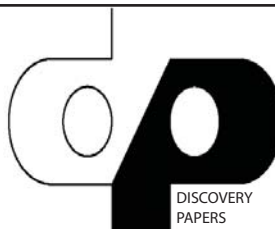


# UNCERTAIN BEGINNINGS

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians  
1st Message  
Paul Taylor  
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*Acts 17:1-10*

Satisfaction Guaranteed.

Doesn't that sound nice? Guaranteed satisfaction. To know for sure that when you start something, you can count on the fact that it will end up well.

My family and I love buying shoes for our kids at REI. Half of the time it seems that we buy a new pair of shoes and something breaks in the first few months. It's true that our kids aren't exactly gentle on their footwear, but we expect shoes to last longer than a month. So it's great shopping at REI and knowing that we can return them anytime for any reason even if its months later. REI gives us satisfaction guaranteed.

But what do you do when satisfaction isn't guaranteed? What do you do when you're not exactly sure how something is going to work out? How do you start something or put effort into a project when you don't know whether it is going to work?

How do you focus on your classes when you're not even sure that your major is going to get you a job that you enjoy? How do you work hard while you're wondering whether you're even in the right job? How do you make decisions as a parent when it's hard to tell whether they are good decisions until many years later?

We are starting a new series called *Between the Times*. It's a study through the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Scott Grant and I will be preaching through these books together – taking roughly two weeks at a time with a few breaks for Palm Sunday, Easter, and Beautiful Day. This series will last until early June.

These two books were written to a church that was trying to answer some of these questions. More than most of the New Testament, these books have a lot of detail about what will happen in the future when Jesus returns. At the same time, they refer back to what happened in the past when Jesus rose from the dead.

These books are written to people who are in between two major events. They have a new faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. That faith gives them hope in the future return of Jesus. The goal of these letters is to help them live in between these two times. To help them in the present. To provide some wisdom for living in between things when they aren't always sure how it will turn out in the short term. How do you live between the times?

I'm excited to study these letters together as a church. We're trying to think more intentionally about what it means to follow Jesus in our unique culture. We're trying to have an impact on our community here because of what has happened in the past and what we believe will happen in the future. We want to live well between the times.

To kick off this series, we're starting before the letters of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Those two letters are written to churches in the region of ancient Macedonia, in modern day Greece. Before we study the letters themselves, we're going to read the story of how this church was started. That story is found in Acts 17:1-10. What we'll notice is that this church had uncertain beginnings.

We'll see how Paul and his companions arrived in the city of Thessalonica. We'll see them preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and we'll see how people responded to this message. There was some positive reaction and some negative. Then Paul had to leave the city before really knowing how things turned out. He'll refer back to that when we get to the letters. Both the cities Paul and his companions visited before and after Thessalonica were apparently more successful. But when they left the young church in Thessalonica, they were really unsure as to how things were going to turn out for them.

As we read about the uncertain beginnings of this church in this message, we're going to be thinking about similar efforts that we've been a part of. The major question we'll be asking is whether we are faithful to God when we can't predict the outcome of our efforts. How do we face situations in life when we

don't know what will come of them? How do we trust God with uncertain beginnings?

Let's read about the planting of the church in Thessalonica to help us out.

## Explain Jesus

The story begins when Paul and his companions arrive into Thessalonica. Acts 17:1:

**Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ”**

We need to back up to provide a little context. This part of Acts describes what people call the second missionary journey of Paul.

Paul used to be a Jewish leader who tried to destroy the church. Then Christ appeared to him and he became a follower of Jesus. After around 12 years of maturing in Christ, he settled at a church in Antioch. That church sent him and Barnabas on a short term mission trip to plant churches around Asia Minor. They did that and returned to Antioch. That was the first missionary journey.



Then Paul decided to go back to all of those churches around Asia Minor and see how they were doing. But he and Barnabas had a disagreement and ended up going separate ways, so Paul recruited Silas and Timothy to join him. Instead of mainly visiting old churches, they wandered around for a bit before God spoke to them. Paul received a vision of a man in Macedonia calling to him for help. This was the direction they needed. Paul and his companions headed straight to Macedonia and started to preach the gospel.



