I & II THESSALONIANS

How did Paul come to be in this northern Greek city of Thessalonica? It happened on his second missionary journey with Timothy and Silas. Acts 17 records what happened:

Acts 17:1-9

They took the road south through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica, where there was a community of Jews. [2] Paul went to their meeting place, as he usually did when he came to a town, and for three Sabbaths running he preached to them from the Scriptures. [3] He opened up the texts so they understood what they'd been reading all their lives: that the Messiah absolutely had to be put to death and raised from the dead—there were no other options—and that "this Jesus I'm introducing you to is that Messiah."

[4] Some of them were won over and joined ranks with Paul and Silas, among them a great many God-fearing Greeks and a considerable number of women from the aristocracy. [5] But the hard-line Jews became furious over the conversions. Mad with jealousy, they rounded up a bunch of brawlers off the streets and soon had an ugly mob terrorizing the city as they hunted down Paul and Silas.
They broke into Jason's house, thinking that Paul and Silas were there. [6] When they couldn't find them, they collared Jason and his friends instead and dragged them before the city fathers, yelling hysterically, "These people are out to destroy the world, and now they've shown up on our doorstep, attacking everything we hold dear! [7] And Jason is hiding them, these traitors and turncoats who say Jesus is king and Caesar is nothing!" **

[8] The city fathers and the crowd of people were totally alarmed by what they heard. [9] They made Jason and his friends post heavy bail and let them go while they investigated the charges.

** KJV: Acts 17:5

And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; That's a fine accolade for believers today, "They turn the world upside down."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THESSALONICA

This great city was founded in 315 B.C. by a man named Cassander. He had been one of the four great generals of Alexander the Great. When Alexander died he divided his Greek empire among the four. Cassander named the city after his wife Thessalonike, who was Alexander's half-sister. The city became a major Roman hub of business and commerce. It contained an amphitheater where entertainment in the form of gladiatorial shows were held.

Paul ministered there about 54 A.D. Shortly afterward, he journeyed to nearby Berea and then south to Athens and from there to Corinth. (The city today is also known as Salonika.)

He preached in Thessalonica for three weeks. He had such success that the Jews were Enraged and raised so much trouble that Paul had to be smuggled out. The same thing happened in Berea (Acts 17:10-12). Paul had to leave Timothy and Silas behind and made his escape to Athens. What exercised his mind was this: He had been in Thessalonica only three weeks. Was it possible to make such an impression on a place in three weeks' time that Christianity was planted so deeply that it could never again be uprooted? So anxious was Paul that, when Timothy joined him at Athens, he sent him back to Thessalonica to get information without which he could not rest. Timothy brought back good news. The believers were standing fast in the faith. But there was some worrying news.

The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians / Wm Barclay / Westminster Press / pgs181 and 182
What were the issues Paul addressed then in this first epistle (letter) back to them?

1. The believers in Thessalonica, believing in the soon return of the Lord, just stopped working.
2. The believers were concerned about fellow believers who had died....had they missed the coming of the Lord?
3. There was a tendency to disregard all lawful authority.
4. There was the danger of lapsing into immorality.
5. Some new elements were slandering Paul.

WHY TWO LETTERS? Both I and II Thessalonians have strong similarities and could have been written within weeks of each other. The second letter cleared up any misconceptions the Thessalonians might have got from the first letter.

I THESSALONIANS

Chapter One

1 Thes. 1:2-3

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;

[3] Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father;

As your pastor, I find these attributes present in this congregation. Your work of faith results in strong labors borne of love for Christ and the people of the world. And your patience is amazing.

1 Thes. 1:4

Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.

Some teach (I believe in error) that some people are pre-destined to be saved and some to be lost. I find this a total disregard for Christ’s Great Commission to TAKE the Gospel to the world. Why obey that command if people are already predestined one way or the other? No, this “election” simply means that God is omniscient - that He knows everything whether it is actual or merely possible, where it is past, present or future, and that He knows those things perfectly and from all eternity. He knows things immediately, simultaneously, exhaustively and truly. God knew a million years ago about you, and whether you would be saved or not – but He did not violate your free will and dictate your actions. No, He simply always knew what you would do.

1 Thes. 1:6-8
And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: [7] So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. [8] For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.

What a living definition those verses teach of what a Pentecostal church should be like. I pray that First Assembly will always be an example of what the power of the Holy Spirit does through us, uniting us, making us strong, providing in times of difficulty and in reaching (the lost), teaching (believers, new and old) and sending workers to the far-flung reaches of the earth.

Chapter Two

In the light of the coming of Christ, how, then, should we live? The expectation of His return should motivate us in every fact of life.

