

1st THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (a)

Lesson #1

Introduction

Paul (with Silas and Timothy) came to Thessalonica from Philippi, where he had been beaten and jailed, on his second missionary journey, stopping in Amphipolis and Apollonia before arriving there (Acts 17). He preached in the city's synagogue, the chief synagogue of the region, for at least three weeks (but quite likely more from Jason's house). His ministry was strong, and he established a Jewish-Gentile church, although it was more heavily Gentile (1 Thes. 1:9). When Paul faced great persecution at the hands of a mob, he fled to Berea, but the envious Jews of Thessalonica, who had followed him for no other reason but to hamper his ministry, eventually forced him to leave there also (Acts 17:13-14).

After a temporary separation of Paul from Silas and Timothy, they all met up again in Athens, and Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica. When he returned from there and gave Paul a good report of the Thessalonian's faithfulness, Paul then wrote this letter to that church. It was an encouragement to continue in the faith, an acknowledgment of their faithfulness under persecution, a reminder of the importance of moral purity, a comment on working and living a productive lifestyle, some correction regarding wrong understandings of prophetic events, and instructions on proper church relationships.

1 Thessalonians Chapter One

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 always thank God for all of you, remembering you constantly in our prayers. 3 We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 knowing your election, brothers loved by God. 5 For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with much assurance. You know what kind of men we were among you for your benefit, 6 and you became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with the joy from the Holy Spirit. 7 As a result, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 For the Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out, so we don't need to say anything. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of reception we had from you: 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 rescues us from the coming wrath.

1 Thess 1:1-10 (HCSB)

Now let's begin our verse by verse examination of these passages:

Verses 1-2:

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 always thank God for all of you, remembering you constantly in our prayers.

This became a common greeting with Paul in his epistles. It serves not only as a greeting, but it also immediately establishes some vital associations. Concerning the church, everything is said to be in God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. It ties Jesus, as the Messiah and Son of God, directly to God the Father, and thereby deifies Jesus right from the outset. There is no church that doesn't properly and freely make this distinction. In fact, this distinction is the very foundation of the church, as it depends entirely on the fact of who Jesus actually is. He is the Son of the living God and the Lord of all. He's the only Savior of mankind, and the builder and head of the church. Every bit of this can be rightly inferred from Paul's opening greeting. And surely this is the intention. Both grace and peace are the natural experiential products of this understanding.

He then tells them that He and his companions always give thanks to God for all of them. Here's another important implication. That they are a work of God, not something they've done themselves, and the thanks rightly goes to God, not to the individual believers. This isn't just opening rhetoric, its sound, fundamental Christian doctrine, and worthy of more than just a casual reading over on the way to the rest of the letter. (Of which I'm often guilty myself) But not this time. Today, let's make sure that we grasp the full significance of this opening greeting of Paul to the church before we move on by. The church is in God, and in Christ, and are His workmanship.

Then he says “remembering you constantly in our prayers.” It’s interesting to note the choice of words that Paul used here. He could’ve just said we pray for you; but instead he says - remembering you constantly in our prayers. If we reflect back now to some of our earlier study in Colossians concerning prayer, we may remember that we discussed that prayer is the means that God has given his children to maintain an ongoing and meaningful relationship with him. We said in that study that obedience is our demonstration of reverence and appreciation to God, and our prayers are a demonstration of our affectionate longing for him. It’s through our regular continuous prayer that we demonstrate that our Lord is truly on our mind and in our affections, and likewise Paul says he’s remembering them constantly in his prayers. Demonstrating that they are continually on his mind and in his heart, and he’s genuinely concerned for their well-being.

Verse 3:

We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ,

Here in verse three Paul uses a combination of words that are popular with him. He uses faith, hope, and love together as a kind of unit. Concerning faith he says we recall your work of faith. Does that mean Paul thinks faith is a work? No of course not, he means the work which issues forth from faith, also called fruits in Scriptures. He’s acknowledging that faith is producing appropriate works in the lives of the believers.

