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CHAPTER 1

A CHURCH IS CONCEIVED

ACTS 17:1-10

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, 'These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harboured them, and these are all

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acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king – Jesus.’ And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Be honest! Have you ever pried into someone else’s mail, to read their private letter? We’ll not discuss now the morality of doing that, but instead we will share in the blessing of nosing into a letter written by Paul to a group of Christians living in the city of Thessalonica. What we are about to do is most commendable, for Paul himself wrote: ‘I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren’ (1 Thessalonians 5:27), so we are not in fact peering into a private letter.

Paul was a pattern-saint for all believers. He was not sinless; only Christ is that. Nevertheless, there is much we can learn from his life of dedication, devotion and discipline. His sacrifice and suffering for the cause of his beloved Saviour is an example to us all. Paul was used by the Holy Spirit to pen words which are preserved in our Bible today (2 Peter 3:15). We are going to study what could well have been Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonian Christians, which was almost certainly written between 50 and 51 AD.

Thessalonica was a major city for the Romans, named by Alexander the Great after his sister. Today it is the second largest city in Greece. At the time of the New Testament, it was the principal metropolis of Macedonia, being situated on a main trading route. The book of Acts says that Paul preached in the synagogue

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of Thessalonica for the space of just three Sabbath days, that being some time between two and four weeks. This is probably referring only to his time in the synagogue, as Philippians 4:16 (and 1 Thessalonians 2:9), implies that Paul was in Thessalonica much longer, if you include his work with the Gentiles. First he preached in the synagogue of the Jews where he used the Old Testament to build a bridge to Jesus Christ. As all the Bible prophecies portray or point to Christ, one can preach Jesus from any part of the Bible, for the Bible speaks of Christ. (See Luke 24:26 & 27 and Acts 8:35.) Therefore, the first converts would have a grasp of the Scriptures as a whole.

Paul kept to the main theme and essential purpose of his visit. He did not speak of himself, but of Christ, 'explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead...' (v.3). Despite the ever-present temptation to stray from the basics of the gospel, Paul refused such distracting by-paths. Jesus was the focus of his heart, and therefore of his message. Proclaiming Christ draws crowds and provokes controversy, as indeed the Thessalonians were to find. Despite Paul's awareness of this, he did not water down his message to please the crowds.

The gospel is said to be 'to the one, the aroma of death to death, and to the other the aroma of life to life' (2 Corinthians 2:16). Hence, where Christ is preached there will be both conversions and confrontations, some souls saved and others angered. This is exactly what happened in Thessalonica. When Paul preached the gospel there, some people repented and believed the gospel, and others bitterly opposed not only Paul, but also Christ himself (see Acts 9:5).

A Christian is a 'persuaded' person – he or she has been

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persuaded of the need to find peace with God, and of the truth of the gospel that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day' (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Each Christian has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and been saved.

Notice the three words: 'explaining', 'demonstrating' and 'persuaded' (vv.3 & 4). We find the same ideas in Acts 28, where Paul towards the end of his life 'explained', 'testified' and 'persuaded' people concerning Christ. No doubt Paul had matured in his faith and grown in his understanding of the Lord Jesus, but his concern remained firmly founded on the commission, 'to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature' (Mark 16:15). Christian growth did not lead to a lessening of evangelistic zeal. Paul was thorough, deep and theological in his preaching, but he never became too sophisticated for 'the simplicity which is Christ' (2 Corinthians 11:3). He began and finished his ministry well.

Paul's stay in Thessalonica was short but significant. Centuries before, as Abraham travelled he put up his tent and erected an altar. When he moved on, the altar remained as a permanent witness to the fact that a man of God had dwelt and worshipped there. Similarly, when Paul had to flee the city because of persecution, there was a permanent testimony left – men and women had been converted to Christ. Do you pray that wherever you go, you would leave an abiding witness to the glory of God? A friend who worked first in city-cleansing, but now serves as a pastor of a growing church, testifies to the fact that in every place he has lived, people were converted to Christ through his witness.

Paul was accused of turning the world upside down. Actually, the world is the wrong way up, and needs to get the right side up,

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and we are the people, under God, to do it! Dr Walter Maier said, 'Every century of history is marked by deep sorrows which have come from blind obedience to false leaders.' Christianity has always moved on despite persecution and difficulty. The opposition to Paul was so great that he was sent over 50 miles away to Berea. (Paul was going to face persecution there too). In the book of Acts, we read of Paul at times escaping opposition (Acts 9:23-25) and at other times, staying resolutely in the same place to face trouble if need be (Acts 21:13). Sensitivity to the Lord's leading is needed at such times. The pattern is that Paul escaped when his presence brought trouble to others, but stayed when he alone was the focus of hatred.

However, the work in Thessalonica had been remarkably blessed. Many had been converted, and Paul had a great love for these new converts. Aware that persecution can lead to stumbling (Matthew 13:21), Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church to encourage them. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'encourage' as 'to inspire with courage, to animate, to inspirit, to embolden, to stimulate, to promote the growth of.' 1 Thessalonians is bursting with hope and encouragement. If you are feeling low because the pressure has been increasing and the obstacles to joyful Christian living seem mountainous, then 1 Thessalonians is for you. There is plenty here which will bless, restore and even thrill your soul, lifting you to heights above any difficulty, and helping you to keep your focus on Christ. Let us then begin our study of it.