

Clarity and Comfort

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

For We Know

August 30th, 2020

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 1.

For the next three months, we are going to walk through the Apostle Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica. Before we study any letter, we need to spend a few minutes clarifying the context. This is likely going to feel like an information overload, but we'll repeat a bunch of this information in the coming weeks so just do your best to track along.

We learn about the founding of this church in Acts 17. Time doesn't permit me to read that story to you in full but let me give you a brief summary.

After his fruitful ministry in Philippi, the Apostle Paul travelled to the city of Thessalonica. Now, one of the important details you ought to know about this city is that they had been granted an unusual amount of freedom by the Roman General Marc Antony. They earned this freedom by cozying up to Rome and taking Rome's side in their struggle against Greece. As a "free city", Thessalonica could appoint their own leaders and conduct their own affairs without any Roman interference.

Thessalonica was also a wealthy city. It was located on the Egnatian Way which functioned like the highway 401 of the Mediterranean world. They also had an incredible port which meant that all Mediterranean trade passed through them.

Thessalonica was a comfortable city with a comfortable way of life and a comfortable relationship with Rome.

I'm not sure if you've noticed this, but people who love their comfort find the gospel of Jesus Christ very threatening.

The Apostle Paul came to town and, as was his custom, he entered into the Jewish synagogue and preached Christ from the Old Testament. He did this for three straight Sabbaths before he was finally kicked out of the synagogue. But that didn't stop him. After being banned from the synagogue his ministry in the city continued. It appears that Paul set up shop as a leather worker and that he taught the gentiles in the city as he went about his daily work. He also preached in people's houses – one of the owners of those houses was a man named Jason.

We don't know how long this ministry continued, but we do know that the Jews in Thessalonica became threatened by Paul's increasing influence. Eventually, they incited a mob and stormed Jason's house. Paul wasn't there so they grabbed Jason and some other believers, and they dragged them before the rulers of the city where they shouted:

“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also,⁷ and Jason has received them, **and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar**, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” (Acts 17:6b-7 ESV)

If I could paraphrase, they said: “These men are threatening to RUIN the comfortable life that we all enjoy here in Thessalonica! They keep speaking about another King, and ROME is not going to be happy when they hear about that!”

With the comfort of the city threatened, the public opinion about Christianity and about Paul and Silas in particular took a dangerous turn. That night, the believers in Thessalonica snuck Paul and Silas out of the city, and it would be months before Paul would hear from them again.

He travelled south to Berea, but the Jewish mob from Thessalonica followed him there and chased him out of that city as well. He was forced to move on to Athens, at which point he sent his ministry partner Timothy to check in with the Thessalonian church. Paul moved on to minister in

Corinth and it was while he was in Corinth, months after his ministry in Thessalonica, that he finally received a report from the church.

So, let's stop and take a breath, and let's digest that for a moment. Paul immersed himself in the Thessalonian culture. He spent full days teaching in his shop and establishing leaders for the church, but before he had completed his preparatory work, he was chased out of town. It was likely more than six months before Paul heard any word from this church that he loved.

Had they survived?

Had they given up on their faith?

Was all of my time spent in Thessalonica a colossal waste?

But then along came Timothy with an amazing report from Thessalonica. The church was continuing to grow! They were facing some persecution, but they were persevering through it. Even the churches in Macedonia were hearing rumblings about the faithful believers of Thessalonica!

But it wasn't all good news. There were also some concerns. Some of the opponents in the city were dragging the Apostle Paul's name through the mud and they were accusing him of manipulating and abandoning the church. Some of the new believers were refusing to work and were living off of the generosity of the church.

And there were also questions. Some of the new believers had died and the church had no idea what that meant. If a believer dies before Jesus returns, do they still get to go to go to heaven? The thought of their deceased loved ones missing out on the return of Christ was causing many in the church a great deal of anxiety.

