

**Whose We Are**  
**Part One. Identity**  
**I Thessalonians 1.4 and selected verses**

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This morning we start a new sermon series that will take us up through Thanksgiving.

In this series we will be exploring the oldest book in the New Testament, a letter that the apostle Paul and two of his ministry partners wrote to the church they planted in the city of Thessalonica in ancient Macedonia.

Let me tell you why I believe it is worth our while to spend a semester in this ancient letter that we call First Thessalonians. Because, even though it was written two thousand years ago to a church five thousand miles away from here, it feels like it was written last Thursday to us.

Here are just a couple of reasons I say that.

First, Paul focuses a lot on *living a life of love*, which is right where God has had us, and where I think He will continue to have us for the foreseeable future. Paul's letter overflows with encouragement. He celebrates their wonderful affection for each other and the great strides they've taken in learning to live a life of love, and he encourages them to love one and others still more and more.

But second, Paul also speaks to all sorts of *crucial places where the gospel and the surrounding culture intersect and collide*: addressing pressing themes like identity, authority, holiness, sexual integrity, and community.

Living in this confused and confusing world, which is working hard to conform us to its cultural agenda, you might find yourself asking questions like:

Who am I?  
Why am I here?  
How should I live?  
Where do I get my final answers to the questions that matter most?  
Who should I pattern my life after?  
Who should I travel through life with?  
What does love look like?  
How do I stand strong in my faith?  
Is this as good as it gets?

Paul addresses those questions in encouraging and practical and relevant ways in the letter he wrote to the Thessalonians . . . and to us.

Before we come to the first of those themes, just a couple of thoughts on how to get the most out of this series, and a quick bit of background on the book.

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The more you are able to spend time in I Thessalonians outside of worship during this series, the more you'll get out of our time together on Sunday mornings.

Four quick suggestions:

1. Pray that God would speak to you personally each time you open this letter.
2. Read it often, reading the whole book through in one sitting a number of different times – maybe even once each week.

Even if you consider yourself a slow and careful reader, this book won't take any more than about twelve minutes to read from start to finish.

Try reading it in different translations, maybe even in a second language if you know one. In addition to the NIV, I'd really encourage you to read it in the New Living translation, which I think is the best when it comes to Paul's letters, and actually much of the rest of the Bible for that matter.

3. Pick a verse that speaks to you and commit it to memory.
4. Talk about the letter with one another. Find out what parts of the book are speaking to the people around you, or puzzling them, or challenging them, or encouraging them. Let's enjoy the riches of the book in our conversations together.

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And a bit of quick background, just to orient us.

### **I Thessalonians 1.1 NIV**

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

We're told in the opening line that this is letter that was written:

From Paul: once a passionately devoted Jewish leader, who actively persecuted the early church, but who then encountered Jesus and gave his life over to him, and is now

spending his life traveling from his home base in Antioch throughout the Roman Empire, telling others about Jesus and establishing and strengthening churches

And it's from Silas, also known as Silvanus: a respected spiritual leader from the church in Jerusalem, who returned with Paul to Antioch after the Council of Jerusalem, and who then joined Paul on his second missionary journey when Barnabas and Mark went a different direction

And it's also from Timothy: a young protégé of Paul, from Lystra, in Asia Minor, who Paul met and led to Christ on his second missionary journey, and who has been accompanying him since

The letter was written Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians – the church that Paul and his team planted in the city of Thessalonica, in ancient Macedonia, in present day Greece.



You can see it here in the top center of this map. Ephesus is down on the bottom right, and Corinth and Athens are down on the peninsula at bottom center.

Thessalonica was the largest and most important city in ancient Macedonia because it was located at a huge transportation crossroads.

It sat on the shores of the best harbor in the Aegean Sea, giving it access to the entire Mediterranean. It also sat along the primary east-west Roman road, the Egnatian Way, that ran from Rome to Byzantium, also called Constantinople, present day Istanbul. And it was the starting point of the Military Road that went north all the way to the Danube, giving access from there to the rest of Europe.

As a result of its location at the crossroads, it was large and rich and cosmopolitan in character, bustling with lots of different languages and cultures and businesses.

