

Thank God for the Church in Every Place

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

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Introduction

Today we begin our new sermon series in Thessalonians.

- Here we have a model church for us to imitate.
 - The church was made up, as we are told in Acts 17, of a few Jews, a great multitude of devout Greeks, and a few leading women who responded to Paul's preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica, a principle city of Macedonia.
 - The work of God in them was remarkable because they had believed even though Paul and Silas (or Silvanus as he was also called) and Timothy had been opposed by the Jews in the synagogue that did not believe after only three Sabbaths.
 - These Jews were so antagonistic that they had stirred up a great mob from the city and involved the city officials, and they were so opposed to Paul that he and his companions had to be whisked away by night to Berea...
 - And even then, as soon as these angry Jews learned of their presence there, they pursued them and Paul had to be whisked away again by night, taken to the sea where he sailed away to Athens to avoid their grasp.
- But despite all that opposition, the fledgling church at Thessalonica continued.
 - Paul, yearning for them, sent Timothy to see how they were doing.
 - And Timothy returned with a very good report about their faithfulness—and that is when Paul wrote this letter.
 - He has very few negative things to say to them—mostly a lot of praise for their faithfulness and some encouragement to continue in grace and hope.

Now keep in mind that all of Paul's letters that are found in scripture are useful for us because in writing them, Paul was carried along by the Holy Spirit, enabling him to write nothing but that which is from God—without any error.

- Everything here is for the edification and teaching of the entire church in all ages that we might believe the truth, know the will of God, and have hope in His promises.
- By preaching from these letters to the Thessalonians, it is my prayer that God's Spirit will use these sermons to help us become a model church...
 - And that we will see how the Lord works in His people that we might put our hope in God and rejoice in His goodness.

Today, as we begin, the focus will be especially in seeing God's goodness as the God who calls together and forms faithful churches!

- We will be looking at the first five verses where we have Paul and his companions Silas (or Silvanus as he is here called) and Timothy giving thanks to God for the church at Thessalonica.
 - Paul and his companions know that God is the one who formed this faithful church, as seen by the fact that as soon as he addresses them in verse 1, he testifies of the constant thanks that he and his coworkers give to God for them.
 - This should teach us about how thankful we should be when we see a believing church!

Listen as I read these first five verses of Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians to you.

- I will begin with verse 1. I Thessalonians 1:1...
- And remember, this is the holy and infallible Word of God, given to us in all ages.

1 Thess 1:1-5: Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ² We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, ³ remembering without ceasing your work of faith,

labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, ⁴ knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵ For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

May the LORD bless the hearing of His Word and fill us with gratitude like that of Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

- Yes indeed...

I. How you ought to thank God for faithful churches, wherever you find them!

A. Just think of what a church is!

- Paul refers describes the church in Thessalonica in verse 1 as **the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**
- 1. They are Thessalonians—people from Thessalonica—brought into a church—an ecclesia...
 - *Ecclesia* is the Greek word that is translated *church* in our Bibles...
 - The word itself refers to an assembly of any kind that is called out to transact business—such a political ecclesia.
 - But these Thessalonians to whom Paul is writing are an ecclesia that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 2. This is a very wonderful thing.
 - a. Many of them had been idol worshippers,
 - and even those that were not had been Jews or God fearers who did not yet know that God had sent the Messiah...but now they do!
 - But now they were all in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - b. Just think what it means to be in the Father and in the Son!
 - On our own, we are all miserable sinners who have been cut off from God.
 - We are under His wrath and condemnation and so are without hope.
 - But to be *in Him* is to have communion with Him restored—to have forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ who died on the cross.
 - He is the one who came to bear the sins of His people, and He has done it.
 - All who believe in Him have forgiveness of sin and new life with God forever and ever!