The first city they visited was Philippi. When Paul and his companions got there, they preached the gospel, but were beaten and thrown in jail. While they were in jail, there was a huge earthquake that freed them. The city leaders were scared of these people who were saved by an earthquake, so they sent them away.

That brings us to Acts 17. Paul and his companions left Philippi. They passed through two “nothing towns” and then arrived in Thessalonica. This city was a major metropolitan center. The poet Antipater had referred to it as “*the mother of Macedonia*” (Epigram, Antipater of Thessalonica). It was the capital city of the entire region. There was a synagogue there, which gave Paul a place to start his ministry.

So that's what he did. Acts 17:2-3:

**And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup>explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”**

Just as Paul did almost everywhere he traveled, he went into the synagogue and preached to the people about Jesus. He probably spent more than three weeks there—he probably got to know people and then started to explain to them who Jesus was. Notice the simplicity of his message. When it says that he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, it's talking about the Old Testament. What Paul did was to show them that God predicted a Messiah who would suffer.

The Jews had this picture of a Messiah from the Old Testament. They wanted someone to save them. And they had heard about Jesus. They knew about a

man who said some crazy things, was killed for it, and then people said that he rose from the dead.

The problem was that their picture of what they needed didn't line up with the picture that they had of Jesus. They knew they needed a Messiah. They just didn't think Jesus was him.

Some of you know that I had long hair in college – past my shoulders. I used to play on the worship team here at PBC. People knew me by my long hair. But then one day, I cut it really short. The next few days were really interesting. I could walk around campus without anyone recognizing me.

People knew Paul Taylor as the guy with long hair. They saw this person walking around campus who had short hair, and it took them a while to connect those two pictures.

This is what Paul did in Thessalonica. He showed them that Jesus matched up with the picture of their Messiah from the Old Testament. He told them, “*This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ*” (Acts 17:3). That's all. You know you need a savior. You know about Jesus. Let me show you why Jesus is the savior that you need.

Our goal in talking about Christianity is simply to explain Jesus. But it's really unpredictable how that will turn out. Jesus is a lot of things, but he is not a safe topic. You never really know how people will react to him. And that's the point. Talking about Jesus is uncertain. The question for us is whether we are faithful to do that. **Are we faithful to explain Jesus?**

People in our culture know they need help. We look everywhere for answers. We watch TED talks and we read books and we make New Year's resolutions. We try new diets and new jobs and new friends. We're always looking for something to fix us. People know they need to be saved.

Most people have heard about Jesus. They know about a man who lived a long time ago. They probably know that he died and that some people say he rose from the dead.

When we talk about Jesus, we can help people to see that the need they have is exactly what is addressed by Jesus: Forgiveness. Meaning. Belonging. Purpose. Hope. Love. This is what we need. This is what Jesus offers. Jesus is the savior that we all know we are in need of.

The gospel isn't about same sex marriage. The gospel isn't about who to vote for. The gospel isn't about whether the earth was created in six 24 hour periods or the identity of Adam and Eve or the history of the church or anything else. The gospel is about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the Christ.

This is the message that we are called to be faithful to as the church. Part of our role is to be a witness of the identity of Jesus. To demonstrate that this crazy guy named Jesus that people have heard about is actually the answer to their life's deepest needs. Through our deeds, our words, our decisions, and our activities, we proclaim that Jesus is the Christ.

## Follow The Fruit

This is what Paul and his companions did. The results were not what they might have expected. Some of it was positive, some of it was negative. Here's a description of the positive response in Acts 17:4:

**And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”**

We are told about three different categories of people who actually accepted this message. First, it says that some of the Jews were persuaded. This was apparently the smallest percentage. Second, we are told about the “devout Greeks.” These people would have been what was called “God-fearers.” They were Gentiles who were somewhat attracted to the Jewish faith, so they went to the synagogue to hear about God. A great many of them believed. Finally, we hear about the “leading women.” These were probably wealthy female merchants. Not a few of them believed—more than the Jews, but perhaps not as many as the devout Greeks.

