

“How to Know You Are Elect”

1 Thessalonians 1:4-10

September 27, 2026

Introduction

1 Thessalonians 1:4–10.

The story of the Thessalonian church is a story of sovereign grace.

Acts 17 explains that the Apostle Paul was there for mere weeks, preached the gospel, a number of people believed, a riot broke out, and the believers had to send Paul out of town under the cover of night. The Apostle had to leave these brand-new believers behind in a hostile pagan city, and from a human perspective, you'd wonder if this little church would fizzle out.

And yet, in our passage this morning Paul writes with confidence that they were his brothers and sisters in the Lord and he knew that they were beloved and chosen by God.

But how could he really know that? Is it possible to know that somebody is elect?

Well, according to this chapter, it is. Paul begins v.5 with the little word "for" or "because" and then goes on to list evidences of why he was sure of their election. In other words, Paul is saying, "I know God sovereignly chose you, because I have seen what God has sovereignly done in you."

That's why the title I've given to this sermon is: How to Know You Are Elect. This morning, as we walk through 1 Thessalonians 1:4–10, we're going to look at the evidence Paul saw. Specifically, this passage reveals five evidences of God's electing grace:

- I. The Elect Receive the Gospel in Power & Truth (1:4–5)
- II. The Elect Imitate Christ & His Messengers (1:6)
- III. The Elect Become Examples & Witnesses (1:7–8)
- IV. The Elect Turn to God & Away from Idols (1:9)
- V. The Elect Await Christ & His Rescue (1:10)

And brothers and sisters, it is my prayer that as we do, the question would turn from "How could Paul know that the Thessalonians were elect?" to "How can I know I am elect?" If these marks align with your life, I pray you would leave with assurance and increased praise for His grace in your life. But if your life does not align with these marks, I pray you would see that the door to the household of God is open to you today. And if you enter, you will find it was due to the electing mercy of God...

With that said, let's begin by looking at our first point in vs.4–5: The Elect Receive the Gospel in Power & Truth.

I. The Elect Receive the Gospel in Power & Truth (1:4–5)

While the emphasis of this passage is on the evidence of election, v.4 serves as the foundation for the rest of the chapter, so we need to take some time to unpack it. Paul writes, "1:4."

Paul proclaims the striking truth that he knows the Thessalonians are elect. When I refer to "election," I am speaking of what we see at the end of this verse: "His choice of you." So when we speak of the doctrine of election, we are talking about the biblical reality of God's choosing of certain individuals unto salvation.

Paul calls the chosen "brethren beloved by God." While God has a general love for the whole world, the Bible clearly speaks of His special, unique love for His chosen people. Ephesians 1:4–5 says that "in love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will." The elect are those on whom God has set His love.

Now, I know this is a hot-button issue, and it can be hard to embrace. But, brothers and sisters, we must humble ourselves before the teaching of Scripture, and the doctrine of election is in the Bible.

We see it clearly here, but also in many other passages. In John 15:16, Jesus told His disciples, "You did not choose Me but I chose you." Ephesians 1:4 says God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." And in Acts 13:48, after Paul's preaching, it says "as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed."

God's election is not based on anything within the individual. As our "What We Teach" statement section on election puts it: "the unmerited favor that God grants to totally depraved sinners is not related to any initiative or works of their own part but is solely of His sovereign grace, love, and mercy." At the same time, "sovereign election does not contradict or bypass the responsibility of man to repent and trust Christ as Savior and Lord... All whom the Father calls to Himself come in faith, and all who come in faith the Father will receive."

You can think of it like this. The sign above the door of God's house says, "Whosoever will may come." But those who enter will look back and see on the inside of the doorpost a sign that says, "Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world."

So we simply want to submit to whatever the Bible says, not a theological system. I believe that God loves the whole world and that whoever comes to Him in faith will be saved. And I also believe that God sovereignly chose some to salvation.