Then he says your labor of love. Again, is he saying that their love is a great labor to them? No of course not, he’s acknowledging their great labors being done on behalf of the love which they have, both for the Lord and one another, which in itself is also one of the fruits of faith. Love is a natural product of faith, where you have one the other is sure to follow. And this serves to substantiate the authenticity of their faith.

Then he says, the endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul’s acknowledging that they haven’t given up hope in the return of Jesus Christ, even though He hasn’t come back yet and they’ve suffered much persecution. He’s acknowledging that their hopes and expectations in His return, has and is, enduring the tests of time and persecution.

Verse 4:

knowing your election, brothers loved by God.

Verse four couldn’t be more clear. There isn’t any way to make it mean anything other than what it obviously means. The only option is to just read over it and ignore it, which I said in an earlier study has become a commonplace practice. But, also at that time, I pledged to try not to do that again, so I’m not going to do it now. This verse says; “knowing your election.” Election by whom, and for what, is the question?

The next words answer that question. Brothers loved by God. Those who are loved by God were elected by Him to be the recipients of that love. They were elected by God before time ever began, and apart from any merit or virtue seen within themselves, and this election by God was an act of his sovereign choice. He elected a group whom he predestined to be the recipients of his love and mercy. Then in the working out of time, He effectually called them, regenerated them, and transformed them to be the recipients of this mercy. And finally he did this because he loves us, and we also discussed in an earlier lesson that it was love that motivated God to begin His creation, and it is love, perfect and pure and everlasting love, that will be the final end product of this creation. If we don’t understand this, then we don’t understand anything, but if we do, then faith, hope, and love are surely ours in abundance.

Verse 5:

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with much assurance. You know what kind of men we were among you for your benefit,

Paul starts this verse by saying that the gospel that they received when he first went there and preached wasn’t just pretty words, but clearly manifested itself in power. What does Paul mean by saying it was in power? Is he saying there was some kind of miraculous signs and wonders? Well maybe there were or maybe there weren’t, but a study of the context of these verses establishes without question that this isn’t what Paul means by power in these specific verses that were reading here. Because he doesn’t mention anything about miraculous signs but only about changed lives.

Do you remember what Paul said in his epistle to the Romans, he said he was not ashamed of the gospel, because it was the power of God for salvation to those who believe it. And this is the power he's talking about here, because he goes on to speak about the life that he and the other brothers lived in the presence of the Thessalonian believers. What Paul is saying is that the gospel demonstrated its authenticity by the power that it showed to change the hearts and lives of those who believe it. This is the point Paul's making with this statement. He's saying the gospel wasn't just some pretty rhetoric, but it was a powerful truth that changed men's lives. Those who heard it and believed were willing to suffer great persecution on its behalf. This is the power of the gospel, its impact on those who believe it. Those who don't believe it think it's foolish, but those who do demonstrate its power through the vastly changed way that they live.

Then Paul adds, in the Holy Spirit. Again what did he mean by saying this? Remember that he just made the point that the words that he spoke of the gospel were more than just words, they demonstrated themselves in power. So if there's power there's a source of that power, and what would that source be? Paul makes it clear that the source of that power is the Holy Spirit acting upon the hearts and minds of man. Emotion has power, intimidation has power, bribery has power, there are many sources of power that influence men's thinking and actions, so Paul makes it very clear that the power that was acting upon those Thessalonians was the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

And Paul continues with this saying - and with much assurance. So to continue our theme, we ask the question, assurance of what? The answer is assurance of the authenticity of the holiness and godliness of the gospel message. Because Paul goes on to say - you know what kind of men we were among you. In other words, you know that our behaviors substantiated our words. You saw that we lived according to what we preached, and we did this for your benefit, so that you would have that assurance of authenticity of the godliness of the gospel. That it truly is the message of God himself concerning his Son Jesus. And again, this is that power that the gospel has on those who believe it.

