

1 Thessalonians 1

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The book of 1 Thessalonians begins with a very typical salutation for Paul, which we find in 1 Thessalonians 1:1. Paul's co-authors are Silas and Timothy, his frequent companions on the second and third missionary journeys, and they greet the Thessalonian church with the words "grace and peace". This shows Paul's concerns for his relations with both Jews and Gentiles. The traditional Jewish greeting, which is still used today, is "shalom", which means "peace" in Hebrew. By contrast, the usual Gentile greeting at the time was "charis", which means "grace" or "favor". When Paul greets the Thessalonian church by saying "grace and peace," he's greeting both Jew and Gentile in a customary way.

Unlike some of Paul's later letters, we're able to use the book of Acts and archaeological evidence to pinpoint the writing of 1 Thessalonians quite precisely. Paul founded the Thessalonian church during his second missionary journey. After he was driven out of town, he went to Athens, but sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the church there. Acts 18:5 reveals that Timothy returned to Paul after Paul had gone on to Corinth, and it was Timothy's report on Thessalonica that prompted Paul to write 1 Thessalonians. A little later on in Acts, we learn that the proconsul toward the end of Paul's stay in Corinth was a man named Gallio. In 1909, an archaeological dig unearthed an inscription that dated Gallio's time in office to 52 AD, which gives us a date for 1 Thessalonians of 51 or possibly 50 AD.

The Thessalonian church at this time was something of a ragtag group. Unlike some of the other early churches, they faced immediate and savage persecution from what must have been a sizable Jewish community in the city. Paul was driven out of town, and some of the church leaders had been dragged into court and forced to pay a bond in exchange for their freedom. In the space since Paul's departure, some of the believers had even died. Paul writes to encourage these downtrodden Christians, and we can find encouragement in his words too. Let's look, then, at 1 Thessalonians 1.

Prayer and God's Choice.

Paul begins the body of the letter by recounting the **PRAYER** he offers to God about them. We see this in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3. Even though Acts 17 only mentions three weeks that Paul preached in the synagogue in Thessalonica, it's evident from this text that Paul's stay there actually lasted a much longer time. That longer stay gave him the opportunity to get to know the Thessalonians, to appreciate their character, and to be thankful for it.

Looking back, Paul identifies three main attributes in the church there for which he is thankful. First, he's thankful for their work of faith. To many in the religious world, this would seem like an oxymoron. The Bible certainly teaches that we are saved by grace through faith, but many in our time have taken that idea to an illogical extreme. They say that because we are saved by faith, we don't have to do anything to be saved, and once we are saved, there is nothing we can do that would cause us to lose our salvation. This faith without works is exactly the opposite of what we see from the Thessalonians. Instead, their faith led them to work, to strive to practice the things they knew would please God. If we have genuine faith, we will do the same. As James says in James 2, we will show others our faith by our works.

The Thessalonians' lives also showed evidence of another kind of work, the labor of love. They didn't do good just because. Instead, they were motivated to obey God and serve man because of their love for everyone. Sometimes, I fear that in the church, we spend too much time focusing on the labor part and not enough time focusing on the love part. Jesus doesn't call us only to change our actions, so that we grit our teeth and go out there and do nice things for people even though we don't want to. Instead, He calls us to change our hearts, to learn genuine love for God and for everyone. The more we develop that love, the easier we will find obedience to the will of God.

Third, Paul is thankful for the Thessalonians' steadfastness of hope. Even though they've only been Christians for a short time, they've had to face a great deal of persecution, the kind of persecution that would erode the faith of a less devout disciple. However, the Thessalonians are committed to the promise of eternal life in Christ Jesus, and because of that hope, they're determined to persevere no matter what. Like them, we need to learn the knack of keeping our eyes on the prize no matter what, so that even if we face suffering or persecution, we will not swerve from the road to heaven.

In the next main section of the chapter, Paul describes **GOD'S CHOICE** of the Thessalonians. We find this context in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5. At first hearing, this sounds kind of Calvinistic, like God reached down and zapped the Thessalonians, but the context makes it clear that that's not what's going on here. Let me give you an example. Let's say that my wife calls me as I'm on my way home from the church building and asks me to pick her up some orange juice. I ask her if she has any preferences, and she tells me that she wants some that's low-acid and no-pulp. In a minor miracle, I actually remember to go to Jewel, get the low-acid, no-pulp orange juice, and bring it home to her. Did she go to the store and select that specific carton? Obviously not, and yet it still was obviously the orange juice she chose because it fit the criteria she set up. In the same way, we aren't individually selected by God. Instead, we are His chosen because we fit the criteria He set up. He wants people who believe His word, and because we believe His word, He has chosen us.