Paul’s life - only on exhibit in Thessalonica for a mere month at best - was a living example of the Christ life:

1 Thes. 2:3-7  [The Message]
God tested us thoroughly to make sure we were qualified to be trusted with this Message. Be assured that when we speak to you we're not after crowd approval—only God approval. Since we've been put through that battery of tests, you're guaranteed that both we and the Message are free of error, mixed motives, or hidden agendas. [4] [5] We never used words to butter you up. No one knows that better than you. And God knows we never used words as a smoke screen to take advantage of you.

[6] Even though we had some standing as Christ's apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important, with you or anyone else. [7] We weren't aloof with you. We took you just as you were. We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children.

The “why” of what we do makes up the gold, silver and precious stones of 1 Corinthians 3 which are the raw material of our possible rewards. In this regard, Paul was a true champion of ministry.

In verses 11 and 12 Paul described what I believe should be the demeanor and motive of every preacher of the Gospel:
1 Thes. 2:11-12  [The Message]
You experienced it all firsthand. With each of you we were like a father with his child, [12] holding your hand, whispering encouragement, showing you step by step how to live well before God, who called us into his own kingdom, into this delightful life.

I suppose I sometimes (often) think of you as my “kids.” We have two children who are now in their mid-fifties (boy, that’s hard to believe). But I sometimes still think of them as little children because of how precious those memories are. That is how Paul apparently felt about the believers in Thessalonica.

1 Thes. 2:19-20  KJV
For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? [20] For ye are our glory and joy.

I love this passage! Paul wrote that his great anticipation is to see those who came to Christ under his ministry gathered around the throne of God. When you and I come into the divine presence in eternity, no one will speak of our buildings, our programs or honors. No, we will rejoice in those we see there for whom we had some place in their salvation.

Chapter Three

What about the “social gospel?” That is, the care of temporal needs of people. We evangelicals are sometimes accused of not being “caring people.” Nothing could more remote from reality than that. This issue is broached at the start of chapter 3:

1 Thes. 3:1-3  KJV
Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; [2] And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith: [3] That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.

We are criticized for not emphasizing the social aspect of the gospel enough. May I say that there has never been any great social movement that was not anchored in the preaching of the gospel. The child labor laws came out of the great Wesley meetings. The labor movement today owes a great deal to John Wesley even though they have moved so far from the source that they don’t recognize it. Hospitals have followed the preaching of the Word of God. If people will respond to the message of the gospel of
Christ, their lives will be transformed and then these good works will flow out of that change.

In the Assemblies of God, we have listed compassion as one of our four primary reasons for being: Evangelism / Worship / Discipleship / Compassion I have no idea how many hospitals, feeding stations, orphanages, schools, etc., have been developed around the world by the Assemblies.

Do Christians go through tribulations? Yes.

1 Thes. 3:3-8 [The Message]

Not that the troubles should come as any surprise to you. You've always known that we're in for this kind of thing. It's part of our calling. [4] When we were with you, we made it quite clear that there was trouble ahead. And now that it's happened, you know what it's like. [5] That's why I couldn't quit worrying; I had to know for myself how you were doing in the faith. I didn't want the Tempter getting to you and tearing down everything we had built up together. [6] But now that Timothy is back, bringing this terrific report on your faith and love, we feel a lot better. It's especially gratifying to know that you continue to think well of us, and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you! [7] In the middle of our trouble and hard times here, just knowing how you're doing keeps us going. [8] Knowing that your faith is alive keeps us alive.

Paul had such great affection for the believers in northern Greece (as well as wherever they were found). Note the degree of his love for them in these verses:

1 Thes. 3:12-13 [The Message]

And may the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. [13] May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master Jesus arrives with all his followers.

Chapter Four

In the light of Christ's return, how should we live?

1 Thes. 4:1-3 [The Message]

One final word, friends. We ask you—urge is more like it—that you keep on doing what we told you to do to please God, not in a dogged religious plod, but in a living, spirited dance. [2] You know the guidelines we laid out for you from the Master Jesus. [3] God wants you to live a pure life. Keep yourselves from sexual...
promiscuity.

I have heard some who don’t acknowledge Christ as Saviour declare that they keep the Ten Commandment; therefore, they are alright with God. The purpose of those commandments is not to save us, but to show us how urgently we need the Cross of Christ and His redemption. They are like a mirror which reveal to us clearly that we are sinners and need a Saviour. But for the believer there are many commandments that go well beyond the Ten Commandments. This chapter lists many of them.

The question is asked, “Well, if we cannot keep the Ten Commandments, how can we keep all of these?” The answer, of course, is that the believer now has the very saving life of Christ within him or her. It is His INDWELLING LIFE AND POWER that makes our proper living possible.

Sex is certainly a major issue in our society. It is flaunted at almost every turn. What is the responsibility of the believer?

1 Thes. 4:4-5 (New American Standard)

that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

[5] not in lustful passion....

