

# EMBEDDED

There is no greater force for change or cultural influence than the local church. The church in Thessalonica is a powerful example: it's one of the farthest-flung churches Paul is able to plant. From there, all of Europe is reached for Christ. Though the people of this young church have serious questions about the reason for their existence, Paul reassures them in 1 Thessalonians that they are fulfilling God's purpose just by being present in the world. Because they are **Embedded**, they stand as a witness to the power and love of Jesus Christ. They are examples of the faith, hope, and love that characterize the Christian life. The church embedded is an insurgency, toppling the kingdoms of this world by sharing the reality of the Kingdom of God.

## INSERTION • 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 • Tim McConnell • April 30, 2017

The TV show “Gold Rush” has a location just outside Fairplay right now. It’s a mining reality show, usually up in Alaska where these teams go out to find gold before the weather sets in and everything freezes up. It’s pretty fun to watch. One of the characters is Parker Schnabel. For whatever reason, that’s a household name for our family. It usually comes up with someone needs a little motivation—“Hey, Parker Schnabel! Get in the car!” Anyway, watch that show for ten minutes and you will never look at a pile of dirt the same way. These miners are pulling tiny little flakes of gold out of these enormous piles of dirt, what they call “material,” to add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of gold. Those tiny flakes of gold change the way you look at a mountain of dirt. They change the value.

We’re turning to 1 Thessalonians for the next few weeks, possibly Paul’s earliest letter written around 50 AD. Paul planted the church along with his friends Timothy, Silas, and the Gospel author Luke, then wrote this letter probably about a year later. We are studying this because this church had serious questions about its purpose. Do you ever have serious questions about your purpose? This church had serious questions about the meaning of its existence. Do you ever? What we learn right away is that God has a purpose for this church, this group of believers. God has a purpose for them. They are embedded in that city, embedded in that part of the world to be a witness to the power and love of Jesus Christ, examples of the faith, hope, and love that characterize the Christian life. They are embedded. This is a series then for anyone who wonders if God has a purpose for their life; for anyone who wakes up or lies awake at night staring up at the ceiling and wondering: Why am I here? Why does God have me in this job, in this school, in this group, in this city? What am I doing in this family? We all have relationships we really treasure. We love to be around these people. Then we all have other relationships too, don’t we? What if God intended you to be in the relationships you are in? What if you are not anywhere by accident, but you are embedded as a Christ follower, embedded and inserted into all these places and relationships to bring glory to Him? If that were true, you and I would wake up with a different attitude every morning, wouldn’t we? I would go to work, watch the conversations I get in, look at the person in front of me and think: I wonder what God wants out of this conversation; I wonder how God can be glorified in this interaction.

If you are a Christ-follower, you reflect his glory and beauty and love wherever you go—unless you hide it. You are like the flake of gold, like a vein of pure gold

embedded in a slab of granite. Only this gold—and here’s where the analogy breaks down—this gold somehow rubs off on the material around it. Somehow this gold interacts with the material beside it. It is like salt rubbed into meat that preserves and seasons it; it is like light that shines in dark places; it is like yeast in the dough changing the whole by being a part. Let me put it this way: Your presence is God’s purpose. You can’t turn lead into gold, but God can. You can’t make the person next to you a Christian; you can’t turn on all the lights for them. But God can. And your presence is God’s purpose to make that possible. You have been embedded to shine like lights, to glimmer like gold, and be a part of God’s mission to bring life to the lifeless, hope to the hopeless, value to the valueless, as long as the mission endures between the ascension of Christ and his second coming when he returns at the end of time to set all things right. You are embedded. Your presence is God’s purpose.

Thessalonica was a great place to plant a church. A harbor city, it also lay along the Egnatian Way, this giant Roman superhighway that literally connected the world from east to west. This city is the farthest Paul got toward what is now Europe, until he was arrested and carried to Rome. Paul was excited to plant a church here. He moved into this city on the back of pretty good success at Philippi and executed the same plan: speak first to the diasporic Jews in the synagogue then continue the conversation out into the streets among the Gentiles. This is all in Acts 17. They didn’t stay long because the officials rejected the gospel and sent them packing pretty dramatically, but the church continued. However, three things had happened to this little church to discourage them causing Paul to want to write these words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to keep them in the game.