We see the way that God had the gospel proclaimed in the next verse. As Paul says, he didn't just show up telling a tall tale. Instead, the message—the word—was confirmed for the Thessalonians in three main ways. First, it was confirmed through powers, the miracles that Paul and his followers worked to establish that they were from God. Second, the word was confirmed through the Holy Spirit, that Paul as an apostle was able to lay his hands on the Thessalonian Christians and impart spiritual gifts to them. Third, the word was confirmed through full conviction, not the conviction of the Thessalonians, but the conviction of Paul and Silas and Timothy. Paul and his companions didn't look to get money from the Thessalonians. They didn't try to glorify themselves. Instead, everything they did was for the Thessalonians' benefit. This kind of humble, selfless service established that they were actually from God.

Today, the legitimacy of the word has already been established, so it no longer needs to be confirmed by miracles and spiritual gifts. However, the other tool that Paul used to spread the gospel is just as important today. Just as the deep conviction of the early gospel preachers was evident in their lives, our deep conviction needs to be evident in our lives. There's a Dave Ramsey slogan that goes, "Live like no one else, so you can live like no one else," and brethren, as Christians, everybody needs to see that we're living like no one else. We need to be different. We need to be like Christ. The more Christlike we are, the more we let our light shine, the more others will come to the Lord through us.

Imitation and Reputation.

Because of their ready reception of God's word, the Thessalonians also **IMITATED CHRIST**. Look with me at 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8. As Paul sees it, the Thessalonians walked this path through four main attributes. The first was that they suffered affliction. Like many of the early Christians, they were persecuted by the same Jewish mobs that ran Paul out of town, but they still held fast to the word. Today, we need to imitate their willingness to suffer for the gospel. In this country, many people seem to believe it's their birthright to go through life without suffering. However, as Christians, we can expect not just to suffer in spite of doing good, but because of doing good. There are lots of people who don't like what the gospel has to say and won't like us if we talk it or live it. Nonetheless, we must endure.

Second, the Thessalonians imitated Paul in their joy. Despite their persecuted situation, they still rejoiced in the blessings of God. We also need to embrace this rejoicing. As Christians, we should be joyful even when our lives aren't going the way we want them to. After all, in the grand scheme of things, our blessings in Christ outweigh all the difficulties we could even imagine. When we are always so richly blessed, how can we be anything but joyful?

Third, the Thessalonians imitated Christ in leading others to imitate them. The story of the way they held up under persecution quickly made its way to every church in the Greek peninsula, and they were all encouraged by the saints in Thessalonica. Wouldn't it be wonderful, friends, if our church had that effect on the churches of Chicagoland? Wouldn't it be wonderful if they heard so much about our love for one another, our devotion to the word, our dedication to the work, and our zeal for reaching the lost that they were inspired to imitate us in those things? The good we do here can have a positive impact on brethren we don't even know. Let's remember, then, to do good all the more.

Fourth, the Thessalonian church imitated Christ in proclaiming the word. Because of their teaching and their faith, the gospel had gone out with greater force throughout the entire Mediterranean basin. One little church struggling to hold on could have that kind of impact. Today, if we are as committed as the Thessalonians were, we can have the same dramatic effect. Only God knows how much good He can do with a church willing to obey His will.

The Thessalonians could have this kind of impact because of **THEIR REPUTATION**. Paul describes what others knew about the church in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10. First, the Thessalonians were known for receiving Paul. I'm certain that when Paul came to Thessalonica, he wasn't dressed up in any kind of impressive finery, but the Thessalonians heard him and received him anyway. In just a few weeks, our gospel meeting is coming up, when all of us will have the opportunity to receive a modern-day gospel preacher. How are we going to do that? Are we going to be so eager for his message that we'll be here every night, or for most nights of the week, are we going to find better things to do?

Second, they turned to God from idols. The Thessalonian church rejected Zeus and Apollo and all the other gods of their people to serve the only true God. Today, our people have many different gods too, gods with names like Bank Account and New Car and McMansion. These gods have millions of fervent worshippers. Where do we stand? Do we live for those things, or do we turn aside to God, because we recognize that the Most High is most important?

Third, the Thessalonians had the reputation of serving God. These weren't Christians who talked a good game. Instead, they rolled up their sleeves and got to work doing what God wanted them to. Like them, we need to be willing to get our hands dirty carrying out the King's business. In our congregation, there are always a multitude of tasks that need to be done. We must be willing to be doers, instead of those who only benefit from the hard work of others.

Finally, the Thessalonians were known for waiting for Jesus. This might seem like an odd way to characterize them, but it's an important one. To them, nothing was more important than the day the Lord would come back, and they centered their whole lives around that. I think that most of us would like to be able to describe ourselves the same way, but there's always other stuff intervening. Sometimes, we need to clear out the other stuff and focus on what's important.