And praise the Lord for that truth, because none of us would be saved without it. The entire human race is sinful and deserves hell. God would be just if He saved none. But in His mercy He saves some, and those who are saved are saved only because of His electing grace.

With that understanding of election established, notice the first word in v.5. Paul says, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for..." By using the word "for," or "because," Paul is saying that what follows gives the reasons he is so confident of the Thessalonians' election.

The first evidence is here in v.5. Paul writes, "1:5."

Paul says the Thessalonians received the gospel not "in word only," but in power and truth. It came in truth because the Thessalonians knew "what kind of men [Paul and his co-workers] proved to be among [them] for [their] sake." Their lives matched their message. They were the real deal.

But the gospel also came "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." It wasn't mere talk or a persuasive speech. That power didn't come

from the preacher but from the Holy Spirit Himself. Paul preached, and God made the message effectual. It was clear that God had done something!

This reminds me of a story from the Great Awakening. On July 8, 1741, in Enfield, Connecticut, Jonathan Edwards preached his most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." A minister named Stephen Williams wrote in his diary that "before the sermon was done there was a great moaning and crying out through the whole house: 'What shall I do to be saved?' 'Oh, I am going to hell!'... The shrieks and cries were piercing and amazing." Edwards couldn't even finish the sermon. The ministers prayed and went among the people to speak with them one by one. Williams wrote that "the power of God was seen, and several souls were hopefully wrought upon that night."

Now, I am not saying that all true believers will be converted in such a dramatic fashion. But whether there are dramatic externals or not, when God saves a sinner, there is a manifestation of power. One way you can know you are elect is if the power of the gospel has transformed you. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:18, "the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

So you can know you are elect if you received the gospel in power and truth.

But there is a second evidence of true saints in the next verse. In v.6, we find that the elect imitate Christ and His messengers. The apostle writes, "1:6."

II. The Elect Imitate Christ & His Messengers (1:6)

So Paul is saying that after receiving the gospel, the Thessalonians began to follow the example of Paul and his co-workers, and ultimately, the Lord Jesus Christ. These brand-new believers looked to Paul and imitated his pattern of life. In their short time with the apostle, they learned the basics of what it looks like to live as a Christian, and they began to do likewise.

In fact, the Greek word here in v.6 for "imitators" is "*mimētai*," which is related to our English word "mimic." The idea behind mimicking is that you are copying someone. So the Thessalonians were imitating Paul and his fellow ministers' manner of life, but in doing so, they were ultimately imitating Christ. As Paul says

in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators [note: same word] of me, just as I also am of Christ..."

This picture of imitating reminds me of a time back when I was at The Master's Seminary. A few of us seminary guys were hanging out one day, and one of my buddies randomly said, "Did you guys know I'm really good at imitations?" We responded: (1) Um, no, and (2) prove it. So he went around the room, one by one, imitating each of our walks. We found out that our friend was not nearly as good at imitations as he thought he was. But I did learn from that experience that I still walk like a high school jock. I'm not sure if any of you have analyzed my walk and concluded the same thing, but I've been told my walk has yet to be sanctified.

Anyways, in the same way my seminary buddy was mimicking our literal walks, v.6 says that the Thessalonians were mimicking Paul and Jesus' walk of life. Christ's people follow Christ's path and pattern of life.

In fact, v.6 says that they were imitators of Paul and Jesus due to how they had "received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." This brand-new church began to suffer severely almost immediately, as seen in Acts 17.

Within weeks of being saved, the men who led them to Christ were run out of town, and they were plunged into persecution. However, in spite of this severe suffering, they had "the joy of the Holy Spirit." So what made the Thessalonians bear resemblance to Paul and Jesus is that they were joyful in the midst of trials.

This joy of the Holy Spirit amid hardship is a mark of God's elect. Galatians 5 says that joy is a fruit of the Spirit. To have this joy demonstrates that the Spirit of God is inside a person. The source of this joy amid trials is not in the person, but the Spirit of God.