Thus, having heard this report, Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians. He wrote to bring them clarity and comfort. This morning, we will be studying chapter 1. Look there with me and hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For 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. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For 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. ⁹For 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, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

One of the things that we're going to see over and over again in these letters is Paul's deep love for the Thessalonians. He's praying for them all the time. And when he prays, his primary note is thanksgiving! He says: "We give thanks to God always for you." And what does he see in this church that makes him so thankful? We find the answer in verse 4:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you (1 Thessalonians 1:4 ESV)

Isn't that interesting? I want to spend a few minutes to think about the implications of this verse. What does it mean to say that God chose the Thessalonians? Commentator G.K. Beale observes:

The fact that Paul thanks God, not the readers, for their election shows that they contributed nothing to accomplishing their own salvation but that they were the object of an unconditional divine act.¹

¹ G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 50.

Salvation is a DIVINE ACT. Only God transform a rebel into a saint. And Paul knew that. And Paul had been wondering for months about the authenticity of the faith he saw in Thessalonica.

He had seen some promising signs of growth, but those early signs were no guarantee. Jesus taught us that truth in the parable of the sower. Do you remember that story? The sower threw seed and some of the seeds initially showed signs of life. Some of the plants shot up quickly, but the soil beneath them was shallow and they died as quickly as they had grown. Other seed grew up and looked promising but was then choked out by thorns that grew up beside it. Paul was familiar with this parable, and he knew that the early sign of life that he saw in the Thessalonian church was no guarantee of genuine faith. Paul threw the seed and then he was forced out of town. If there was going to be any real, genuine growth, it would need to come miraculously from God.

We know that Paul thought this way, because he used the same language when he wrote to the church in Corinth. Reflecting on his ministry there, he wrote:

I planted, Apollos watered, **but God gave the growth.** (1 Corinthians 3:6 ESV)

That's why, when Paul receives the report of the blossoming faith of the Thessalonian believers, he doesn't thank them, or their leadership team, or his own leadership team. He simply says, "We thank GOD, for we know that HE has chosen you." Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones says:

If we fail to realize that the gospel and all that it professes is primarily an activity on the part of God, and not on the part of man, we have entirely failed to understand it.²

I know that there are some who bristle at the notion of election. There are some who are put off by this idea that God would ever "choose" anyone for salvation. But our text this morning suggests that Paul does not share that same concern.

For we know, brothers loved by God, **that he has chosen you** (1 Thessalonians 1:4 ESV)

Paul's not annoyed by that. On the contrary, God's electing, saving, CHOOSING love for the Thessalonians causes Paul to overflow with thanksgiving!

² Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1995), 245.

In this church, Paul saw fruit that he knew could only come from God. He saw identifying marks that proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that God had chosen and called a people to Himself in Thessalonica.

So, this morning, I want to pull out and highlight the three evidences of grace that Paul saw and celebrated in the Thessalonian church.

Three Evidences of Grace

First of all, Paul saw:

1. A people powerfully changed by a powerful Gospel

Look with me at verses 4-5:

⁴For 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. (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5 ESV)

Commentator Jeffrey Weima says here:

Paul's point is that his gospel message was not only a "heard word" but also an "experienced power."³

Forgive me if this sounds a little bit subjective, but isn't it true that there have been times in your life when you have felt God moving powerfully through the preaching of His Word? God ALWAYS speaks through His word, and I'm thankful for that, but sometimes it's almost as if everyone else in the room disappears and God, by the power of His Holy Spirit, preaches a sermon just for you. Have you ever felt that? The great theologian John Owen describes it this way:

When he does speak, he speaks as never man spoke; he speaks with power, and one way or other will make your "hearts burn within you," as he did to the disciples (Luke 24:32).⁴

³ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 95.

Paul says to the Thessalonians: “I know that you are chosen by God because I saw THAT happen! There was a supernatural, Holy Spirit anointing on the Gospel when we brought it to you.” Notice also that Paul takes NO CREDIT for this! He doesn’t say “we came to you in power.” No, he says, “our GOSPEL came in power!” The power was in the message! The power is always in the message!

And, Paul says, that powerful message brought about a powerful change!

It brought conviction!

It caused you to turn away from your idols!

Your faith was evidenced by works and your love was evidenced by labour!

I know that God is working in you because that kind of transformation doesn’t happen on its own!

