

1 Thessalonians 1

Intro

Short book: 5 chapters, 89 verses. Probably the first epistle written by Paul. (around 50AD)

We know God has chosen to include this letter as part of Scripture, which means that it speaks truth from God to everyone everywhere, and therefore it is appropriate for us to study it. But it is important for us to understand the immediate context as well.

Author

- As most of us know, Paul was a fierce persecutor of Christians until he was confronted by Jesus who radically transformed his life (Acts 9). He then became a fierce contender for the faith, preaching the gospel to anyone who would listen, setting up churches and encouraging and discipling them. His letters make up 13 of the 27 books of the NT (Romans-Philemon).
- As we look at his actions in Acts, and his words, thoughts and emotions in his letters, it becomes very clear that Paul loves the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loves his neighbour as himself. (Mark 12:30-31)
- Paul doesn't just care about evangelising and starting churches, he also invests time and effort into making disciples. He really cares about people and their walk with Christ. He makes it his business to revisit the churches that he sets up to strengthen and encourage them, appointing elders and establishing community. And when he's unable to visit in person, he writes letters. He sees the importance of community, leadership and accountability within the local church.

Background

- Written to the church in Thessalonica that Paul and Silas established on Paul's second missionary journey. We can read about it in [Acts 17](#).
- Acts 17:1-4 - Paul teaches, people believe = a church is born.
- Acts 17:5-10 - jealous Jews stir up the crowd and attack the church. Issue a warning. Paul and Silas secretly move on to Berea, where the same Jews follow them, and they're forced to move on again to Athens.
- Paul is concerned for these new churches in the midst of this persecution from the Jews, so sends Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on them. They meet up in Corinth and Paul hears Timothy's report. Writes letter in response.

Reason for writing

- What we can see from this letter is that, according to Timothy's report, the church were generally doing well in their faith. Paul is thankful for this and really just wants to encourage them to keep the faith and continue on. At least 3 times he basically instructs them to keep doing what they're doing, but to do so more and more. "You're doing well; keep going!"
- However, there are one or two things that need to be addressed. There seems to be some confusion among them regarding '**the day of the Lord**'. The fact that some of the

congregation had died in the mean time left them with questions about their salvation. Some were apparently neglecting day-to-day life/work because they expected Jesus to come back any minute. Paul writes to reassure them of their salvation and explains more fully about *the return of Jesus and its implications* for them and those who have already died. It's one of the major themes of this short book, it's mentioned at the end of every chapter, and really forms the basis for hope in the Christian life.

- It's also likely that they were still undergoing persecution from the Jews in Thessalonica that had objected so strongly to Paul's preaching. Paul writes to encourage them in the midst of this.

Outline

Paul's **Enthusiasm** for the Thessalonians (v1-3)

The **Election** of the Thessalonians (v4-5)

The **Example** of PST and the Thessalonians (v5-10)

Paul's Enthusiasm

v1 - Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

- Even in his initial greeting, Paul firmly establishes the centrality of God. He is the reason the church exists, and He is the reason Paul is writing to them.
- **Grace...peace** - a commonly used greeting, but Paul really does want them to understand and experience the incredible grace of God, and the perfect peace that comes from knowing Him.

v2-3 - We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

- It's clear from the outset that Paul really cares about these people, and wants to encourage them. He is incredibly thankful to God for them. He only spent a short time with them before being forced to move on, so the fact that they're doing so well can only be the work of God.
- **...always...all of you...constantly...** - Paul already makes us feel inadequate about our own prayer life! He is committed to this church.
- **work of faith, labour of love, steadfastness of hope**
 - Here is why Paul is thankful to God for them. Not because they were living perfectly, or because their doctrine was completely accurate, but he is grateful for the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.
 - *faith, hope and love* - these are 3 staples of the Christian walk that Paul frequently links together.
 - *work of faith* - their faith is not passive, but results in action, as true faith should. **"So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."** - James 2:17
 - *labour of love* - likewise, love is not passive. It takes effort to show love, and it's often a choice rather than a feeling. We must labour to love one another, and

even more so to show love to those who don't know Christ, who are perhaps more likely to respond negatively to us. Let's never be fooled into thinking love is easy. We are to love with the love we have been shown by God; unconditional.

- *steadfastness of hope* - finally, and perhaps most prominently, Paul **remembers** their steadfastness of hope. Perhaps their hope is not as steadfast now as it was initially (on account of deaths/confusion), and that is why Paul is writing, to reassure them about the coming of the Lord and repair any wavering in their hope.