What does that mean? It means that when a believer saves his or her body for marriage and remains faithful to the spouse, he or she is possessing his or her “vessel” (body) in sanctification and honor.

1 Thes. 4:9-10  KJV

But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. [10] And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more;

I grew up in a time when Christians of differing denominations kept well away from each other. Oh, we met one Saturday night a month for Youth For Christ rallies....but even then in a city of 85,000 people I cannot ever remember more than 400-500 gathering. And Pentecostals kept at arms length from others - almost as if we were better than they were. It dawned on me in high school that this was an untenable position scripture-wise. The Bible teaches us to truly love each other - and not only believers but also who are not.

Now Paul addresses the concern of the Thessalonians of departed believing loved ones - had they missed the Rapture?
This marvelous passage is one of the strongest biblical supports for the Rapture of the Church. We speak of the IMMEDIATE coming of the Lord. That does not mean the IMMEDIATE return...it means that it is the NEXT EVENT TO TAKE PLACE ACCORDING TO PROPHETIC SCRIPTURE.

Critics of this belief often mention that the word “rapture” is not in Bible. *I insist that it is there, found in this chapter in verse 17: “Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” The Greek word translated as “caught up” is HARPAZO. It means to “catch up or grasp hastily, to snatch up, to lift or to rapture.” The fact is that the Bible teaches that believers in Christ are to be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”*  
Ibid / p394

Now the issue with the Thessalonians was this: they believed in the rapture. But their concern was for fellow believers who had died and been buried. What about them? Had they missed it all?

1 Thes. 4:13  KJV

*But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.*

The Greek poet of 230 years before Paul’s day Theocritus wrote, “Hopes are among the living; the dead are without hope.” The Gospel says otherwise!

Cemeteries

The early believers buried their dead in places they called (in the Greek) *koimeterion.* It meant “a rest house or sleeping place for strangers.” It is from this word that we get the word “cemetery.” To a child of God, departed Christian loved ones are buried in a “sleeping house - or rest house.” The same word was used in that day for hotels. You go to a Hampton Koimeterion. You spend the night, get up the next morning and go on your way. Paul teaches that the dead believer is put into a “motel” until the day of the resurrection. No wonder we do not mourn as those who have no hope.

1 Thes. 4:14

*For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.*

When the divine trumpet sounds, indicating the Rapture, what happens? What is the order?
1 Thes. 4:15-18  KJV

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent (precede) them which are asleep (dead). [16] For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: [17] Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. [18] Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

I can honestly say I have no fear of death. At my age I sometimes think about it. Should the Lord delay His return further and I die, I will be buried in Memorial Park Cemetery on the hills east of Sioux City, Iowa, on the old road that leads to Climbing Hill. I will be buried next to my father. All around that grave site are the “temporary” motels of many of my family. How long will my body remain there? Only until the trumpet sounds! Then my body will be resurrected (as was Christ’s in every detail - He Who was the “first-fruits,” the prototype) and the old gospel song will be lived, “Can’t No Grave Hold My Body Down.”

Chapter 5

Be alert! You don’t know when Jesus will take us out of here! To a non-believer it will seem like this:

1 Thes. 5:1-7 KJV

But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. [2] For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. [3] For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. [4] But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. [5] Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. [6] Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. [7] For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night.

It will be a nightmare - a living nightmare - for those left behind.

In the light of the approaching Rapture, Paul admonished the believers to:

1. Be a source of comfort to those less privileged than yourself (14)
2. Do good to those who do evil (15)
3. Live in a spirit of rejoicing (this means the joy I spoke about last Sunday) (16)
4. Pray without ceasing - be in a constant attitude of prayer (17)
5. Be thankful (18)
6. Quench not the Spirit of God – obey what He tells you (19)
7. Don’t despise God’s Word (prophesyings) (20)
8. Prove all things - don’t get taken in by the deceivers (21)
9. Abstain from all appearances of evil (22)

II THESALONIANS

Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians had caused further questions to be raised and Paul answered them in this, his second letter (epistle) to them. One of the issues was this: some false teaching had infiltrated the church, one of them insinuating that Christ had already come (Rapture) and that the church was now living in the tribulation period. There is some of that teaching prevalent today. Let’s study what Paul wrote.

Chapter One

Paul acknowledged that the followers of Christ were going through difficult times. He even called them “tribulations.” But NOT the Tribulation.

2 Thes. 1:4
So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure:

“Well, Pastor, what about those beleaguered followers of Christ in the Middle East who are being persecuted and executed by ISIS Muslims? Isn’t that tribulation?” Yes....but note this: they are going through the anger of men and earthly systems. The Tribulation period will be a time of the anger of God!