Paul was preaching from the Old Testament about their expected Messiah in a Jewish synagogue. He might have expected the most significant response to come from them. But it didn't. By now, this might have stopped surprising him because this seemed to be the case over and over again. But in general, it surprised the apostles that the Gentiles were responding more to Jesus than the Jews.

The gospel of Jesus Christ collects people that you don't immediately expect. You think one person is ready

to hear about Jesus, but it is another who responds. You go to church thinking that there will be a lot of a certain kind of person there, but in fact, it's an entirely different kind.

One of the challenges about being faithful in the midst of uncertainty is we have expectations. We want a certain kind of response. We want a certain kind of people to respond—probably the people that are the most similar to us. It can be tricky to be faithful to what God is doing instead of what you think God *ought to be* doing. We sow seeds in lots of places, but sometimes we only look for fruit in the places we want fruit to be.

We need to be willing to see what God is doing, even if it isn't what we expect or even prefer. We need to pay attention to it and be willing to change course to give it more attention. I call this "following the fruit." We need to see what God is doing and be willing to adapt our efforts by giving that more attention. **Are we faithful to follow the fruit?**

One of the most remarkable aspects of the ministry of the apostles is that they are constantly changing course, adapting their strategies, and responding to new situations. It's sometimes hard to recognize because it just seems like the apostles always know what they are doing, but they don't. They sow seeds; they watch where the fruit appears; and they follow that growth.

I was surprised by this when I was working in software development. There were some people that I was very similar to. I spent a lot of time with them and I enjoyed their company. I expected that some of them might get attracted to Jesus. But then one day, another one of my colleagues—whom I least expected—asked to have lunch with me to talk about faith.

I couldn't believe that he was the one who was interested. I never would have expected, and I might not have chosen him if I had the choice. God doesn't always work in the places where we expect him. When he surprises us, we need to be willing to change course. In this case, I really wanted to see God work in other people's lives, so it was hard to see and pay attention to what he was doing in someone else.

This is an important lesson for us to learn as a church right now. We are in a season of a fair amount of change as a church (e.g., we have people who have been around a long time stepping down, we have new people starting, and we're considering a major building project). There is a lot of change. We need to be careful to really open our eyes to what God is doing.

When you preach, God sometimes teaches you the very thing he's asked you to share with others. That's been happening to me this week. It's been a challenging week. I've been especially burdened by the uncertainty of all the change happening at PBC as a church. I've been having to let go of my expectations and try to see what God is doing, *not what I expect him to be doing*. Honestly, I've been anxious. But I'm also excited to see what God does. I'm praying for eyes to see it.

When things are uncertain, do we recognize where God is at work? Or are we looking for him in the wrong places?

## Challenge The Norm

Sometimes we don't see God's work because we're looking in the wrong place. Other times we don't see God's work because it is mixed in with other things. Things don't always work out well, and a lot of times, the hard things going on can tend to overshadow the gifts that God gives.

For Paul and his companions, some surprising people responded to their message, but others opposed it. By now, they had probably gotten used to this, but this opposition in Thessalonica is a bit unique. Acts 17:5-8:

**But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. <sup>6</sup>And when they could not find them, they 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, <sup>7</sup>and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." <sup>8</sup>And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things."**

The Jews were jealous. Paul had managed to convince some people that Jesus was the Christ. So they rose up and formed a mob. It's a terrifying scene. They roused the "wicked men of the rabble," they stormed the house where they thought Paul was staying, and when they didn't find them, they dragged out the owner, Jason, and brought him before the court.

This scene is reminiscent of one of the worst stories in the Old Testament. When a group of angels visited the city of Sodom, the townspeople found out about it. Just

as in Thessalonica, the crowd assembled and surrounded the house, with the intention of violent assault. What happened in Sodom was remembered centuries later as the prime example of how bad a city could become. Sodom became synonymous with evil. Now the Jews in Thessalonica were responding in almost the exact same way.

My favorite phrase in this story is how they refer to Paul. They call them, “*these men who have turned the world upside down*” (Acts 17:6). That’s an incredibly strong thing to say. These three men who had just been beaten and jailed in Philippi are being accused of turning the world upside down.

