

Small Group Study – 1 Thessalonians – John Morrison
Chapter One – Evident Faith

1:1-5 Paul establishes right up front that this is a biblical group of people.

They are a church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. By labeling the church as “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”, he rules out a) that they are a pagan religion and b) Judaism without Jesus as Messiah. This actually is a statement of Jesus being One in substance with the Father. He identifies them right away with the triune God since the Spirit will be mentioned in just a moment.

Not only are they identified with the triune God of the Bible but they are not a group of people organizing for a social function or because of custom. To the contrary – this church only came into being quite recently and only because of the gospel and are maintaining their affiliation to their own hurt.

Paul begins with a greeting that later becomes his traditional double blessing: (1) God’s grace (which is His favor and His acceptance), and (2) Peace... a sense of restful well-being in their spirit. This blessing reminds those who hear that the Thessalonians are worshiping the living God by His grace and that He offers to produce peace in their lives.

We have evidence that Paul may have been discouraged at the time shortly before writing this letter. Think about what has gone on in these few months.

- Acts 15:38-40 Paul and his best friend Barnabas disagree over Mark and split up
- Acts 16:6 He travels Phrygia, Galatia, Mysia, and the Spirit doesn’t let them speak.
- Acts 16:7 He want to go into Bithynia to preach; the Holy Spirit prohibited that, too.
- Acts 16:13-23 They witness of Jesus in Philippi and are beaten and thrown into prison
- Acts 16:39 They are begged to leave Philippi.
- Acts 17:5-10 After some believe in Thessalonica, they are kicked out in three weeks.
- Acts 17:10-14 After a few believe in Berea, they are kicked out again and Paul is separated from Silas and Timothy.
- Acts 17:15-34 Paul shares the Lord in Athens at the Areopagus and is mocked.
- Acts 18:1-6 Paul shares the Lord in Corinth with Jews; they blaspheme and do not believe and eventually bring him before the Proconsul.

If Paul was discouraged before the writing of this letter, after Silas and Timothy return in Acts 18:5, something enables him to work at preaching/teaching full time and he is “devoted” to it.

What good news is there about the Thessalonians? Paul gives thanks for something specific about them. What does he praise? *What is there that a NT church is to be distinguished by?* We will see something all Christians, all Christian homes and all churches are evaluated by God. These are three things by which God is presently evaluating our church and each household in this Body.

Work of Faith

The first thing Paul appreciates about the Thessalonian Christians is their work of faith. This means things they were busy doing because of their faith in Christ. He says that these works were produced by faith, but his *concentration* here is less on the faith and more on the tasks themselves. Good works were a calling card for the gospel.

In the case of the Thessalonians, Paul has learned from Timothy that they were working hard in ways that honored God and brought positive attention to Him and His gospel. One of these faith-based works may have been financial help that Paul mentions later (in 2nd Corinthians) which he received from those in Macedonia on behalf of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who were in great financial need. He himself may have even been helped since he was able to devote himself full time to preaching in Corinth in Acts 18 after Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia.

At each church, works of faith are sometimes visible, sometimes hidden. Matthew 5 tells us that our good works are to be seen by men so that our Father in heaven is glorified, but Matthew 6 tells us for our left hand to not know what our right hand is doing, so that we do not do what we do to be congratulated by men. It is a fine line: *When are my works attracting attention to the Lord in such a way that others are moved to praise Him and when are my works causing me to get noticed?*

Labor of Love

The second thing Paul remembers fondly about the Thessalonians is their labor of love. Though the work of faith was a focus on the thing done, the labor of love is more a focus on the motivation for labor expended to the point of weariness.

When a teacher prepares at 6 am or midnight for a class she'll teach, when a man uses his day off to build shelves for the administrator of children's ministries, when a woman packs and re-packs boxes with little mementoes and birthday greetings for missionaries, when a couple of kids help their mom set up a room with clothing to swap for the new season, when three guys in a community group go to the home of a sister in Christ to hang cabinets, when a family opens their home for someone to stay a few days and ends up with more than they bargained for, when a learning center teacher sends out postcards or schedules a party, when a friend listens and weeps and prays with a friend, when a man instructs his friend more accurately in the way, these are labors motivated by love for the Lord. It involves considerable effort because of the love that God has for us in Christ.

