

Thessalonians, Part 2: The Gospel Comes in Power

1 Thessalonians 1:1 ESV (Pg. 573) 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 give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, **3** remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. **4** For 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. **6** 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, **7** so that 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. **9** 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, **10** and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

- I. Last week we began a new series on the letters of Paul to the Thessalonians. We began in Acts 17, where we read the story of how Paul (along with Silas and Timothy) came to the city of Thessalonica in Macedonia (modern day Greece).
 - A. After having been in their synagogue for three Sabbath days proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah, many Jews and Gentiles repented and believed. This caused jealousy among the Jews, who incited a riot in the city. For their safety, Paul, Silas and Timothy fled by night to the neighboring city of Berea.
 1. In Berea, Paul preached in the synagogue and many people believed: Jews as well as Greeks, women as well as men, heard the gospel, and believed.
 2. But when the Thessalonian Jews heard that Paul had moved to Berea (45 miles away) they came and agitated the crowds against them there also.
 - B. So the brothers in Berea sent Paul off again! How would you like to be so effective in proclaiming the gospel that everywhere you went, civil unrest ensued, and you had to be whisked out of town in the dead of night?
 1. Timothy and Silas stayed behind in Macedonia, working with the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, while Paul went south by sea to Athens and eventually Corinth, in the province of Achaia, about 355 miles away.
 2. Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. Preaching, making disciples and planting a church. But he was also anxiously awaiting Timothy and Silas to return and report on the spiritual health of the Macedonians.
 - C. In a time when there was no electronic communication, and all mail was carried by foot, Paul had to wait for months, wondering whether the persecution had been too much for the infants in Christ, and if the whole mission had failed.
 1. However, Silas and Timothy eventually found Paul in Corinth and brought him the report he longed to hear. The Macedonian churches were thriving, even though they were severely persecuted! This news filled Paul's heart with joy and he wrote the letters to the Thessalonians from Corinth, answering the questions they had relayed, and expressing his love for them.

2. **1 Thessalonians 3:6 ESV** But now that 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— **7** for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. **8** For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.
- II. This celebratory note is reflected even in the way Paul begins his first letter to the church. After his customary greeting, wishing the church “grace and peace”, Paul thanks God for them, telling them how he is praying for, and remembering them.
- A. **1 Thessalonians 1:3 ESV** remembering before our God and Father your work of **faith** and labor of **love** and steadfastness of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.
 1. Where have we seen those three words (faith, love and hope) before? **1 Corinthians 13:13 ESV** *So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.* These are not the only places Paul uses these three words together to encourage believers; he also does so in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Ephesians as well as again in 1 Thessalonians.
 2. But here, he modifies those virtues, calling them a “work” of faith, “labor” of love, and “steadfastness” of hope. To the Corinthians he gives the prominent place to love (faith, hope, love); he gives it here to hope (faith, love, and hope). Our study of these two books will make the reason behind that clear.
 - B. Paul speaks of their **“Work of Faith”**. This is interesting because most of us view faith and works as polar opposites. We know that the gospel frees us from working to be righteous. The Bible says that by our faith in Christ, we have been made righteous by God apart from our works. So what does Paul mean?
 1. He is not saying that the Thessalonians are working **for** their salvation, or that they are counted among God’s elect because they worked for it, “Rather, because they were the elect of God, they had a faith that worked.”¹
 2. James tells us that “Faith without works is dead”². James is telling us that any claim to saving faith that is genuine will be evidenced by a life of good works. The Thessalonians showed that the gospel had really transformed them by denying themselves, and serving their Savior with good deeds.
 - C. Next, Paul talks about their **“Labor of Love”**. Jesus said that the 2 greatest commandments were to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” and to “love your neighbor as yourself”³. Later John combines these two, concluding that **1 John 4:20a ESV** *If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar.*
 1. The gospel had so changed the Thessalonians that Paul used the Greek word *kopos* (labor) to describe the nature of their love. It means to work hard with trouble, toil and great weariness⁴. It’s how they loved God and others.
 2. Has the gospel so changed your life that you love God and everyone else, your friends and enemies, to the point where it costs and it hurts? Surely this is part of what it means to love God with **all** our heart, soul, mind and strength; holding nothing back and leaving nothing on the table. May God make it so in all of our lives as He did in the lives of the Thessalonians!