I have experienced this personally. I was just sharing with my community group this week about how I was saved in 2020, and almost instantly the Lord saw fit to have me walk through suffering. A couple months after my conversion, the COVID lockdown happened. A couple months after that, my dad died in front of me at 55 from undiagnosed kidney cancer. Yet somehow in the midst of that, even as a brand-new baby believer, I still had a joy and a peace that surpassed all

understanding. How? I'll tell you without a doubt that it wasn't because of something great within me. The only explanation was that the Spirit was in me!

So, how can you know if you are elect? Well, friends, do you seek to walk in the ways of Christ? Do you imitate those in the faith? And in particular, by God's gracious indwelling, do you have the joy of the Lord in difficulty? If so, then v.6 encourages you that this is evidence of your election.

But as we continue forward, we will find in vs.7–8 that the elect do not only follow the example of Christ and His messengers, but they become examples to Christ's people and witnesses to the world. Paul writes, "1:7."

III. The Elect Become Examples & Witnesses (1:7–8)

We have very similar language here between v.6 and vs.7–8. This word "example" in v.7 is túpos in the Greek, and it is very similar to the concept of "imitation" in v.6. This verse is saying the Thessalonian church was a "type." They typified the pattern of Paul's and Christ's conduct and served as a pattern and model for other Christians to follow.

There is a beautiful chain of connection here. Christ set the example. Paul and his co-workers followed Christ. The Thessalonians followed Paul. And now the believers in Macedonia and Achaia were following the Thessalonians.

Brothers and sisters, this is a vision of discipleship. It's similar to 2 Timothy 2:2, where four generations of discipleship are described. Discipleship in the church is meant to work in multiple directions: we all need to follow an example and be an example. You should have people who are more mature in the Lord whom you are learning from as they imitate Christ. And you should have people you are investing in who are learning from you. That's how the church is meant to function.

Discipleship is like a relay race: we must faithfully receive the baton, run our own leg, and hand the baton to others.

And powerful things happen when this kind of discipleship takes place. Just look at verse 8. It says, "1:8."

Again, it is amazing to consider what a profound effect this new little church had. This brand-new church was all out for the Lord. The Thessalonians were having a gospel impact not just on their immediate location, but on surrounding regions! Thessalonica was the epicenter, but the impact of their "faith toward God" was rippling out through their own province of Macedonia, south into Achaia, and to many other places. In God's providence, Thessalonica was a port city, so many came into contact with the powerful witness of this church, and word then traveled throughout the region.

Powerful language is used here. V.8 says that "the word of the Lord [had] sounded forth from [them]." This term "sounded forth" carries the idea of a loud sound echoing out. In the same way that Leviticus says the shofar trumpet of the Jubilee was to sound forth on the Day of Atonement throughout all the land of Israel and proclaim liberty to all its inhabitants (Leviticus 25:9–10), the Thessalonians were like a trumpet God was using to blast out the offer of liberty through the atonement of Jesus Christ into the surrounding regions. Christ was the message and the Thessalonians were the means of it going forth...

This church was so well known that Paul ends v.8 by saying that "we have no need to say anything." The Thessalonians' faith toward God and the sounding forth of the word of the Lord was an established fact that everybody knew.

So, brothers and sisters, on this point I'd like to drive home two things. First, like all of this passage, we see here a mark of genuine conversion. The elect become an example to others. That doesn't mean perfection or complete maturity. But to some degree, you live a life that if people follow, they will be following in the ways of Jesus. And the elect will exude Christ with their life and share Christ with their mouth. They live in such a way that the "word of the Lord" sounds forth from them.

So, to some degree, does this describe you? If so, you can know you have been chosen by God.

Second, I also pray that the Lord would use the example of the Thessalonians to inspire us to become more zealous in how we live for the Lord. Let us not become complacent with half-hearted Christian living. Let us strive to grow and be men

and women whom other people can learn from. And let us have a holy ambition to have the gospel sound forth from Cornerstone Community Church and have an impact on our area... This young little church was able to do that by God's grace, and may God also do that here by His grace...

