

Chosen by God and Delivered from Wrath
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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

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 labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 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. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 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, 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. 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 (1 Thess. 1:1-10).

The “Perfect” Church?

I can’t begin to count the number of times people have come to me over the past 50 years with a complaint about a particular local church. Either it is too formal or too casual. Or perhaps the preaching is too long or too short. The music is too loud or not nearly loud enough. The parking is minimal or the childcare is deficient or the people are all hypocrites, and the complaints continue seemingly without end.

When a person comes to you or to me with their complaints, how many times have you responded by saying: “*Well, there’s no such thing as a perfect church*”? And, of course, you are right. There’s always something amiss in every church. Sometimes the shortcomings are severe enough that you feel compelled to leave, while at other times you know there probably isn’t a better place down the road and you decide to weather the storm and stay.

I bring this up because not even in the days of the apostles was there a perfect church. In fact, most of Paul’s letters are addressed to churches facing some sort of challenge. It may be false teaching or the influence of false apostles or the failure of people to forgive one another or rampant sexual immorality, or any number of other problems.

But if there were a church that came as close as possible to being the ideal, even if not altogether perfect, church, it would be the church of the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 3:6 Paul says, “Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you.” That’s a fairly glowing report. It gets better in 1 Thessalonians 4:9 where Paul says, “Now concerning brotherly love, you have no need for anyone to write you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.” When it came to the timing of the Lord’s return, Paul wrote this in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 – “Now concerning the times and seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”

If there is one thing where the Thessalonians messed up, it has to do with certain individuals who likely were despising prophetic utterances. We see this at the end of chapter five where Paul says, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies” (5:19-20).

I bring all this up because of all the churches to whom Paul wrote letters, the church in Thessalonica was probably the most mature and stable and doctrinally rock-solid of them all. And we see this in virtually every word that he writes in chapter one. So let’s turn our attention to what Paul says about them, not simply so they can be praised but more importantly for what we can learn from their example.

Instead of trying to comment in detail on everything Paul says, I’ve identified 9 things that Paul highlights for our benefit.

The 9 Truths in 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

(1) The church of the Thessalonians exists and finds its identity in its relationship to the Father and the Son. So too do we (v. 1)

(2) The Scriptures are the means or conduit through which the grace and peace of God come into us and abide or dwell within us at all times (v. 2; 5:28).

(3) It is God who is responsible for the salvation and progressive spiritual growth of the Thessalonians and thus it is to God that Paul gives thanks (v. 2).

(4) Christian faith produces godly works, and Christian love energizes our labors, and our hope in Christ Jesus produces endurance (v. 3).

We must never think of these virtues as if they exist merely to provide us with a subject for discussion. They are not designed by God to sit quietly in our souls. Faith, love, and hope must never lie dormant in our hearts. They are of no value if they do not produce the fruit of works of obedience and labor for the sake of others and endurance so that we might persevere.

Note well what Paul is saying. The faith that you placed in Christ Jesus is the sort of faith that works. We are saved by faith *for* works, but not because of them. We are not saved by works of obedience. Now, this is going to sound almost contradictory, but listen carefully. ***We are not saved by works, but neither are we saved without works.*** What can that possibly mean? It means that works play no part in our acceptance with God. He has forgiven you and me of all our sins and has imputed to us the righteousness of Jesus himself. And all this is done without regard for anything that we do. No work, no act of obedience, no sacrifice we have made, no scandalous sin we have avoided, no promise we have kept has anything to do with our salvation.

But now listen closely. What can I possibly mean when I say that although we are not saved by works, neither are we saved without works? What it means is simply this: works are not the *cause* of our salvation, but works most assuredly are the *consequence* of it. So, when I say that we are not saved by good works, I mean they play no role and carry no weight in God's sight that might move him to forgive us of our sins. But when I say we are not saved without good works, I mean that acts of obedience or good works are the *necessary product or fruit or result* of saving faith.

That is why a person who says, "I have been saved by faith alone in Christ alone, but I have no intention of living in obedience to Jesus; in fact, I plan on living now just as I lived before I put my faith in Christ," is deceived. If the faith you have put in Christ is the result of the Holy Spirit in you and is genuinely saving faith, you will work. You must work.

I have often tried to illustrate this truth by holding up for you to see a pebble and a seed. From where you are sitting, they look to be identical. Their texture and smell are the same. And they both are representative of a claim to have faith in Jesus Christ. But what happens when we bury these two seemingly identical expressions of faith. We bury them, we water them, we make certain that they both get sufficient sunlight. What happens? The seed produces a plant, or fruit of some sort. We know it is a genuine seed by looking at what it produces. But the pebble, because it is lifeless, lies dead in the dirt. No matter how much water and sunlight you pour on that pebble, it will never be anything but a pebble. It is incapable of producing any form of life or fruit or plant. No matter how long or how passionately you insist it is a real, genuine seed, we know otherwise because it produces nothing. And we know the seed is a seed precisely because it produces fruit.