We're told about the first time Paul came to Thessalonica in Acts 17.1-10. He came from Philippi, where he had been badly beaten and thrown into jail with Silas, and then, when God broke them free from prison, they were escorted to the city limit and sent on their way.

Paul and company followed the coastline and the Egnatian Way west to the next major city, Thessalonica, and started their ministry there, as they usually did, at the synagogue.

A few heard their message about Jesus being the promised Messiah and believed, but most of the Jewish people rejected their message. So Paul shifted his ministry to the marketplace and began to reach non-Jewish people there.

Only a few of the ruins of ancient Thessalonica have been unearthed because they largely lie beneath the city that is still the largest in the area.



But there are still some things to see. Here's the marketplace where Paul as a tentmaker would have spent much of his time, working and sharing his faith. Because the marketplace was also the primary place where philosophy and religion were discussed, this would have been the center of Paul's ministry while he was there.

While the Jews in Thessalonica were largely unresponsive to the gospel, the Greeks and Macedonians and Romans were wonderfully responsive, and soon a church began to grow. It was a close community, and Paul and his fellow workers had a great affection for the Thessalonians.

But once again trouble surfaced, and Paul and his team were run out of town.

From there the three men went further west to Berea. Silas and Timothy remained there while Paul went on, heading south down the peninsula, first briefly to Athens and then ultimately to Corinth, 330 miles south of Thessalonica, about the distance from here to Nashville. There he lived and worked and carried out his ministry for the next eighteen months.

Not long after he arrived, Jason, the man who provided a place for Paul and his friends to stay when they first came to Thessalonica, came to join Paul in his ministry in Corinth. Silas and Timothy caught up with him there as well.

It was during that year and a half in Corinth that Paul – together with Silas and Timothy – wrote this letter.

The three of them wrote another letter to the church in Thessalonica as well – which we know of as II Thessalonians – and one of the interesting recent questions in biblical scholarship is which one was written first. Because neither claims to be first, and because the collection of letters in the New Testament is generally organized from longest to shortest, which one came first isn't quite as obvious as you might think.

Whichever came first, these letters to the church in Thessalonica were written sometime between 49 and 51AD, just sixteen or eighteen years after Paul's conversion – the earliest written glimpse of the Christian faith.

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And what a window onto the faith it provides! Let's zero in on the content of the book.

For some context, let me take us back to the book of Acts.

Wherever Paul and his team go, they keep getting driven away. Why is that?

We aren't left to guess. We're told in Acts 17 that describes their ministry in Thessalonica. It wasn't the way Paul and his team behaved when they were there. They weren't rude or combative or self-serving. To the contrary – as we'll learn from the letter when we get farther along.

No, the problem was with their message and its radical implications.

In Acts 17.6 (ESV) we're told that a mob

. . . dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men *who have turned the world upside down* have come here also . . ."

Paul and Silas and Timothy aren't offering a few self-help tips to tidy up an otherwise satisfactory life with the self happily ensconced at the center of things.

Their message is nothing less than flipping the whole of reality upside down – pressing us to see life, and to live life, in a whole new way – with a new defining center: Jesus, a new way of understanding reality, a new purpose for living, a new inverted set of values and allegiances, and being part of a new community.

What they teach is comprehensive and radical and disruptive and subversive.

"These men *who have turned the world upside down* have come here also,

Acts 17.7 (NLT)

“And Jason has welcomed them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for *they profess allegiance to another king*, named Jesus.”

Paul and company are calling the world to recognize Jesus as the one true king of kings and to turn our lives over to him. To put him first. To devote our lives to him as his faithful subjects.

This is an especially poignant message in Macedonia, where for two hundred years they were part of the greatest kingdom of the ancient world, the kingdom of Alexander the Great, and still, at the time of Paul, two hundred years later, he is revered as the greatest Macedonian ever, and still the “imitation of Alexander” (*Imitatio Alexandri*) was considered the considered the greatest of all the virtues.

Then the Macedonian kingdom was crushed by the Roman Empire, but the city was handed back its freedom, and for the next two hundred years, up to Paul’s time, they have revered Rome and honored the Roman emperor, who calls himself the son of god, and they worship him in a temple in the heart of their city.

