

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
Resonating with Christ  
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8-2-15

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I want to open with this question: what would be the very best thing someone could say about us as a community? Take a moment to think about that question. Now turn to your neighbor and tell them what you think the very best thing that someone could say about us. Ready, Set, Go.

If you weren't here a few weeks ago, I want to let you know that for the next 5 weeks, we'll be journeying together through Paul's first letter to a church in the city of Thessalonica, that Greek crossroad city. Paul's prayer for the people of Thessalonica, and I believe the Spirit's intention for us, the readers of this letter, is to grow as people who display the Christ-like characteristics of strength of faith, steadfastness of hope, and abounding in love.

But how do we get there when our community continues to grow and shift, and the culture that surrounds us is so unpredictable? How do we get there when I still struggle with weights and burdens, hopes and anticipations in my own life, especially when what I'm going through might be very different from the person sitting down the row from me? These are questions that are intimately relatable to us, no?

So before we begin this morning, would you join me in prayer, and ask that the Holy Spirit would speak to us as he spoke through Paul to the Church in Thessalonica?

**Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.**

**We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.**

How do we grow in grace as people living in challenging and ever-changing circumstances? This is a question to which we can relate.

The Thessalonians are an example of a people gathered from a wide variety of backgrounds and values, who gathered in one place. We read about this last time in Acts 17. There, Luke describes Paul's visit, going first to the synagogue, where he reasoned with them from the Scriptures. He met with the Jews, but it also says that a great many Greeks also joined them. So Paul's message was spreading beyond the Jewish community. What we know about life in Thessalonica is that there was tension in their midst, everything was not just gumdrops and lollipops.

In 168 BC, the Greek region of Macedonia, that had once been united under the rule of Alexander the Great, fell to the Romans—sending this once beacon city into a time of great poverty. But under Alexander the Great and his father Phillip II's rule, Thessalonica had established good relationships with Rome, so because it was such a valuable trade route, it continued as a prosperous Roman port city.

You will see on this map that the city of Thessalonica is located at the intersection of the Egnation Road (trade route that connected Rome with the east) and the Thermaic Gulf. Thessalonica was a key to the economic health and supply of the rest of the Mediterranean, connecting the inland resources of Macedonia, rich agricultural land, mining, forestry, and immense raw materials with the rest of the region. When Macedonia fell to the Roman Empire in 168 BC, there was a large community of Romans who settled in Thessalonica. What you had now were three great cultures converging in one city: Greek, Roman, and Jewish.



When Paul begins to evangelize and the church begins in Thessalonica, these are the people who were present together: Jews (who gathered in the synagogue), Greeks, and Romans. What I want to do briefly is look a little closer at each of these groups to see how they provide a wonderful example for us, how they smooth one another's hard edges, see one another's blind spots, and so grow together in grace.

The first group is the Jews. What we know about the Jews of the first century is that they were a people who held closely to their history; they had a story and a heritage they held near to their hearts. There are three big promises that the Jews clung to: the Abrahamic Covenant (that is, that God covenanted himself to them and promised to be their God, God would bless them to be a blessing, God made that unending promise to Abraham that he would always be faithful to). The second was the Mosaic Covenant where they were given the Law, the Torah that showed them how to live as God's people. And the third was the Davidic promise that through the line of King David, a Messiah would come who would deliver and rescue them.

The opening scene of the great musical *Fiddler on the Roof* describes it perfectly. The Jews are described as being like a fiddler on the roof, trying to keep their balance in difficult circumstances while always hearing the sounds of their history. The movie opens with the hero Red Tevye telling the audience:

“A fiddler on the roof, sounds crazy, yeah? But here in our little village of Anatevka, you might say that every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn’t easy. You might ask, why do you stay up there if it’s so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home. How do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word, TRADITION! Because of this tradition, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.”

The Jews had a deep devotion to history and tradition, but there were also Greeks, and the Greeks were much different. They weren’t so fascinated with family and heritage, they were interested in ideas and wisdom. With people like Plato as their teacher, the Greeks—to a fault—were in a constant search for meaning, for essence, for idea. In a way, I think the Greeks are like the Millennial Generation. Even in their golden age, they were led by Alexander, who was hardly 30 years old and had that passion and zeal, that youthful infatuation with truth and beauty and wisdom. The Greek language became the lingua franca of the Mediterranean, and even after it fell to the Romans, they held on to the Greek Language because it was so vast and universally adopted. Paul tells us that the Greeks were persuaded by the Gospel, as well.

