

The First Fruits of the Spirit

Historical Background:

This is a story of a man writing a letter some two thousand years ago. One would think that such a story is insignificant, has no impact or bearing in our world today. I seek to challenge those views through 'First Fruits of the Spirit.'

The letter (epistle) being written is one to a community in the Greek city of Thessalonica and has come to be known as 1Thessalonians. The author is one of the greatest Christian apostles, St. Paul. He preached the gospel of Christ in the city and after some trouble, left for Athens and then for the city of Corinth; fellow apostles Timothy and Silas later joined him in Corinth with good news from the newly emerged (yet persecuted) Christian community of Thessalonica. Paul's letter in response to Timothy's news is one of thanksgiving and steadfastness to the new faith.

The Christian community of Thessalonica is a community of both Jewish and Greek converts - a united body - in the city upon which the great Alexander the Great came from.

As a side note, it is believed by scholars that St. Paul used a scribe to write his epistles. My story deviates from this, so that St. Paul himself becomes the scribe. Aside from this historical 'discrepancy' (for literary purposes), this is a story that explores the importance of historical understanding and how one simple act can have repercussions for the whole of humanity.

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

(St Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians, 1:1)

The two men cackled hoarsely at the crude joke as they walked through darkness as full of perversity as their hearts. They passed a young slave girl hurrying through the narrow, cobbled streets and stared with lecherous eyes—eyes that stripped bare, dissected and dehumanised.

They continued to stumble along, drunk yet erect to any sign of pleasure. Their hefty frames, vulgar words and heavy breathing slashed through the warm night, which was as still as the infinite desert and as devoid of life.

A couple appeared out of nowhere, startling the men. The men glowered suspiciously at the strangers. Didn't the couple know this was *their* city? And yet the pair walked on, as if floating through the air. They lowered their eyes as they passed the Temple of Aphrodite— as if gazing upon it would contaminate them—and muttered a prayer to some unknown deity.

'*Foreigners,*' the men whispered, walking past. The couple entered a house, slammed the door with a gentle thud, and disappeared forever.

'*Prisca and Aquila, I have waited for you. You are safe. Praise God,*' the small man uttered as he bent over the parchment. He continued to write in the semi-dark, the only light a small flickering candle fighting for life.

Now was not the time to stop. The Spirit had taken hold of him, like a commander ordering him to inscribe—to admonish—to edify the community he had established in the city of Thessalonica on the other side of the Greek world.

The Spirit stirred as if agitated. Again, he heard the hoarse laughter of a moment ago. It disturbed his peace and troubled his soul. Rubbing his bushy eyebrows and closing his squinting eyes, the man let his mind wander to the day's events. He remembered how the peace of the infant church here in Corinth had been disturbed by scandal, rumour, false prophesy and divisions. He thought of how the church had become a divided body, where one voice proclaimed 'I belong to Apollo,' the other insisted, 'I belong to Christ,' and the third declared, 'I belong to Paul.'

But who was Paul, that they should belong to him? Was he crucified for the people? Did he die and rise again from the dead? Were they baptised in his name?

No. He was just Paul—formally called Saul of Tarsus—an instrument of God whose life had radically changed on the road to Damascus. He was a Hebrew and a man whose small stature and bodily ailments belied his insightful wisdom and love for the communities that had embraced the Gospel of Christ.

His physiognomy was far from the classical beauty admired by the Hellenes, with his baldness, hooked nose and crooked legs. But his spiritual beauty was such that his face would transform into that of an angel, astonishing all who looked upon it—for they knew that this small Jewish man, with his strange speech, was indeed a servant of God infused with the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens, and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith. . . .

He paused for a moment, reflecting on Timothy's words. Both Timothy and Silas had come to him recently, and gave good news of the 'faith and love' of the community in Thessalonica, the community about which he was now writing. His anxiety and fretful apprehension concerning them was relieved by the news. They had indeed remembered Paul and the others

for their kindness. Paul replied that their ardent faith had encouraged him during his distress and persecution.

Be brave! Be strong! Do not waver! And may the Lord strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before God. . .

His hand trembled with ecstasy and exhaustion. A cool breeze penetrated the thick air, saturated with smoke and incense. It nuzzled the neck of the holy man with its delicate fingers. Pain pounded throughout his body, as if all the demons of hell struck at him with their fists. He prayed that the pain be healed, but he knew such prayers to be futile. This thorn in the flesh — a messenger of Satan to torment him — had been given to keep him from being elated and boastful of his spiritual discernment.

For grace is sufficient, for power is made perfect in weakness.

As he recalled the remarkable transformation that had led him to the infamous city of Corinth, he felt an urgent need to remind the community in Macedonia to continue to become imitators of himself and his fellow workers and, in doing so, become examples to all believers *'not only in Macedonia and in Achaia, but in every place. . .'*

He reminded them that it was through them that people were turning away from idols to worship the living God. And that together, all would be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air — to be with the Him forever.