This little church had three things happen after Paul left. First, they were surprised at the animosity and persecution they got for naming themselves Christians. What’s this? People go all kinds of directions with religion and philosophy and form all kinds of societies. Why are we the subject of such hatred when we name Jesus? Second, some of them died. See, this church was so young, so new, and so close to the resurrection of Jesus—only twenty years later—all they knew was that Jesus broke death. Jesus broke death in pieces. So, when their friends died (as is usual) they were surprised. Think about that, they lived with such faith in Jesus’ victory over death they were actually surprised when death came around again, as it still does for all of us. But the problem was that someone told them the wrong thing, they were told that if they died they

would not get to participate in Christ's return. That's wrong. Jesus told the disciples they would suffer and die, but He promised to be with them and carry them through to life after death and eventually to the resurrection at the end of time when all things are restored. But they didn't understand. So, thirdly, some of them just started giving up. They started giving up.

When you think about this church, don't imagine the kind of break out success we hear about with church plants that open their doors and months later have thousands of people. Don't think of Peter's sermon in Jerusalem when thousands were added. This little church met week after week in those beginning years in the back room of someone's home, praying, reciting the stories of Jesus, reading scripture together and taking the bread and wine of communion. Then at the end, I bet the benediction went something like this: "Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we close this precious time together, let me just say...do you think we should get together again next week?" Each week was a trial with no apparent progress being made. No success, no wins. Should we still do this? Should we still even try? What are we doing? Why are we here? Does God even care? Do you think it's time for the church to just give up? Into this mood, into this moment, the Lord inspires Paul to write a letter—and he reminds them: Your presence is God's purpose.

Verse 1:

"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 always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thessalonians 1:1-3)  
Okay, so, who are they? They are the church of Thessalonians. They are the church, in God, in Christ, they are the church in that city. That's something. That's not by accident and that's not to be taken lightly. You are embedded there. Your presence is God's purpose. You are the church.

And their life is marked by what? By faith, love and hope. This is the great Christian triumvirate, faith, hope and love. Paul knows they are the church. He knows they are rooted, because what he hears about is faith, hope and love. "The work produced by faith," he says. We are saved by faith, not by works; but faith that saves is faith that works. Faith bears fruit. Paul knows "labor prompted by love" among them. Love is not just a feeling, it's a way of life—an act of sacrifice for the well-being of another. And they have "endurance inspired by hope." Christian hope is not optimism—

that's a mood. Christian hope is surety that whatever we suffer currently, and however bad life and the world around us gets, Jesus has already won, the tomb is empty and we saw Him alive after He was dead, the kingdom He started is coming and there is no stopping it. I may have to suffer a little while, but glory is on the way. Faith, hope and love. John Calvin called this verse "a brief summary of true Christianity"—faith working itself out in love bearing burdens with endurance founded on hope of the coming victory of Christ. Calvin wrote, "intent upon the hope of the manifestation of Christ, they despise everything else and armed with patience they rise superior to the wearisomeness of length of time as well as to all the temptations of the world." (*Calvin's Commentary*) Now, you can't live like that without having an impact on the world around you. You can't. You are a flake of gold. You shine like light. Just live right where you are with faith, hope and love. God's going to use you to make a difference. You are embedded and your presence is God's purpose.