Election

v4-5a - For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

- **brothers loved by God...chosen** - again Paul is encouraging them, reminding them of their rightful place within the family of God. It's no small thing to be loved and chosen by God. We (Christians) rejoice in our adoption into God's family.
"...even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ..." - Ephesians 1:4-5
- **because our gospel came to you...** - this is how they can know that they are loved and chosen by God. He made provision for Paul to come to Thessalonica and share the gospel with them, but they weren't just words coming out of Paul's mouth. The gospel came to them **in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction**. It was only by the power of God that they were able to hear, understand and accept the truth of the gospel.
- This is incredibly important for us to understand as we share the truth with others. Our words do not and cannot save people. This is why we ask for prayer and meet to pray before our Friday night outreach. We acknowledge that it's only by the work of the Holy Spirit that people are convicted, it's the living and active Word of God that pierces hearts, and we ask him to bless us and work *through* us.

Example

v 5b-8

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

- Paul confidently backs up the authenticity of his gospel message that he preached to them by pointing to himself as an example. He and Silas (and Timothy) spent time among them. How confident would you be in saying to someone, "You want to know if the gospel is true? If Jesus really gives people a new heart? Look at my life."?
- I'm sure that makes some of us feel uncomfortable. But the fact is, we should be able to recognise and point to the work that Christ has done in our lives. Of course we understand that we are not perfect, and we need to be open about that. There's no point trying to present a false message to people by hiding all our flaws, because that's only going to set them up for a fall. We're not perfect, so don't make anyone else think they'll

be perfect when they become a Christian. But we should celebrate the work that the Holy Spirit has done and is doing in us.

- “[Paul] wasn’t shy about saying ‘follow me’ because he knew where he was going.” - David Guzik.

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,

- *imitators of us and of the Lord* - Paul commends the Thessalonians for imitating them, because in doing so they are also imitating Jesus. Obviously, Jesus was no longer physically with them, but they were able to see Him in Paul, Silas and Timothy.
- This is exactly how the work of God is supposed to happen. Christians are meant to be examples to others, so that those people can become examples to others still, and as people consistently see faith in action, the gospel spreads. Are there areas in your life where you have the opportunity to model Jesus to others? Workplace, neighbourhood, family, church?
- As Christians part of a church community, we should be able to study Jesus’ character in His Word and be able to recognise Christ-like behaviour in our fellow Christians, and that should help us to imitate Christ as we see others’ faith in action.
- Unfortunately, I’m sure we’re all aware that not everyone who claims the title Christian is a good example to the world. That’s why we need to test everything against the Word of God, and study the character of Jesus. But more than just studying His character, we get to really know Him!
- *received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit* - the Thessalonians experienced affliction almost immediately after becoming Christians, as we saw in Acts 17. But Paul again points to this as evidence that they are truly saved, because they experienced the joy of the Holy Spirit in the midst of it. The persecution they endured did not cause them to abandon their faith.

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. - Mark 4:16-17 Paul’s saying, “That’s not you!”

- Rather they are *“the good soil...who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” - Mark 16:20*

so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 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.

- These guys are bearing fruit!
- Macedonia and Achaia were the two Greek provinces of the Roman Empire. Thessalonica was capital of Macedonia, had quite a large population, it had a harbour and was a busy centre of trade.
- News of their conversion travelled far and wide - ref [Acts 17:4](#) - *...a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.* It was big news!

- Again, this is the work of God. The gospel is powerful and people notice it. God will carry out His work and build His kingdom. He may choose to use us, or someone else... We need to do the work, but we don't need to worry about the outcome.

v9-10 - 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, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

- Throughout Macedonia, Achaia and beyond, people were reporting the change that had taken place in Thessalonica. These people were displaying the marks of true and genuine conversion. Their true acceptance of the gospel, their repentance from idols to serve God, their endurance through persecution, their widely recognised love and hospitality towards Paul, Silas and Timothy, their imitation of Christ, their work of faith, labour of love, steadfastness of hope, and finally their anticipation of the return of Jesus.

Conclusion

This church wasn't perfect, and neither are we. But let's be encouraged by Paul's words to them, because they are also God's words to us. Christian, be encouraged that you are loved and chosen by God, and know that it's no accident that you belong to Him. Let's press on to imitate Christ more and more, and to be an example of godly living to those around us, so that others can imitate us. Let's be encouraged as we share the gospel with others that God's power is behind it, and even though we may never see results in this life, God's Word will not return void.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Let's end the same way this chapter does; looking to Jesus. Jesus has been raised from the dead, but we are waiting for Him to come *from heaven*. When we talked about the Ascension, we talked about some of things that Jesus is doing in heaven right now, like preparing a place for us. And He's also preparing for His return. We don't know exactly when that will be, Paul tells us later in this letter that it will be unexpected, *the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.* - 1 Thess 5:2

Let's take the elements of communion as we worship the Lord. Let's come to the table with our focus on Jesus, remembering His love and sacrifice for us, celebrating our unity in the body of Christ, and looking forward with hope to His return.

Benediction

Now may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13