

II. An Example to All Believers

September 22/23, 2010

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Aim: To recognize how the Trinity impacts the election, conversion, and life of the believer.

In Greek, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 is a single sentence, one of the most grammatically complicated in all of Paul's letters (similar to Eph. 1:3-14).

A. The Election of God (1 Thess. 1:2-4)

The main grammatical point on which the whole of 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 hinges is the verb 'we give thanks' (v. 2). There are three subsidiary points indicated by three participles: 'mentioning,' 'remembering,' and 'knowing.'

1. Mentioning in Prayer (1:2)

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

Paul starts the letter with 'We give thanks' (*εὐχαριστοῦμεν, eucharistoumen*). The plural form implies that all three missionaries were in a real sense joint authors of the letter. Although an opening 'thanksgiving' in relation to his readers is a normal part of Paul's letters, this particular one seems especially appropriate because Paul has just heard the good news about the Thessalonian church from Timothy's report (3:6).

Paul's prayers for the Thessalonians were marked by a deep sense of thanksgiving. By starting his letter this way he assures his readers at the outset that they are never out of his mind. The introductory clause of this sentence is wonderful shorthand for Paul's theology of grace.

To pray so regularly and so selflessly is never easy. Yet prayer of this sort lay at the heart of Paul's ministry. His effectiveness as a preacher and a pastor can never be separated from his prayerfulness. If we are to see anything approaching his fruitfulness in our ministries, we must recapture his faithfulness in our prayers.

2. Remembering Their Salvation (1:3)

...remembering without ceasing...

Paul and his companions did not thank God in just a vague or general way. Three qualities stood out as Paul prayed for the Thessalonians. They were faith, love, and hope. Paul is describing the Thessalonians' way of life when he was with them, and especially their actions in spreading the gospel after he left despite opposition. In addition, these three qualities proved God's sovereign choice of them (v. 4), which were manifest in their sanctification.

The linking together of faith, love, and hope appears often in Paul's letters, and not in any specific order (cp. Rom. 5:2-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5-6; Eph. 4:2-5; Col. 1:4-5; 1 Th. 5:8; see also Heb. 6:10-12; 10:22-24; 1 Pe. 1:3-8, 21-22). His emphasis upon one or the other of the three differs according to each context, with the final quality to be named usually being the one that is stressed (e.g., 1 Cor. 13:13). Among the three, the emphasis here is on 'hope' in the Second Coming, which is a prominent theme in the letter (e.g., 1:10; 4:13-5:11).

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a) *Work of Faith*

...*your work of faith...*

A true church is made up of people who have faith (*πίστις, pistis*) in Jesus Christ. Faith is based on the assurance that God has acted for His people's salvation in Christ. Faith includes the idea of confidence; it is convinced that Jesus can be trusted. The Christians at Thessalonica had entrusted their eternal well-being to the Lord of glory, convinced that He loved them and had given themselves for them (Gal. 2:20).

Their faith was *productive*. True faith is not sterile but active. Life in the Thessalonian church was marked by work produced by faith. When the gospel came to these people they did not receive it as a set of ideas to be talked about and debated. It had changed their whole outlook and way of life. Their new life was one governed in every way by their faith in the gospel.

A 'work of faith' is action representative of the transforming power of regeneration (2 Cor. 5:17). Simply stated, the elect engage in holy, righteous deeds to the honor of God. 'Work' is the Greek word *ergon* (*ἔργον*), which refers to the deed, achievement, or function itself. Paul was confident of the Thessalonians' election because their 'faith'—the authentic saving and sanctifying gift from God—was producing righteous deeds in their lives.

Paul's words here do not in any way contradict his clear teaching elsewhere that salvation is by faith alone (cp. Rom. 3:20-21; Eph. 2:8-9). However, the New Testament also stresses the active side of faith—salvation will necessarily produce holy conduct. Such teaching is not opposed to justification by faith alone through grace alone, but actually complements that doctrine

The gospel will always revolutionize lives where it is truly believed. It gives people a new center for life, a new motive for life, and a new power for life.

b) *Labor of Love*

...*labor of love...*

A true church is made up of people who love God and who love one another. Love (*ἀγάπη, agapē*) is the present (and continuing) relationship between God and His people through Christ. The Thessalonian church displayed this attribute. Love had been the constraining force behind their service to one another.

