

1 Thess. 1:1 INTRO READINESS¹

Let me ask a question to begin: Is there a difference between believing Jesus will return, and, longing, praying for, and being prepared for, his return? A difference between knowing its true and being genuinely prepared for it? I think there is. And I think it's that difference that Paul addresses in this letter.

We know Christ's return was important to Paul because *every chapter* of 1 Thessalonians concludes with a remark from him about Christ's return. It's intentional. It's the heartbeat of this entire letter. Paul was writing to a young and embattled church and in essence was saying in this letter, *the hope of Christ's return must shape the way you live today*. And that was happening, they were doing it.

Paul says (1:8) *...wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God... (v.10) they speak of how you are looking forward to the coming of God's Son from heaven...*

This was a remarkable church. Remarkable in the sense that even though Paul wrote to lift them up, their faith – really, only a few months old – was deep. It had backbone. They weren't spiritual fence-sitters!

I hear this a lot from a number of you: *"I don't know how people live without being a Christian...or, I wouldn't want to NOT be a Christian today"* **Why do we say that?** Because we recognise how void of hope and joy and purpose this life would be, without Jesus, and without the knowledge he is coming again. We say that because we recognise, really, the only voice that matters, among the opinions, and the noise and the constant dismantling of truth is the voice that speaks to us in the pages of this word: **God's voice.**

So in very practical terms here's where I'm hoping we'll land by the end of the series in this letter:

- *I am ready* to meet Jesus if he comes back today
- *I am ready* to meet Jesus if I go to him *before* he comes back

If you knew you only had a few weeks left with your kids, or your friends, before you were separated forever what are the most important things you would say? What matters most when time is running out? That is the pressure cooker environment that inspired this letter.

Folks when Jesus returns, there will be no opportunity to say *"wait Lord I've got a few things to sort out"*, it will be sudden, it will be visible and will unmistakably be the Lord!

There are things God wants to say to us in these verses and chapters. Come to this letter, having prayed, ready for your Christian life to turn a new leaf; for Christ to have a more prominent place in your life and for his coming again to have a new level of focus for you. The teaching of 1 Thessalonians is that the Christian life in every sense is to be *geared toward* Christ's return; it is a renewed call to be ready.

I'm going to very quickly get to v.1 – the only verse we're looking at today, but for us to feel the emphasis, and the weight and the heart of Paul's teaching there are several background dynamics vital for us to appreciate:

¹ BI = If 1 Thessalonians describes a way of Christian living and being ready for Christ's coming again.

1. This church was born out of suffering, *not comfort*

Arguably, the most important background truth (read in acts 17) is that Paul arrived in Thessalonica immediately after being beaten and imprisoned in Philippi. He arrived bruised, persecuted and pressured – yet, he preaches anyway.

Then, the brand new Thessalonian Christians themselves almost instantly face persecution and pressure, and is why Paul responds to their suffering all through the letter: (1:6) *you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you.*

This church was not planted in comfortable, easy and ideal conditions, but out of pressure and persecution, real persecution (note 2:14). Remember that when we hear Paul say (5:16-18) *Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.*

2. This church was very young

... believers who were only weeks/months old in their faith, and yet it was as if they had been Christians for years because of how they grew in the Lord and faced the pressure cooker environment of persecution. They didn't have shelves full of Bibles, access to 100's of sermons, and podcasts. Their faith and spirituality was not dependent on modern resources, *no*, but on the power of the Holy Spirit. Real power!

3. The conversion in this church was radical!

1:9 *"...you turned away from idols to serve the living and true God"* V.9 sums up the entire Christian life: repentance, worship, serving, mission and truth. Only God is true, and only his word is truth.

In the deeply pagan, idolatrous and sexualised city of Thessalonica, committing life to Christ meant a complete transfer of allegiance. Meaning these believers didn't just half-heartedly tack Jesus onto their lives. No, Jesus was and is a whole-of-life commitment. Radical!

4. The return of Jesus is the main topic!

As I said earlier, the teaching is that the Christian life in every sense is to be *geared toward* Christ's return. This church lived with eternity in view! Suffering, grief, persecution, illness, all of life's difficulties, highs and lows are lived with the return of Christ and eternity in view.