- D. Last, Paul talks about the “**Steadfastness of Hope**” they had in Christ Jesus. Since Paul’s short visit, the Thessalonians had been subject to severe persecution. We can only imagine that they would have moments when they wondered if it was all worth it. But Paul is saying the gospel had given them such a confident assurance that even in perilous times, they stood firm.
1. Gospel hope isn’t the same kind of hope as when we “hope” we win the lottery, or can capture the heart of that special someone. **Gospel hope is our present comfort experienced because of a certain future reality.** I take comfort in the fact that one day, I will be made perfectly free from sin, sickness and death, no matter my present circumstances because of Jesus.
 2. **Romans 15:13 ESV** *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.* Hebrews says that our hope is an anchor for our soul⁵. Are you anchored?
- III. In Romans, it says that the gospel is the Power of God that works salvation in every one who believes it⁶. Power is never subtle. When something has power, it is evident. What Paul is celebrating in this first chapter is the evidence of the power of God that is on display as they have believed that Jesus died and rose again. Evidence of this power makes him say, **1 Thessalonians 1:4 ESV** *For we know (confident based on evidence), brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you.* What was Paul seeing in the Thessalonians that led him to this conclusion?
- A. First, the gospel’s power was revealed in the effectiveness with which it was proclaimed: the presence of the Holy Spirit’s work, sent in the conviction that led to repentance. **1 Thessalonians 1:5a ESV** *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.*
 1. Paul emphasizes that the gospel proclaimed was not just another philosophy presented for their consideration, but rather it was a universally relevant declaration of pardon, leading to peace with God for those who believed.
 2. He says it was effective because of the working of the Holy Spirit. Many preachers can play on emotions, making someone weep or commit to a religious ideal; but there has never been a preacher good enough to truly convict a lost person of their depravity and persuade them to believe. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. Genuine faith and repentance is always evidence of the Holy Spirit’s power at work in the heart.
 - B. But Paul also says the integrity of those who preached confirmed the gospel’s power. **1 Thessalonians 1:5b ESV** *You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 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. First, Paul says that their selfless service was not an opportunity for greedy gain, but it was for *the sake of* the Thessalonians, for the church’s benefit.
 - a) Thessalonica was filled from one end to the other with cults and temples that operated for the sole purpose of taking people’s money, or exercising control over them. **2 Peter 2:14 ESV** *They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!*

- b) But Paul was able to point to their ministry as having such integrity that the people became imitators of the preachers and the Lord in their willingness to endure thorough persecution, while maintaining real joy.
- 2. When you share the gospel, is it backed up by a life that proves its truth? When people on the outside hear what you say, and observe your life, do they want to imitate your example, or avoid your destructive path? I'm not talking about moral perfection, but rather a life of constant humility and constant repentance that adorns and confirms the gospel we preach.
- C. The gospel's power was also verified as it made the Thessalonians an *influential* people: **1 Thessalonians 1:7 ESV** so that 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. **9a** For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you...
 - 1. Paul says that they so fully embraced the message of Jesus that they became a prime example to all the other believers in their region of how Christianity is done. Everyone was talking about this barely-planted, heavily-persecuted church that thoroughly repented and was serving faithfully.
 - 2. Paul writes that they became "an example", and that the "word...sounded forth" from them, that their faith "has gone forth everywhere". If you are one who claims that you have truly put your trust in Christ, what are people really saying about the testimony and impact of your life? Is the transformation that is taking place in you so winsome that both believers and unbelievers alike are drawn to you, looking to you as an example of what Jesus is like?
- D. Paul says that all these people in other places "report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you". He is talking about their reception of the gospel message that he preached. So what effect did the gospel have on the Thessalonians? **1 Thessalonians 1:9b** 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 delivers us from the wrath to come.
 - 1. Paul reports that they turned from their idols. John Calvin famously said "the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols."⁷ Genuine repentance always requires the abandonment of the things that give us purpose, meaning and satisfaction outside of Christ. If you have not done that, you have not repented.
 - a) But since we have within us a "perpetual forge of idols" that means that our repentance must also be perpetual. Martin Luther said, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance."⁸
 - b) One-time repentance isn't just how we become believers, daily (even constant) repentance is how we prove we are believers. This is how the Thessalonians responded to the gospel, revealing its power.
 - 2. But before they turned from idols, they turned to God. It is never enough to try to clean up your life by ridding it of troublesome immoralities and idols if you have no intention of surrendering your life to God. It won't accomplish anything.

- a) The Galatians were under the false impression that becoming believers meant that they must be circumcised in order to please God. **Galatians 5:2 ESV** Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.
 - b) Paul reminded them that it was faith in what Christ had done that made them saved, and not a single thing that they could do for him. We first put our hope and trust in God alone, and as we do, we rid ourselves of idols through repentance so that we can please the one we love, and have him permeate more and more of our thoughts, desires and actions.
3. Lastly, the Thessalonians demonstrated the power of the gospel by their hope. They were waiting for God's Son to return from Heaven, complete their redemption, and fill them with joy.
- a) The Jesus they were waiting for wasn't some figment of their imaginations, but the Christ of the Bible who is risen from the dead, and who has delivered us from the wrath of God eternally.
 - b) When you become a believer your priorities dramatically shift. You are no longer concerned with building something here that will soon pass away; rather, you are waiting for something much better that is coming to you: the end of the world system with all of it's hatred, wars and disease; the resurrection of body, to be glorified like Christ; and the promise of eternity in his presence, reveling in his love and freed from sin and death.
- IV. How mightily did God demonstrate the power of the gospel in the lives of the Thessalonians! How powerfully is the gospel's effect demonstrated in you? Lets honestly assess ourselves this morning. For the sake of Christ's holy name, let's evaluate whether the light of the gospel has been dimmed through our apathy, our idolatry, our compromise, our unforgiveness...whatever it is. Let's repent, asking God to restore the mighty working of his gospel within us. If you have never experienced the gospel's life-changing good news, you can begin today.
- V. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

¹ *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*; by Mark Howell; Pg. 16; © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

² James 2:17

³ Mark 12:28-31

⁴ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G2873&t=KJV>

⁵ Hebrews 6:19

⁶ Romans 1:16

⁷ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; John Calvin (translated by Henry Beveridge); Book 1, Chapter 11, Section 8; © 2008; Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA

⁸ <https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html> (1st Thesis)