Think about it. Of the 12, or we could say 13 original apostles, did any of them, save for Judas Iscariot, ever recant or fall away? When faced with death did they deny their Lord and Savior? Did even one of them do this? No they didn't, and thus, for us who live today, 2000 years later, we have the assurance of the authenticity and integrity of the gospel they preached, and the Scriptures they left us. What would we do today with the Scriptures if half of the apostles that wrote them had abandoned them later in life? Would we still call them inspired and inerrant? This would surely leave us in quite a fix wouldn't it? So for that reason, the Lord himself didn't let any of his messengers fail. In the face of death they stood firm, because their message was sure, and faithful, and true, and now we can rest assured that the gospel message that we hear, and that we preach, is absolutely true and holy and godly. We have the full assurance of the authenticity of the gospel and scriptures, because they were substantiated by the behaviors of the men through whom God delivered them.

And such it is today. The authenticity of the gospel will always be evaluated by the lives of those who preach it and say that they believe it. We don't expect those who don't believe it to live according to it, but the whole world expects those who claim they do believe it to live in conformity to it. Certainly the authenticity of the gospel doesn't really hinge on the faithfulness of the proclaimers, but it will certainly be evaluated, both by believers and unbelievers, by the lives and actions of its followers. And as it was then, so it is now.

The importance that we put on the faithfulness of the apostles of the past, is the very same importance that those who follow us will put on our actions and behaviors. If the gospel was true then, then it's true now, and the effect it has on the lives of men now must be the same as it was from the beginning, if in fact it really is a product of the Holy Spirit. Shame on those Antinomians and liberals who declare that repentance and style of life are not a part of the gospel. Because this is the very power of the gospel, not just to pardon, as some say, but to regenerate and transform by a rebirth unto holiness. If this transformation isn't present then there's been no regeneration, only an emotional profession.

What would we think if Paul and Peter and John and James had taken such a preposterous position, and lived lives of wanton worldly pleasures? Would we have any confidence in the gospel today? And this is exactly what Jesus meant when he said that those who are His are like shining lamps lifted up on stands to illuminate their surroundings. Illuminate them how? By their godly behaviors, that's how. And this is what Paul wanted them to realize, so that they would understand the importance of purity and godliness in the lives of the believers.

Verse 6:

and you became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with the joy from the Holy Spirit.

In this verse Paul's continuing on with the same thought when he said, you became imitators of us and of the Lord. This is what he meant when he said the gospel came to them in power and not just words. It had the power to produce the same response in the Thessalonians that it did in Paul and Timothy and Silas, and all of those who believe it. And what does it do? It makes the believers imitators of the Lord. The power of the gospel is to bring those who believe it into conformity to the Lord in their thoughts, behaviors, affections, and actions. And even severe persecution cannot suppress the power that the gospel has to bring about this conformity to the Lord in the true believers.

Now, to deal with the second part of this verse, allow me to make an analogy first, and then we'll draw on that analogy. Suppose someone you loved very dearly was on an airplane trip and you were told that the plane had crashed. Then the announcer told you that the one that you love survived the crash without injury, but unfortunately they couldn't recover their luggage.

I'm sure you see the perspective here. Paul had come to Thessalonica and told the people that they were lost sinners, doomed to perish in an eternal burning hell, but he had a message about a man named Jesus who could save their lives and keep them from perishing in hell, but they'd have to lose some of their belongings. You see just like the example of the airplane, when one grasps the enormity of the peril, and realizes what he has escaped from, then the loss of a few incidentals is rendered meaningless. The fact that there would be people who persecute and ridicule them was of little significance whatever, in the face of escaping such a monumental peril.

