

Faith, Love and Hope

1 and 2 Thessalonians

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
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Heavenly Father, we thank you, thank you in the middle of a busy week that we come apart, come together as the Lord's people. We come needy, hungry, thirsty, spent, in need of recharging, our minds need to be refocused, our affections need to be drawn to you once again. We thank you for the rock which is your word. We thank you that holy men wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, that all Scripture is the product of your out-breathing and is profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness, that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. We thank you for the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that when we were dead in trespasses and in sins, you drew us with the cords of love to embrace the Lord Jesus as he was offered to us in the Gospel, and that we found in him our all-in-all, and he has become to us the altogether lovely one and fairer than 10,000. We ask for your blessing, for the pouring out of your Spirit that the word might come to us not in word only but in power and in might and in demonstration of your sovereign purposes among us, and with the Holy Spirit and with conviction, confirming in our hearts, in our souls, the truthfulness of that which we read and its applicability to our lives and to where we are just now. So hear us, Lord, and to your blessing. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now turn with me, or if you have a sheet of paper on the table with 1 Thessalonians 1. 1 Thessalonians 1.

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For not only has the word of the Lord

sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Well, may God add his blessing to the reading of his holy and inerrant word.

Now 1 Thessalonians, Paul in AD 49 perhaps 50, we know from the Acts of the apostles that he spent three weeks in this city, a well-established city in Paul's time with a long history. Founded in the fourth century BC by Cassander. Cassander was one of the officers of Alexander the Great. In an idyllic spot, a beautiful harbor set, as it was, on the so-called Via Egnatia, the Roman Way, the high road to Rome, so therefore in terms of commerce and industry, an idyllic, ideal location for a city with a sea view. A beautiful harbor. Today known as Thessaloniki, second city of Greece. Luke tells us in Acts 17 following the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Silas, and later Timothy, and later still at Troas Luke was added to this missionary church planting team, who sailed the Aegean, went to Philippi, and then southwest to Thessalonica. There was a sufficient Jewish community in Thessalonica to form a synagogue and it was there that for a period of time Paul and his company proclaimed the Gospel until things got a little out-of-hand. There was an accusation made that they were preaching, Paul in particular was preaching another king called Jesus, and you remember they left the synagogue, went to the house of a man called Jason, and Jason consequently got into some trouble, he's put on bail, and Paul and Silas are smuggled out of the city in the dead of night and head to Berea and then eventually to Athens, and Timothy joins them. Paul is anxious to learn what's happening in Thessalonica, how the folks are faring. It's a young, fledgling church. And Timothy is sent back and Paul and Silas head on to Corinth and it's from there that Timothy returns with news, good news, some not so good news, to which Paul responds with this letter, 1 Thessalonians.

And the theme of this opening section, verses 2 through 10, after the initial greeting, is one of thanksgiving. Verse 2, "We give thanks to God always." And I want us to think together through the things for which Paul gives thanks and I want to single out four things for which Paul here gives thanks following the greeting, "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace."

The first thing I want to single out is that one of the things that Paul is giving thanks for here is the church at Thessalonica that is in fellowship with the Father and with the Son, and if you allow your eyes to drop down to verse 4 and 5, he's talking about the Holy Spirit, but in the opening verse, "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The church of the Thessalonians. Now Paul sometimes will say things like the church in Thessalonica or the church in Corinth or the church in Ephesus, that has a location, a geography, a zip code, that is identified with a particular location, but

here it's the church that is made up of Thessalonians, people from the city of Thessalonica, or is it Thessalonika? The church consists of Thessalonians.