5. Paul's relationship with this church is deeply pastoral and emotional

He loved this church.

- "like a nursing mother" (2:7)
- "like a father with his children" (2:11)
- "we were orphaned by being separated from you" (2:17)

Paul is not writing as a detached lecturer. He is writing as a spiritual father who genuinely loves these people and fears for them.

That's not a history lesson, that's the environment and the reality of the church that inspired this letter. How do we, FBC today take these 5 chapters and by inspiration of the Holy Spirit to ready ourselves for Jesus' return...?

Now, to bring us home this morning I want to give you three truths Paul wrote to *lift the faith* of that church, just in v.1, and equally may *lift your faith* this morning.

WE BELONG TO GOD

(READ) 1 Thess. 1:1 *We are writing to the church in Thessalonica, to you who belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Notice what Paul did here. He isn't identifying the church by their geographical location, or their status, but by **who** they belong to, God! In fact, the original language is more powerful: "in" God.

Why is this statement important? This was a young newly planted church – only several months old remember – with brand new believers, in a pagan city, full of idols, sexual immorality was normalised and persecution was already happening.² Yet, in that environment, Paul says you don't belong to any of that anymore. You don't need to be drawn into that way of life anymore...*you belong in God. You're his. You're in him.*

Paul's statement carries enormous significance. He's saying, whatever you used to do, whoever you were, *that life is what you were.* The guilt and shame you've carried, all these years, *that is what you were.* The choices and habits that defined you before Christ, are past tense. Because now, *you belong "in" God.*

Follow me to 1 Thess. 5:9-10. There we see the full meaning of what being "in God" means. *For God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever.*

In God, belonging to God changes EVERYTHING about how I feel around matters of the past and the perspective I have for my future. I belong to God means I'm set free of the past; I have a hope for the future. For those of you carrying heaviness right now – debt, illness, grief, suffering, exhaustion – hear this: belonging to God is not about what you must *do* for him. It is about what he has *already done* for you. You are his. He's got you.

That truth, is the foundation of everything else in this letter.

We live in Hamilton, Cambridge, Ngaruawahia, Gordonton... we have jobs, we have tough things going on – jobs, mortgages, family and relationship matters, hard diagnoses' – every day we are navigating the same sorts of pressures the Thessalonians were. But the gospel gives us a deeper identity: we live in a city, but our life is in ***belonging to a kingdom.***

And belonging to God's kingdom shows. We see that through 1 Thessalonians. Just one quick example: 1:8 "...*wherever we go* – Pauls says – *we find people telling us about your faith in God*" Your neighbours see you at your letterbox, the person at Woolworths sees you in the store, your friends see you at coffee. So, does your life 'say' you belong to God? Our strongest, loudest message is often the way we actually live. Our words, the ways we encourage, our choices, our kindness, our compassion and grace.

"...you belong in God"

WE GATHER IN GOD

Now, connected to this truth of belonging in God means something very important for the church. Here's the verse again: *We are **writing to the church** in Thessalonica"*

Paul writes to the church, not individuals. And, not just 'the church'. Paul means the gathered church. Why? Because in Paul's mind being the church – that belongs to God – and *gathering*, go hand-in-hand. We know that

² See Acts 17

because the word “church” – ekklesia in GK – means a gathering or assembly of believers³.

Let’s not miss this detail. All the way through 1 Thessalonians we’ll see the Christian life is not a solo ride! We need each other. We do! It’s why Hebrews 10:25 says “*And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near*”

Did you notice Hebrews 10 connects our gathering with Jesus’ returning? Gathering is not for the purposes of earning favour with God. It is commanded, because God sees the closer we get, the more we need each other. Life gets complicated. Busyness can pull us away. If that’s you, hear my heart and invitation. The church needs you, and – whether you feel it right now or not – you need the church.

We gather in his name; we gather as his body; we gather to offer worship; we gather to sort out our differences...we gather around the Lord’s table and we gather to urge and encourage one another toward Christ’s return.

We *belong* to God, we *gather* in God, and then, we *build together* in God.