Steadfast Hope

Paul continues his thoughts of them. He next remembers their steadfastness of hope. Hope is a primary component of this little book. Here Paul begins to be painfully aware of some difficulties they face. People are divided from family members who believe they are heretics or fools and some are being threatened.

The Thessalonians have suffered from both Jews and Gentiles. 1 Thess. 2:14 makes it plain that they have suffered from fellow Macedonians, probably Gentiles. 1 Thess. 3:3-4 shows that they are under real afflictions. And Acts 17:5-10 make it plain that they suffered persecution from the Jews of Thessalonica. *What is their hope?* Is their hope that God will stop bad things from happening?

Paul's praise of steadfast hope tells the tale on the early church. The hope he mentions here is an active expectancy — an eager certainty. The hope of these Christians was so strongly rooted in Christ and His return that some people had stopped working and were packing for the trip home — one error Paul is going to have to address. Paul is so pleased to hear that they know Jesus is coming back.

This becomes a third way of evaluating our church and our homes. How often do we speak of the Lord's return? Are we aware that something about it is mentioned an average of *once every thirteen verses* in the New Testament? Do we expect it will be in our lifetime? How much do we anticipate what it will be like to see Him face to face, to discuss with Him privately and at length every act done because of faith, every hope harbored until then, every deed of love?

The hope Paul addresses is the hope which is in Jesus Christ alone. And it is a hope which is specifically tied to what will happen in God the Father's presence. Sometimes we forget that the few years we spend here are but a down payment on the future — a time of investing ourselves in the two things which will last forever — people and God's Word. It is a real encouragement to my hope to know that while we are on earth now is our only opportunity to live by faith.

God's Choice

Paul changes his focus in verses 4 and 5 from what he sees in them to what he sees in God. And that is the foundation of Paul's hope. Nothing we see in a man is significant but that it is tied to something about God.

In this case, the faith, love and hope Paul sees in the Thessalonians is tied directly to their having been chosen by God. He says it this way: *Knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you.*

God inspires the writers of scripture on numerous occasions to tell us things we would not know except by His direct revelation. This is one of those. Since anyone who ever believes on Jesus Christ must do so in their mind, exercising their will, we are all readily aware of our choice which was involved. No one is forced to believe. But here we have something less obvious: *God has chosen you.* As we see in other places (Deut. 7:6, Ps 33:12, Rom 8:33, 11:5, Eph 1:4, Col. 3:12, 1 Pet 1:1-2), Paul reminds the Thessalonians of a simple fact: *God chose you.* He chose you before you chose Him.

How does he know they are “Chosen” and what does it mean?

The way Paul knows that they are chosen is because of what happened when he preached the truth about Jesus Christ. Several things happened: they believed, they changed and they waited. He says in verse 5, *For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.*

What happened that affirmed that the gospel had gone forth in power? First, *they believed*. That required the power of God since man, according to 1 Corinthians 2:14-16, cannot believe without God quickening him and since Romans 1:16 says that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

If you have seen that God has every right to judge you for your sins of deceit, selfishness, immorality or unbelief but in His mercy, He provided His Son to pay the price for your sins through His death on the cross, you have believed the gospel. The Bible claims you can't do that without God enabling you. That, as with the Thessalonians, is the first mark of the gospel coming in power.

1:6-10 You Are An Example In Words And Deeds To All the World

A second sign of the gospel coming in power was that they changed. Look at verses 6-8. *You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.*

Character-changing transformation in the lives of those who hear and the lives of example lived by Paul, Silas and Timothy who brought the message are the second indication of the message coming with power. Paul says that the Thessalonians imitated what they saw in Paul and the others, and that by doing so, they are imitating Christ.

Something should be said about the Greek word we translate *imitate*. While it is the word from which we get “mimic,” it is not intended to merely be a behavioral following of an example. It means that when they believed, they emulated the example they saw in Paul and Silas’ life – namely when they encountered persecution.

