

Paul Greets and Commends the Thessalonian Believers

1 Thessalonians 1:1-7

1 Thessalonians 1:1-7 - *“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy: To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

² We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers ³ remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, ⁴ knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵ For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.”

Background Notes

The apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament are not in chronological order. Although Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica comes eighth in order in Paul's letters, it is one of the apostle's earliest epistles. In fact, it may be Paul's earliest epistle, depending upon the dating of the letter to the Galatians. 1 Thessalonians was written in about AD 50-51.

The account of the founding of the church at Thessalonica, during Paul's second missionary journey, is found in Acts 17. *“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus.” And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.”*

So the church at Thessalonica was founded in an atmosphere of persecution. Because of the persecution, Paul and his team moved on to Berea, then to Athens, and finally to Corinth. From Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the believers were doing. After all, it was a very young church, and it was already facing persecution.

When Timothy rejoined the apostle Paul at Corinth, he brought good news from Thessalonica: *“But now that Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news of your faith and love” (1 Thessalonians 3:6)*. In spite of the persecution, the Thessalonian believers were standing firm! They had a few questions, but they were secure in their faith. The new church was well founded, and the believers were solid in the faith.

So Paul wrote this letter back to the believers in Thessalonica to commend them for their steadfast faith in the midst of trial. In addition, he gave them further teaching and instructions on godly living, and answered a few questions they had about the Lord’s return.

Doctrinal Points

1. The proof of conversion is faith, love, and hope.

After Paul’s salutation and typical greeting (v1), he moved on to a “Section of Thanksgiving,” which was conventional in 1st century letters. In this section Paul commended the Thessalonian believers for their lifestyle that was characterized by faith, love, and hope. *“We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father” (v2-3)*.

Faith, hope and love - those three words put together are very familiar. They’re found in 1 Corinthians 13, the great New Testament chapter on **“love.”** Here we have these words again - with love placed in the middle. Faith, love and hope are the marks of a true Christian. Do you display these marks?

Notice how these “mark of the Christian” are amplified here: **work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope.** Let’s look at these terms a little more closely.

- **“Work of faith.”**

“Work of faith” is probably a reference to their conversion, rather than their Christian service, because the next term - *“labor of love”* - refers to their service. In John 6:28-29, the people who witnessed the feeding of 5000 said to Jesus, *“What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”* Jesus answered and said to them, *“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”*

Salvation is by faith, and not by works, as we know from Ephesians 2:8-9: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works.”* Yet **the kind of faith that saves** can be called a “work of faith.” Salvation does not come about by mouthing a mere profession of faith – it is by a **work** of faith. We’re not advocating “Lordship Salvation” here, but saving faith certainly involves more than just making a spoken profession of faith.

The Thessalonian believers had taken a deliberate action – they **turned to God from idols**. “*You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*” (v9). That “work of repentance” was produced by true saving faith. Saving faith produced a positive action. Thus it was a “work of faith” - not a mere spoken profession.

- “**Labor of love.**”

One area of their “*labor of love*” was generous giving to the Lord. Already the young church at Thessalonica was literally “putting its money where its mouth was”! In 2 Corinthians 8, when Paul challenged the Corinthians to give to the needy believers in Jerusalem, he used the churches at Macedonia as an example. The church in Thessalonica was one of those churches. 1 Corinthians 8:1-2: “*Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.*”

Note that Paul mentioned the **churches** of Macedonia. That would certainly include the church at Thessalonica. In fact, 1 Thessalonians 1:7 says, “*so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.*” If anything, the church at Thessalonica was a model to the other churches in the area of Macedonia - and one area of their labor of love was their generous giving to those who were in need.

Notice that 1 Corinthians 8:2 says that they gave, even though they themselves were experiencing a “*great trial of affliction*” and “*deep poverty*”! When you follow their example by giving generously to the Lord for others, even when you’re in the midst of trials or when you’re financially strapped, that certainly is a **labor of love!** Could you classify your Christian giving as a “labor of love”? Or is your giving just a mere “token of love”?

- “**Patience of hope.**”

The Thessalonian believers were not only characterized by their “work of faith” and their “labor of love” - they were characterized by the sure hope of their eternal future with the Lord. The result of this sure hope was their patient endurance and steadfastness, even when they were in times of persecution. Remember, they were undergoing trials, as we saw in Acts 17 and also here in verse 6.

My Emmaus Bible College faculty colleague and good friend, Jim Catron, is presently undergoing a trial of suffering. He is a wonderful example of “patience of hope.” The endurance and steadfastness that is evident in Jim’s life comes as a result of a sure and eternal hope for the future. From God’s perspective, we are “elect” (v4). But from the human perspective, **the proof of conversion is faith, love, and hope.**

2. The proof of the gospel is power and changed lives.

Verses 5-6: “*For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.*”

When the apostle Paul preached the good news of Jesus Christ in Thessalonica, the gospel was much more than just a new philosophy or new worldview. The gospel came with the ***power of the Holy Spirit***. Acts 17 doesn't give an account of any "sign miracles" taking place when the gospel came to Thessalonica, so Paul wasn't talking of dramatic miracles when he said the gospel came in power and in the Holy Spirit. No. He was talking about ***the power of the gospel to convert souls and change lives***.

Romans 1:16 says, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes."* The proof of the gospel is power and changed lives.

Look at how the power of the gospel completely changed the apostle Paul from a proud Pharisee and persecutor of Christians to the great, but humble, servant and messenger of the Lord Jesus Christ! What could do that? A New Year's resolution? No way! The amazing change came about through the power of the gospel. It radically changed Saul, the proud Pharisee, into Paul, the humble servant of Jesus Christ! A present-day example is Charles Colson, the founder of Prison Ministry. What changed the life of Charles Carlson so dramatically? It was the power of the gospel!

If you're not a Christian, take a good look at the gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ, who died for your sins. Put your trust in Him, and commit your life to Him - and you too will be saved by the power of God. And your life will be changed forever! The proof of the gospel is power and changed lives.

Practical Application

Do your friends imitate Christ when they imitate you?

Verse 5-6: *"You know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. ⁶And you became followers of us and of the Lord."*

Paul, Silas, and Timothy were great models for Christian living for the Thessalonian believers. In fact, the apostle could say that when the believers imitated the lifestyle of those men, they were imitating Christ! Wow! What a testimony!

When people imitate you, are they imitating Jesus Christ? Could that be said of you - or of me? Paul could say it. Silas could say it. Timothy could say it.

It's a good question for all of us. If your friends imitate you, could it be said that they are imitating Christ?