

Thessalonica: A Model Church for Today

1 Thessalonians 1

Introduction

1 Thessalonians 1 begins with a prayer of thanksgiving. When we look at the Thessalonian Christians, there would have been much to be thankful for. They had embraced the gospel under challenging circumstances. The fruit of their faith was evident, and this chapter is filled with praise and thanksgiving for their commitment to God and determination to honor Christ in everything.

They became part of God's chosen people because they had decided to believe through their free will. In verse 4, the apostle says God loves them and *that he has chosen them*. Here, Paul is drawing off the imagery used by the Jews who applied this term only to the greatest of figures, like Moses, Solomon, and the nation of Israel³. Now, the most incredible privilege of the greatest among God's chosen ones has been extended to the Gentiles. Peter described our status this way:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

This is the Christian identity: chosen by God and loved by God. In Paul's prayer, we see what it means to live inside this relationship day by day.

1:3 - What It Means in the Present

We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul loved to join the concepts of *faith*, *love*, and *hope* together⁴. Here, we see them in action. How does one chosen by God choose to live?

A Faith That Works

For the Christian, works are an outgrowth of faith. We work *from* salvation, not *for* salvation⁵. When we were regenerated (saved), the Spirit went to work inside us for transformation (Philippians 2:13). Our works are an outgrowth of that transformation (Galatians 5:22-24). They are the evidence of genuine faith. Without works, our faith is dead (James 2:17). Genuine and authentic faith always obeys God because it recognizes Christ as Lord. We have become *slaves of righteousness*, Romans 6:16, and the fruit of that is *sanctification*, leading to *eternal life* (Romans 6:21-22).

Work Motivated by Love

Someone, I don't remember where has said, "Faith produces works, and love performs the labor." In Galatians, as Paul powerfully exhorted those Christians to walk away from a twisted concept of salvation combining faith with works of law, he urged them to focus on the gospel: *faith working through love* (Galatians 5:6). "Love," in verse 3, comes from the word *agape*, which denotes a love that loves the

unworthy and loves unselfishly. It is a love that is freely given irrespective of merit and a love that seeks to provide. Ultimately, it is seen in our God, with the most significant example being the gift of His son (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9-10; Romans 5:6-10).

The practice of *agape* love has a way of changing us – to where we see others as God sees them. It becomes an essential characteristic of any person committed to Christ. “Labor,” as used in verse 3, describes the effort with which we are to love. The word speaks of going to the maximum level, straining at, and exerting the most significant effort. This, of course, is done with sincerity. We are to *show sincere brotherly love for each other from a pure heart and love one another constantly* (1 Peter 1:22).

An Enduring Hope

Christians look forward to when the Lord returns so they can see Him face to face and be with Him forever. Here, Paul commends the Thessalonians for their *endurance*. They stayed faithful to God despite their tremendous pressure to conform. They could do this because they *knew* their hope was anchored in the unchanging and all-powerful Lord, Jesus Christ. God has guaranteed us His promises. He cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18), and He has taken an oath (6:17). Through these two unchangeable things, our hope is *an anchor of the soul*. Our hope is also confirmed through the constant intercession of Jesus (Hebrews 7:25) who stands guard over us.

Your hope of heaven is more than wishful anticipation; it is firm, solid, and immovable. Since it is, it bolsters our actions day by day.

The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, shining brighter and brighter until midday, Proverbs 4:18.

1:5-10 - How the Thessalonians Received This Identity

They received the Gospel.

Paul and Silas proclaimed the gospel to the Thessalonians in the synagogue (Acts 17:1-4). Theirs were empty words of a mere human message but the powerful word of God. The word “gospel” was not uncommon in the Greco-Roman world. It was usually associated with “good news” regarding the emperor and his edicts. What Paul and Silas delivered was anything but human braggadocio⁶ of temporal human interests alone; it was the life-changing, powerful words capable of penetrating a person’s heart (Hebrews 4:12).

“Words” and “power” aren’t in contrast; they depend on each other, with what is spoken or taught being supported with power (What Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:4 is appropriate to consider here: *My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God’s power*). While “with power” could refer to the manifestation of miraculous signs, Paul’s main point is the gospel’s power to cast out deceptive worldly philosophies and change lives. “Full assurance” is translated as “full conviction” in the New American Standard, describing the gospel results.

Changed Lives and Exemplary Behavior

The depth of the faith, love, and hope of these saints was evident to all as they imitated the examples of Paul and the other leaders (1:6) and then, in turn, became models for other churches to emulate (1:7). First, this celebrates the extent to which they internalized and then practiced what they were being taught: *You became imitators of us and of the Lord*. In verse 5, Paul tells how the gospel came to them, and now we are told how they received that Spirit-empowered message. The depth of the response fitted the depth of the proclamation.

Note how discipleship works, beginning with their imitation of Paul's team and the Lord and proceeding to their function as a model that others imitate. This is the path of discipleship seen also in 2 Timothy 2:2:

What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, **commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.**

Both spiritual truths and the Christian lifestyle that results are meant to be passed on to others. To fail to do so is to be a failure in God's eyes, as in Hebrews 5:12:

Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God's revelation again. You need milk, not solid food.