For it is here that Paul adds “they received the word with much tribulation yet with joy.” This was a part of the sign of the Thessalonians being on target with the gospel — tribulation will come but we can be sustained by the joy of the Holy Spirit in the midst of hardship.

This is perhaps one of the greatest strengths offered to the life of a Christian: *because of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, it is possible, even expected, that in the midst of tribulation the believer is to be characterized by joy.*

Result is a Reputation

Paul is not bashful about letting them know what is being said about them. He believes it is to the glory of God. What people say about those Thessalonians is so well known that the Thessalonians do not even have to tell what Paul taught them because it is so apparent in them.

Many of us as Christians think we are worlds apart from the apostles and the Christians of the early church. We have inadequately understood that as we work at American Woodmark or WMC or for a federal contractor, the reputation of Jesus Christ and his gospel continue to go forth. People talk about what they see in Christians — it was happening back in those early days and it's still happening. God gets a reputation from how we live and work among our neighbors, co-workers, teammates.

I knew a student well-known in his school. He was a senior and had earned a reputation as reliable, bright, hard-working, humble and pleasant. When he approached advisors for permission to write a senior research paper on a hot topic of the day, he said he'd like to write on Apologetics (An Answer) for the Christian Faith. This was in a state school, a secular place if ever there was one. The student was given permission for the research paper — but probably in part because his reputation for hard work and for handling relationships well with those around him.

I mentioned earlier that Thessalonica was a strategic city. It lay on trade routes by land, sea and river, connecting the Roman Empire's western and eastern portions. It was Jewish, Greek and Roman in identity, opening doors for much witness in all directions.

Winchester, though much smaller, is remarkably strategic. Its proximity to Washington means that representatives of the King of Kings work in that influential center. Its university means that students come through for a few years and have their whole lives shaped in significant part by what God teaches them here. Its good business climate means that people will come through for a few years, possibly on the way somewhere else in their occupation, and that what God teaches during their Winchester sojourn may mark the rest of their days. People retire here, having what may be the most fruitful years of the ministry of their lives. Families start here, setting the course for generations. Our reputation as a church will affect people around the world.

Finally, after Paul acknowledges that they have received the Word of God in the past and he praises the changes of their character which are going on in the present, he makes a sweeping statement of what their lives stand for in the future.

You Turned From Visible Idols to Wait for the Invisible Son

Others speak of how the Thessalonians received the truth from Paul as it was from God. Paul writes in verse 9, *For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.* They speak of how these men and women moved from serving dead, vain idols which accomplished nothing to serving a living, true God. The emphasis in this description of God is not on who He is — that has been established — but on what kind of God He is. He is true... you can count and rely on Him. He fails not. And He is living... that is, He is vibrant and passionate and purposeful.

You wait (v. 10)

Paul's crescendo of compliment to the Thessalonians is that with eyes of faith, they have seen the invisible God and are anxiously waiting for the Son who is as surely going to return to rescue them from God's wrath as He surely was resurrected. His coming again to earth is tied here — as elsewhere — to His historical resurrection.

This certainty of Christ's return provides much of the strength for their hope. This factor — the confident expectation — has more to do with instilling hope than we often see. One reason people will fall into unrepentant sin is that they take their eyes off the fact that they will live in eternity with the consequences of their decisions on earth. Likewise one of the things that motivates people to follow Christ is the reminder that one day, these few seconds that went by when we were here will be rewarded. The Thessalonians know that and it supplies them with stomach for the challenges they undergo.

Discussion Questions

1. When and how did you receive the gospel? In what ways was it marked by power and by character transformation?
2. When you first began to follow Christ, whose life most created a reputation that you wanted to imitate and why? What were some things you did imitate and how did they affect your overall commitment to Christ?
3. What are some of the things about Christ's return and our future with Him in the new heavens and new earth (the eternal state) that affected how you pursued Christ and how you live today? Have they affected your readiness to follow Christ even when the going got tough?