And now Paul and Silas and Timothy come to this city that reveres their great king of old, Alexander, and that worships the great Roman king, Caesar, and they invite allegiance to *another king*, a greater king, named Jesus.

And really the whole book of I Thessalonians is about what happens when, as it says in I Thessalonians 2.12, we are concerned first with *his* kingdom and his glory.

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The book of First Thessalonians is woven together of a number of different themes . . .



. . . that keep appearing and disappearing throughout the letter, all of which trace back ultimately to idea that Jesus is the King who deserves our allegiance and who turns our world, and this world, upside down.

So the way we’re going to approach this book is not to walk through it verse by verse, but theme by theme, following each thread as it’s woven through the letter.

And the first theme we're going to tackle in the remaining minutes we have this morning, the theme that gives this series its title, is the theme of *Identity*.

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What do we mean when we talk about our identity? How would you define identity?

Let's make that more personal. How would you define *your* identity? What comes to mind?

Our identity is *who we are*, right? It's the thing that, when we say it, or see it, we can point to it and say, "That is me! That is who I am!"

It's interesting, when you look at contemporary definitions of identity, that they all seem to focus primarily on what sets us apart, what distinguishes us, from others, what makes us unique.

Two examples:

Merriam Webster says identity is the distinguishing character or personality of an individual, his or her individuality.

Berkeley Well-Being Institute says identity is a person's sense of self, established by their unique characteristics, affiliations, and social roles – his or her uniqueness.

What a modern American way of thinking about identity, as nothing more than  
what makes me different  
what enhances my life  
what distinguishes me

According to that view of identity, my identity is really a very small thing; it's the way I happen to be different from others. It's no more than some combination of

My giftings – what I happen to be good at  
My wirings – what I happen to be interested in  
My leanings – what I'm happen to be drawn to or prefer  
My doings – what I happen to accomplish

A much more faithful way of understanding identity is to answer the question:

Not: what makes me different?  
But: what makes me *me*?

Not: what distinguishes me?  
But: what *defines* me?

Not: what enhances my life?  
But: what *explains* my life?

Our world likes to project upon us that we are boundless and limitless wonders, unique and glorious and infinitely capable, the authors of ourselves, starring as the lead character in a movie of our own making, and able to do anything we put our minds to.

But from a biblical perspective, the reality is both much much less and much much more than that.

The reality is that we are, each one of us, limited, finite, flawed, mortal, creatures.

But at the very same time, we are also God's creation and his image bearers, created by and for God, chosen and loved by God, ones for whom Jesus laid down his life, existing by his choice and for his sake.

The crucial thing, when it comes to our identity, is not *who we are*, but *whose we are*.

Our world wants to tell us that our identity is defined by something that is part of us, something within us.

No, says Paul. Our identity is determined by someone who stands outside of us.

The most important thing about us isn't something about us at all. It is something about the One who created us. The most important thing about you and me is that we are *his*.

Let me give you an example that might be helpful.

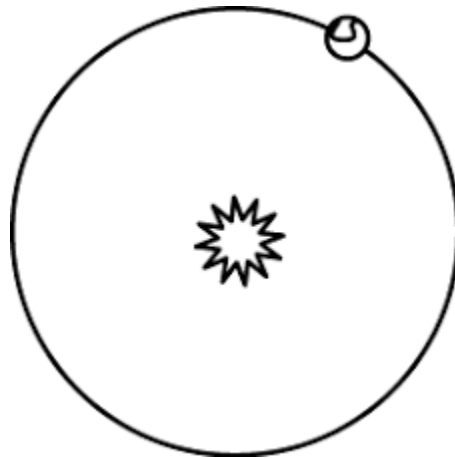
Think of the earth. What comes to mind?





We think of the earth as a thing in itself: what it's made of, or how big it is, or how fast it turns, or how much land and water we see on its surface, or maybe something about the resources it holds or the atmosphere that shelters it. All true and important things.

But think of how much we leave out if we speak about the earth without reference to the sun.