Clearly the message of Christ was having an impact on the world. It’s probably the reason why Jews had recently been expelled from Rome. This is probably the reason why it was so easy to stir up the city against Paul. A lot of people knew that something about Jesus was causing disruption in many different cities. The message of Jesus was turning the world upside down.

In 2010, the Israel Museum, located in Jerusalem, was undergoing a massive renovation. As part of that they commissioned a sculpture outside their main building. An Indian artist, Anish Kapoor, built a 16 foot tall polished steel hourglass and named it “Turning the World Upside Down, Jerusalem.”

This sculpture perfectly reflects the world upside down. It’s fascinating to me that this sculpture is there in Jerusalem, the city of David. The city where Jesus died and rose from the dead. It is supposed to be “a reference to the city’s duality of heavenly and earthly, holy and profane.” ([http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/21/arts/design/21museum.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/21/arts/design/21museum.html?_r=0))

Paul and his companions faced opposition because their message challenged the way the world worked. It turned the world upside down. Does our message do that? Do we talk about Jesus in a way that turns the world upside down or just tweaks it a little? The true message of Jesus Christ changes everything. It challenges the normal things in life. Are we faithful to explain Jesus in that way? **Are we faithful to challenge the norm?**

Sometimes we settle for a gospel that just slightly tilts the values of our world instead of turning things upside down. We think that we can still worship education. We can still chase money. We can still hurt people in order to get ahead. We can still neglect our families and pressure our kids and obsess over our status. We can keep doing

all those things, but just go to church and Bible Study on top of it.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges everything about our world.

Maybe the world already is upside down and the gospel of Jesus Christ sets it right. That’s probably a more accurate way to understand it theologically. If you’re used to living upside down and someone offers to straighten things out for you, it’s terribly threatening. Right-side up feels like upside down to you. But this is what the gospel of Jesus does: It sets things right. It restores life to how it’s meant to be.

The gospel of Jesus doesn’t just challenge the norm, it offers a new and fuller life. The gospel of Jesus enables us to live as we are meant to live. It restores our humanity, recreates our dignity, gives us purpose, redeems our desires, and heals our wounds. The world is upside down. It needs to be set right by Jesus.

But as Paul and his companions experienced, this is a message that people oppose. It’s too threatening. It’s too challenging. It doesn’t make sense.

That’s why this message is opposed. It’s why 21 Egyptian Christians were beheaded in Libya. It’s why mobs are burning churches in Niger. It’s why PBC had to cancel our short term trip to India this year due to safety concerns. This message really does turn the world upside down. We might not face the kind of violence that our brothers and sisters around the world face, but the gospel of Jesus Christ will cost us.

If you stop worshipping education, your kids might not go to the best school. If you stop worshipping achievement, you might not accomplish as much. If you turn from idolizing money, you might not drive the car you’d really like. If you really allow God to turn your life right-side up, then you’re going to miss out on some of the upside-down values that our world preaches.

This is where the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians help us. These are tensions of living in between times. It’s the challenge of figuring out how to be here and live in an upside down world that doesn’t know it is upside down. We need to learn how to live in between times.

## Responding to Uncertainty

A big part of living in between is responding to uncertainty. What we’ve seen in Thessalonica is Paul and

his companions being faithful to the call God gave them. They preached a message that centered on the identity of Christ. Some surprising people responded. Others stood out in opposition. What next? How do you respond to uncertainty like this?

In the previous city, Philippi, the angry Jews found Paul and Silas and they arrested them. They beat them and they put them in prison. Then, in the middle of the night, an earthquake shook the prison and set them free. The jailer turned to Christ and the city officials apologized for their mistreatment of them. It was an incredible, miraculous resolution.

The resolution in Thessalonica is very different. Acts 17:9-10:

**And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. <sup>10</sup>The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue “**

In Philippi, God saved them with an earthquake and miraculous conversions. In Thessalonica, Paul and Silas paid a fine and slipped out of the city. This is an anticlimactic end to the story. The money that Jason paid was probably similar to what we would call bail. It was an assurance that something like this wouldn't happen again. If enough time passed without incident, he'd get his money back. Otherwise, it would be kept as a penalty.