I wonder if Timothy give this same report if he came to check in on us. “The gospel was preached with power and it worked powerfully in the people! Day by day, men and women turned away from the idols in their lives and surrendered to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Their faith was more than mere lip-service. They actively sought to live for God in every facet of their lives!”

I hope that would be a true report of our church. May it be increasingly so. Only God can do this in us, so let’s continue to ask Him to move powerfully in our midst.

The second evidence of grace that Paul sees and celebrates is:

2. A people who persevere through every trial

We see that in verse 6. Look there with me now:

⁴ John Owen, Kelly M. Kapic, and Justin Taylor eds., *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 126.

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 (1 Thessalonians 1:6 ESV)

An insincere and half-hearted faith – a MAN-MADE faith – will not weather the storm. It won't.

Only people who have received real, divine grace will persevere through the trials. Paul never clarifies the exact trials that the Thessalonians were facing, but we assume that they were enduring the same backlash that led to Paul's ejection from the city. Worshiping King Jesus in a city that worships the emperor is very dangerous. As one commentator notes:

Turning to God from idols also meant a rejection of the imperial cult, thereby jeopardizing Thessalonica's favored political and economic status as a free city.⁵

The church was perceived as a threat to the peace and prosperity of the city. This would have made them a stench in their culture. Following Jesus likely meant saying goodbye to some family. It likely meant saying goodbye to some career aspirations. It likely meant saying goodbye to any hope of having a positive reputation. And yet, they embraced the cost, and they did it with joy.

Every true believer will at one time, or another be called to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Every Christian will at some point face trials and tribulations. It's not a question of if, but when. Bruce Waltke says it so well:

Prosperity and adversity are the wise and necessary mixture of the saint's condition.⁶

Adversity tells you who you really are! And it tells the people around you who you really are. This church in Thessalonica walked through their trial, and they did it with joy! They imitated Jesus:

who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2b ESV)

⁵ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 6.

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 249.

They displayed, as Paul coined it in verse 2: “the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the New Testament, that word “hope” is powerful. It’s not wishy washy. It means to look forward to something with a settled *expectation* that it will be fulfilled!

God WILL right every wrong! God WILL vindicate His people! Jesus DID die for my sins and I WILL be delivered from the wrath to come! God HAS risen Jesus from the grave and He WILL raise me up in the same way! God IS building His kingdom and the gates of hell WILL NOT prevail against it! THAT is the Christian hope! And when God’s people resolve to hold onto that hope, they are unshakable!

Is that you, Christian? Can you sing along with saints of old:

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come!
‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home!⁷

Paul looked at the church in Thessalonica and said, “You wouldn’t have walked through those trials the way that you did if this faith wasn’t real. This is evidence of true faith. This is the kind of grace that only God can give.”

Friends, as I look across this room, I could say the exact same thing about so many of you. I have watched you march through the fire and back again. I have watched you endure things that no one ought ever to endure, and you did it with the joy of the Lord.

I thank God for that. For I know that He has chosen you. I see His grace shining through you.

But there’s one more evidence of grace that Paul sees and celebrates in this church. He sees:

3. A people who are multiplying disciples through their witness and testimony

We see this in verses 7-8:

⁷ John Newton, *Amazing Grace*.

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. (1 Thessalonians 7b-8 ESV)

People are coming to Christ simply after HEARING THE REPORT from the Thessalonian church! Isn't that amazing?

Can you imagine someone in Toronto saying to their friend: "Hey! Did you hear what's going on in Orillia?" "No, I haven't. What is it?" "Well, people's lives are completely changed! Drug addicts are leaving their drugs behind! Pornography addicts are leaving their porn behind! The Jesus-followers there are losing their jobs and even their families are disowning them, but they keep pressing on! And they're so full of joy! The more the city persecutes the church, the more the church worships and grows!" ... "Do you think I could be a Jesus-follower too?"

To be clear, that's EXACTLY what was happening! Paul says: "We show up in these places and we don't even need to SAY anything because the people have heard what's happening in Thessalonica and they want in!" Do you believe that God can do that? God DOES that!