Then the Romans, the Romans came in and brought stability, they brought the Republic, law, innovation. The Romans brought innovations, like the Aqueduct, that enabled water to be transported great lengths which allowed for vast cities to be built. The Romans also built roads that connected vast distances to their center Rome. The Roman legions brought order and stability by the sword to the places where the empire spread and their allegiance was ultimately to Caesar, or the other Greek word for the Latin word Caesar is *Kurios* (Lord). If the Greeks were the youthful, passionate idealists, the Romans are the pragmatists; they liked structure, order, and stability. Romans looked to Caesar as Lord and ruler, and so what impacted them was the message that there was another Caesar, another *Kurios*, another Lord—Jesus Christ the Messiah who won them by the power of his love, by the authority of the Gospel.

These three cultures are all present in the Church in Thessalonica. They are present in all the churches Paul interacted with in the first century. This morning’s passage begins: **Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.**

God the Father—this was a reference familiar to the Jews.

The Lord Jesus Christ—*Kurios*, the new Caesar, this drew the Romans in.

Grace—*Charis* is one of the most powerful Greek words and ideas in Greek culture.

Why is it worth our consideration to recognize these three cultures together in one church? Because this cultural stew is every bit as present today in this church, and

growing in faith, hope, and love will mean that we understand how all three of these cultures are present in us.

While Amy and the kids and I were traveling in Minnesota, Christian had a chance to meet some of his cousins at a family gathering that he had never met. And during their play together, there was an altercation over a train (to those of you who know him, this comes as no surprise.) In the altercation, Christian pushed his cousin Beckett. And being the responsive parents we are, we pulled him aside, looked him in the eyes, and spoke clearly: “We don’t do that.” What I communicated to him was that our family has a history, a way of being. I wanted him to see that in my eyes and know that he was a part of a larger story that did not involve pushing others for trains. This is a very Jewish response; he is a part of our family, and our family behaves in certain ways with others.

We also have people in our church and in our community who are in the Greek time of their lives. Maybe they’re in college or in young adulthood where ideas are terribly important to them. In this phase of life, people question things, they challenge the ideas and mores of their culture with passion and zeal. This is what we might call the Greek time of our lives.

Then the Romans, Romans love order, laws, and stability. When people get closer to retirement, perhaps they have worked hard to earn a living for their family and have saved for retirement and want to make sure there is a system set up to make sure they’re taken care of in their retirement—this is a very Roman way of thinking.

Then, finally, as we approach death, we go back to a Jewish way of thinking. When my grandfather was in his final days, all he wanted was to be surrounded by the faces of his family. His family, his heritage was incredibly important to him, so you might say that this was a Jewish way of seeing the world.

All of these people were together in one church, in Thessalonica, and miraculously, by God’s amazing grace, it worked. Paul begins his letter by saying **We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father.** Why?

Paul says in verse 5 that it was because **they received the gospel in word in the power of the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.** The Thessalonians became God’s instrument of grace and peace and love, because the Word came to them in the vastness of their diversity and became their centering principle. All these different stories and histories were gathered into one identity; people who encountered and were changed by the risen Lord Jesus who became their identity.

You know, there is such a diversity of stories in the church today: mainline, evangelical, Catholic; traditional, contemporary; conservative, liberal; charismatic or contemplative; soul-saving or community-reforming. There are Romans, Greeks and Jews, all gathered under one roof, and if everyone is clamoring for their individual voice to be heard, we—as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 – are **a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.** There is so

much noise in the church today, because it's our *Romanness*, our *Greekness*, our *Jewishness* that is taking precedent.

Paul is so proud of the Thessalonians because the Gospel came and took root. The Gospel, Jesus Christ the Kurios, the real Caesar, whose power is not in might but in weakness, in service, giving himself for our sins on the cross, so that we might all be one no matter what our heritage or ideas or order—all are one in Christ Jesus. This is what happens when, as Paul says, the Gospel comes in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When the Gospel takes root in a place, and it comes in power, the Word of the Lord sounds forth with the clarity of a trumpet, it resonates. But not just in Word only. When the Gospel comes in power, the Spirit wind of God blows through us, as God's special instrument of grace and peace and love. When the gospel is primary, we become uniquely singular in our tune.

When the Gospel comes in power, the Spirit gives power for people to live differently. When the Gospel comes in power, blind eyes are opened. When the Gospel comes in power, prisoners are set free. When the Gospel comes in power, people are released from addictions, anxieties, insecurities and fears. When the Gospel comes in power, people are so consumed with Jesus' love and conviction that they look closely at their own issues rather than fixating on other people's problems. When the Gospel comes in power, communities like ours get down to the business of what Paul calls the Work of Faith, the Labor of Love, and the Steadfastness of Hope. This is what happens when the Gospel comes in power, and it begins when a community ceases to be known by categories like Roman, Greek, or Jew; Millennial, Gen X, Boomer; Traditional, Contemporary; or whatever other categories we can come up with, and is known as a place where the Gospel is primary.

The very best thing, I think, that could be said of us is that we are a church, like the Thessalonians, where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is present—not just in word, but also in power and presence of the Spirit. Let's pray.