These men were preaching a message that was supposedly turning the world upside-down, or right-side up, or something like that. It was dramatic. They had encountered demonic opposition and angelic deliverance. What do we make of the fact that now they just post bail and sneak off?

Paul had no idea how things would turn out in Thessalonica. When he wrote to the church in Philippi he said this, *“I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”* (Phi 1:6).

But when he wrote to the Thessalonians he said this, *“I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain”* (1Thes 3:5).

The way things turned out in Thessalonica made Paul worried that the people would fall away. The uncertain beginnings of the gospel in this city concerned him.

It's easier to have faith when things are dramatic and miraculous. Faith is hard to sustain in the midst of the ordinary and the everyday.

This is one of the biggest challenges we face living in these in between times. How do we move forward with uncertainty? How do we believe in a transcendent God when our lives are so ordinary? How do we keep faithful and integrate God into the daily rhythm of our lives? **Are we faithful in the everyday?**

Sometimes God works in miraculous ways. He dazzles us, surprises us, challenges us, and makes himself clear. But sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes He works in the common and the ordinary and the regular things of our lives. It can be hard to be faithful in the lull of normal life.

We want God to tell us the next step to take, to show up and make it clear that he wants us to take this job or marry this person or make this change. And sometimes he does. But sometimes he works through weeks or months of conversation and reflection that gradually crystallizes into a decision.

We want God to bring revival and pour out his Spirit on the Bay Area. We want people to crowd into our churches to receive the life that is only found through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sometimes that happens, but sometimes he works through churches and believers faithfully proclaiming and living the gospel over years and years.

We want earthquakes and jailers falling on the ground in worship. Sometimes that happens. When it does, we praise God and marvel at his work. But sometimes we post bail and move on.

How do we stay faithful in the midst of uncertainty? We have to avoid getting complacent. Sometimes big things happen and sometimes they don't. But God is always at work. The outcome is often uncertain, but God is firm.

## Conclusion

When I buy a pair of shoes from REI, I don't have to worry. I know that if the shoes fall apart next week or next month or even in a year, I can return them. Consumers don't like things to be uncertain. They want guarantees. They want confidence. REI has figured that out, and I appreciate it. It makes me a happy consumer of shoes from REI.

But that's not the way the rest of life works. There is no satisfaction guaranteed. I don't know what is going to come of my efforts as a friend, as a pastor, as a neighbor, as a father. But I know that God has asked me to be faithful to his call in my life.

Faithful to explain Jesus. Faithful to pay attention to what he's doing and follow the fruit. Faithful to live a life that challenges the norms of the culture I live in. And faithful in a consistent, ordinary, everyday kind of way.

God doesn't guarantee that any of this faithfulness will work. He doesn't tell me that I can have my time back if it turns out I spent it in vain. He doesn't tell me whether anyone will respond. He doesn't promise that any of my efforts will succeed in the way that I think they are supposed to. But he gives me something more.

God gives us his presence. He says that he loves us and walks with us. He sends the Spirit. He fills us individually and as a community with power and guidance. He says that Jesus is here. In the midst of everything else in the world being uncertain, God's presence is sure. He is here. He is at work. His purposes will prevail.

These letters written to a church with uncertain beginnings will help us to consider how to live between the times in a lot of different areas. We'll talk about what kind of life to live, how to live out our sexuality, about the future return of Jesus, about ambition and grief and working hard and devotion. We'll see these letters give us practical guidance for finding and following Jesus in lots of different ways.

The clear message through it all will be that Jesus is there. Even when things look uncertain, Jesus is there. When Paul wasn't sure how things in Thessalonica would turn out, Jesus was there, growing the faith of these new disciples. While they were figuring out how to live their lives, Jesus was there promising them that he will return to bring them home. While we're here in Palo Alto, wondering what it looks like to follow Jesus in Silicon Valley, he is here with us, guiding us with his presence and his Word.

Life is uncertain. But Jesus is sure. May we continue to place our hope in Him.