

Bible Study: Letters of Paul

Central Presbyterian Church

September 14, 2025

Session 2: “1 Thessalonians, Eschatological hope and faithful living”

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10; and 4:13-18

1 Thessalonians 1:2–10 (LEB)

2We give thanks to God always concerning all of you, making mention constantly in our prayers,

3because we remember your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father,

4knowing, brothers dearly loved by God, that he has chosen you,

5because our gospel did not come to you with word only, but also with power and with the Holy Spirit and with much certainty, just as you know what sort of people we became among you for your sake.

6And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

7so that you became an example to all those who believe in Macedonia and in Achaia,

8for from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith toward God has gone out, so that we have no need to say anything.

9For they themselves report about us, what sort of welcome we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

10and to await his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, the one who delivers us from the coming wrath.

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (LEB)

13Now we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep, so that you will not grieve as also the rest, who have no hope.

14For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, thus also God will bring those who have fallen asleep through Jesus together with him.

15For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who remain until the Lord's coming, will not possibly precede those who have fallen asleep.

16For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17Then we who are alive, who remain, will be snatched away at the same time together with them in the clouds for a meeting with the Lord in the air, and thus we will be together with the Lord always.

18Therefore comfort one another with these words.

The culture and ethos of 1st-century Thessalonica (Thessaloniki, modern Greece)

Geographical:

- Port City
- On Via Egnatia (major Roman road from west to east)
- Hub for trade, travel and cultural exchange

Political

- Free city of Rome, capital of Macedonia
- Self-governing
- Certain tax exemptions

Population

- 30k to 100k
- Greeks, Roman settlers, Jews

Economy

- Trade, shipping, craftsmanship
- Business: Artisans; merchants; labourers; elite wealthy landowners

Culture / Social

- Rigid social hierarchies tied to wealth, citizenship, patronage (note 1 Thess 4:11 "working with your hands" indicate social status of Thessalonian believers)
- Hellenistic, Greek the lingua franca

- Imperial (Roman) ideology; emperor worship; citizens expected to show loyalty through participation in civic and religious events
- Religious pluralism
 - Greek Paganism: worship of Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Artemis, Cabirus
 - Eastern Cults: Mystery religions like Isis and Serapis
 - Emperor Cult: imperial worship a civic duty, an outward sign of loyalty to Rome
 - Judaism
 - (not 1 Thess 1:9 “turn from idols to serve the living and true God”)
- Social values
 - Greco-Roman – Honour, patronage and reciprocity
 - Public benefaction (euergetism) by elites funded civic projects, expecting loyalty in return
 - Limited social mobility
 - Outsiders (including Christians) subject to exclusion

Ethos (guiding beliefs, values and character of the population in general)

- Civic pride and loyalty
- Pragmatism and materialism (success and stability valued)
- Religious devotion
 - Prevalence of cults and temples indicates a spiritual hunger
 - Greco-Roman views of the afterlife were vague or pessimistic (Epicurean or Stoic); lacks hope of resurrection (see 1 Thess 4:13)
 - Honour/shame governed social interactions. Reputation mattered. Challenges to civic norms (monotheism) provoked hostility (see Acts 17:5-7)

Ethos of the Thessalonian Christians

- Faith; Love; Hope (1 Thess 1:3)
- Perseverance in persecution (see 1 Thess 1:6)
- Missional zeal (see 1 Thess 1:8)
- Radical conversion (see 1 Thess 1:9)
- Community and mutual support (see 1 Thess 4:9-10)

Challenges faced by the Thessalonian Christians

- Persecution
- Cultural tension (refusal to participate in pagan festivals and emperor worship was seen as subversive)

- Eschatological confusion (anxiety about deceased believers – 1 Thess 4:13) – reflects a new faith grappling with Greco-Roman pessimistic views of death)
- Social and economic pressure (Thessalonian believers were likely of the lower-class – 1 Thess 4:11 – and would have been subject to the obligations of patron-client systems and/or trade guilds that required pagan rituals).

Cultural and ethos contrasts that faced Thessalonian believers

- Monotheism versus polytheism
- Hope versus despair
- Community versus individualism
- Eternal perspective versus temporal focus

The cultural and ethos backdrop explains the challenges Paul addresses:

- Encouragement in persecution (1:6, 2:14)
- Eschatological hope (4:13-18)
- Holiness and ethics (4:3-8, 4:11-12)
- Community focus (4:9-10, 5:11)

Theological and practical highlights of 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Theological

- God's sovereignty in salvation (1:4, developed later in Romans 8:29-30)
- Power of the Gospel (1:5) arises from its divine origin, delineating it from any human philosophy
- Eschatological hope (1:10) – not a passive waiting but in active service and witness
- Joy in suffering (1:6) – a supernatural perspective: suffering is tied to participation in Christ's redemptive work (e.g., Tertullian, late 1st-century, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church")

Practical

- Exemplary faith (Thessalonians a model for others, challenging believers today to live in ways that inspire and influence surrounding communities)
- Active evangelism (1:8) – a call to Christians to bold public witness, even in hostile environments
- Radical conversion (1:9) complete reorientation of life

- Hopeful endurance (1:10) – perseverance, a reminder to believers on eternal realities amid temporal struggles

Theological and practical highlights of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Theological

- Resurrection hope (4:14) is a cornerstone of Christian theology (1 Cor 15:12-20). The dead are not lost but will rise.
- Christ's return – a personal and triumphant event. Fulfills Old Testament expectations of God's intervention (e.g., Zech 4:5) but reorients them around Christ
- Union with Christ – phrases like "in Christ" and "with the Lord" emphasize the believer's inseparable bond with Jesus in life, death and eternity
- Eschatological unity – unites the living and the dead, dispelling fears of separation and affirming God's inclusive salvation plan

Practical

- Hopeful grief – (4:13) validates grief but transforms it with hope
 - Communal encouragement (4:18) – the church is a supportive community, particularly in times of loss and uncertainty
 - Eschatological readiness: Vivid imagery of Christ's return motivates believers to live with purpose, knowing that the believers' ultimate destiny is eternal fellowship with God
 - Countercultural witness: the Greco-Roman world had little hope for the afterlife, making radical the Thessalonian believers' belief in resurrection
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Suggested discussion points

- Name/describe any parallelisms you see between today's culture/ethos and 1st-century Thessalonica, believers or not.
- How does Paul characterize faith and hope in his letter to the Thessalonians?
- How do you understand "eschatological hope" and does it have any bearing on your walk with Christ today?