Mark writes it down.

Or Matthew is talking with Thomas or one of these others while they are, remain in Galilee until you receive power from on high. And they're starting to assemble these things and they're talking for weeks and months on end with each other and recollecting. And oh, boy, wasn't that a great time when we were up there on the mountain side? And you remember Jesus was talking, didn't he say something about a mustard seed and one of the others would remember it? Well, their collective memories I think are what are reflected in the gospels.

But, so that's my side point. I think when you look at those gospels and you say, wow, look at how similar these are, it's because this thing got error checked. It got edited and cross referenced and added to and amplified and straightened out and made consistent because many of the disciples participated in contributing a recollection.

It's under Matthew's name. It's under Mark's name or it's under Luke's name. But that's why there is such great consistency in the words of Christ.

This is the service that these disciples did. And you think, wow, you know, I thought all this time that Bartholomew was just kind of a minor character, but he's a witness. And his witness is reflected in these gospels.

But, again, none of this is circulating in Macedonia, in Asia Minor, in these places where Paul is going. And this is what, I've built this whole big foundation so I can put this little hut right on top of it. This is the idea I'm working toward.

You don't need the gospels for the gospel. Does that make sense? It is not the birth and the ministry and the teaching to Israel that Jesus Christ did that constitutes the gospel on which Paul built these churches. Paul is not preaching the biography of Jesus or the nativity of Jesus.

What is he preaching? He is the Christ. He is the Son of God. And that relates to righteousness, to self-control, and to judgment.

This other is going to be backstory. It's going to be... I'm taking nothing away from it. It's inspired scripture.

It's terrific to have. God intended all along to have it. But notice, the church doesn't need Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to get going.

What does it need? Christology and soteriology. Homardiology. Sin, righteousness, judgment, salvation.

Who is Jesus Christ? Not who was Jesus Christ. He's not the God of the dead. He's the God of the living.

Who is Christ to you, O Macedonian man? O Gentile man? O Judaistic former Israelite living out here in the Roman Empire? Who is Jesus Christ to you? And it didn't take... As far as I know, Paul never preached the virgin birth. It's a wonderful doctrine. And it is a terrific thing to know.

But it's not what Paul preached. There is a God in heaven who has this righteous standard. And this is what Paul preached.

So, think about it now. He's in Thessalonica. And he goes to the synagogue.

And he starts with this. He leads with, You have heard from the Old Testament about the sacrifices, about the prophecies, about the suffering servant, about God's demand for satisfaction and His justice and His righteousness. These blood sacrifices for atonement.

Jesus Christ came and accomplished that. And He preaches the work of Christ on the cross. Preaches Him as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God.

Now, He's got just under a month, three Sabbaths. And remember, they met three times a week, Monday, Thursday, and Saturday, right? So in this three Sabbaths time, He gets nine shots in the synagogue. And so He starts with that.

He does the righteousness. He does the identity of Christ. He does the notion of, if you have believed in Christ, here is your self-control responsibility, your self-determination responsibility to lay hold of righteousness by faith.

Here is the coming judgment. And He's just getting ready to get into eschatology and the return of Jesus Christ and the execution of that judgment and the coming of the kingdom. And as soon as He gets this, He was coming up on His fourth Sabbath where He would be talking in the synagogue.

But in preview of coming attractions, on the previous Thursday maybe, He said, this Jesus Christ is the Messiah. He is the King of Israel. And when He comes back, He is going to be King of the world.

Well, the Jews, the Judaizers who hire the thugs to disrupt everything, they seize on this. He's preaching a different king. And this, if it reaches the ears of Caesar that Thessalonica is embracing by droves another king, this will endanger our free city status that we enjoy and appreciate so much.

We don't have any Roman troops here. We don't have a Roman procurator or governor here. We govern ourselves.

But if we start looking like a threat to the peace and civility and happiness of the empire and in particular Caesar, we're going to be in big trouble. And so they convince themselves that they are doing God's work by running Paul out of town. But it's a clue as to how far Paul had gotten in his preaching.

He's covered all of that ground and he's just getting to the eschatology and the Lord Jesus coming back. Jesus said, my kingdom is not of this world first time around, but it is going to be of this world the second time around. So we can see the progress of Paul's preaching.

And just when he got to the Lord Jesus is the King, capital K, whoa, the mobs break loose and the thugs are hired and so on. So Paul has to leave. Now, all of that plays into this letter because

after covering a few introductory things, he is going to go back and finish what he could not preach in person, which is the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of that judgment and the setting up of that kingdom.

And so we're right in the midst of what Paul was trying to get across to these new believers, mix of Gentiles and Jews. And it is the essence. This is the distillation.

This is the core, the fundamental foundational truths upon which churches were founded, were established, were built. So this is going to be a great letter for us to study because these are the essentials of the faith. And you'll notice taking nothing away from the life and the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, that had a particular purpose and focus and that was to confront Israel and give Israel the first chance to redeem her promises and call in that guarantee, that earnest that God had given them of those Old Testament promises.

Israel, when he came into his own, his own received him not. So now it is going to the Gentiles in this form and in this fashion. And so all of the presentation to Israel is really subordinate to saving faith, living faith, expectant hope of the return of the Lord Jesus.

This is the church's foundation. So when people try to say, contrast the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of Paul, well, you know, Jesus never condemned homosexuals. Jesus never said that women ought to keep silent in church.

That's Paul. And I don't really hold with Paul. I think Christianity ought to be defined by Jesus instead of Paul.

If it wasn't for Paul, there would be no Christianity because the teaching of Jesus was not designed to establish the church. The teaching of Jesus is designed to fulfill the covenant to Israel. Paul is made steward of the mystery.

He is the purveyor and the communicator of everything for the church. So if you meet somebody that says, well, I don't hold with Paul, say, well, you know, you really need to become an Old Testament Israelite. Get yourself under the law of Moses and quit eating pork and let the curls grow down the side of your face and move to Israel, become Orthodox, bang your head against the wailing wall, and do that thing because if you don't have Paul, you haven't got the church.

This is the church. This is what we as church-age believers must know, must build our faith on. And it is harmonious, just as we can always study the Old Testament and observe, interpret, and apply.

It doesn't diminish or lessen the Old Testament or the preaching ministry of the Lord Jesus. But first things first, this is the distillation of church truth. And this is what you must have.

Paul knew that. That's why he didn't start in Bethlehem. He starts at Calvary.

So this is going to help us understand how this letter is organized, why things are presented as they are, because Paul is building this foundation and adding to the foundation that he preached in the three or four weeks that he was there. Let's pause here and take our break. When we come back, we'll get back to our text.

And when he says, our gospel, now we know what this gospel is. It's not angels and shepherds in Bethlehem. It is the triumphant Christ who overcame death and sin at the cross.

That's his gospel. Let's pause here and take our break.