

## A Golden Thread | I Thessalonians | September 14 & 17, 2017

**Introduction:** The theme we will be focusing on in I Thessalonians appears eleven times in this short letter through various words from the root word *hagios*, the Greek word for *holy*. I am designating it “a golden thread” which begins in 1:5 and runs through the letter to its end in 5:26 with a *holy kiss* – revealing the close communal setting of this Christian community.

Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, (Hendrickson, 1994).

In this earliest extant Pauline letter, the Holy Spirit is mentioned by name or alluded to chiefly in contexts that refer either to the Thessalonians’ origins or to their life as believers... Thus in 1:5 he reminds them of his Spirit-empowered ministry among them. In 1:6 he recalls for them their own experience of conversion, and mentions the central role of the Spirit. In 4:8 the emphasis is on the Spirit as the one who fits them for ethical life; and 5:19-22 reflects on the community at worship. 39-40

What strikes one in 1:6 is what he recalls for them as the evidence of their genuine conversion: their experience of *joy*, resulting from the Holy Spirit’s invasion of their lives. The little phrase, “with the joy of the Holy Spirit,” probably tells us much about both the paganism from which they had come and the life of the Spirit into which they had entered. On the one hand, life as a pagan may have had its moments of happiness, as it does for humanity in general, but by and large it was for them a life of heaviness and toil, arid in religion and empty in personal fulfillment—especially for the slaves and poor freedmen who would have made up the majority of the typical early Christian congregation (cf. 1 Cor 1:26). But in coming to Christ and thus receiving the Holy Spirit, they had been filled with such an untrammled [*unrestrained*] joy, which was such an experienced reality for them, that even in the midst of genuine hardships related to their having become believers, this is the one characteristic of their life in the Spirit that Paul recalls for them as evidence of their conversion. This suggests in the strongest possible way that for Paul joy is one of the certain hallmarks of genuine spirituality (Spirit-uality?). 46-47

### Factoids

Beginning our new series I will be offering some basic “facts” that I am calling “factoids” following Ester Lightcap Meek in *Loving to Know*. I suggest this designation to soften “facts”, making them more pliable, more like clues than nails, helping us to hold them more loosely, more stewardly.

#### **First Factoid: The Text of the New Testament**

“None of the autographs [original] of the NT writings survives. The texts of these works must therefore be reconstructed on the basis of surviving evidence, which comprises (a) Greek manuscripts produced in later centuries, (b) copies of ancient translations into other languages (i.e. the Versions), such as Latin and Syriac, and (c) NT quotations found in Christian authors, especially Greek and Latin... Due to extensive manuscript discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the amount of evidence available today completely dwarfs what was available 100 years ago... The official tabulation of Greek manuscripts is maintained by the *Institute for New Testament Textual Research* in Munster, Germany... As of 1994, the Institute recorded a total of 5664 known Greek manuscripts, ranging in date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and in size from credit-card sized fragments discovered in trash heaps in Egypt to massive tomes housed in the libraries of Europe.” Bart Ehrman, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, (Eerdmans, 2000), page 1292.

Website for the NT research center mentioned above is:

[http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/index\\_en.shtml](http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/index_en.shtml)

### **Second Factoid: The City of Thessalonica**

“Thessalonica was foundation 316 B.C.E. [Before the Christian Era] by Cassander, one of Alexander the Great’s generals, and named after his wife, a stepsister of Alexander. It became the main port of the Macedonian capital of Pella... Thessalonica had always been a prominent center of trade, but by the Roman period it was at the junction of two important transportation routes. The primary east-west land route, the *Via Egnatia*, ran through the center of Thessalonica while its port was the beginning of the primary route from the Aegean Sea to the Danube River. The Sea itself made Thessalonica accessible from all points in the circum-Mediterranean... During the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. [Common Era] mystery cults were thriving at Thessalonica, particularly that of Sarapis and Isis, Dionysos, Asclepius, Demeter, and the Cabiri/Dioscuri... Emperor worship was also particularly strong at Thessalonica, and there is some evidence for the worship of the goddess Rooma. Many inscriptions were also set up by the Thessalonians honoring Roman patrons and Roman client rulers who had been benefactors of the city. A number of voluntary associations are attested at Thessalonica, including the *mystai* of Dionysos and various professional associations.” Scott Spencer, *Eerdmans Dictionary*, page 1300

