

The Oldest Part

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Acts 17:1-9 (NIV) and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (NIV)

Acts 17:1-9

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. **2** As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, **3** explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. **4** Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

5 But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. **6** But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, **7** and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” **8** When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. **9** Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. **3** We 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.

4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, **5** because 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. **6** You 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. **7** And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. **8** The 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, **9** for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, **10** and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

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Grace and peace to you.

This morning I'm going to offer a teaching sermon - to ground us in shared knowledge for our texts for the next few weeks.

This Eastertide we are wrapping up our time with the Narrative Lectionary. It has taken us to some new and interesting territory. Since Easter, we've been hearing about the early church as remembered in Acts. Now, as one scholar puts it, Acts is highly stylized. In other words, this is not

Encyclopedia Britannica - it's a theological document not a factual document. But Acts and Paul's letters are the closest we get to early church history. Acts chronicles the early church as it spread from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The first half of Acts taught us about early church leaders who had known Jesus in his earthly life and chose to continue to follow his Way. Peter and James and John; Jesus' mother Mary, and the women who were close to him, among others. As we move through Acts we meet people who were not with Jesus in Galilee or Jerusalem - those who came to faith after the Resurrection. Paul is the most prominent name in today's chapter of the early Christian story.

Acts is also the story of the early church spreading beyond Judea and Galilee, beyond the area now called Israel. In Acts, the Way of Jesus makes a journey as far west and north as modern Greece - including the city in today's passages, Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a Roman city far Northwest of Jerusalem.

Acts is also the story of the Way of Jesus developing from a school within Judaism to its own separate faith. Acts chapter 11, remembering the community in Antioch, marks the first time when people were called Christians. Acts traces a tension of self-identity among the earliest Christians: are we Jewish, are we something separate, are we both Jewish and something new? How can our tight knit community of faithful Jews who followed a Jewish teacher named Jesus welcome in Gentiles, folks who were not Jewish before they started following Jesus?

We know that within a few decades, Christianity became a separate and new faith. Acts tells us those few decades were hard. Let's just look at Paul. Paul, who was Pharisee and a faithful Jew, was not one of the earliest followers of Jesus - in fact he participated in persecuting Christians. When he converted, he became a zealous leader. He fought with other Jews, with Jewish Christians, with Gentiles, and with Rome. From the records we have, it seems like Paul argued with everyone. He got into various kinds of arguments that divided him from Peter, and later from

Barnabas. And yet Paul's evangelism built a big part of the early church. If Paul hadn't been so zealous, maybe Christianity would not be its own faith. Maybe it wouldn't have grown the way it did.

An overly simple way of thinking of how Paul and Peter's influence on the early church developed is that Peter led the Jerusalem church and the Jewish Christians; Paul moved out into the world and ministered to uncircumcised Gentiles. It's overly simple because Paul also worked through local synagogues all over the Roman empire.

And, as we noted in Bible Study this week, Paul wound up the winner in terms of history - most of the letters in the New Testament are either actually from Paul or are attributed to Paul. And, by the time Acts was written down, most Christians were from the Gentile branch - mostly formerly pagan Gentiles. With that, the first evolution of Christianity - into a separate tradition - or the 'non-amicable divorce' from 1st century Judaism - was complete.

So that brings us to today's readings. Today we connect a passage from Acts 17 with a passage from 1st Thessalonians. Both passages chronicle the same moment, but they tell it differently. Paul and Peter had gone their own ways, with Paul and Silas to the northwest of the Roman empire, modern Greece.

That far away from Jerusalem, Paul was converting Gentiles - and also engaging with the small Jewish populations in those places. In Thessalonica, the Jewish community would have been a very small minority, trying to survive surrounded by Rome.

Paul had a tentmaker ministry - a term we still use today for bi-vocational pastors - meaning that when he traveled from place to place he set up a business to pay for his daily needs, while teaching and preaching and dialoging and arguing with local leaders, Jewish and Roman, and converting folks who then set up house churches. These are the communities Paul wrote letters back to after he moved on.

In Thessalonica, he must have made such an impression on Jason and his household that they offered him hospitality. In Acts we hear that Paul caused an uproar in Thessalonica - word of Jesus turned everything upside down. There was conflict in the city.

One guess as to the reason the local Jewish leadership would have been so upset by Paul's visit is this: central to the Way of Jesus was declaring Jesus *Lord* - which went against the Roman empire. As Edward Pillar writes, "Paul is suggesting that Jesus has become for the Thessalonians an alternative emperor, a true and living King...resurrection speaks of the ability of another and greater power to usurp that imperial authority and call into question all imperial claims..."¹ Local Roman authorities would not have noticed the difference between Paul and the local synagogue leaders - so they'd all have been in trouble.

The local Jewish leaders were so upset with Paul they went to Jason's house to get him - but because he was already gone they fussed with Jason. Jason got arrested for offering hospitality. Can I just say, that's a sermon right there: getting arrested for offering hospitality sounds like a pretty committed Christian move.