WE BUILD TOGETHER

The letter opens: “*This letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy.*”

This might look like a throwaway line, but it actually reveals something very important. Paul – one of the greatest apostles in history – was a team guy! He’s acknowledging the *input*, the *value* and the *place* of Silas and Timothy in the work of the church. Christianity advances through spiritual partnership⁴.

When Billy Graham received his Congressional Medal of Honour, the first thing he is reported to have said when receiving the award is, “*This has been a team effort from the very beginning,*” and he named the people who had ministered with him through the years. In closing he said, “*We did this together.*”⁵

That’s the spirit of the New Testament. Christ is the builder of the church, but we are his bricklayers, we do the work! This means all of us mucking in, getting involved, serving and helping. All of us using our gifts, because we all have them. *The church needs you. We build together.*

In one short greeting Paul tells us three things every Christian needs to know: *we belong to God, we gather in God, and we build God’s kingdom together, in God...* then Paul’s leaves his most powerful words to the conclusion of his greeting: *May God give you grace and peace*⁶.

GRACE AND PEACE

You’ll find this or a similar combination of words at the beginning of 11 of Paul’s letters. I know my notes open with “*Hi there...hope this new day finds you doing well...*” But these two five letter words are packed to the gunnels with theological depth and meaning, they carry the entire weight of the gospel and Paul’s letter.

Grace is what God has given us that we did not deserve and can never earn. *Peace* is what we have *with God* and *from God*, and *toward one another*, because of grace. When Paul begins with *grace and peace* what he means is his entire letter – the inspired word of God, every call to holiness, every instruction, every reminder of Jesus’ coming – flows from grace and peace. Peace. Not a worldly version of peace. Not an absence of conflict, or of

³ Strong’s Greek: 1577. ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia) -- Church, assembly, congregation

⁴ Phil 1:5-7 *Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now.*

⁵ Holmes, Michael W. “Contemporary Significance” In *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: 1 and 2 Thessalonians*. By Michael W. Holmes, 43. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 1998.

⁶ Romans 1:7 – “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 3

suffering. But peace that knows in the depths of my spirit, God's got *this*, and *me*.

Here's the thing: through the word we receive grace and peace, to give grace and peace. So, if *grace and peace* are to have a presence in the life of the church, then we must be people of the word. That's what Paul means!

Grace and peace. How many of us are yet to really come to terms with what these two words mean? What they mean today, right now for your diagnoses, your marriage, that situation with a friend you're struggling to reconcile. Your concern for your son, daughter, grandchild deep in depression, or struggling with their identity. Grace and peace. They are healing. Liberating. Saving words. Sit with these two words this week. Study them and ask the Holy Spirit to help you see what you've been given.

The church at Thessalonica was a remarkable church, one we can learn a great deal from. The message of 1 Thessalonians isn't, work on getting ready. It's, be ready, now! Today! Why? Because **everything we do as Christians is geared toward Christ's return.**

That's why I'm urging you to take readiness for Christ's return seriously. *I am ready* if he comes back today, *I am ready* if I go to him *before* he comes back. That's the call of this letter I want to place before us.

We know what the bible says. We know the end of this world's history. We know we are waiting for Jesus Christ to return. For now, we live in the light of that hope. We have to live our lives in light of an imminent return should that be the case. 1 Thess. 2:19, 20 *After all, what gives us hope and joy, and what will be our proud reward and crown as we stand before our Lord Jesus when he returns? It is you! Yes, you are our pride and joy.*

Why would Paul say such a thing? Because he wanted them to be found faithful, so that when Jesus comes, they, with believers dead or *alive*, *will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...(and) be with the Lord forever.* (4:16f).

Church family, take time today to check your heart. In no way to condemn self, but to ask God honestly, *am I ready?* Do I know I *belong to him* and does it show? *Am I gathered? Am I building?*

As we study this letter together, let's gather, having prayed, having read through 1 Thessalonians. Come ready for Christ to have a more prominent place in your life. Come ready for his return to have a new level of focus for you.

Benediction

1 Thess. 5:23, 24 *Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful... **May God give you grace and peace***