So far, we have seen that the elect receive the gospel in power and truth, imitate Christ and His messengers, and become examples and witnesses. Now, in v.9 we come to the fourth evidence of God's choosing, which is that the elect turn to God and away from idols. The Apostle writes, "1:9."

IV. The Elect Turn to God & Away from Idols (1:9)

Paul explains that he heard reports of how the Thessalonians had become examples of faithful living and witness, how they fully embraced the apostles' leadership, and how they had made a decisive 180-degree turn from their former manner of life.

Specifically, I'd like to focus our attention on the last half of v.9: this church's turn to God from idols.

Let us remember that Thessalonica was a thoroughly pagan, polytheistic city in the Roman Empire. One commentator notes that in that culture, honoring the gods was considered a civic duty that kept the city at peace with them. So when the Thessalonians abandoned their family and community gods, society viewed it as an antisocial act that could provoke the anger of the gods, and these believers were persecuted for it (Faithlife Study Bible).

While there were some Jews in this congregation, it seems to have been a mainly Gentile church marked by turning from false deities and worthless idols.

Now, this point may seem somewhat removed from us. If I had to guess, many of you probably don't have a background of worshipping literal idols. Yet while Paul is referring to the Thessalonians' literal pagan background, this point surely applies to us all. Idolatry is not just a thing of ancient times and foreign places. It is something we were all saved out of.

The Bible teaches not only about physical idolatry, but heart idolatry. In the OT, the Lord told Ezekiel that Israel's elders had "set up idols in their hearts" (Ezekiel 14:3). Likewise, in the NT, Paul writes in Colossians 3:5 that we are to "put to death therefore what is earthly in [us]: [things such as] sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."

So idolatry is ultimately an issue of the heart. An idol of the heart is anything besides God that we set up as preeminent and worship.

Therefore, a mark of the elect is that they have made a decisive break with their former manner of life. We all had things we served and followed after. But God's people did an about-face, turned from those idolatrous sins, and followed the Lord.

So I must ask you: Have you done this? Have you embraced Christ and smashed your idols? Or are you still living for things that are not God?

I'm reminded of the scene on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18. Two altars stood before the people of Israel: one for Baal, one for Yahweh. One for an idol, one for the true and living God. And you cannot worship at both. So the prophet Elijah asked the people, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21, ESV).

So what altar do you worship at? Have you turned to the Lord and begun to worship Him? Or are you still worshipping vain idols of the heart?

Now, as long as we are in the flesh, we will battle sin. Our hearts will be a battlefield until we are with the Lord. But I am speaking about the overall direction of your life. Have you ever broken with your idols and turned to follow the Lord?

If not, then friend, you have no biblical basis for assurance that you are numbered among God's elect. You are still outside of Christ, dead in your trespasses and sins, and in danger of falling under the wrath of God.

But you can be reconciled to God today because of the work of Christ. Knowing the idolatrous nature of sinful humanity, God in His love sent His only begotten Son to live the life you could never live. He is the only man who has perfectly followed God and never pursued an idol of the heart. In Matthew 4, the devil

showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory and said, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Matthew 4:9–10, NKJV).

See, Adam and Eve, and us like them, would sell our souls for a piece of fruit and a shot to be our own god. But Jesus, the perfect man in our place, refused Satan when offered the entire world. And this Jesus not only lived the life we couldn't, but died the death we deserved, suffering the wrath of God for our idolatry. Then He rose again, defeated death, and now offers salvation to whosoever will forsake their idols and turn to Him, the one true and living God.

If you have not turned from your idols to the Lord, Christ calls upon you to do so today.

But I know there are many here who have. You're not perfect, but you have truly turned to follow Christ. You have turned your eyes to the Lord and are seeking to live for Him, even though you are still weak and fail.