The church became a leading example for believers, including those more experienced in faith. The term "example" derives from the Greek "tupos," meaning an exact reproduction, from which we use the English word "type." The Thessalonians were seen as blueprints for others in their region, guiding how to live their lives, especially in Macedonia, northern Greece, and Achaia, southern Greece, covering cities like Athens and Corinth. Specifically, Paul highlighted the Thessalonians to the Corinthians as exemplary in generosity and financial support despite their own poverty, largely due to persecution. Their willingness to help Jerusalem's needy believers showcased their godly behavior.

1:6 - Joy in Persecution

The term "tribulation" speaks of "intense pressure," indicating they faced severe persecution. Despite this, their genuine faith allowed them to maintain joy, echoing the experiences of the apostles in the early Acts, who rejoiced in suffering for their faith. This reaction to persecution, rooted in the joy of the Holy Spirit, is not unusual but is considered a divine aspect of being in Christ, as joy is among the spiritual blessings Christians enjoy. Romans 5:1-4 teaches that faith justifies us by leading to peace with God and the ability to rejoice in hope and tribulations, understanding that suffering builds perseverance, character, and hope. This kind of joy, unlike earthly happiness, can flourish under persecution, serving as both a gift and a goal for us, reinforcing the call to continually seek greater joy in our spiritual life.

1:8-9a - Evangelistic Hearts

The Thessalonian believers demonstrated the transformative power of their faith through their fervent sharing of the gospel. The term "sounded forth," unique to the New Testament, describes their intense and vigorous proclamation, akin to a loud trumpet or thunder, indicating their message was boldly and continuously spread. From its beginning, the church's message reverberated locally in Macedonia,

Achaia, and far beyond, thanks to Thessalonica's strategic position on the Egnatian Highway and its busy port. This strategic location enabled residents and visitors to carry the gospel to various places, exponentially amplifying its reach.

Their efforts were so effective that the Apostle Paul noted the widespread knowledge of their faith and evangelism to the extent that he found it unnecessary to speak of it himself. People Paul met during his travels were already well-informed of the Thessalonians' faith and their dynamic role in spreading the gospel. This level of impact and the resulting reputation were remarkable, serving as an ideal example for other churches to aspire to.

1:9b - A Decisive Break with Their Old Life

The Thessalonians' conversion to Christianity is highlighted by their radical shift from paganism to exclusively worshiping God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This transformation involved renouncing all forms of pagan idolatry and committing to a new way of life. Paul describes this as turning away from idols to God, using the Greek verb *epistrephō* to emphasize a complete reversal in direction—a key aspect of conversion. This shift was a total realignment of allegiance, moving from the worship of false idols to serving the living and true God with the dedication of a bond slave, the most intense form of servitude. Paul recognized this as a transition from a life enslaved by inanimate, spiritually void idols to a liberating servitude under the one true God, suggesting a significant and welcome transformation in their lives.

1:10 - Looking for Christ's Return

Those who love Christ long for and anticipate His return. We eagerly look forward to Christ's return because we know it brings to fulfillment and satisfaction God's eternal purpose, which is, as Paul stated it, to rescue **us from the wrath to come**. **Rescue** denotes the deliverance the Lord provides. He is the Rescuer, Deliverer, and Savior of those otherwise headed for divine judgment and eternal punishment.

In the ancient world, the idea of divine wrath was accepted, but there was no genuine hope of rescue from it. By contrast, in the postmodern world, the idea of divine wrath is rejected, so the Rescuer is unnecessary or heeded. *Orgē* (**wrath**) describes God's settled opposition to and displeasure with sin. In this context, the **wrath** is God's eternal judgment against sin. See also 5:9:

For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

What we observe in 1 Thessalonians 1 are true marks of a disciple. We must be diligent in our service, ensuring our calling and election, 2 Peter 1:10. There is nothing more assuring for the Christian than to know his true spiritual condition by seeing the work of Spirit as these identifying marks become more and more evident as one matures in Christ.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How can we express gratitude for our spiritual leaders and their impact on our faith, like Paul's thanksgiving for the Thessalonians?
2. How can we demonstrate our chosen status and God's love daily?
3. How do faith, love, and hope manifest in practical actions within the local church?
4. What are some examples of faith-produced work in our congregations, and how can we encourage more of it?
5. How can the concept of agape love change our perspective on service and labor for others?
6. Considering the assurance of hope described in Hebrews 6:18-19, how should this shape our response to life's challenges?
7. How can we effectively "sound forth" the gospel in today's society as the Thessalonians did in theirs?
8. How can we model the transformation from a former life to a new life in Christ to those observing us?
9. In what practical ways can we prepare ourselves and others for Christ's return?
10. How do we reconcile the ancient and postmodern perspectives on divine wrath with our understanding of God's salvation through Christ?

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:13; Colossians 1:4-5; 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

⁵ Ephesians 2:8-10 describes the progression. God gives us salvation by grace. It is not by our own work, lest we should boast. Because of that gift, the Christian *works*, having been empowered by the Spirit to do the works God has designed.

⁶ Osborne, Grant R. *1 & 2 Thessalonians: Verse by Verse*. Edited by Elliot Ritzema and Danielle Thevenaz. Osborne New Testament Commentaries. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018, p. 24.