

While the Pastor is Away

1 Thess. 1:1-5

When the game is about to start and your MVP quarterback hasn't shown up yet, people start getting nervous. When the board-meeting started 5 minutes ago and the company founder and CEO is nowhere to be seen, people start checking their watches and glancing toward the door. My race was set to begin in minutes and my coach had not arrived. I couldn't run without my coach there. He always stood in the same spot on the fourth lap of the mile and yelled, “swing your arms, Kershner!” I couldn't run without my coach. I'd forget to swing my arms and they would just be dangling beside me the whole race.

You know what, it can be uncomfortable, awkward, and downright irritating when worship has started, and all the songs have been sung, the greeters have greeted every last person, but the pastor is nowhere to be seen.

That's what has happened in the little **Thessalonian church** in what we would call Northern Greece. Everybody has **shown up for worship**, but there's only one topic of conversation – “*we're in trouble, and the minister's away. Paul said he would come back but Paul hasn't come back – what are*

we going to do?” That’s all there is to talk about. **Paul had started the Thessalonian church – he told them about Jesus**, how Jesus was the one and only true God and how Jesus loved people so much that he took all the hate and ignorance and violence that people could throw at him and overcame it. Paul told the Thessalonians, Jesus overcame the worst of the worst so that all people could live lives of compassion and love and experience salvation in the here and now.

But the good news of Jesus had one little catch – they had to leave their old god’s behind. No more hanging out in front of the shrines, they must worship only Christ. And they couldn’t give allegiance to Rome anymore, allegiance belonged to God alone; and because of their new and higher allegiance, they lost a lot of their legal privileges.

They couldn’t do business the old way anymore either. They used to be part of the good ol’ boys club that did all their business at the local pagan temple, but because they couldn’t do business that way anymore they were segregated and picked on. Some were in jail. Attendance was down. They were in trouble, and the person they needed most was nowhere to be seen. They were all there for worship, but nobody was able to pay attention. The

ushers forgot where to stand and what to do, because everyone was thinking about Paul and how he wasn't there, and how they were in trouble.

But Paul is in Corinth. He is being hunted wherever he goes by people who want to kill him, but he keeps moving on, starting churches, preaching Christ. **In Corinth he gets to thinking about the Thessalonians; he really wants to get back up there, he tried several times but his way was blocked each time. In chapter three, Paul says that Satan blocked him.**¹ We don't know how Satan stopped him, but Paul knows, and he knows he would go back to the Thessalonians if he could – but he can't. He knows that **they are in over their heads** – that the city officials are going to **tax** them hard, **push them** out of their jobs, **chase** them out of public, **send them into hiding and prison** – all because they won't participate in the old customs and rituals of exploitation, all because they insisted on telling the truth about themselves and God.

Some at Thessalonica worried, *“What's our church going to do? I don't think we can stand up under this pressure very much longer. I don't think we can make it without Paul, but he's way down in Corinth. We're a*

¹ 1 Thess. 3:18.

sinking ship. We're never going to get anybody else like Paul. I don't know what's going to happen to our church. I just don't know with Paul gone.”

Paul wants to return to the Thessalonians, but he can't. He knows they are worried; he knows they are nervous; he knows they've been checking their watches and calendars and he knows they are trying to figure out how long to wait before going back to their old ways. And so Paul does the best thing he can. He writes them a letter.

And while the Thessalonians are at the church **worrying, musing, reflecting, crying and going through all of that**, someone walks in with a **letter**. One of the Thessalonians hastily gets the letter and begins to read it out loud.

It's from Paul.

So I don't have much of a sermon for you today. I just want to tell you what Paul told the church in Thessalonica. It's a short little letter, it only takes up about two sides of a page. I found I couldn't make many improvements on it, so I'm just going to give you the Reader's Digest version straight up and then if you have problems with it, you can just take it up with Paul.

This is what Paul said:

“My dear Thessalonians,
You are not alone. You have God on your side. You are in my thoughts and prayers. Get your mind off of me and get your mind off of your troubles. I am not the center of the church, God is. And your life as a congregation doesn’t live and die with me – it is founded and grounded in the life and work of God, so don’t worry about me so much and don’t worry about yourselves so much – you are a part of something much bigger than any of us.

Do you remember the way I conducted myself when I was with you? Did I take you for granted? Did I brow-beat you? Did I mooch off of you? No! I was gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.² I encouraged you so you would know what to do when I was gone.