Now it consists of saints, sinners reckoned saints in the Gospel, the church that is comprised of Christians, the church that is comprised of the elect, the church that is comprised of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. There are lots of ways that you can talk about the church at Thessalonica but the church of the Thessalonians, the church of the Columbians, or the west Columbians, or the Lexingtonians? Some of you take great pride in the fact that you are west of the river. I had this conversation today, there was certain, well, there was a certain snobbery about it. They lived in one location. I won't tell you which side of the river they were on but they were definitely pro one side and not so pro the other side in terms of where they desired to live, and in terms of what mattered more. Paul is identifying the fact that these people are Thessalonians, they're from this city. They have jobs here. Some of them might have been slaves. They were born here. They had roots, they had family going back several centuries perhaps. You know, I used to be in Mississippi and these things are recorded so I have to be careful now what I say, but there's a certain difference when you ask, "Where are you from?" and you say, "I'm from Mississippi," or you say, "I'm from South Carolina," and people react very differently to those two statements. There are definitely folk in here who really really identify with South Carolina and are proud of it, not in a sinful way or maybe they're sinful about it but that's not my point. It's a legitimate thing to identify with your roots and your lineage and your culture and so on. Where does the Gospel come? It comes right into that culture that you identify with. They are Thessalonians. You are Columbians. You are Lexingtonians. You are west Columbians. But you are also members of the church of the living God, members of the body of Christ.

This is the church that Jesus promised to build at Caesarea Philippi, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." This is his mission. Jesus has a plan. It's Plan A, it's not Plan B or C or D. It's Plan A. It's his main objective, church building. Here in Columbia, in Poland, it's God's plan, it's Christ's plan. It's what he died for. It's what he rose for. This is it. And there's a church in Thessalonica made up of Thessalonians. Ekklesia, church, related, I think, to the Hebrew verb "to call, kaleo," from the word "to call, kaleo," and related to ideas in Hebrew in the Old Testament to synagogue and so on. Called out of and called into fellowship with each other and with the Lord Jesus. Called out of the world and into fellowship with each other and interestingly here, "in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ." In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now typically Paul's way of saying this is usually "in Christ." That would be a typical signature of the Apostle Paul. Sixty plus times in the New Testament, Paul uses this telltale signature, perhaps learned and burned into his soul on the Damascus Road at the time of the martyrdom of Stephen, and Saul of Tarsus' involvement in that. And the words that Stephen, that's heard at the death of Stephen, that Saul hears, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" So that when you touch one of Christ's, you touch him. Perhaps it was there more than anywhere that Paul learned what it is to be a member of the church

of Christ. It means to be in Christ, but interestingly here, in the Father, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. In communion with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why is Paul saying that? This is a young church. Perhaps because this brings to the mind of these young Christians in Thessalonica that not only are they in union and fellowship with each other but they are in union and fellowship with God who is Father and Son, and later in the passage, Holy Spirit. In God the Father. Almost as though Paul is saying inside him, surrounded by the protection of his arms embracing them so that in the midst of the storm, and he mentions in verse 6, the word coming "in much affliction," and we know from Acts 17 the kind of affliction that came to the early church and to the house of Jason, that right at the heart and right at the center of that storm there is an eye where there is peace and calm. You know, people tell me, I've never experienced a tornado, I've seen one at a distance, considerable distance, I have to say, but people say who have experienced tornadoes that there's a calm. I remember when Katrina came and blew in from the south, that there was an hour or so where there was blue sky and warmth and peace and we thought, "Well, it's over," but actually we were just in the center of it, and all around there was this tremendous storm and damage being done. This young church in communion with the Father and the Son.

So that's the first thing for which he gives thanks, the church in fellowship with the Father and the Son. Secondly, the church in verse 4, the church, he gives thanks because the church is loved by God and chosen. Loved by God and chosen. See it there in verse 4? "We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you." Loved and chosen. We are loved. In an era perhaps where our affections are in some disarray, we are reminded here at the very heart of the Gospel is the love of God. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." And chosen. Well, meant here as a comfort, meant here to bring encouragement, meant here to reinforce and invigorate and strengthen. Personal, sovereign, unconditional election, that the Lord did not set his affection upon you because you were more numerous than other people for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because he loved you.

Why does the Lord love us? Because he does. He loves us because he loves us. He loves us because he has always loved us, set our hand upon us from eternity. Why are you a Christian right now? Why are you a believer right now? Why are your affections embracing the Lord Jesus Christ right now? Because in the counsels of eternity, he chose you. He set his affection upon you. In the words of Josiah Conder,

"'Tis not that I did choose thee,
For, Lord, that could not be;
This heart would still refuse thee,
Hadst thou not chosen me.
Thou from the sin that stained me
Hast cleansed and set me free;
Of old thou hast ordained me,
That I should live to thee.