This young church didn't do anything particularly special. They simply set out to imitate Jesus. And by God's grace, they did that so well that the churches in Macedonia and in Achaia began to imitate the Thessalonians! As commentator Jeffrey Weima notes:

The imitators have now become the imitated. This is high praise indeed.⁸

Here's a probing question: Are you living a life that you would want others to imitate?

Let's attack that from a different angle: Are you living a life that anyone else would want to imitate? Is the gospel transformation in your life so compelling that your children are pressing in and seeking the Lord for themselves? Through your testimony and your witness, have you been used by God to lead others into the kingdom?

⁸ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 102.

Multiplication is a mark of grace. Living things grow. Paul saw that in the Thessalonian church, and he was overwhelmed with gratitude.

Conclusion

As we conclude, I would suggest that there are two ways that we should be hearing and responding to the text this morning. First, this text presents us with:

1. A word of caution

Now, let me be the first to point out that Paul did not write this chapter to give caution. He wrote this letter because he was so pleased with what he saw in the Thessalonian church.

But we're not the Thessalonian church. We're the church in Orillia. So, as we listen in on Paul's celebration of the evidences of grace that he saw in THAT church, we ought to stop for a moment and consider whether he would see those same evidences of grace in THIS church.

Has the powerful gospel powerfully changed us? Are we persevering through trials? Is our witness and testimony leading to multiplication? Those are important questions to meditate on as a church. And the church is made up of individual parts, so we should each be asking these questions of ourselves.

It is a sad reality that there are many who claim to be saved who possess no evidence of grace in their lives. The gospel never changed them. They look the same today as they did when they first prayed that prayer of repentance. They never turned from their idols. Every hardship presented another excuse to take a step back in their faith. Nobody's lining up to imitate their faith because everyone sees right through it.

Let's be clear: that person would receive a very different letter from the Apostle Paul than the one we have in front of us. That person would receive a letter much like the one that Jesus wrote to the church in Sardis. He told them:

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. (Revelation 3:1b ESV)

If that's you, I would plead with you to call on God for His grace! His grace won't leave you the same. His grace will give you the power to turn from those idols. His grace will set you free! His grace is available to you this morning because Jesus died on the cross for your sin.

Repent. Believe. And experience the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some of us might need to hear that word of caution this morning.

However, the primary note that we are meant to hear in this text is:

2. A word of comfort

You see, there's another pervasive problem in the church that breaks my heart. There is a vast number of people who fear that they are NOT saved even though all of the evidence suggests that they ARE! I can't tell you how many Christians I've spoken to who feel completely crippled by unworthiness and guilt. They say things like: "Pastor, I don't think I'm really saved." I ask, "Well, why is that?" And they come back with any number of responses: "I still struggle with temptation all the time. My Bible reading feels dry. I feel like I sin every day."

I want to speak a word of comfort to that person this morning.

Has the gospel of Jesus Christ changed you, or has it not? Are you the same person that you were when you were first helped to hear and understand the good news? You've changed, haven't you? You've grown from one degree of glory to the next! You turned away from those idols, didn't you? Your eyes were opened to see Jesus and you love him more than anything! You were POWERFULLY changed by a POWERFUL gospel! Were you not?

You say: "Well, I've still got a long way to go..." Of COURSE you do! There will be work to be done until we stand before Him in glory! You have not arrived yet.

But are you looking more like Jesus every day? Is He changing the desires of your heart?

Loved one, that is evidence of grace! The Apostle Paul would point at that evidence and say: “For I know that you are chosen by God. Only God can do that in a person’s life.”

Don’t listen to that voice that condemns you. I love this word of comfort from Charles Spurgeon:

When justice would have said, "Let the rebel go O Jesus; be not bound any longer by chords of love to such a wretch," our ever-faithful Redeemer would not cast us away but threw another band of grace around us and loved us still.⁹

For some glorious reason bound up in the grace and the mystery of God, He has chosen you.

So, take heart. Be comforted. Press on with confidence. He who chose you before the foundation of the world will complete the work in you that He has started. And as the world sees the evidence of grace in your life, they will give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

This is what God does. This is GOOD NEWS! And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

⁹ Charles Spurgeon, *Sermons on Proverbs*, 157.