

## “Turning the World Upside Down”

Introduction: Now that we have celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, we will be embarking on a new sermon series for the next nine or ten weeks in which we want to draw out some of the implications of the resurrection for the church. To do so, we will be working our way through Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, guided by the theme: “Holiness and Hope in a Hostile and Hurting World.” As this title indicates, the faith that we profess is often met by the world with indifference at best, and hostility at worst. And yet, the good news we bring is what this hurting world truly needs! How are we to live with holiness and hope (distinctively and trustingly), as God calls us into his mission to renew and restore all things, at home, at work, in our neighborhoods, and in the many other places of our daily lives?

1 Thessalonians is thought to be the very first letter the apostle Paul wrote to a church, so it provides a helpful window into the early Christian movement, a movement that many thought was turning the world upside down, and this was not a compliment! How these early Christians lived and moved into their world can help us, I believe, understand how to live and move into our own.

### I. Jesus’ call to receive and extend his peace

A. Since a number of you were unable to be with us on Easter (and please know that we missed you!), I’d like to begin with a very quick review of our text for that day, John 20:19-23, which sets up where we want to head over the next few months. There, on the evening of the day of resurrection, we are given a picture of the infant church that is about as far from a healthy church as you can get! We see fearful disciples of Jesus, hiding behind locked doors, probably guilt-ridden for abandoning Jesus on the cross, and not wanting anything to do with the world around them! But we saw that the risen Jesus did not abandon his church. Rather, he turned this motley crew into a missional community through the pronouncement of his peace. It would move eleven men from hiding behind locked doors to launching a faith that would grow to somewhere between 3-5 million followers by the end of the third century.

B. The peace that Jesus pronounces encompasses deep, holistic relational wholeness - shalom. It brings about healing in our relationship with God, with others, with ourselves, and with creation. It is a peace we are called, in our brokenness, to first receive, and then, empowered by the Spirit to extend into the broken and hurting areas of our world. This summarizes in succinct fashion the dynamics of a healthy, missional, church, one that, as we express it in our vision statement, receives and extends the hospitality (peace) of Jesus.

### II. The church established by God . . .

A. Not surprisingly, we will see the receiving and extending dynamics of this peace being worked out in the church of the Thessalonians. This church was formed, the account in Acts reveals, sometime during Paul’s second missionary journey, in the years 49-50 AD. It was actually the first time the good news set foot in what we now know as Europe. Thessalonica, which still exists today, was founded in the fourth century BC by one of Alexander the Great’s army officers, who named the city after his wife. By the first century, situated as it was on the north coast of Greece, and located on the 700-mile Via Egnatia (the Roman “Route 90”), Thessalonica had become a center of commerce, a mixture of religions, and a destination point for many immigrants. It was a truly cosmopolitan city.

B. On arriving in Thessalonica, Paul followed his usual pattern and went to the synagogue to speak. As he taught from the Scriptures, what we now know as the OT, he wanted the people there to know two things. First, that the Messiah (“Christ”) had to suffer and die and rise from the dead. Second, that this Messiah was Jesus. These were challenging teaching points. What kind of Messiah would allow himself to be crucified? If there was going to be a resurrection, wasn’t it going to be at the end of time, and include all God’s people, not just one guy? And wasn’t Jesus the son of a carpenter? But the Spirit was evidently at work. As Paul would remind his readers, “...our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Th. 1:5). And so we see that a mixture of Jews, Greeks, and prominent women were fully convicted by Paul’s teaching and began meeting together.

C. In his opening greeting in his letter to these folks, Paul identifies this meeting together with the word “church.” “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . .” The word “church” that Paul uses describes an assembly of citizens (it’s pagan, Greek background), as well as the gathered community of Israel (it’s Jewish, Hebrew background). Putting the two together, Paul declares the church to be the community that derives its life from, like branches in a vine, the God who is the Father and his Son who is the Lord. And then Paul offers this: “Grace to you and peace.” This community, in other words, has been formed by grace, God’s undeserved favor, and they have experienced his peace. In response, they are to continue to live by grace and extend his peace.

### III. . . . to be a holy and hopeful community

A. One of the things Paul is doing here is distinguishing the church from every other community or assembly in the city - it was a unique community that had been assembled by the action of God the Father in Christ the Son. This meant, significantly, that its loyalty was due, not to the Roman Empire and its gods, and the peace they purported to bring, but to one particular god, the God of Israel, who had now revealed himself through his Son, Jesus. As such, its vocation was to be a public witness to the character and mission of this God, and it was this public witness, not just as individuals but as a community, instituted by the preaching of Paul and his companions, that had begun to turn the world, according to some, “upside down” (17:6).

B. What does that mean? It means that the status quo was somehow being threatened by the good news, by the fact that the crucified Messiah was now the risen and reigning Lord. It was perceived as a threat because it meant that the one who thought he was king and lord over all, the Roman emperor, was not. There was a new king in town. This was a threatening, upside down truth on at least two levels.

1. First, it’s threatening because of the nature of the foundation of the church. Many, if pushed, would say that favor is something that has to be earned or deserved. But to proclaim, and seek to live, the good news of grace, which begins with divine favor and extends out into all our other relationships means that favor is given, and received, as a gift. It sets forth a remarkably upside-down way to think, and live, as least as far as the world is concerned.

2. Second, it’s threatening because of the nature of the life the church was to live. To reject the imperial cult, and to refuse to take part in the city’s worship life, but to instead gather to worship the Lord Jesus and seek to live a life of holiness and hope, would be perceived as being politically, socially, and economically offensive, if not just flat out weird. It’s worth noting that one of the men identified in the greeting, Silvanus, also known as Silas, was one of the two men the gathering of church leaders in Jerusalem—the Jerusalem Council—sent out

with instructions for all the new, predominantly Gentile churches that were springing up. Such churches were to feel welcomed into a faith that came out of a Jewish background. They didn't, it was determined, to first become Jewish (cf. circumcision) in order to then become Christian. But as they went forward, the council did instruct them to abstain from food sacrificed to idols and from sexual immorality (Acts 15:22-29). They were to live lives, in other words, that reflected the purity and faithfulness of the God who had rescued them and redeemed them. Both of these matters are taken up by Paul in his letter (1:9; 4:3), which we'll look at in more detail when we come to them. But for now, they simply, yet boldly, called these early Christians to live lives that stood apart from, and therefore seemed threatening, to the culture around them - lives of holiness and hope. As they did so, it seemed to many of that city's residents as if their world was being turned upside down. The folks in Thessalonica became so upset that they eventually ran Paul and Silas out of town.

C. So we can begin to understand why Paul, just a few short months later, would want to write to this congregation to see how they were doing, to strengthen them in the faith, and to keep encouraging them toward missional living. Paul, of course, knew that when we ground our life on the rock that is King Jesus, risen from the dead, everything changes. It may seem like everything has been turned upside down, but it is then, and only then, that we truly begin to see things right side up.

If you want to get a wonderfully produced, seven-minute animated overview of the whole letter, go to You Tube, type in "1 Thessalonians Bible Project" and enjoy!

Now, let us go to the table of the Lord and enjoy the hospitality Jesus has for us there as we remember and celebrate the event that began to turn the world upside down. As we go, let us know that the closer we get to Jesus, the more we walk with him and receive his love, the more likely it is that his love will rub off on others.