Paul said, you welcomed the message with the joy from the Holy Spirit. The joy one experiences in being released from bondage to sin, and forgiven all offenses, simply cannot be diminished, either by persecution, or by the loss of any amount of temporary worldly possessions. Again like our airplane example, yes, it is unpleasant, and inconvenient, to lose your luggage, but if you did it during the survival of a deadly crash, then the luggage becomes insignificant. We will not stand in the midst of the wreckage and weep over our lost luggage, we will stand in the wreckage and **shout with joy to God** for our survival of a monumental catastrophe, with only the loss of our luggage. This is the joy one experiences from the assurance of the Holy Spirit that we are truly the children of God, and have escaped the wrath to come. (Verse 10)

Verse 7:

As a result, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

Just recently there was a news story about an aircraft that had just taken off and immediately some birds got into the engines and caused them to fail. The pilot of the aircraft did a magnificent job of landing the aircraft with no engines, and no one was severely injured. This story was all over the television news for nearly a week. The pilot and some of the crew were on television for weeks afterwards and probably nobody in the country missed that story.

In like manner the Thessalonians couldn't help but tell their story of how they were rescued from the ravages of sin by faith in this man named Jesus. They didn't have television to broadcast their story but they certainly made it well known throughout the entire region, just like the story of the airplane and the birds. But, the story that the Thessalonians had to tell far surpasses the story of this airplane. The ones who survived this recent plane crash will still all have to die some day, so what they actually got was just an extension of time. The gospel does much more, it presents a salvation that's forever, where there will never be death, or tragedy, or pain, or sorrow, or sufferings. Those who survived the plane crash had their mortal bodies saved temporarily, but those who hear and believe the gospel have their eternal souls saved forever. This was the testimony of those Thessalonians, and this is what Paul means by the next sentence, in verse eight when he says:

Verse 8:

8 For the Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out, so we don't need to say anything.

Paul acknowledges here that the power of the gospel made the Thessalonians both imitators of the Lord in their behaviors, and proclaimers of the gospel to others, to such an extent that Paul and his companions didn't even need to go to those surrounding areas to preach, because the Thessalonians had already done a thorough job of that themselves.

Now let me just comment that Paul didn't say - you took Macedonia and Achaia for Jesus; he said, your message rang out into these areas, and just like Thessalonica, it was met with much resistance, and most rejected it, but for those few who were chosen of God, it performed the miraculous work of salvation to all who believed. There's not a single account in the Scriptures where the gospel took an entire city for Jesus. Quite the contrary, it always stirred up quite a ruckus, but amidst that ruckus a few chosen got saved. This has been the biblical principle by which the Holy Spirit operates from the day of Pentecost until this very day, and continuing on until the end of this age.

There is no such thought in the Bible as taking our city, or our country, for Jesus. As was described in the book of Acts, (13:48) the gospel is presented, and then as many as have been appointed to salvation will believe it, the rest will not. They never will, and nothing you or I can say or do will change it. An expectation of rejection by the majority of the world, and even hostility are mandatory perspectives for any who wish to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can preach the gospel, but only Jesus Christ builds his church. (Mat 16:18)

Just so that I'm perfectly clear, the Bible clearly and plainly declares that only those who are drawn directly by God the Father will believe the gospel, (Jn 6:44) and Jesus said no one could come to Him, that is believe in Him, unless his Father specifically draws them. (Jn 6:65) Once we understand this, we realized the futility and absurdity of all of the strategies and manipulations that are popular today to get spurious professions. Such actions are nothing more than the intentional introduction of masses of tares into the true Church of Christ for the sake of size and numbers and influence. And this leads us to the next verse that says:

Verses 9:

For they themselves report about us what kind of reception we had from you: how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

What Paul's saying here is that the other cities have testified to Paul and his companions what kind of impact they had on the lives of the Thessalonians when they preached the gospel message to them. How the Thessalonians immediately turned to the true and living God, and abandoned all their idols, and the pagan and immoral practices that went with them. And again this is the testimony of the power of the gospel, demonstrated not in signs and wonders, but in the impact that it has on the lives of the believers. Upon hearing about the true God, and his Son Jesus, those who believed immediately turned from their old practices, and their old idols, and begin to become imitators of the Lord Jesus and the apostles. And this is what impressed the believers in the other cities. They heard the gospel with their ears, and then they saw it lived out in the lives of those who proclaimed it. And thus is the testimony of all those who truly believe.