- c. In God, they are embraced, loved, protected, nurtured, renewed, justified, adopted, sanctified, and destined for heaven...
 - where before they were estranged and headed for eternity in Hell.
 - Paul says, “grace and peace to you,” knowing that in the Lord they will have grace (God’s covenant mercy) and peace (wholeness) forever.
 - 3. What a marvellous thing it is that there are people in the Father and the Son all across our land!
 - How wonderful that there are churches in Halifax made up of people from Halifax that are in God and His Son...
 - How glad we should be whenever we learn of such churches that are there for God in their communities—kept by Him and testifying to His glory there!
- B. Paul gives thanks for such churches all the time!
1. He can’t even get to the second verse of his letter to them before he is already thanking God for this church of Thessalonians!
 - Almost all of his letters begin with this kind of thanksgiving...just to think that there were churches made up of people from these places filled him with gratitude!
 - And it was no mere formality with Paul to include a thanksgiving section in his letters—he did not include such a section when he wrote to the Galatians because they were in serious error—
 - He did not thank God unless he really meant it, but he did mean it.
 - I wonder, do you give thanks for the church wherever you find it—whenever you hear of a faithful church or run across one—
 - does gratitude well up within you?
 2. And not only that, but do you actually thank God for them in sessions of prayer?
 - That is what Paul is talking about—
 - that he and his companions regularly mention the believers to give thanks for them in their sessions of prayer.
 - Don’t just feel that you are thankful—
 - actually speak to God real words of thanks!
 - The prayers of the Greeks in Paul’s day were full of arguments in an effort to get the gods to do things for them...
 - But Christian prayers were unique because they were filled with words of thanks...
 - Evaluate your prayers. Are they like pagan prayers or Christian prayers in this regard?
 - Can you pray for another church or for a fellow believer without giving thanks for them?
- C. Failure to thank God for His wonderful work of gathering sinners to Himself has very adverse consequences.
1. It makes you cold toward God to have such a gracious work before your eyes and to not even notice it—or perhaps I should say that it shows that you are cold toward Him.

2. When you do not thank Him for this great work, you cease to appreciate what He has done.
3. And when you don't appreciate what He has done, you will not commend Him to others or promote His salvation to them.
 - You don't see anything much to promote.
4. And this will hamper your own growth and your prayers because if you are not thrilled to see faithfulness in others, you will not seek faithfulness for yourself.
5. And because you are not cherishing the things of God, you will be drawn more and more to the things of the world—
 - to the deceitful lusts that promise you much but only lead to death and destruction.
 - And you will be easily discouraged by your trials—persecution and affliction will turn you away even more.
6. And you will fail to encourage other believers in their walk...your spouse, your children, your Christian friends...
 - What is more encouraging to another Christian than for them to hear that you are giving thanks for God's work that you see in them?
 - That is much better than praising them for how good they are—that will make them insecure or proud—
 - but thanking God for His work in them causes them to look to God in assurance and hope.

II. Especially be thankful for the new life that God has given His people in their salvation.

- That is what Paul does in verse 3—
 - he remembers **without ceasing**, as he says to them, **your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.**
 - Yes, just think of how Christ has turned them around...
 - how grace has abounded to them so that they have this triad of faith, hope, and love that we read about throughout the New Testament.
 - Like Paul, give thanks for each component of this triad when you see it in a church...
- A. Give thanks to God when you see their work of faith...
1. The Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve the living God.
 - Faith had turned them into followers of Christ.
 - Now they were serving Him and their fellow believers even in the face of opposition—that is what faith does—it makes us followers of Christ.
 - Faith without works is dead.
 - Paul was so thankful to see the work of faith in the Thessalonians.
 2. Give thanks when you see the work of faith in those around you...
 - There is one who was a drunkard—but now he is filled with the Spirit...
 - Look at what he is doing—he is worshipping God.
 - He is leading his family in the worship and service of God—caring for them when he used to only care for himself.

- And there is the one who used to be a hardened secularist...
 - The professor who used to destroy the faith, teaching the foolish doctrine that the world created itself—and now he is spreading the truth.
 - Or the former activist who marched in the gay pride parade, promoting sin and debauchery—
 - faith has set her free and now she is living a pure and holy life in service to God—
 - Give thanks for the work of faith!
 - And over there are those former ritualists—who used to bury the truth in all sorts of rituals and traditions...
 - And now they have come to know God through Jesus Christ and are worshipping God in spirit and truth, and spreading the gospel of free grace instead of relying on their own works.
 - Faith has made them alive.
- B. Give thanks likewise when you see their *labour of love*.
1. Jesus told us that people would know that we are His disciples by the love that we have for one another.
 - He said that after He had washed His disciples feet when each of them had found that too lowly of a task for them to do for each other.
 - When God gathers us to Himself, He puts love in us for Him and for others, and that love shows itself in labour—*toil* is actually the word that Paul uses.
 - Love is willing to sacrifice for others—to pour itself out sacrificially for them.
 2. How Paul gave thanks when he saw this labour of love in the Thessalonians!
 - They were being persecuted...
 - Some may have lost their jobs or been imprisoned, but without fear those who were able gave of their own substance to provide for them.
 - You can be sure that they cared for the sick and strengthened the weak and laboured in prayer and encouragement for one another.
 - This church gave to the saints who suffered in this way at Jerusalem.
 - Some of them in love were ministering to Paul and his companions—they found them that they might serve them.
 - Love is diligent—it does not shrink from service, but looks for ways to be a blessing to others.
 3. We can see this love in other ways also...
 - We can see those who were full of bitterness or pride, but now they are full of love and look at others as more important than themselves.
 - Instead of hateful words of resentment and anger, they speak words of edification and grace that are helpful.
 - We see those who used to be lazy, but when the gospel changes them, they look to bless others—they are diligent at work or in the home.
 - What a beautiful thing it is to see such a transformation.
 - Thank God for it!