Genuine saving faith is like that seed. Spurious, so-called faith is like that pebble. That's what Paul is saying here. If your faith doesn't work, it isn't saving faith. That is why I can say that ***we are saved by faith alone, but not by the faith that is alone.*** Saving faith brings forth good fruit, good works, obedience, and holiness of life.

The same thing applies to love. Notice that Paul speaks of the "labor of love," which is to say, true love for Christ and his people will invariably show itself to be real by the labor that flow from it. So, too, with hope. As we saw last week, it is hope that produces endurance. The endurance of one's life, the commitment to persevere in pursuit of Jesus, is the result of our hope having been placed in him and his promises.

(5) It is possible to be assured that people are loved by God and chosen by God by observing how they responded when the gospel was preached to them. Here we see the principle of convergence in operation (vv. 4-6).

People are always asking, "How may I know that I'm chosen by God? How can I be sure that I'm among the elect? How can I have confidence that God really loves me?" The answer to each of those questions is found here in vv. 4-5a. And let's be clear about what Paul does not say. He doesn't say that he knows the Thessalonians are among the elect because he had the privilege of sitting down in eternity past when the Father wrote down names in the Lamb's book of life!

Paul says that "we know," that you are "loved by God" and that "he has chosen you" because of two things: *first*, we know it because your faith works and your love labors and your hope produces endurance; and *second* we know you are beloved of God and among his chosen people because of how you responded to the gospel when we preached it to you. In other words, he claims to know they are elect not before they came to faith in Christ, but only after, when their lives poured forth evidence that they had been chosen and redeemed.

a. The Thessalonians heard and believed the truth of God's word when it was preached to them (vv. 4-5a).

b. The Thessalonians also experienced the power of the Holy Spirit as seen in miracles of healing and various signs and wonders (v. 5b).

c. When the Thessalonians heard and believed the word when it was preached and were made recipients of the Spirit's power, their faith did not waver but was rooted in heartfelt conviction of the truth (v. 5c).

When Paul says that the gospel came to the Thessalonians “not only in word” he is not minimizing the absolute necessity that the gospel be proclaimed in understandable words. You’ve probably heard the old saying, “Always preach the gospel; if necessary, use words.” That’s a sweet sentiment, but it’s also dumb and unbiblical! “If necessary”? Yes, it is always necessary. When others looked on the Thessalonians they could see a difference in their lives. They could hear their declarations of faith and could see their labor of love and could even marvel at how they refused to give up but endured by clinging to their faith.

But that is not enough to communicate the gospel. The absence of works and the absence of labor and the absence of endurance might easily drive people away. But in order to draw them to Jesus Christ we must speak the gospel in intelligible terms. *The gospel cannot be communicated merely by one’s life.* One’s life is absolutely essential. But I have known atheists who did good deeds and labored for the sake of others and persevered through hardship. However, the only way for anyone to experience true saving faith and genuine Christ-like love and the sort of hope that endures is by hearing and receiving the good news of the gospel. It must be preached, spoken, shared, written in a tract, proclaimed on a podcast, made known in a sermon, or communicated by a Christian in words that people can understand.

Paul’s point, then, is that when he proclaimed the gospel in Thessalonica the people heard it and believed it. Paul’s words were received and believed. But that isn’t the only thing that occurred. When you heard us preach, says Paul, and you believed, you were eyewitnesses of the power of the Holy Spirit. More than eyewitnesses, you personally experienced his presence and power, most likely in signs and wonders and healings and deliverance.

And all this took place, says Paul, when you were genuinely convicted and convinced that the gospel message was true. It was with “full conviction” (v. 5b) says Paul, that you believed and received the gospel.

Do you remember how Paul said much the same thing in Romans 15:18-19? There he said,

“For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed.”

Let me pause right there for a moment. Notice that when the Gentiles, people like you and me, believed the gospel spoken by Paul, that it produced “obedience” or good works. And notice also that what Christ accomplished through Paul came about by both “word and deed.” It wasn’t only the word, but the word accompanied by works of power and healing and deliverance.

Now, let’s finish what Paul was saying in Romans 15. How do we know that the “deeds” Paul mentioned are miraculous phenomena like healing and cleansing lepers and raising the dead? We know it because of what he goes on to say:

“For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed, - by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God.”