If that is you, then I want you to know that this is evidence of God's sovereign grace in your life, and you can have assurance that you are one of God's chosen and beloved people.

And as His beloved child, v.9 says that you have turned to Him to "serve a living and true God." That word means to serve as a slave. God's beloved children are also His willing servants. So brothers and sisters, if God has graciously chosen you, may we faithfully serve Him...

However, there is one final mark of a true child of God found in this passage. Paul's sentence isn't finished. The Apostle Paul writes that they turned from idols to serve God and... "1:10."

V. The Elect Await Christ & His Rescue (1:10)

When you think about it, these final verses really are a beautiful short summary of the gospel. From v.9 we know that there is one true and living God. And in v.10, we receive some more amazing core truths about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We learn that this one true God has a Son. This only begotten Son of God is named Jesus. His parents were told to name Him this because "He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). And that is exactly what He did. Jesus died for our sins on the cross, and as 1:10 says, He was raised from the dead, and then ascended into heaven, where He now sits at the right hand of the Father. It is this resurrected Jesus who "rescues us from the wrath to come."

Brothers and sisters, don't grow cold to those facts. The fact that we have been saved from divine wrath is a marvelous grace. God's wrath is a terrible and frightening thing. Think of how the world was destroyed in the Flood. Think of how Sodom and Gomorrah went up in flames. Think of the judgments that fell upon Egypt. Those are all temporal glimpses of the eternal wrath that is coming for unrepentant sinners.

Scripture says that the wrath of God is coming against this sinful world. He will pour out His judgments upon this whole earth in the Great Tribulation. And after this, sinners will be sealed in the Lake of Fire.

But if you are in Christ, you have been saved from this fate. You will not suffer under the wrath of God because Jesus did so in your place. Jesus has delivered you from the wrath to come.

Remember, this entire section of ch.1 explains Paul's assurance of the Thessalonians' election, and here the Apostle highlights that this church was marked by waiting for Jesus.

It may seem that "waiting" is a passive thing, but that is not the case. The word "wait" in v.10 is in the present tense in the Greek, describing an ongoing waiting. It speaks of an eager expectation, longing, and anticipation for the soon coming of the Lord Jesus.

The Passover paints a picture of this principle. A Passover lamb was slaughtered so that the wrath of God would pass over each Israelite house that had the lamb's blood on its doorpost. But additionally, the Lord told Israel to celebrate the Passover this way: "You must be dressed for travel, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand" (Exodus 12:11, HCSB). In other words, they were to be

ready to leave in the Exodus. They were prepared and eagerly waiting until the time came to leave Egypt and go to the Promised Land.

In a similar way, Jesus is our Passover lamb through whom we avoid the wrath of God. And in this life we are to be "dressed for travel" and ready to go. And until He returns, we are waiting and preparing to be with Him. There is a Promised Land of eternity with the Lord that awaits us. We are to be living and waiting for Christ in light of His return.

Jesus is coming, and the true saints of God are waiting...

Conclusion

So, brothers and sisters, we have seen in this text the marks of sovereign grace in the lives of the Thessalonians. But as we have gone through it, have you recognized the marks of sovereign grace in your own life?

While not exhaustive, this passage provides five evidences of God's electing grace so that you can know if you are elect:

1. You can know you are elect if you received the gospel in transformative power and truth (1:4–5).
2. You can know you are elect if you now imitate Christ and His messengers (1:6).
3. You can know you are elect if you have become an example to believers and a witness to the world (1:7–8).
4. You can know you are elect if you have turned to God and away from the vain idols that marked your life outside of Christ (1:9).
5. You can know you are elect if you are eagerly awaiting Christ and living in light of His return (1:10).

If these marks align with your life, I pray you would leave with assurance and increased praise for His grace in your life. If they don't, I pray you would come to Christ today. And if you do, you will find it was ultimately because of the electing mercy of God...