



Theme: Lighting the Way – Paul’s First Letters

“Surviving and Thriving with Criticism and Complaints”

Weekly Memory Verse:

³ *As we pray to our God and Father about you, we think of your faithful work, your loving deeds, and the enduring hope you have because of our Lord Jesus Christ.* –1 Thessalonians 1:3

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity Ideas for the Week: Read Psalm 91:1-2. Whether in disappointment, fear, uncertainty, or joy, we can be assured God is always with us. Go to a favorite room in your home. Talk or think about why that room is a favorite. Is it extra comfortable? Does it have more lighting? Now, move to the least favorite room in your home (maybe the garage or laundry room). Discuss or reflect upon why it is the least favorite. Is it the dirtiest or the darkest? Return to the comfortable room, talk, or think about, where you experience God’s presence most deeply. Think about your most disappointing and most joyful times this week and share them with others if you in a group or with your family. Encourage each person to remember God is always present with everyone, everywhere and in every situation. Pray and thank God for always being with you and your family.

Monday, September 20 – Read Acts 1:4-8 and 17:1-10. “Thessalonica” may be a new term for you, and for some it is just a strange name heard in church. Scholar William Barclay knew the city was crucial for sharing news of Jesus when we wrote: “Thessalonica’s supreme importance lay in this—it straddled the Via Egnatia... Its main street was part of the very road which linked Rome with the EastIf Christianity was settled there, it was bound to spread East along the Egnatian Road until all Asia was conquered and West until it stormed even the city of Rome. The coming of Christianity to Thessalonica was crucial in making it into a world religion.”

- 🏔️ Paul used his grasp of the Hebrew scriptures and his speaking skill to win his Thessalonian hearers to faith in Jesus as “the Christ.” Paul said Jesus, crucified and risen, embodied all of God’s saving action. In what ways has Christ’s power brought “reversal” and hope into your life?
- 🏔️ Scholar N. T. Wright said Paul didn’t just use a few Scriptural proof texts. He wrote in his commentary on Acts, “It was a matter of ... the whole sweep of the narrative, the story of Israel going into the dark tunnel of slavery in Egypt only to be rescued at the Passover, of David fleeing from Absalom only to be reinstated after the great victory, of Jerusalem

destroyed and the nation carried away captive to Babylon, only to be brought back and rebuilt after a tribulation everyone had thought would be final... in other words, of a story whose main themes were all about suffering and vindication, disaster and reversal, death and resurrection.” How have you experienced resurrection in your life?

Prayer: *Gracious God, your great redemptive story reached its central turning point in Jesus. When that story took root in Thessalonica, it was on its way to my life. Thank you for that. Help me to find ways to pass it along. Amen.*

Tuesday, September 21 – Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5. We often use the word “church” for a building or a religious organization. But the apostle Paul called the early followers of Jesus, “the church.” The word *ekklēsia*, which is the Greek word for church, appears 114 times in the NT, sixty-two times in Paul’s letters. The first use occurs here in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 in the greeting to the Christians at Thessalonica. Paul has in mind an actual gathering of the Thessalonian Christians. So, he requests that his letter, “be read to all the brothers and sisters” and that they “greet them all with a holy kiss.” See 1 Thess 5:26–27. For Paul, “church” was people.

🏠 It’s been said, “If the building burns down, and the preacher leaves town, what you have left is the church.” A church in Pennsylvania gave their members T-shirts. On the front, they said, “I don’t go to church.” The back said, “I AM the church.” What helps you understand that you may “go to” the theater or a ball game, but “church” is who you are, not somewhere you go? What shift in thinking or acting can make that understanding of church a reality for you?

🏠 The believers in Thessalonica were not the church on their own. They were the church because of their connection to God. Paul sends this letter to the church of the Thessalonians and makes clear in this introduction that God was the very atmosphere in which the Church lived and moved and had its being. How can you make God the “very atmosphere” in which you live and move?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, as John Wesley’s covenant prayer put it, “thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.” Make that a living reality in my life today. Amen.*

Wednesday, September 22 – Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10 and 2 Corinthians 4:5-9. In the Roman Empire, there was nothing harmless or casual about calling Jesus, “Lord,” as Paul does in verses 6 and 8. To let “the message about the Lord” ring out meant denying the Empire’s religious as well as political claim that Caesar was “Lord.” People who chose to live as committed followers of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed Lord, risked their social standing, and sometimes their very life. Both Rome and Christians knew that in any kingdom, there can ultimately only be one Lord.

🏠 The believers in Thessalonica accepted the good news about Jesus, “with joy in spite of great suffering.” After 18 months of pandemic fears and limitations, whether our specific challenges were physical, mental, economic, or relational, we all have a clearer sense of what suffering feels like. Did you learn any habits or practices to access the spiritual strength God offers you so that you can have inner joy and resilience, and not let any challenges you face crush you? How can you take one step in doing that going forward? (Such as Scripture Reading, Prayer, finding a small group, etc.)