'Twas sov'reign mercy called me
And taught my op'ning mind;
The world had else enthralled me,
To heav'nly glories blind.
My heart owns none before thee,
For thy rich grace I thirst;
This knowing, if I love thee,
Thou must have loved me first."

Loved by God and chosen. Paul isn't raising this as a piece of philosophical inquiry, something to debate, something to have a little spat over, the ethics of election, the place and function of free will, what about our decision. He goes right over all of those. Think about it when you get down on your knees and you think about your salvation, what is your instinct? To thank him? That it's all of him and it's not something that he just came to in the last five minutes or the last day or so, in the last year or so? He's been at this from eternity.

We are loved by God and chosen, and then a third thing for which he gives thanks, the church in fellowship with the Father and the Son, the church loved and chosen by God, and then, thirdly, he gives thanks for the Gospel and how it came to them in verse 5. The Gospel and how it came to them, "because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Now note the three stages. The Gospel came to you. You welcomed it. And it rang out from you so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, "you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction." It came to you, you received it, and it went out from you.

It came to you. Well, how did it come to you? Well, we know the answer to this because Luke tells us in Acts 17 how the word came to them. The Gospel came to them in words. The Gospel came to them en-fleshed in the Apostle Paul and Silas and Timothy. The Gospel came in words, not in word only but it came in words. We hear that adage often repeated, often attributed to Francis of Assisi, there's absolutely no evidence whatsoever that Francis of Assisi said any such thing, but it's often attributed to him: preach the Gospel, use words if necessary. Well, words are absolutely essential to the Gospel. Absolutely essential. If you see a picture of the cross, it doesn't say Gospel. To some it's foolishness. To a Roman soldier it means one more criminal put to death. To a Jew, an Orthodox Jew, the sight of a cross, the picture of a cross is simply a sign of the anathema of God, the curse of God has come down upon this individual, but there's no Gospel in it. You need words to interpret that.

People say words are cheap. We live in an era where words are discounted, where words are constantly changing their meaning and the Oxford English Dictionary, for example, is constantly renewing itself, adding new words, changing the meaning of old words as words morph. And so sociologists of language suggest that language is just an evolutionary product from grunts and groans to something more sophisticated, but has no permanent fixity in itself. And against all of that background, here's the New Testament

saying words are essential. Words with meaning. Words that mean one thing and not another. Words that need to be investigated, nouns and verbs and adjectives and adverbs and clauses and subordinate clauses. So that God gives us a Bible consisting of 66 books, three different languages, two million words, 40 different authors, a variety of cultural backgrounds, a variety of genres, history and poetry and apocalyptic and proverb and narrative and prose, letters. Words. The Gospel comes in words. One of the things I like to think about, I like to set as a test every now and then, can you relate the Gospel in, say, 100 words? 150 words? Can you crystallize it? Can you bring it down to its most basic form? But it's going to involve words.

It came to the Thessalonians and it came in words but not in word only, not in word only, it came in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. It came in words but it came with words to which the power of God was added, the blessing of the Holy Spirit was added externally and internally, enabling Paul and Silas and Timothy to be bold and strong and forthright. But also illuminating, the understanding of those who heard it, the affections of those who responded to it so that they respond with conviction, with assurance, so that they were saying yes to God's yes, and amen to God's amen. Now that's what we need to pray for here in Bible studies, in Sunday school classes, in Sunday services. Lots of words. Lots and lots of words but we need the power and we need the Holy Spirit and we need the conviction.

When the word came to these Thessalonians, it came in power and it transformed them from the inside out, and that, I think, is the fourth thing for which Paul gives thanks. He thanks them, he gives thanks to God because of the church's fellowship with the Father and the Son, and he gives thanks to God because the church is loved and chosen, he gives thanks because of the Gospel and how it came to them, but fourthly, he gives thanks for the Gospel and how it changed them. Now he mentions it back in verse 3, "remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Faith, love, and hope. The order can sometimes change but this triad in the New Testament, faith, love and hope, they are a work of faith. Not just faith but there was a work that demonstrated the validity of their faith, the genuineness of their faith. There was a work that sprang from their faith because faith without works is dead faith. It's not real faith. They had faith but it was a faith that was demonstrable. It was a faith that was evidence. It was a faith that was seen. It was a faith that was talked about in Macedonia and Achaia and beyond.

