

# 1 Thessalonians

## Chapter 1

**1** *Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The author of this epistle is clearly stated to be the apostle Paul, joined in his salutation by Silvanus and Timothy (1:1), and with specific mention of his name again later in the epistle (2:18). Early sources in church history that attribute this letter to Paul include the “big three”: Clement of Alexandria (200 A.D.), Tertullian (200 A.D.), and Irenaeus (200 A.D.).

The audience of this letter is the church in Thessalonica. At the time of the writing of this letter, most likely during the stay of Paul in Corinth in 50-52 A.D., the Thessalonian church was only a few weeks old (see notes below). Since the Church was so new, and the persecution and trials they faced so severe, Paul feels compelled to send them a letter of encouragement and exhortation. We know this letter as 1 Thessalonians.

Paul begins this letter, as many of his other letters, with his standard apostolic greeting “grace and peace.” Grace is the foundation from which springs all that God has for us and peace refers to the cessation of hostilities between God and a rebellious sinner. Without Christ, both of these would be impossible as it is only in the cross that God’s grace is made available to the undeserving sinner.

### The City of Thessalonica

It was the capital and largest city of the Roman province of Macedonia. Located on the Egnatian Way, a major road from Rome to the eastern provinces, the city served as center of trade and commerce. Today, it is known as Thessaloniki, or Salonica.

### The Church and Thessalonica

The establishment of the church is recorded in Acts 17:1-9. On his second missionary journey, Paul and his companions (Silas and Timothy) had just left Philippi and passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia to arrive at Thessalonica. As was his custom, Paul immediately located the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews for three Sabbaths concerning Jesus Christ. While some of them were persuaded, including a great number of devout Greeks and leading women, the unbelieving Jews became jealous and created an uproar in the city. Therefore it became necessary to send Paul and Silas away secretly by night to Berea. Despite such ominous beginnings, a strong church was established in Thessalonica (cf. 1:2-10). Mostly Gentile (cf. 1:9), its members included Jason (Ac 17:9), Aristarchus, and Secundus (Ac 20:4).

### Time and Place of Writing

First Thessalonians is considered one of Paul's earliest epistles, if not the first. From the letter itself (3:1-6), and the record of Paul's travels in Acts (Acts 17:10-18:11), it appears that Paul wrote this letter soon after arriving in Corinth on his second journey. This would put it somewhere in the time frame of 50-52 A.D.

### Purpose of 1 Thessalonians

The abrupt departure from Thessalonica so soon after the beginning of the church naturally left Paul anxious about the condition of the brethren. When Timothy joined Paul at Athens (cf. Acts 17:14-16), his concern prompted Paul to send Timothy at once back to Thessalonica to encourage and ground the new disciples in the faith, and to learn how they were enduring persecution (cf. 3:1-5). When Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth (cf. Acts 18:5), the news was mostly encouraging (cf. 3:6-7). Despite persecution they had remained strong (2:13-16), and even proved themselves to be an example to others (1:6-8). Yet, as with any young church, they needed further instruction concerning holy living (cf. 4:1-12). They also needed to be reassured that their loved ones who died in Christ would not miss out on the blessings involving the coming of our Lord (cf. 4:13-18). Therefore we can summarize by saying that Paul's purpose in writing was: 1) To praise them for their steadfastness under persecution, 2) to instruct them concerning holy living, and 3) to correct any misunderstanding, especially about the second coming of Christ.

**2** *We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;*

Here we catch a glimpse of the heart Paul had for this church. In fact, if we look at all of the Pauline Epistles, only one does not mention his prayers for the recipients and that one is Galatians.

Paul's prayers for the churches he founded did not center on physical or material well-being, but rather on spiritual growth, maturity, and endurance under persecution and suffering.

**3** *Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father;*

**4** *Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.*

What was it about this church that made Paul especially joyful? It was the knowledge he had that these people were the elect of God. Many try to explain away election by emphasizing man's "free will", but the bottom line in Paul's writings, and in the evidence of Scripture, is that we have been chosen by God before the foundation of the world, and it is this choice, not ours, that drives man's redemption.