Peter himself warned us of difficult times: 1 Peter 4:12  KJV Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: Peter would later be crucified (upside down, according to tradition) but even then he would not refer to the persecution of believers by Rome as the great Tribulation. That time is yet to come: 2 Thes. 1:7 And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels,

What will that divine anger be like?

2 Thes. 1:8-9
In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not
the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: [9] Who shall be punished with everlasting
destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;

The biggest gambling racket going on today is not taking place in Las Vegas; it is in the
church - when men and women hear the Gospel and walk out without Christ, gambling on
their souls. It's a gamble they will most certainly lose.

Chapter Two

There seems to be a lot of speculation currently among believers as to the “order” of the
last days. Perhaps Christian television and the book market causes some of this
speculation. It's not altogether bad for at least it gets people into the Word, hopefully,
and to think. Paul gave us a very clear picture of what would happen and in the order it
would take place:

2 Thes. 2:1-4  KJV

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by
our gathering together unto him, [2] That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be
troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of
Christ is at hand. [3] Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day (the time of
Christ’s coming) shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man
of sin (antiChrist) be revealed, the son of perdition; [4] Who opposeth and exalteth
himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth
in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

Apparently someone in Thessalonica had started a teaching that Jesus had already come
and they were now living in the tribulation period. “The Day of the Lord” is a phrase
that speaks of the period of time that begins with the Great Tribulation and ends
following the Millennium (the 1000-year reign of Christ on this very earth).

1. The falling away....speaks of the organized religion that turns away from God’s Word
and Christ. This is known as the APOSTASY. We are seeing indications of this today.
(There is another “falling away”, of course - and that is the departure of the Church at the
Rapture, which will clear the way for the total apostasy of religion, led by the False
Prophet.) We see this false church indicated in Revelation 17 as “the harlot church.”

2. The second thing that must happen prior to the tribulation is that “the man of sin” is
revealed - antiChrist. The unholy trinity from Hell will emerge: Satan, the father;
antiChrist, the son and the unholy spirit, the false prophet.
This antiChrist will be worse than anything you can describe or imagine: 2 Thes. 2:4
[The Message]
He'll defy and then take over every so-called god or altar. Having cleared away the opposition, he'll then set himself up in God's Temple as "God Almighty."

The Restraint of the Holy Spirit Now

The wickedness on this earth is growing; however, there seems to be an invisible barrier that keeps the entire civilization from exploding. That barrier is the restraint of the Holy Spirit. But Paul writes that at the Rapture, the restraint of the Holy Spirit will be lifted:

2 Thes. 2:6-7 (New American Standard)
And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he may be revealed. [7] For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.

When I go into Death Row I have no fear because there are restraints everywhere, walls, barred doors and windows and guards. How would I feel about going in there where there were no restraints at all? The lawlessness on Earth is going to get worse; but one day, following the Rapture, the Holy Spirit will take "hands off" and lawlessness will rule this planet. YOU DON'T WANT TO BE HERE WHEN IT HAPPENS!!!!!!!!!!

But it won't be permanent:

2 Thes. 2:8 (NAS)
And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

How does antiChrist wield so much power when he comes? To quote an old adage: "There's a sucker born every minute!" He deceives the "suckers."

2 Thes. 2:9-12 KJV
Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, [10] And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. [11] And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: [12] That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Why will people be so gullible? They will have abandoned the churches and the Word of God. They will "believe a lie." ACCORDING TO THE LATEST U.S.
GOVERNMENT REPORTS, THERE ARE NOW 5,000 WORKING CULTS IN THE
UNITED STATES ALONE. A “cult” is any organized religion that depart from
historic Christianity based on the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul then issued a challenge to believers to stand fast in scriptural truth:

2 Thes. 2:13-15 [The Message]

Meanwhile, we've got our hands full continually thanking God for you, our good
friends—so loved by God! God picked you out as his from the very start. Think of it:
included in God's original plan of salvation by the bond of faith in the living truth.
[14] This is the life of the Spirit he invited you to through the Message we delivered,
in which you get in on the glory of our Master, Jesus Christ.
[15] So, friends, take a firm stand, feet on the ground and head high. Keep a tight
grip on what you were taught, whether in personal conversation or by our letter.

Chapter Three

In this final chapter, Paul concludes that there are certain responsibilities we believers
have.

1. Pray for us (Verse 1) There is no point in praying for Paul now - or any dead
person. But you can pray for everyone living.

2. Be firmly established! (Verse 3) Our homes, our faith, our lives should be
consistent with God’s Word - always, not just now and then.

3. Be patient in God’s plan. (Verse 5)

4. Don’t hob-nob with phony religionists. (Verse 6)

5. Work! (Verse 10 - those who don’t work - who have the ability to work - and don’t
work - DON’T EAT!)

6. Don’t get tired of good service to the Lord “Be not weary in well doing” (verse 13.)

Next week: I and II Timothy