Now it’s your turn. You are a part of God’s grand scheme for the whole world and if things look shaky now don’t worry because when it’s all said and done, God wins. Love triumphs over hate; goodness wins over evil; and Christ is Lord over all. I have been traveling all over Greece following God’s leading through persecution and confusion. And now you need to do

² 1 Thess. 2:7.

the same thing – quit thinking about me and hoping I'll come back. I'll come back when God makes the way clear, but no church can survive built around the preacher. The church is built around Jesus Christ. I am in Corinth and can only be in one place at a time, but the Spirit of Christ is everywhere and can sustain and preserve you in your trouble and confusion. Christ is the Lord of all, the author of our hope and salvation. Preachers come and preachers go. Old ones, and young ones; big ones, and small ones; good ones and bad ones; funny ones and sober ones – but the church is the church. You have Christ.

I warned you that there would be trials and tribulations on your journey, and I was right. I said that so that you would have endurance when tough times came along.³ I want you to prove all of the nay-sayers and doom prophets wrong. I want you to inspire all the people who are about to give up. I want you to stand firm. Your faith isn't built on gimmicks and programs, it isn't built on your resume' – it's built on the gospel that came to you not only in words but with power and deep conviction.⁴ Remember the reason you exist – it's because God called you, formed you, and has sustained you with the Holy Spirit. When you put your faith to work it's

³ 1 Thess. 3:1-5.

⁴ 1 Thess. 1:5.

like Jesus is working right there with you. Show them that they’re wrong when they say, “*The attendance will go down now that Paul’s not here.*” Show them that they’re wrong when they say “*the offerings are going to drop off now that Paul is not here.*” Show them that they’re wrong when they say, “*I think the members will drift off now that Paul’s not here.*” Show them that they are wrong.

Stand together, side by side, rooted firmly in the work that God has begun in you. The most basic way to show everyone that God is alive in you is when you love each other and when you honor God with your mind and bodies.⁵ Be ambitious in a good way, not ambitious about all the usual things people think about when they hear the word “ambition.” Be ambitious about God and letting God live through you.⁶ Be ambitious about that! Renew your faith, increase your love, be grateful in every circumstance and endure in hope no matter how difficult it is to be a Christian, because your existence is established by God and God will not forget what He has begun.⁷”

⁵ 1 Thess. 4:8-9.

⁶ 1 Thess. 4:11.

⁷ 1 Thess. 5:16-18.

One scholar rightly said that there are two things that are absolutely essential to the church: **Jesus Christ and human need.**⁸

In that place where the church dwells are the physically hungry and people who are spiritually hungry, people who are rich and people who are poor, the haves and the have-nots, the educated and the uneducated, those who believe and those who do not believe. People who are at war with God and at war with themselves. There are the powerful and the powerless, the high and mighty and the lowly who nobody knows. **In between is the church of Jesus Christ.** The church is called to be pictures of the gospel for the haves and the have nots, for those with means and those who are mean. The church proclaims in word and deed the Good News of a new and renewed life in Jesus Christ. The church proclaims that this Good News is for everybody of every station and nation.

As long as you have Christ and as long as you have human need, you have the church. Paul said that all the encouragement and leadership the Thessalonians need is right there in the midst of them in the **Holy Spirit.** He said the **proof is in the pudding.** He said that the evidence of the

⁸Fred Craddock, *Cherry Log Sermons*, 87.

Thessalonian's salvation and calling is by their **work produced by faith and labor prompted by love** – by the way the **Holy Spirit took root among them.**

Paul said, *“You have Christ and you have all these human needs – needs most people don't even know they have. Get your mind off me, and get your mind off your troubles as a church.”*

And then Paul closed his letter by telling the Thessalonians everything they needed to know:

“Remember this,” he said, “no matter how bad things get, you can have joy, because God is with you. No matter how discouraging things get, live prayerfully. And remember this: no matter how messed up you think you are, the Holy Spirit plans on doing nothing less than making you holy and giving you every spiritual resource you need to be faithful today.”⁹

Now I know I haven't been doing much preaching today, I haven't done much in the way of application. I've just been telling you about Paul

⁹ 1 Thess. 5:19-28.

and the Thessalonians. But it makes a lot of sense, I think. You probably don't know any Thessalonians, but can you think of anyone else who needs to know about this?

I invite you into a time of open listening. If you believe like I do that the Spirit who inspired Paul and the Thessalonians is also the Guide who inspires us, then this is a momentous time. If you are given a message, and you believe this message is to share with all of us, for our strengthening and edification, then please signal to one of the ushers and wait for a microphone to be brought to you. Let's listen together.