How he wanted to see his brothers and sisters again! With what eagerness he wanted to see them *'face to face'* — his *'glory and joy'*!



The wailing of a hungry cat, the persistent hoot of an owl. The cry of a child and the whimpering of a soul condemned to a life of sin. A city saturated in idol worship and the temptations of the flesh — temptations now afflicting the community here in Corinth.

Paul continued to write his letter as if possessed, all the while reflecting with a lucid fanaticism on his journey so far: from his Jewish upbringing in the Hellenistic city of Tarsus all the way to his conversion on the road to Damascus. Where the scales of blindness — spiritual and physical — had fallen from his eyes and his sight had been restored.

His was a synthesis of two great worlds: the Hellenistic and the Hebrew worlds . . .

Worlds where a pious Jew followed the ancient Law of Moses in a city home to Stoic and Epicurean philosophies and where obedience to the Holy Law coincided with a refined knowledge of Greek rhetoric. Where — despite strong self-righteousness and the knowledge that he was of the separated ones, of the sect of the Pharisees, a Hebrew amongst Hebrews — he could quote Greek philosophers. Where Greek philosophy began to influence the writings of Jewish people, as expressed in the Wisdom of Solomon.

Where he came to an anguished awareness that uprightness could not be attained by slavishly following legal precepts and cutting oneself off from the rest of humanity. Where he also came to understand the spiritual confusion of the non-Jewish world and the earnest quest for truth in a humanity drowning in idols — a world suffocating in the smoke of incense to false gods.

A synthesis . . . a journey . . . a revelation. . .

Paul's transformation drastically revolutionized the way he viewed the world and God, the way he viewed the Scriptures, and the way he viewed the relationship between Jew and

Gentile. When the scales fell, Paul came to understand that the true Law was that of the Spirit – that everything had its origins in the Light that *is* Christ. That the supposed wisdom of the wise was mere foolishness and the demand for signs and messianic greatness was thwarted.

This realisation would radically transform the world.

The brush stroke of the *kalamos*¹ caressed the parchment with the Word that was at the beginning of time; the black ink created patterns and symbols of rhythmical precision – a symphony in the Greek of the common man that would have repercussions in lands not yet discovered.

The graceful dance of the Spirit within these black lines and curves waited to leap out of the page – from the confines of the lampblack mixed with the juice of plants that created the ink, the magical ink – and capture the heart of the faithful who struggled in a world so utterly corrupt and imprisoned in darkness. From there, it would circulate amongst the many lands and tongues and peoples, inspiring the world through the universal and poetic language of the Roman Empire, reverberating for thousands of years – proclaiming:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

‘Paul . . .’ a woman’s voice hummed melodiously.

It was Prisca, blessed Prisca, calling to him; she who, together with her husband, risked her neck for Paul and would have sacrificed her own life for the Gospel and Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. Whose commitment to Christ outstripped even Paul’s – for Prisca, together with Aquila, was among the first Christians. They were the ones who made possible Paul’s stay and mission in Corinth. Prisca’s gift of teaching and evangelising stunned even the most pious of men – challenging the entrenched structures of male power that silenced women, that condemned them as the weaker sex.

The *kalamos* fell gently onto the floor. The epistle had been written, the final exhortation asserting the power of the Gospel and the rupture in history.

The historical significance of the occasion was at odds with the insignificance of this Jewish man – overcome by weariness and hunger; paralysed by pain and persecuted by his own people – writing with the tattered *kalamos* in the sordid city of Corinth to a persecuted community tempted by the ways of the old life.

How was he to know – he who was waiting for the imminent return of the Lord – as he heard the voice of the great Prisca, whose wisdom was so great she was renowned as Woman Wisdom incarnate – of the theological and historical significance of this one small epistle to a marginal and struggling community somewhere in the northern region of Greece.



A synthesis . . . a journey . . . a revelation. . .

Of the magnitude of the times he was living in.

¹ Greek for reed pen, a type of writing implement.
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Of the consequences of this epistle that, unbeknown to him, would become the first book of the New Testament canon. That the Hellenistic world he lived in – with its cosmopolitan cities and syncretism, Roman efficiency and technology – made it possible for him to preach the Gospel to Jew, Greek and Barbarian. That the spread of Greek civilization and language created the one people that Alexander the Great – a Greek pagan – had established and strived for when he conquered Asia Minor from the plains of Macedonia, attempting to create a harmonious world where Greek and non-Greek could live as one, making possible the spread of the Gospel of Christ to all people.

‘It was Alexander the Great who made your Gospel possible,’ a Greek once scoffed at Paul while he was in Macedonia, traversing the land of the Olympian gods.

Paul had meditated upon the words of this proud Greek, as he always meditated upon the words of those who opposed him.