### Luther, Edwards and Free Will

When we say that man has a free will, we do not mean:

1. Man can do anything he wants since it may not be possible for him to do that which he wants to do because of some limitation of his being. For example, man cannot exist in the vacuum of space without some kind of protection from the environment.
2. Man always chooses what he wants to do. For example, we may do things we do not want to do because it would be wrong not to do it.
3. Man can do something outside of his ability. For example, play 18-holes of golf with a score of 18.

Jonathan Edwards distinguished between two different aspects when it came to free will.

1. The Moral aspect refers to that which is moral, to choose that which is right.

**2. The Natural aspect (Schaferism) refers to that which is according to one's nature or ability.**

Edwards then defined free will as "the ability to choose a course of action consistent with the strongest inclination at the present time." This choice is bound by one's natural or moral ability. Thus in the case of God, He cannot sin since that is against His moral nature.

Thus, man has a free will, but that will is subject to his strongest inclination at the time of the decision. Men may do something they do not want to do, but even then they are following the strongest inclination, the consequences of not doing something one does not want to do is more severe than doing that thing which one does not desire.

Thus, according to Edwards, man has a free will, but that will is subject to the strongest inclination present in them. Therefore, in the case of an unbeliever, they are not "free" in the sense that they, in and of themselves, will never choose God. Thus, they are not "free moral agents." Put another way, man's will is in bondage to sin and therefore will never have as an option a choice for God.

Although salvation is all of God, we must never lose the understanding that our salvation is not an invisible thing, rather, it is something that is evident by the way we live. Paul rejoiced in the election of the Thessalonian believers by observing the fruit of that election, namely their work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope.

First, we note their work of faith. Faith is not an inert addition to one's life, rather it is an active motivator. Those who have faith exhibit that faith in very tangible and visible ways. The message we find in James 2:17-18 is "*Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.*" He then goes on to give us some examples of this active faith, namely Rahab and Abraham. Rahab exhibited faith in hiding the spies, Abraham exhibited faith in sacrificing his son. In both cases, the invisible faith they had was evidenced by the actions they performed. In the case of the Thessalonians, their salvation, based in God's election, was made manifest to Paul and others by the lives they lived.

### **Think About It**

**The faith we have as believers is a faith that has as its source something outside of ourselves. We lack the ability to believe, therefore that ability must come from the outside and in Ephesians 2:8-9 we find that source to be God. God is the one who grants us faith to believe, and the faith that God grants is an unassailable and unfailing faith. For example:**

**Why do you believe**

- ... in a place you have never seen (heaven)
- ... in a person you have never met (Christ)
- ... in a being you have never seen (God)
- ... in an enemy that has never once visibly appeared (Satan)
- ... in a hell you have never visited
- ... in an event for which you have no video tape (the crucifixion)
- ... and in a message that is absurd (the Gospel)

**It is because GOD gave you the faith and it is not your own!**

Secondly we note their labor of love. The word for labor, *kopiaō*, refers to that which is exhausting in nature. Their love cost something! We see this in the example of God. John 3:16 states that “*God so loved the world.*” How? “*that he gave his only begotten son.*” God’s love was evidenced by action and not emotion. Biblical love is a self-sacrificial love that knows no boundaries. When we are given a definition of love in 1 Corinthians, that definition is given in terms of verbs, action words. Love is not inert, but is active.

Finally, we note their endurance of hope. Whenever we read “hope” in the Bible we usually think of it in our terms, namely something that may or may not occur. This is an invalid definition. “Hope,” as understood in the Bible, is a present certainty of a future reality. It is not an hit-or-miss proposition, but rather a certainty bound up in the promise and plans of God. It is this hope, the hope of eternal glorification and reward, that enable us to endure the trials and tribulations of this life.