C. Next, we see from Paul's example that we should give thanks for *patience (or endurance) of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ* when we see it in believers.

1. The endurance of hope was something that stood out in the Thessalonians.
 - It stands out whenever there is a lot of opposition and persecution.
 - Endurance of hope has two parts...
 - First, it is the assurance that your affliction will end...
 - Second, it is the assurance that God's promises will be fulfilled and especially that Jesus will come in glory and take us to Himself.
 - If the Thessalonians had not had this hope in Christ,
 - They never would have come to the Lord in the first place.
 - Paul and Silas still had wounds on them from the treatment they received at Philippi—and now they were preaching the same message at Thessalonica!
 - And after only three weeks of preaching at the synagogue, they were already being opposed with great violence.
 - Put yourself in the place of those who were being drawn at that time!
 - When you see such opposition to their message, it makes you think twice about whether they are really right in what they are saying—
 - and whether this is really something you want follow!
 - Unless you are fully convinced that the promises of forgiveness and eternal life are true, you will hold back and not follow these prophets.
 - But those in the church at Thessalonica did believe—they did have hope—and that is why they received the word in much affliction.
 - We find this triad—faith, hope, and love—in the Bible a lot...but here in Thessalonians the order is *faith, love, and hope*...
 - Paul puts the thing that a church needs the most at the end...
 - When he wrote to the Corinthians, they were lacking in love, so he put love at the end—*faith, hope, and love*...
 - But with the Thessalonians, he put hope at the end because those who are suffering affliction need hope most of all.
 - It is hope that has kept them going in all their afflictions...they know that there is an end and that God's promises will be fulfilled...that is what keeps them going.
2. Do you give thanks when you see believers keeping on for the Lord despite severe affliction? enduring in hope?
 - If the gospel is in you, you certainly will rejoice in this.
 - It is very beautiful to see someone who goes on for Jesus in hope.
 - It is very encouraging—it reminds you of how valuable the kingdom we are waiting for truly is!
 - Think of Paul himself—his hope was so firm that he took one beating after another and just kept on going...
 - He rejoiced if his labours brought a few into eternal life.
 - He looked to the day when he would be able to present them as a chaste virgin before the Lord at the last day.

- Some of you have known a godly person who was suffering.
 - You'd go to see them to try to encourage them and instead they would encourage you because their hope was so strong—they were steadfast.
 - I remember speaking to Wayne Sproule when he was dying, and one day he ask me if he was losing his mind—he thought his mind was going—and I said, “It doesn't matter because the Lord will not lose His mind and He is the one who will take you to glory.”
 - In his weakness, he beamed.
 - He had hope in God.
 - That smile of hope brought great encouragement to me and it still does.
 - I thank the Lord for it.
3. Let me tell you where this patience of hope comes from...
- We are told in Romans 15:4 that it is through the patience and comfort of the scriptures that we have hope.
 - It works like this—God has given us promises of things that are yet future—in particular the promise of eternal life with Christ in glory...
 - But why do we have hope in these promises?
 - We have hope in these promises because the guarantors of these promises are God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit...
 - And they are absolutely faithful.
 - Thank God whenever you see anyone with this hope that keeps them going.

TRANS> Indeed, thank God as Paul did for all three things, whenever you see them: the work of faith, the labour of love, and the patience of hope.

D. And be all the more thankful (as Paul was) because those who have these virtues have them **in the sight of our God and Father.**

- Indeed, we are always before God...
 - Everything we do is before His face.
 - And of course that is true of other Christians as well.
- 1. But true believers know that they are before the face of God...
 - They do not do their works of faith and labour of love and endurance of hope merely to be seen by other people, but they live consciously before God.
 - They walk in communion with Him and draw strength from Him to live this way as those who are ever before His face.
 - It should add to your thanks to God that they are sincere.
- 2. And not only that, but also that they are pleasing God when they live this way.
 - He delights when He sees the work of faith and the labour of love and the endurance of hope in His people.
 - It should make you thankful when you see His people pleasing Him—just as it makes you glad to see a child pleasing his parents.