Why are we still here? They were asking. Why didn't Jesus just rescue us out of this mess, out of this nasty city, this bitter world? Why don't we just get extracted into God's kingdom? I want to go back to the first line of the letter: "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thessalonians 1:1) Do you catch that? Usually Paul says, to the church in Corinth, in Rome, in Ephesus. But here it's Thessalonians "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." There's a lot here. As John Stott points out, "Already within twenty years of the death and resurrection of Jesus the coupling of the Father and the Son as equal is the universal faith of the church. This simple fact is enough to undermine the teaching of those who claim the New Testament nowhere attributes deity to Jesus." (*The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 27) But I want to make another point, that they, as believers in Jesus Christ, are IN God right where they are. I wish I could pause here and read all of Exodus and Leviticus to you. How much time have you got? Understand, the presence of God is a huge deal. The people of God knew His presence in the Ark of the Covenant, and in the Holy of Holies where it was kept. Jerusalem had a Temple, with colonnades and atriums and series of gathering spaces and thresholds...but at the center was the Holy of Holies, hidden behind a thick curtain. Leviticus 16 outlines how a man, a priest, might enter that space to feel the presence of God. He had to wash, put on special linen clothes. He had to kill a bull as a sin offering, making atonement for himself and his household. Then burn a ram. Then take two goats, kill one and lay his hands on the other, confessing it says, "all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head" (Leviticus 16:21), then send it into the wilderness, the scapegoat.

He had to sprinkle blood on the altar, all around. Why? Because blood is life, and sin always draws blood, and it was God's mercy to allow the blood of an animal to cover the sins of a man, of a people. Then, only then, and only once a year, one man, one priest could enter the presence of God. And this was a great blessing. Don't get me wrong, this was a huge blessing to have God's presence among us.

But don't you know what we have now? You are in God in Christ. Wherever you are. Thessalonica. Colorado Springs. You are in God in Christ. When Christ came and accomplished the final sacrifice, His perfect blood didn't just cover sins, it washed them away—and now wherever you are, you are in God in Christ. You walk with the presence of God; you live in the presence of God. You are at work plugging away at your emails. You are in God in Christ. You are at home driving your kids from thing to thing. You are in God in Christ. You are at school trying to learn enough math to pass this last section or do decent on your SATs; you are in God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing. The Holy of Holies is cracked open and turned inside out. You are in, and you are carrying in you, the presence of God. That's going to make a difference. You are nowhere by accident. Wherever you go, you are embedded. Your presence is God's purpose. Hang in, don't give up, stick with Him—you are going to see God make a difference through you.

We'll come back to these verses; these are the theme verses for the series. From verses 6-8: "... for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere." (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8) You are nowhere by accident. Your life—faith, hope and love—in Jesus is making a difference. God has a purpose for you, He has a purpose for your life. Wherever you are, your presence is God's purpose. The faith you have, the gospel you received with joy even the middle of suffering—that stuff is shining like gold. God has a purpose for you. Should we come back next week?

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## STUDY GUIDE

### "Embedded: Insertion" I Thessalonians 1:1-10

#### Start It

- I remember when I first heard airlines were using plain-clothed air marshals to protect flights after 9-11. Now every time I get on a plane I wonder if there is one, and I try to spot him or her. One of these guys—who looks just like the rest of us—is actually totally different. There for different reasons. Thinking about different things. Looking for things I'm not looking for—or even could look for if I tried! One of these is not like the others. Believers are not extracted from the world upon confession of faith in Jesus. We are actually embedded in the world to make a difference.

#### Study It

- Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1. This is a simple epistolary greeting, but is there something more being said? What stands out to you as you read it? Why does the church need grace? Why does the church need peace?
- Paul greets the church in this first inspired letter, "Grace and Peace" or "Charis kai Eireine." People were used to saying "Chairein" to say Hello. It was a common greeting. Paul created a new greeting for the Christian church: Charis kai Eireine. Is innovation important to the spread of the Gospel?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3. What causes Paul and the other founders of the church to give thanks to God? Does our church share in these characteristics?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4-8. How did the believers in Thessalonica become "models to all"?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10. What steps are found here for conversion, turning from one thing or another to faith in Jesus Christ?

#### Pray It

*Lord, by Your merciful love we have become Your church, filled with faith, hope and love. Help us to be the examples You intend, that in us You might shine Your light across a darkened and hopeless landscape. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

#### Live It

Consider how you might bring the face of Jesus to someone you know—sharing faith, hope, love and joy in the Holy Spirit.