That is what we see here. The trials endured by the Thessalonian believers were endured since they looked forward to the “blessed hope” of eternal reward. They understood that the sufferings faced in this life do not compare to the glory revealed in the next. It is this anticipation of glory that gave them the ability to wade through the grief of this life.

It is important to note in closing that all of these characteristics are motivated and energized by God. It is God who gives us the faith to believe, the love to show to others, and the hope to endure. These qualities are not self-generated but divinely empowered.

**5** For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.

How is it that salvation came to the Thessalonians? It came powerfully! We are reminded of Paul’s statement in Romans 1:16 that the Gospel is the “power of God unto salvation.” It has the ability to transform a fallen, rebellious sinner and transform him into a saint.

This transforming power was evidenced in several ways among the Thessalonians. First, it was not based in the power of words but in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul was not merely another roaming philosopher (of which there were many in Greece in those days), but was an emissary from God taking a message to a lost and dying world. This message is not based in man’s wisdom and does not have as its source earthly philosophies. Rather it is transforming in its effect as can only be done by the very words of God.

Secondly, this power was evidenced by the deep conviction wrought by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men. We sometimes fail to understand that it is not our great intellectual capabilities or persuasive techniques that move the heart of a sinner, but rather the conviction of the Holy Spirit. It is this conviction that pricked the hearts of the Thessalonians and caused them to turn from paganism to Christ.

Finally, this power was evidenced by the lives of the messengers. We need to realize that our message is validated and empowered by a holy life. Later in this epistle, and in the next, Paul reminds the Thessalonian believers of his manner of living which validated the message he preached. It is said that at one point in time D. L. Moody went into a barber shop to get his hair cut. After he left someone remarked of how powerful a presence he had although he did not say a word. It is this presence that lends power to the message of the messenger.

**6** And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost:

Paul's life was so powerful that the Thessalonians not only became believers, but became followers of Paul himself. Many times we piously say that "don't do as I do, but do as I say." Paul didn't say this! He said in **Philippians 3:17**, "*Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample,*" and in **1 Corinthians 4:15-16**, "*For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me.*" Paul's call for imitation is not based in some egotistical view of himself, but rather in the knowledge that he so closely followed Christ that he became a model to others of how to walk the Christian walk.

Also, we see another example of the power of the message of the Gospel, and that is that it was received under much persecution. Put another way, the power of the Gospel is such that nothing will keep the elect from responding to its message, not even the threat of death or persecution. In spite of the efforts of the ungodly Jews and the demon-inspired persecutions of a lost society, the Thessalonian believers responded to the message of the Gospel with joy, knowing that the value of the Gospel far eclipsed any temporary trials.

**7** So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.

So transforming was the Gospel on the Thessalonian believers that their faith, love, and hope became examples to all others in Macedonia and Achaia. Since Macedonia and Achaia are two provinces that comprised the entire nation of Greece at that time, the reputation of the Thessalonian believers had made it to all parts of the country in a very short time. No doubt this was helped by the fact that Thessalonica was situated on the Egnatian way, and as such news would travel fast from that city to all other cities in Greece.

**8** For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.

Going further, Paul notes that the word of the Lord was sounded out, not only in Greece, but in other parts of the Roman Empire. So far-reaching and comprehensive was this news that Paul did not have to tell anyone about what happened in Thessalonica as it was common knowledge.

**9** For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye 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, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

What was this great news? What was it that made the headlines in Greece and Rome? It was the transformation of these believers. This transformation took them from being pagans, bowing down to idols, and transformed them into worshippers of God.

Not only were they turned from idolatry, but they expectantly looked for Christ to return from heaven. Not a spirit-Christ, but a resurrected Christ. Not one who was a victim of Rome, but one as a victor over death.

And what was it that this savior provides? It is deliverance from the wrath to come. Some think of this as temporal wrath, or punitive wrath, or even the tribulational period. However, contextually it is best seen to refer to the eternal Lake of Fire which IS God's wrath.