This is almost identical to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:2-5 –

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

Paul quite clearly spoke in words of the crucifixion of Jesus. And he just as clearly stated that his gospel proclamation did not come in the form of clever sayings and did not rely upon human wisdom, but depended upon a demonstration of the power of the Spirit. The word “demonstration” clearly points to some visible, tangible expression of supernatural energy.

d. Paul knows the Thessalonians are loved and chosen by God because when they received and believed the word of the gospel, they did so in imitation of both Jesus and Paul and with a joy produced by the Holy Spirit, in spite of the affliction and persecution that their faith provoked (v. 6).

We saw last week in Acts 17 that the Thessalonians were subjected to opposition and persecution when they responded in faith to the gospel. But the fact that they encountered “much affliction” was hardly surprising. What impressed Paul and assured him that their faith was real is that they received the word of the gospel “with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (v. 6b).

Their “joy” wasn’t rooted in self-reliance. They didn’t rejoice when opposed because they were masochists and enjoyed pain and discomfort. Their courage in the face of trials and persecution wasn’t the result of hypnotism or stoical resignation to fate. They remained happy and delighted to be identified as followers of Jesus in the midst of opposition and pain and affliction because *the Holy Spirit was active in their hearts*, most likely reminding them that they are the elect of God who are passionately loved by him.

If there is one thing that challenges my claim to be a Christian is the way I so often respond to criticism and persecution in comparison with how my brothers and sisters in Christ around the world bear up under the worst forms of hatred and pain. A few examples of this will help us.

I think of Abune Antonios, imprisoned in Eritrea; pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and Tran Thi Hong, imprisoned in Vietnam; Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, imprisoned in China. And these are only a small handful of believers who suffer far worse than I can even imagine.

Samuel Mukiibi, 27, and 25-year-old Ephraim Duula, in the last six years have led several Muslims to Christ. They were attacked on May 16 near Naigombwa swamp near Bukwanga village, Iganga Sub-County in Iganga District, in eastern Uganda. After an evangelistic outreach in the Nambale area on May 13-16, they left at about 4 p.m. after open-air preaching and were approaching the swamp when three Muslims blocked the road, said Mukiibi.

“They stopped us and asked us to renounce Jesus Christ, whom we were preaching at Naigombwa trading center for four days. We totally refused, and they started beating us badly with sharp objects and left us unconscious in a coma in a pool of blood.”

“I managed to identify one of the attackers named Murshidi, who was calling the other attackers by Islamic names. My colleague, Duula, suffered serious bleeding coming out of his ears, bruised face and a deep cut in his left hand, while myself I had a twisted neck, swollen face and neck.”

A Muslim in eastern Uganda is suspected of killing his mother on April 16 by putting pesticide in her food for refusing to leave her Christian faith, a relative said. Sulaina Nabirye, 50, of Kamuli, Kamuli District, put her faith in Christ on February 10, and since then her 31-year-old son had tried to persuade her to return to Islam.

During the month of Ramadan, she complained of her son pressuring her to stop attending church and revert back to Islam, since he was studying to become an imam at Bugembe Mosque. When she refused to convert back to Islam, he stopped visiting her at her house and threatened to chase or even kill her.

At 7 p.m. her son came with food and he left. One witness testified that “Shortly after eating the food, Sulaina started vomiting, and then followed diarrhea. I tried what I could, but things were worsening, I called a nearby clinic officer who came with medication. He tried to put her on drip, but all was in vain.”

Nabirye died that night at 2 a.m., April 10. The food was tested at a medical clinic and it was discovered that it contained Methanol, a toxic alcohol used as an industrial solvent and pesticide.

An evangelist was hacked to death on March 30. He was only 32 years old. A mother and her 10-year-old daughter suffered serious burns for their faith in separate incidents last month in eastern Uganda.

In neighboring Namutumba, 33-year-old Zafara Nagudi said she was unaware that her Muslim husband had come home when she and her 10-year-old daughter, were praying in Christ’s name in their kitchen on March 25. She was cooking dinner at 9 p.m. when her husband found them praying. He asked her what they were doing, and she had no answer, she said. He continued asking the same question.

“I eventually told him the truth, that we were praying to Jesus Christ to help our family,” Nagudi said. “He became very furious and said, ‘Are you a Christian or Muslim?’” She said she told him that six months ago she had converted to Christianity and had been fellowshiping at a church.

“From there he slapped me and kicked me. Since he was in the doorway, we couldn’t run away. He grabbed the saucepan of hot water and poured it on me and the child.”

Nagudi suffered lesser burns as she was wearing heavier clothing, but her daughter in lighter clothing suffered more serious burns. They were discharged from the clinic on April 3 and were staying with a relative.

The truly remarkable thing about each of these individuals is that, much like the Thessalonians, “they received the word [of the gospel] in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (v. 6).

(6) The authenticity of the conversion of the Thessalonians was seen in the way their reception of the gospel and faith in God provided a Christ-exalting example to believers everywhere (vv. 7-8).