The earth's path through space, its changing seasons, its rhythm of night and day, its ever-shifting wind and weather patterns, its hot and mild and cold regions, the life that teems and thrives in its oceans, on its lands, in its skies, the beauty of the aurora borealis, and sunsets and sunrises, and the dazzling blue of the sky: every one of those things is defined and determined by the earth's relationship *to the sun*.

We can only ever truly understand the earth when we see it in its relationship with the sun: that is, as a sphere in orbit around, gravitationally bound to, illuminated by, enlivened by, and in countless ways impacted by, a massive nearby star that we call the sun.

Turns out that one of the most important and defining dimensions of earth is not to be found in or on the earth at all. It is that the earth is paired up with – in a profoundly imbalanced way, yes, but paired up with – the sun.

In the same way, we can easily fall into considering our identity in isolation, in and of ourselves, and focus on the giftings and leanings and doings and preferences of the individual.

But it is an utterly inadequate definition of our identity to define us as isolated stand-alone beings. The deepest and truest things about us cannot be said until we see ourselves not in isolation, but in our relationship with God, in orbit around Christ the Sun.

Look at the way Paul identifies himself in his various letters to the churches:

Romans: Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God

I Corinthians: Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God

Galatians: Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father

And so on. Paul insists that the only way he can be known for who *he* is is to bring another person into the picture – his father, his king, his creator, his master, his rescuer – and describe the relationship *they* share.

This is the consistent way the Bible frames identity. It is never about the person in and of himself or herself, as a planet floating in space. Identity is always framed in terms of relationship to another. It isn't who we are. It is *whose* we are.

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Listen to these three powerful passages about identity from I Thessalonians.

### **I Thessalonians 1.1 NLT**

This letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. *We are writing to the church in Thessalonica, to you who belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. May God give you grace and peace.*

### **I Thessalonians 1.4 NLT**

*We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people.*

### **I Thessalonians 5.5**

*You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.*

According to Paul, this is what is true about the identity of every child, every teen, every woman, every man who gives his or her allegiance to Jesus:

You belong to God.

*We are twice his, once by virtue of creation, once by redemption*

God loves you and chose you to be his.

*God has set his gaze on us as the object of his affection*

You are children of the light.

*His love for us is defining and transformative, as more and more who we are will display whose we are*

In his wonderful book *Abba's Child*, Brennan Manning quotes this life-changing statement of identity from the journals of John Eagen:

Define yourself radically as one loved by God.

Imagine what that would mean for you,  
as you walk down the hallway at school under the scrutiny of your fellow students,  
or you feel alienated from those you love,  
or as you face criticism at work,  
or lack of acceptance in your family,  
or neighbors dismissing you,  
or friends leaving you out,

Imagine what that would mean for you,  
as you wrestle with temptations that no one else knows about,  
as you look out upon this increasingly broken world of ours,  
as you face your increasing frailty because of the advance of sickness or old age

Imagine what that would mean for you,  
as you see how fleeting your triumphs and accomplishments are,  
as you are confronted by your failure to live the sort of life you know you should,  
as you are pressured by the surrounding culture to define yourself and one another on the basis of the way you cut your hair or what your grades are or how much money you make or what kind of jeans you wear or the complexion of your skin or your political views or your sexual preferences  
as you feel misunderstood and accused by others who don't understand your faith convictions,

. . . imagine what it would mean if you were to define yourself radically – that is, at the root of your being – as one loved by God. Because you are.

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Thursday and Friday, following the example of my covenant group brother Richard White, I went away on my annual prayer retreat, when I pray for every adult and every child who is part of the Covenant family, as well as for all of those we have sent out to the mission field. What a privilege!

Among the various specific things I prayed for different ones of you, this one thing that I prayed for every one of you. It might be the most important thing I could pray for you, and that we could pray for each other.

That you would know to the core of your being that God chose you and he dearly loves you, and that you would let that fact and nothing else define you and set you free to live your life in him and for him.

Define yourself radically as one loved by God.  
That's who God says you are. You are *his*.

**Prayer**

Lord, bring this truth home. That I am, that we are, yours. Your children. Your sons and daughters, chosen and loved by you.