



Becoming a Model Church

Sermons from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

Introducing the church

Acts 17:1-15

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I have in my hands an old letter which begins, *"Hello one and all..."* and then goes on to tell lots of stories, *"We've just come from a midwifery case! Oh dear, let me tell you the events..."*, *"The sick surround us..."*, *"A man on a stretcher was brought to us. We did what we could..."*, *"Brenda your cake arrived! It is so nice. We had a bit at tea time..."*

Without background, it's hard to know exactly what is going on: who was the writer? Who were they writing to? What were the circumstances? But once you know the background everything makes sense: the writer is my mother, Barbara Hallifax, a 31 year old missionary in the foothills of the Himalayas; she's working in a team, taking the Gospel from one village to another; one member of the team is a midwife-nurse; Brenda is her sister who sends English treats like cake to cheer up the team, and so on....

On Sunday mornings this term, we're planning, God-willing, to make our way through one of the letters in the New Testament, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Without background the letter would be hard to understand but God has given us the book of Acts, to provide us with the backstory and help us get to grips with 1 Thessalonians. Our prayer, this term, is that as we learn about this young lively church, we too will become a "model church." *"You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia" (1:7)*

This morning our task is to try and understand the church at Thessalonica from Acts chapter 17 and then to draw out some immediate lessons for us today.

1. The Backstory

Many of you will know already that God appointed the apostle Paul and his teams to spread the Gospel across the world. James, John and Peter spread the Gospel among the Jews, but God appointed Paul to take the Gospel into the world of non-Jews or Gentiles, to people like you and me. *"Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ..."*

(Ephesians 3:8) How did Paul spread the Gospel around the world? Well he set out from his home church in Antioch on three missionary journeys. Each time he took a small team with him. As a general rule he hit the big cities and expected the Gospel to spread out from there to the surrounding areas. As a general rule, he started with the Jews in the city, because they already knew about God from the OT, and they knew that God had promised a Messiah or Saviour. So they were “ready” so to speak, to hear the Good News that God’s promised Messiah had come. Once the Jews had heard the Gospel in a city, the Gospel would spread from them to the Gentile pagans in the city. After visiting a city Paul would move on to the next city, just like Jesus did, led by the Lord. Then, some months later, Paul would visit those churches again to strengthen the believers and appoint elders in each church. That was Paul’s God-given strategy.

Paul’s second missionary journey starts in Acts 16 from Antioch. Paul has Silas with him and at Lystra young Timothy joins him. They want to strengthen the new Christians win new converts and take with them the rulings of the Jerusalem council. He is led to the port of Troas and then on to Europe, to the region of Macedonia. The first church he plants is in Philippi where a number of people were wonderfully converted, notably, a wealthy lady by the name of Lydia a dealer in purple cloth, a demon-possessed slave girl and the local jailer. But Paul and Silas had a very rough time in Philippi, severely flogged, thrown into prison and yet they were praying and singing hymns to God in the middle of the night!

They left Philippi and travelled to Thessalonica. How they travelled those 100 miles bruised and beaten we will never know! Thessalonica was the capital city of Macedonia, and as was his custom he went to the synagogue to preach to the Jews first. The preaching of the Gospel met with great success! People from different backgrounds, not just Jewish were converted! And that’s when the trouble began. Whenever God blesses, Satan is close behind, and Satan always uses people. The Jews were jealous! Jealous of Paul’s spiritual gifts, jealous of his influence, jealous of his “success.” What do jealous people do? They set out to harm the person they are jealous of. They hired rent-a-mob but since they couldn’t find Paul and Silas they dragged the man who was showing them hospitality, Jason, into court and made up lies about Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas had caused trouble all over the world, he and his team were defying Caesar's decrees and breaking the emperor’s rules! They were saying that Jesus is King instead of Caesar!

Well you can’t charge people who aren’t in court so they let Jason go but, it says in the NIV, “put Jason and the others on bail.” Some people think that they told Jason never to allow Paul into his house again, but we don’t know. The young Christians in the church sent Paul and Silas away that very night on a 50 mile journey to Berea: *“As soon as it was night the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.” (v. 10)*

Well, the opposition did not stop there. Paul’s enemies followed him to Berea and stirred up such a crowd that he had to flee Berea as well. Back in Thessalonica, the jealous Jews persecuted the new Christians, “You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.” (2:14). And they spread lies about Paul, which he answers in the 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

What happened to this persecuted young church after Paul forced to leave? Paul was afraid that Satan would have destroyed the church. He tried to go back there to encourage the church many times himself but Satan stopped him (1 Thessalonians 2:18) Eventually he sent young Timothy back. And Timothy found a thriving church, for Jesus Christ is more powerful than Satan! *“Timothy has now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.”* (3:6) All the attempts of the jealous Jews to rubbish Paul had failed, *“He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.”* (3:6) When Paul heard this encouraging news, he got out his pen and wrote 1 Thessalonians to encourage the young believers to keep going, and to answer with truth some of the lies that Satan had seeded into the church.