### **Third Factoid: The Church in Thessalonica**

The formation of the church in Thessalonica is recorded in Acts 17:1-13 occurring in the late 40’s. Populations in the ancient world are very difficult and tenuous, to give us some frame of reference Rodney Stark in his *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome*, (Harper Collins 2006), places the population of Thessalonica at 35,000. At the year 50 Stark would place the number of Christians at below 1% or 35 people. This is a significant reality of the sizes of the earliest churches during the timeframe of the NT letters being written. These numbers speak to a community of faith deeply connected in interpersonal dynamics – healthy, difficult, encouraging and disruptive, clearly evidenced in NT letters.

### **Fourth Factoid: Archeological Remains in Thessalonica**

Wayne Meeks in his work *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (Yale University Press, 1983), notes “human disaster is the archaeologist’s good fortune, but Thessalonica, although it has suffered more than its share of disasters, has survived continuously on its original site since its founding in 316 B.C. Much of what the archaeologists would like to see therefore remains buried under modern buildings and streets, many of which follow the ancient plan.” Page 46. For English archeological of early churches see – Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, (Trinity Press International, Volume I, 1990; Volume II, 1997). See Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, (Yale University Press, 2000), for early Synagogue discovers.

### **Holy = *hagios***

The family of words include – ***hagios***, holy, sacred; ***hagiazō***, make holy, consecration, sanctification; ***hagiotēs***, holiness; ***hagiosyne***, holiness, etc.

### **NIDNTT, Vol. 2**

The decisive element in the *Old Testament* concept of the holy, in contrast to the profane, is not so much the awesome divine power. Rather, through certain places, objects or occasions men enter into

relatively direct contact with the divine power which can be awesome, if men treat it in a profane way (1 Sam 6:20). The basic idea is not that of separation, but the positive thought of encounter which inevitably demands certain modes of response. Although Hebrew worship was particularly concerned with this encounter, the sphere of the holy was wider than the cult. 224

When we leave the realm of the OT and enter that of the *New Testament*, two facts stand out. First, God is only seldom described as holy (Jn 17:11; 1 Pet 1:15 f.; Rev 4:8; 6:10), Christ is only once called holy in the same sense as God (Rev 3:7; cf. 1 Jn 2:20). The concept of holiness in the NT is determined rather by the Holy Spirit, the gift of the new age. Secondly and following from this, the proper sphere of the holy in the NT is not the cultus but the prophetic. The sacred no longer belongs to things, places or rites, but to the manifestations of life produced by the Spirit. 228

In the Pauline epistles those who name Jesus as their Lord are called *hoi hagioi*, the saints... It implies association with the Holy Spirit. Christ is their sanctification as well as their righteousness and redemption (1 Cor 1:30), and thus the One in whom they become holy to the true God. "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11; cf. 2 Thess 2:13). 229-230

Sanctification is like the growth of fruit which results in eternal life (Rom 6:19-22; cf. 1 Thess 4:3-7). Spiritual, rational worship is the offering of oneself as a living, holy sacrifice, acceptable to God (Rom 12:1). The saints are not simply "nice" and worthy people. They are those who are called, and an essential aspect of sanctification is love for all the saints (Eph 1:15), standing by them in need (Rom 12:13), and not profaning the sacred by bringing disputes with fellow-believers before secular authorities, but allowing the saints to judge them (1 Cor 6:1 f.)... Because it is God himself who sanctifies (1 Thess 5:23), bearing fruit unto sanctification is all the more important (Rom 6:22; Phil 2:12-16). 230

### TDNT, Vol. I

In the *New Testament*, which everywhere rests on an OT foundation, the material element largely yields before the personal... Holiness and glory combine to express the essence of the Godhead, and a holy awe permeates the whole scene. 100-101

The connection of the holy with the *ekklesia* [church] may be clearly perceived in the New Testament, not merely in the name of God but also in fellowship in divine service. 105

The communion of saints is that of the reconciled in Christ mutually serving one another (2 Cor 5:17), and the holy kiss is the seal of this fellowship (1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thes 5:26). 108

In *hagiasmos* we have a process which has as its presupposition the process of atonement. *Hagiasmos* is the will of God (1 Thes 4:3), and it consists again in purity of physical life, so that marital fellowship is fulfilled "in sanctification and honor" (4:4). 113