It was this ancient region – from its lakes and rivers, its mountains and rich soil, its fertile plains and abundant forests – that had brought forth King Phillip. Phillip had transformed Macedonia into the most powerful kingdom in Greece and united a people bitterly divided. A people engaged in endless wars, blinded by hatred for one another; a people completely unprepared for the rise of Macedonia in the north.

King Phillip’s unity ushered in an era of Hellenism, an era that would imbue the world with poetry and science, drama and philosophy, architecture and literature, rhetoric and mythology, the Gymnasia and the Agora, the theatres and libraries of Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Asia Minor.

From Phillip to his son Alexander: the man who, at the young age of 20, became the King of Greece and, eventually, the world. Who affirmed that he was indeed a Hellene by descent and who boasted that he had been educated by the great Aristotle. Who discerned the sign of the times and took upon himself the imperative duty to finish what his father had started: the conquest and eventually overthrow of Persia, the eternal enemy of the Greeks.

Some 40,000 Greeks began the conquest in the spring of 334 BC, surrendering their will and lives for their young leader, whose charisma was so great legends would arise that this man, so noble and illustrious, was indeed a son of a god. His mother, on the day of his birth, proclaimed the birth of a god, and the signs were there – so the people were told. The destruction by lightning of a temple in Asia was the sign par excellence and foretold of Alexander’s conquering of the East.

Alexander believed in his own greatness so much that he deemed himself one of the sons of the twelve gods of Olympus. He was a second Achilles – invincible in battle and predestined to greatness from the beginning of time itself. His symbolic throw of a spear from the ship he was sailing on towards the coast of Asia signified that victory was assured; Persia would be defeated and Asia Minor would finally be Greek.

From the spear blossomed a vigorous Hellenistic world – and this would have consequences for eternity. When the King of Greece became King of Persia and beyond, he created a united humanity forged in the blazing fires of Hellenism.

The seeds of Greek civilization had been planted; its culture, language, religion, literature and philosophy established a united Hellenistic world with cosmopolitan cities populated with Hellenised peoples of all ethnic persuasions. The division between Greek and Barbarian crumbled like dust, and a new humanity was moulded from Alexander’s divinely inspired vision.

This vision of unison originated hundreds of years before the Gospel of Christ strove to tear down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, boldly proclaiming a message that ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek . . .’ but only one people in Christ Jesus. The Gospel therefore took Alexander’s message to its logical end:

I wish all of you, now that the wars are coming to an end, to live happily in peace. All mortals from now on shall live like one people, united, and peacefully working towards a common prosperity. You should regard the whole world as your country. . . .

A synthesis . . . a journey . . . a revelation . . .

To transform Greek culture from its insular and ethnocentric character to an inclusive, syncretistic, sophisticated and dazzling tradition of cosmic significance that recognised the unique differences amongst people and longed to infuse the whole of humanity with the brilliance of Hellas.

Paul understood the words of that Greek. He also discerned the significance of his actions as an Apostle of Christ and the consequences of them. The events he was propelling would transform the world as he knew it and would generate and shape further historical events. Every action in history had a domino effect; everything had meaning and purpose—a rationale guided by the great Director of human history. And the Word of God who became flesh was at the pinnacle of all human history.



The breeze that had floated through the tiny window and soothed him became a gust of wind blasting through the house—puffing and knocking objects over without a care. The parchment fluttered and the *kalamos* rolled over the floor in a circular dance, creating invisible patterns with the movement of the wind. Psalms were being chanted in the next room; prophecies were being uttered; and tongues of all languages were spoken as the Spirit of God whirled around the congregation—weaving His way through the room and coiling Himself into the hearts and minds of a people. Those people were seized by this invisible Power and transformed into instruments of the One God they now embraced. As Paul chanted a prayer for the community in Thessalonica—kissing the parchment with his dry lips—he longed to walk its cobbled streets and see the faces of his children.

As Paul closed his eyes and allowed the Spirit to entwine His limbs around his fragile, broken body, he had a vision of a city of splendid beauty—a city that would continue to bear witness to the Resurrection of Christ, a city boastful of its illustrious churches of gold and ivory—a holy city comparable to Jerusalem. Where church bells tolled throughout the day, proclaiming that Christ is indeed raised from the dead—summoning the people to participate in the liturgy in which angels participated. Where his epistle to the Thessalonians would be read down the centuries—where the reading of mere letters (lines and curves!) became the means by which the Spirit was released by the Word—the same Spirit who inspired Paul—who had inspired Alexander.

The Spirit circulated the whole of the created order—comforting, nourishing, inspiring, instigating and interceding. A creation groaning in labour pains and waiting for the redemption of the Spirit: waiting for the first fruits that had been planted in the Greek world to finally ripen, waiting for its final emancipation from corruption and sin.