(Meditation Moments for September 18-19, 2021 – For more, go to www.summitdurango.org)

🏔️ Paul told Christians in Corinth, “We don’t preach about ourselves.” Scholar N. T. Wright wrote in his commentaries, *Paul for Everyone*, “Paul is very concerned that [his converts] might have supposed he regarded himself as the head of the organization. He is simply a servant... a secretary, an assistant: he is merely someone who introduces people to the top man. He is one of the Messiah’s office staff.” What helps you resist the urge to make people impressed with you, and instead introduce them to your Lord?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, your light is so much brighter than mine. Help me learn how to get out of your way, to let you shine forth from my life to brighten the lives of others around me. Amen.*

Thursday, September 23 – Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 and Matthew 5:10-12. Paul spoke of the courage it took to preach in Thessalonica after he had already suffered and been publicly insulted in Philippi (see Acts 16:12-40). Paul didn’t yet have a copy of the gospel of Matthew, but he got to live out Jesus’ principle about meeting insults and harassment with joy and trust. The presence of the God’s kingdom come on earth through the resurrection of Jesus turns the tables on normal expectations regarding what it means to be fully human.

🏔️ Later, Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, “If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.” But like prophets before him, and many godly leaders since, like his Lord Jesus himself, Paul often found himself hated and harassed. In our seemingly more tolerant age, what forms can “persecution” take? How did Jesus call us to respond when that happens?

🏔️ Scholar N. T. Wright wrote in his commentary *Matthew for Everyone* these words about chapter 5, “This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It’s about something that’s starting to happen, not about a general truth of life. It is gospel: good news, not good advice.” In what ways does Jesus’ presence in your life create an inner “climate” in which you can find God’s joy and peace even in conditions that otherwise would produce only anger or depression?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, some of your most faithful servants have focused on pleasing “an audience of one.” Even as I work to live at peace with all people, keep me aware that it is you I most want my choices to please. Amen.*

Friday, September 24 – Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12 and 2 Corinthians 7:2-4. In 1 Thessalonians 2:7 yesterday, Paul said, “we could have thrown our weight around as Christ’s apostles.” In contrast, he chose gentle family images: a “nursing mother” in verse 7 and a loving father with children in verse 9. “We appealed to you, encouraged you, and pleaded with you to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom.” As later in 2 Corinthians, Paul chose a very different leadership style from the almost military approach some church leaders teach and practice.

🏔️ The apostle some people think hated women compared his work in Thessalonica to a gentle nursing mother. In 1 Corinthians 7:6-9, Paul seems to be a missionary grateful that he had no family to consume his energy, yet he still compared himself to a loving dad. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote in *Paul for Everyone*, “The question for all Christian ministers [and all Christians] is: if we were to describe ourselves like this, would anyone recognize who we were talking about?”

🏔️ Paul gently invited people to a breath-takingly serious goal: “to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom and glory.” God didn’t seek a few trivial changes. God asked for their whole life. Paul lost no opportunity to explain to those early followers of Jesus, and now to us, that the living God wanted living human beings to reflect God’s glory. God has called us to both an utterly demanding AND utterly rewarding way of life. How are you answering that call?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I know myself too well to think I’m worthy of your great kingdom. Then you say you’ve already made me worthy if I just walk life’s path with you. Humbled and grateful, I accept. Amen.*

Saturday, September 25 – Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20 and 2 Corinthians 3:1-3. We may see the apostle Paul as a Christian “superhero” (in a shirt with a capital “P” on his chest?). This brave, tireless evangelist never saw himself as a solo act. This letter named a team from the first verse of chapter 1: “From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.” Next week we’ll see that when Paul couldn’t return to Thessalonica, he sent Timothy as he names in 1 Thessalonians 3:1, “our brother and God’s coworker,” to support the Christians there. He also told his Christian friends that, when he met his Lord after his life here ended, his own deeds were not his hope and “crown.” Their presence in God’s kingdom, he said, was his “glory and joy.” Scholar William Barclay noted, “In Greek there are two words for crown. The one is *diadema*... used almost exclusively for the royal crown. The other is *stephanos*... used almost exclusively for the victor’s crown... especially for the athlete’s crown of victory in the games. Paul uses *stephanos* here. The only prize in life that he really valued was to see his converts living well.”

🏔️ Paul served God by preaching the gospel and planting new churches. When Paul wrote this letter, Timothy served God by checking on the churches, nurturing them and helping to relieve Paul’s concerns. Is your heart willing to serve in any role needed that fits your gifts in God’s kingdom, where “the last shall be first” and God values every member of the body equally?

🏔️ Paul said Christians are a letter from Christ, “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.” What would a careful observer learn about God by “reading” the letter you are writing with your life? What parts of your daily routine would show others clearly that you are a God-follower? What activities or practices are you involved in that you wouldn’t be if you weren’t loyal and grateful to God for the grace and love you’ve found?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, “fellowship” is not a church cliché. It’s the path to your kingdom that your servant Paul modeled and called all of us, including me, to follow. Thank you for including me in your family. Amen.*