(2) Some first lessons

#1 A word to every Christian—persecution will come your way

One day, in some way, you will be persecuted for being a Christian, just as these Christians were. It may come from your neighbours, it may come from work colleagues, your family, it may come from the state, but everyone who follows Jesus Christ will suffer persecution. I can remember many years ago after preaching this, someone came up to me and told me off! I shouldn't talk about persecution and the Christian life being difficult, I should only talk about the blessings of being a Christian! I cannot remember what I said back then, but if someone came to me today with that objection I would quote: *“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”* (2 Tim 3:12) and *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 1Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you.”* (Matthew 5:11-12) and *“No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me they will persecute you also..”* (John 15:20). Paul and Barnabas *“returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. (How did they encourage them?) “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”* (Acts 14:21-22). Preachers are not being gloomy when they warn their congregations about persecution; they are being faithful and realistic for persecution is the norm! If there is someone here this morning who is being persecuted for their faith, be encouraged!

#2 A word to Christian leaders and especially pastors—you will be opposed

Second place, a word to all Christian leaders, present or future, and especially to Christian pastors—you will be opposed! When Satan attacks a church, he goes for the leaders, and if possible, the full-time leaders. His reasoning is that if he can strike the shepherds he can scatter the flock (Zech 13:7). Just as a virus heads for the nucleus of a cell, so Satan heads for church pastors. Some of you will know that one year ago, Chinese pastor Wang Yi was arrested along with many members of his church. They let the members go and let his wife go, but in the last few days they have sentenced Pastor Wang Yi to 9 years imprisonment for undermining the state, a lie, if ever there was one. Let us pray for him.

As many of you know, my mom and dad, under God, planted the Asian Christian Fellowship in Wolverhampton, a marvellous work of God. But on two occasions over those 25 years, Satan attacked my dad. Interestingly, although he had fellow leaders, Satan focussed his attack on the main leader. On the first occasion, a big family envied my dads' influence and godliness, and wanted some of that for themselves, so

they rose up against him. On the second occasion, about 8 years later, an older couple, wealthy, educated and just out of Bible College full of the pride that comes from knowledge, slipped into the church, again jealous of my father's influence. On both of these occasions, I observed these things. First, the jealous opponents spread gossip and lies about my dad around the church. "Mr Summers is too old to be a pastor they said." "Mr Summers doesn't understand the Indians" - having lived in India and Pakistan for 20 years he was more Indian than Indians born in the UK! Second, the leaders and especially my dad, just kept on being the same godly and humble and loving leaders they had always been, they made no change to the preaching or the vision of the church—they just kept on going. Thirdly, God scattered the opposition without the leaders having to lift a finger. One by one they all drifted away, fulfilling Deuteronomy 28:7, *"The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven."* And fourthly, the church continued to grow and flourish even more so after the storm had passed.

I warn every church leader and especially every church pastor, that one day Satan will attack them; it is not a matter of if, but a matter of when. And I urge every church member, to protect your church leaders and to be on your guard against anyone who seeks to undermine your loving, godly humble elders and pastors.

#3 A word about church planting—you only need a small team!

Manor Park Church was planted with a larger team of people who lived this side of the water, and that's how Community Church Warndon was also planted, but it's not the only way to plant a church. The church of Thessalonica was planted by just Paul and Silas and young Timothy! As we think and pray about the needs of areas around Worcester who need the Gospel, let us remember that if God so pleases, a church can be planted by a very small team—and in a very short time.

#4 A Word about preaching—preaching must answer the lies of Satan

As we study this letter together we are going to discover that Paul answers the lies that Satan has seeded into the church. And so we learn that one of the purposes and duties of preaching. Preaching must address the lies that Satan seeds either into the local church or into the wider church. Paul's opponents spread the lie that Paul and Silas did not really love the church, how could they have left so soon if they really did love the people? They took a fact—that Paul and Silas had to leave quite soon and twisted it to a lie—Paul and Silas didn't love the people. The lie needed answering, not so much to defend Paul's reputation, but more importantly to defend the Gospel. He tells the church that he was "torn from them" and that he has tried on numerous occasions to come and see them. He corrects the lies Satan seeded into the church.

All true preaching must do the same; it must answer the lies which Satan sows into the church. That may be at a local level, into the local church, or at a national level. Last term we took time out to answer the lies Satan is sowing into our culture about gender and sexuality and the roles of men and women. That's exactly what the Holy Spirit tells preachers to do, through the example of this letter.

#5 A word to the church—Christ Jesus is Triumphant

Let us end with a triumphant note! All the attempts of Satan to destroy the church, either through persecution or through lies are destined to fail, utterly fail, for Jesus Christ is the omnipotent head of the church who reigns over the universe for the sake of the church, and who has said: *“I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)* In fact, when Satan attacks the church, it makes the church even stronger! Unbelievers see the faith of Christians under fire and they are attracted to it—that's what is happening in China, which by one estimate could become the most Christian nation by 2030! And when deceivers enter the church, attack the leaders, and try to scatter the flock, the church learns to be on their guard against divisive individuals in future! Satan always shoots himself in the foot! Jesus is the triumphant King of kings and the Lord of lords, who will guard and protect His church! We need not fear!

And what Jesus does for his church, collectively, he will do for each believer individually. He will protect you, he will keep you, he will watch over you. Whatever trial you are passing through, whatever heartache, whatever season of doubt or fear, however weak you may feel: *“He is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.” (Jude 24)*