I wish to say this to all those who count themselves among the children of God and yet claim that the principles of Lordship salvation, and repentance of behaviors, and holy affections toward God are not a part of salvation but rather a second and higher but optional step. Let me make it clear right here that no one can possibly have received a new heart, had God's laws written on that heart, and impressed into their minds and not know that it's happened. Therefore, all those who hold these positions of non-Lordship, and unnecessary repentance cannot have been regenerated. To them these terms are abstract principles, they somewhat understand them but they themselves have never experienced them, so their only conclusion is either they haven't been regenerated, or regeneration can occur without them. And since they will not accept the former, they are stuck with the latter.

Let me make a small concession to my statement. I suppose it's possible for a very young and immature believer who has never received proper instruction, and has shown very little maturing, to be temporarily deceived on these matters, but they are not abstract principles, they are real and subjective, and as such no one can for very long be unaware that they have received a whole new change of heart, and a whole new mindset on holiness and godliness, and a repugnance towards sin, and a powerful inward desire to please God by imitating their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Because, this is the power of the gospel toward all those who believe it. If this is missing, then salvation hasn't happened.

But for all of those who know these things experientially there is grace and peace and great joy in the Holy Spirit, and absolute assurance that what has happened to them is truly an act of God. And this grace and peace and joy transcends any and all obstacles, persecutions, or temporary hardships that life dishes out, as we patiently await the glorious and triumphant return of our Lord and our Savior Jesus Christ. Which leads us now to verse 10:

Verse 10:

and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Now Paul brings these thoughts together to form a conclusion, which is indeed the glorious and hopeful outcome and the ultimate purpose for the gospel. We are here patiently waiting, and being prepared day by day, through trials and tribulations for an event which is the culmination of our lifetime of preparations while here on this earth and living in this age. We are here waiting for the return of the Son of God from heaven, who was raised from the dead himself, and brings with him righteousness and eternal life for all who believe in Him. Paul wrote this in his letter to Titus:

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, 14 who gave Himself for us, to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds. Titus 2:11-14 (NASB)

Now, the last half of verse 10 says – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. This is the first mention Paul makes in this epistle about future events, and specifically the coming wrath, but he knows he’s going to go into the subject more deeply as he goes on. Initially I was going to try to include this in this lesson, but it quickly became apparent that the scope of the subject would demand a lesson of its own. So we’ll leave the last half of verse 10 for next week, and spend our entire study on this subject. So now let me conclude this lesson with a brief summary.

Conclusion:

Paul opens this epistle with a standard greeting which firmly establishes both God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son as the source and power of the church. He links Jesus Christ with God the Father to make it clear to the Jews especially, but to the gentiles as well, that there is no salvation or worship of God that isn’t through his Son Jesus.

He goes on to affirm his affection for the Thessalonians by telling them that he constantly mentions them in his prayers to the Father, and that he’s mindful of their faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ, and then acknowledges that this is because of their specific election by God to be the recipients of His love.

Then he goes on to say that the gospel didn’t come to them in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance, because the gospel clearly worked its power and affect in the lives of the believers. He demonstrates that the power of the gospel is its ability to impact the lives of those who believe it, and this is a definite part of what authenticates its reality. A gospel that has no ability to impart change would be an impotent gospel, but the gospel that carries the power of the Holy Spirit is truly effectual upon the believers. And in this gospel there is much assurance, and grace, and joy amongst the recipients.

And then finally Paul reminds them that there’s an ultimate purpose of the gospel, and the effects that it has, that’s beyond simply the immediate effects. It’s preparing the believers for a wonderful and glorious event, which is the return of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, to be vindicated and glorified by every creature God ever made. This is the hope for which every true believer patiently and passionately awaits. And therefore we cry - Come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen.

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