

Acts 17:1-10 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Acts 17:1-9 The Message (MSG)

17 ¹⁻³ They took the road south ... to Thessalonica, where there was a community of Jews. Paul went to their meeting place, as he usually did when he came to a town, and for three Sabbaths running he preached to them from the Scriptures. He opened up the texts so they understood what they'd been reading all their lives: that the Messiah absolutely *had* to be put to death and raised from the dead—there were no other options—and that “this Jesus I’m introducing you to is that Messiah.”

⁴⁻⁵ Some of them were won over and joined ranks with Paul and Silas, among them a great many God-fearing Greeks and a considerable number of women from the aristocracy. But the hard-line Jews became furious over the conversions. Mad with jealousy, they rounded up a bunch of brawlers off the streets and soon had an ugly mob terrorizing the city as they hunted down Paul and Silas.

⁵⁻⁷ They broke into Jason’s house, thinking that Paul and Silas were there. When they couldn’t find them, they collared Jason and his friends instead and dragged them before the city fathers, yelling hysterically, “These people are out to destroy the world, and now they’ve shown up on our doorstep, attacking everything we hold dear! And Jason is hiding them, these traitors and turncoats who say Jesus is king and Caesar is nothing!”

⁸⁻⁹ The city fathers and the crowd of people were totally alarmed by what they heard. They made Jason and his friends post heavy bail and let them go while they investigated the charges.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 I, Paul, together here with Silas and Timothy, send greetings to the church at Thessalonica, Christians assembled by God the Father and by the Master, Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace be with you! God's robust peace!

Convictions of Steel

²⁻⁵ Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you're in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God our Father. It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions.

⁵⁻⁶ You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated the Master. Although great trouble accompanied the Word, you were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit!—taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble.

⁷⁻¹⁰ Do you know that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore—you're the message! People come up and tell us how you received us with open arms, how you deserted the dead idols of your old life so you could embrace and serve God, the true God. They marvel at how expectantly you await the arrival of his Son, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescued us from certain doom.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. AMEN

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Messiah, Jesus, your followers established churches in communities near and far. Take us outside of ourselves and teach us to give away what you have given to us. Show us how to witness to your presence in places near and far. Amen.

We have taken quite a leap from last week's text from the 3rd chapter of Acts where Peter and John, still in Jerusalem had healed the lame man who daily begged for alms outside of the temple. To this morning's text where the Apostle Paul, once a persecutor of the follows of Christ, has been transformed into a believer and is traveling around the region to share the word of what God has done for us through the life and death of his beloved Son Jesus, the Messiah.

This morning we hear in the Acts text of the experience that Paul and his companion Silas had in Thessalonica. As was his practice, Paul began his ministry in Thessalonica by preaching to the Jews of the town in their common meeting place. Although many had come to believe that Jesus was indeed the long awaited Messiah, they did not understand why the Messiah had to suffer and die.

Paul recognizing that Jesus' suffering and death was a stumbling block to believing that Jesus was truly the long awaited Messiah for many of the Jews, Paul went to great lengths to connect what had happen to Jesus to the words of the prophets from Scriptures. The prophets of old had prophesied that indeed the Messiah would come and then be rejected, humiliated and put to death by his own people. And then after 3 days, he would rise again.

For many of the Jews, the words spoken by Paul brought them to believe that indeed Jesus was their long awaited Messiah. In addition to sharing this good news of the Messiah with the Jews, Paul also shared the good news of the Messiah with the Gentiles of the city, many of whom also came to believe Jesus was indeed the one sent by God to bring hope and restore them to wholeness.

So, we see in this text that the community of believers is now growing beyond the descendants of Abraham and has become open to people of all nations just as God had promised in his covenant with Abraham. As God told Abraham that his descendants would be many and that they, the Israelites would be blessed and through them all nations would be blessed. And here in this morning text we see that extension of God's blessing beginning to take shape.

It could be compared to the birthing of a younger sibling in a family. There was not only great pain in the birthing process, but becoming a family often presents its struggles, even when it is the family of God. As there is often jealousy brewing toward those who are new to the community, especially when they do not

embrace the practices that had always been the way for their people to affirm their commitment and loyalty to the group. And the older sibling – in this case – some of the Jews – were jealous and angry at the attention and the lack of traditional practices that were being required for acceptance into their community. So, they took measures into their own hands to discredit and/or plot to harm the messengers who were advocating this new way of being God’s people. With their lives in danger, Paul and Silas make a quick exit from Thessalonica.

The second text that we heard this morning is a letter from Paul written to the Thessalonians after his visit with them. It is clear in the letter that although Paul was no longer present with the community of believers in Thessalonica that he continued to minister to them from afar. And that he had received reports probably through a variety of sources on how they were doing.

We hear in Paul’s letter that in spite of the conflict with regard to how the “older brothers” wanted to define bona-fide membership in this community of followers and all the disagreements that arose regarding those issues, the community of believers in Thessalonica stood firm. They trusted in God, and believed and spread the good news of what God had done for them through the gift of his Son Jesus. They were able to stay the course and anchor themselves in what was really important and they became known throughout the region as imitators of the ways of Christ.

In his letter to them, Paul praises the Thessalonians for their persistence in staying the course as he states in his letter, “You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and [you were] determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated the Master. Although great trouble accompanied the Word, you were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit!—taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble.”

Imitating the Master, imitating Jesus by imitating our forefathers in the faith like the Thessalonians who received Paul and Silas with open arms in spite of the consequences, who gave up their idols from their old life so you they could embrace and serve God, the true God; and who patiently and confidently lived in hope as they awaited the return of their Savior.

Those were turbulent and uncertain and even dangerous times for these young communities of followers, but they stood firm. And, I believe that their spirit, their resilience and their faith are great examples for us to rely on as we, as members of communities of believers, live through this storm.

And as I write this message, I hear that Thessalonian spirit, faith and determination captured in the words of the VBS song *Stand Strong* from last summer:

We will trust, trust in God alone
We will stand, stand upon his word
And whatever comes our way
We are strong, and we are brave

His truth, truth will be our guide
Through the day, and the darkest night
Our god will give us strength
We are strong, and we are brave and we will

Chorus:
Stand together Stand forever
We will stand strong
Standing up for God each day
We will stand strong

WE WILL STAND STRONG!!!

The birth and maturation of God's church throughout the world encountered plenty of pain and suffering. But, the followers of Christ throughout the ages Stood Strong. They trusted in God for their strength and guidance, they anchored themselves in the Word, and empowered by the Holy Spirit they found courage to be the people that God had always intended them to be.

That is: the people God has claimed as his children, the people God has named as his beloved and the people that God has abundantly blessed, so that through them (through us) the whole world gets to know the unconditional love, the faithfulness and the steadfastness of God.

AMEN