And labor of love, using a word for "labor" that is of the strongest kind of physical, manual toil that brings aches and pains and a little perspiration. That kind of labor. Their labor of love, how they loved one another, how they cared for one another.

And their patience in hope because they live in a tension between the now and the not yet. They look for a city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God. But here they have no continuing city and here there's suffering and trouble and difficulty, and they're patient as they wait, the theme of Thessalonians, but as he mentions it in verse 10, "to wait for his Son from heaven." They're waiting.

Their work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope, the Gospel had changed them so that these three star qualities shone out from them. It wasn't all talk. There was a work and a labor and a patience. And then a little later on, he mentions in verse 9, "For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." You turned to God from idols. Think of the answer to the question about repentance, what is repentance, and it's a turning away from sin and a turning toward righteousness. The verb here "epistrepho" is related, I think, to perhaps the Old Testament word, at least one of the Old Testament words for repentance which actually almost physically has the idea of turning, turning away from idols and turning toward the living God.

Turning away from idols. This is largely, I think, a Gentile community. He seems to mention this in the middle of chapter 2, that the church of Thessalonica was made up largely of Gentiles, so perhaps the idols that he has in mind here are the idols of the Imperial cult. Calvin says in "The Institutes" in 111.8, "man's mind is a perpetual factory of idols." A factorum idolorum, a perpetual factory of idols like my favorite tv program, "How It's Made." I love that program and you've got a factory belt and they're producing widgets, just one after another, it's a perpetual line of them and they're coming out in clockwork fashion one after another. The capacity of our minds to create and fashion and form idols. It was Nietzsche, I think, who said that there are more idols than there are realities. And they have a strange power upon us. Tom Shippey, the Tolkien scholar, says about the ring, this Nordic, Germanic ring figure in history, and how those who have it, it wields, it wields this strange power upon the individual. Idols that we create in our minds wield this enormous power on the individual. Luther says in his "Large Catechism" that he wrote, there's a reason why the first commandment deals with idolatry.

How do you identify your idols? What are your idols? Well, ask yourself the question that John Owen asks, "What do you think about? What do you gravitate to when you don't think about anything in particular? You know, when you drift into neutral, you just let it slide, you're no longer using any energy to think about anything, you just drift into that neutral mode, what are you thinking about? What dominates?" Well, that's your idol. Is it Jesus? Is it the Gospel? Is it the sweetness of the word? Probably not. Then it's an idol. What are the things that you're really living for? If I were to suddenly ask you, "What are your five priorities in life? Name them quickly. You've got 10 seconds." They're probably idols. What is it that makes you angry or gets you irritable? I mean, it gets you immediately and you almost have an instinctive emotional response to? It's probably an idol.

And what marks these Thessalonians, what marks the genuineness of their faith that's talked about in Macedonia and Achaia and seemingly in all the known world? That something extraordinary had happened in just three weeks of ministry in Thessalonica. Three weeks. Do you believe that? That an entire community could be changed in three weeks of ministry and that a vibrant church, I've no idea what the size of this church was but a vibrant church making enough noise that communities far away were talking about it? They had turned from their idols to serve the living God. Their focus of attention was different. What drove them was different.

"Waiting for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." Well, that introduces us to other areas now of Thessalonians which we'll take up next week and in the weeks coming but let's pray together.

Father, we thank you, thank you for an example here of what you can do in one month. We think of ministries that have been taking years and years and years and show almost no fruit or very little. So we pray, we pray for that ministry with it's power and the Holy Spirit and much conviction that is a sovereign thing that comes from you that is evidence of you at work, and we think tonight of our own church and our sister churches and works in Ashville and Leath and Pontiac and shortly in Poland, and we pray, Lord, do it again so that news of what's taking place here would spread like wildfire across the globe. Lord, forgive our unbelief. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.