I love how Paul says, in effect, your faith was so widely known and your devotion to Christ so real and immovable that you left us speechless. “We need not say anything” (v. 8b). Evidently the news of their faith and steadfastness in the face of opposition was so glorious that it spread everywhere. It is all people could talk about. The verb translated “sounded forth” in v. 8 is a picture of a mighty trumpet blast, the effects of which linger in the air for all to hear.

But we must not overlook the implications of what Paul is saying. He is holding up for all to see not merely their reception of the gospel but *their own personal evangelistic outreach* in the wider areas of Greece.

(7) The Thessalonians are a superb example of what true repentance means: (a) there must be a turning away from all idols and (b) a turning to serve the one living and true God (v. 9).

Similar to the language here is what we read in Acts 14 about the nature of true conversion. There Paul says to the people of Lystra that they “should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (Acts 14:15). In other words, why would you bow down and worship and give your hearts to something in creation when you can worship the Creator (cf. Gal. 4:8-9).

Repentance is not merely a change of mind. Many mistakenly define repentance as solely an act of the will or some sort of mental transformation. It is surely that. But it is far more. Here Paul says that the Thessalonians turned “from idols” (v. 9). We don’t know the precise nature of these “idols.” Perhaps they had begun to worship certain Roman or Greek deities. After all, Mt. Olympus was only 50 miles from Thessalonica. Or it may simply be that they directed their attention and trust to anything other than God. The essence of idolatry isn’t in bowing down before a granite statue of Buddha or some other alleged ‘god.’ *Idolatry is anything we trust to do for us what only God can.*

Sadly, many respond to the gospel with what at first glance appears to be faith, but on closer inspection is seen to be fraudulent because instead of embracing Christ alone their hands are hidden behind their backs holding a multitude of idols that they are reluctant to abandon.,

In the case of the Thessalonians, it didn’t stop with abandoning their idols. They realized that there was far more to being a Christian than simply ceasing false worship. They instinctively “turned to God . . . to serve the living and true God.” Unlike every idol in the world, our God is alive! Our God is the one true God!

(8) The Thessalonians anxiously, but humbly, are waiting for the return of Christ, the one whom God raised from the dead (v. 10a).

The faith of these believers in the church in Thessalonica was so intense and heartfelt that they diligently set their eyes and hearts on heaven, from which they were confident that Jesus would come. Of course, neither Paul nor the Thessalonians knew with certainty when Christ would return. And neither do we. But every generation, be it the first century or the twenty-first, must patiently wait for our Lord’s return.

It’s also important to note that Paul affirms without hesitation that our waiting for the return of Jesus is only reasonable if Jesus is himself alive. We know he is coming back, says Paul, because we know that God raised him from the dead! *The entirety of the gospel is found here:* we know Jesus died because God raised him from the dead and exalted him to his right hand in heaven, from which he will eventually return to earth!

(9) The Christ whom they now love and serve has delivered them (and all believers) from the inevitable outpouring of divine wrath at the final judgment (v. 10b).

There are countless reasons why repentance from idolatry and turning to God as revealed in the person of Christ Jesus is the best thing that anyone can do. The primary reason Paul cites here is that it is Jesus, and only Jesus, who can deliver us from the wrath that will be poured out on the day of judgment. Later, in chapter five, Paul declares that “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (5:9-10).

What is it that you are counting on to deliver you from the wrath of God (see 2 Thess. 1:6-10)? In what are you trusting? To whom or what do you look with confidence that you will never endure God’s righteous anger? Is it your good intentions? Or perhaps it is that you have carefully calculated your alleged good deeds in comparison with your bad ones and the good ones are greater in number? Or are you confident of never tasting the wrath of God because you’re an American? Or because your parents were good people who regularly took you to church? Or is it on the grounds that you have determined to avoid all scandalous sins, be it adultery or sexual immorality or theft or whatever you may have been tempted with?

We have not faithfully and fully proclaimed the gospel until we make clear to unbelievers that if they remain in their idolatry and unbelief they will suffer divine wrath. There is only one hope for all of us to escape the wrath of God. And it isn’t because God simply pushed delete and said, “Let bygones be bygones.” God has himself provided only one way of escape, and it is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The one who delivers us from the impending and eternal wrath of God is the one who in himself endured and suffered that wrath and extinguished its flame. This is called in Scripture the doctrine of propitiation. The reason God has not destined his elect for wrath (5:9a) is because Jesus Christ has propitiated or satisfied the demands of God’s holy nature in our place.

Conclusion

Was Thessalonica the “perfect” church? No, because it was filled with “imperfect” people. But these imperfect people had turned from idols to worship and serve the one true God and had given evidence of their salvation through their faith, love, and hope. If, as Paul says in v. 7, the Thessalonians had become “an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia,” they can just as readily be an example to us in OKC.