TRANS> Okay, so we have seen that we ought to give thanks...

- First, whenever we see a faithful church...
- And secondly, that we ought to give thanks when we see the new life of faith, love, and hope that God has given them.

- Now thirdly,

III. Give thanks for faithful churches because you know that they are elect.

A. Paul *knew* these Thessalonian believers were the elect of God because of the way that the gospel came to them.

- He says (in verse 4 & 5), **knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵ For [or rather *because*] our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.**

1. So you see that the gospel did indeed come to them...

- Paul and Silas and Timothy preached the gospel to all at the synagogue.
- Salvation comes by believing the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ—
 - that God sent Him into the world to redeem His people by dying on the cross for them, and that whoever believes in Him will be saved...

➤ God graciously brought Paul and Silas and Timothy into the synagogue at Thessalonica to preach that marvellous message...

- but if it had only been the word of the gospel that God had brought, there would never have been a church in God and in Jesus Christ at Thessalonica.
- That is why Paul says that our gospel did not come to you in word only...

2. He says that it also came to these Thessalonian believers—to *you* [you in particular] *in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance.*

a. In this they were distinguished from the ones who did not believe at Thessalonica.

- It is not about what they did, but what God did.
- He sent it to them in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance.

b. So what does that mean?

1) That it came with *power* means that it came to them with God's authority in such a way that they could not deny it.

- They were convinced by God that they were wretched sinners who could not save themselves—that they were fit only for judgment...
- And they were convinced that Jesus really was the Son of God, sent by the Father to redeem His people by dying for their sins on the cross...
- And they were convinced that it was only by believing in Him that they could be saved.

2) And that the gospel came in the Holy Spirit means that God the Holy Spirit came to them to give them life when the gospel was preached to them.

- That is what the Holy Spirit does—He gives life to those who are dead in their trespasses and sins—so that they will repent and come to Jesus for forgiveness!
- He opens our blind eyes and He cleanses our hearts so that the stubborn heart is taken away and a heart that responds to God is given.
- The change is such a radical one that Jesus called it a new birth...saying that no one would see His kingdom unless that person is born of the Spirit.

- 3) And that the gospel came with much assurance means that the elect are convinced that all of this is true.
 - That is why they were willing to leave their idols and their families to follow these strangers that had come to their synagogue.
 - That is why they were willing to suffer—because they were sure that the message preached was true.
- c. But do not miss the point...
 - Although the gospel was preached to all who were in the synagogue, it only came to those that were chosen by God with power and with the Holy Spirit and with much assurance.
 - The others would have been saved if they had believed the gospel, but they would not because they could not.
 - They were dead in their sins and they would have nothing to do with God's salvation.
 - That is the way we all are unless God has chosen us and then He draws us by sending the Word in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance.
- And we are also told that God did something else...
3. God sent messengers who themselves had been made alive.
 - Paul and Silas and Timothy were these messengers, and when the gospel came with power and in the Holy Spirit...
 - the Thessalonians were able to see that Paul and his companions were true messengers of God—they could see that they had truly received God's word and were alive in Christ...
 - It is hard to believe that a messenger is telling you the truth if he doesn't have the new life that he is preaching about!
 - We will look at this more next week...but for now...
- B. See that election is a third reason that we have to give thanks—because we know that those who have received the gospel were elected by God to salvation.
 1. Sinners would never come to God—would never choose Him.
 - They are too full of sin.
 - They want to continue in their own way.
 - They do not want to be punished, but neither do they want to be reconciled to God unless God draws them.
 - You can preach to them all day and they will never come.
 2. But when someone does come to Christ to be saved, like the Thessalonians in the church did, you can be sure that it is God who has chosen them—they are elect.
 - They have not chosen Him, but He has chosen them.
 - It is entirely of His grace that they have come.
 - All the glory goes to God.
 - They are saved because He appointed them to salvation before the foundation of the world.
 - It is not for works of righteousness that they have done, but it is entirely of His mercy.

3. Thanks should be given to Him for having loved them...
 - He loved them even though they hated Him and would not come to Him.
 - His power and His Spirit have transformed them.

Conclusion

So let us learn today from Paul to thank God for every faithful church that we come into contact with.

- Your words of thanks will help you to take a greater delight in God's saving work in His people...
 - And it will cause you to yearn to more of the fruits of His salvation in your own life and in the life of our church and in other churches...
 - And it will cause you to yearn to see more people brought into His kingdom so that you will do more to spread the gospel.