So Paul's in trouble and he and Silas get out of town.

That gets us to 1st Thessalonians. It's the letter Paul sent back to the house church there. 1st Thessalonians is the oldest text of the New Testament. Most folks think it was written 50-51 CE but it may have been ten years before that.²

Paul might have argued with everyone when he was in person with them - but when he wrote back to communities he founded, he started with love and blessing. No wonder these letters were kept. Can you imagine getting

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/church-at-thessalonica-3/commentary-on-acts-171-9-1-thessalonians-11-10-2>

² The Jewish Annotated New Testament says 41CE

a letter like this one? Or even better - if you ever need to bless someone, maybe you can take some of this letter as a model.

Grace and Peace to you, Paul wrote. In the name of God, and in the name of Jesus, Peace and grace.

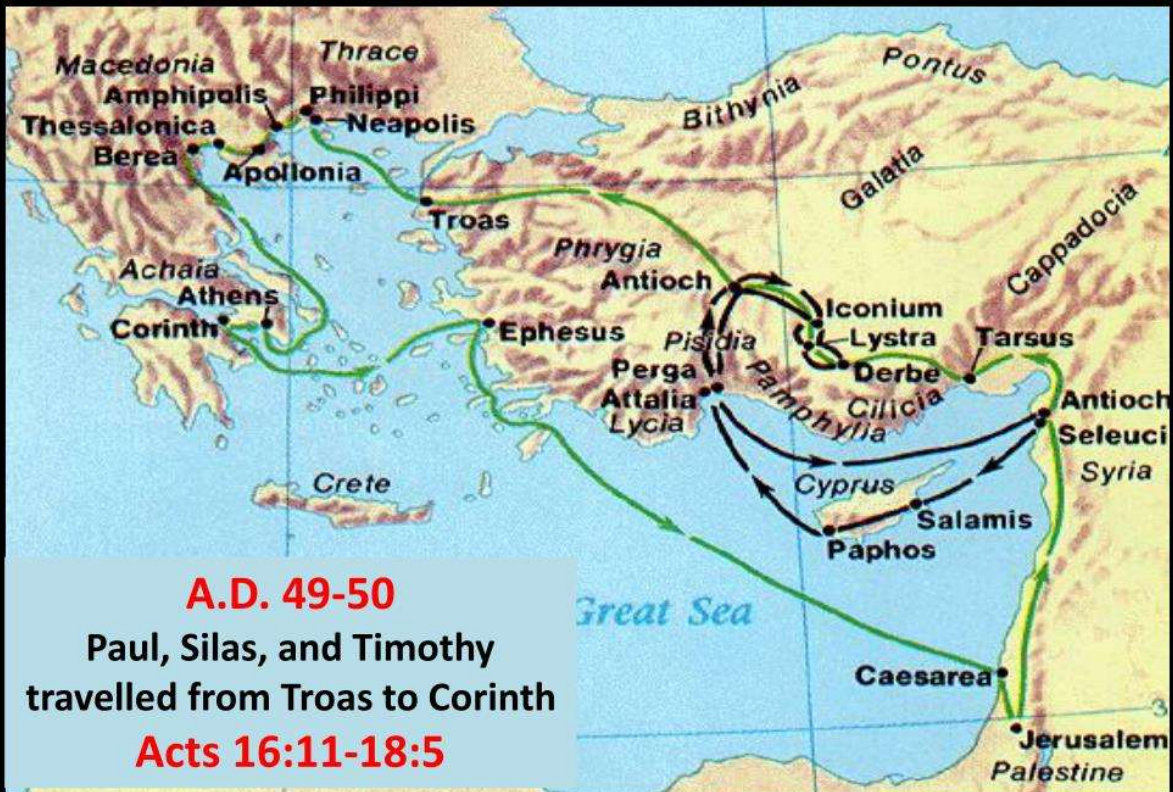
He was writing to people he loved. He was writing to affirm how much God loved them. Siblings, believers, family - beloved by God!

He was writing to people under pressure. The conflict in the city did not disappear when Paul left town. They were living under severe suffering - with the joy given to them by the Holy Spirit. Imagine that: being faced with terrible circumstances and living with a kind of deep spiritual joy. What a thing. And their faith was so powerful it was a model that people in other new Christian communities heard about. They turned to God - and away from those Roman idols - to serve the living and true God.

My final note about this first portion of the letter to the church at Thessalonica is Paul's word of reassurance. These first few years of the Way of Jesus were full of turmoil - and followers were expecting Christ's return. Paul reassured the Thessalonians in the midst of conflict and gave them a good word on patience.

How good it must have been to get that letter - a letter full of love and grace and reassurance and peace and courage. These verses are the oldest recorded in the New Testament, but their blessing to a faithful congregation should be beautiful to this congregation's ears 2000 years later.

Thessalonica



<https://image1.slideserve.com/2812943/thessalonica-l.jpg>