This love of theirs was *practical*. When Paul thanked God for the love that was evident in the lives of his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, he was not referring to something abstract and insubstantial but something tough and practical. The love that Paul had in mind was the self-giving love that characterizes God Himself, the love that reached out to us 'while we were yet sinners' (Rom. 5:8). In effect, the believers in Thessalonica had begun to imitate the Savior.

'Labor' is the Greek word *kopos* (*κόπος*), which denotes an arduous, wearying kind of toil, done to the point of exhaustion. Unlike *ergon* ('work'), which focuses on the deed itself, *kopos* looks at the effort expended in accomplishing a particular deed. It is an effort that strains all of one's energies to the maximum level. The noblest, most altruistic, and selfless form of 'love' (*agapē*) motivates this kind of spiritual effort.

c) *Patience of Hope*

...*and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father...*

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Thirdly, the missionaries thanked God for the endurance inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ that they had witnessed in the Thessalonians. It is in Him that His people's hope is placed, and their hope will be realized at His Parousia. The future event of the return of Jesus burned as a living hope in their hearts, inspiring them to press on, counting no trouble too much to bear.

Like faith and love, hope is an essential component of the make-up of every true believer. It was Paul's conviction that the Christian can anticipate a golden future with complete confidence. It is not a matter of likelihood or probabilities but of absolute certainty. Jesus will return and make all things new. The matter is not in doubt.

This hope of theirs was *patient*. The Christian anticipates the return of his Savior with calm confidence. It is a persevering anticipation of seeing His future glory and receiving their eternal inheritance.

'Steadfastness' or 'patience' is from the Greek word *hupomonē* (ὕπομονε), which conveys the idea of endurance or perseverance; literally, it denotes the condition of staying under pressure. It is closely related to the idea of the Reformer's concept of the 'perseverance of the saints'—that is, Christians will hold fast to their hope. 'Hope' (ἐλπίς, *elpis*) transcends mere human, wishful anticipation and rest confidently in the consummation of redemption that Scripture says will certainly occur when Christ returns. Such hope will inevitably cause believers to triumph over the struggles of life because it derives from the type of true faith the Thessalonians received from God.

3. Knowing Their Election (1:4)

...knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.

Like all the people of God in every era of Christian history, the men and women who made up the fellowship in Thessalonica had been chosen by God. Ultimately the good works done by the Thessalonians are a result of their divine election in eternity past. In assuring the believers in Thessalonica that they have been chosen by God, Paul is again revealing his deep spiritual roots. The idea that God chooses or elects people is embedded in the Old Testament (cp. Dt. 7:6). Believers in Christ in the New Testament are God's chosen people in this same way (cp. Rom. 8:17).

The biblical doctrine of election simply means that God ordains to eternal life all who come to faith in Christ (Acts 13:48). He did so 'before the foundation of the world, for no other reason than the 'good pleasure of His will' (Eph. 1:4, 5). Christians are the elect, chosen of God solely by his sovereign, loving purpose, apart from any human merit or wisdom. While God saves those whom He is pleased to save, He does so because He loves them. No one deserves the electing love of God. Christians are not chosen because they are holy. They are chosen in order that they might become holy (Eph. 1:4).

There is no distinction between the called and the chosen. The choosing and the calling are alike the act of God: He chose His people in Christ 'before the world's foundation' (Eph. 1:4) and called them in time (cp. 2 Th. 2:13-14) in order that they might reproduce His character by being 'conformed to the image of His Son' (Rom. 8:29). While the act of election took place in God's eternal counsel, its effects are seen in the lives of the elect, as they were seen now in the lives of the Thessalonian Christians.

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Paul said he knew his friends in Thessalonica were chosen by God. He knew it, not because he had secret access to the heavenly equivalent of classified information, but because election had consequences. ‘Knowing’ (*εἰδότες, eidentes*) could also be translated ‘seeing’ or ‘perceiving.’ Chosen people exhibit faith, love, and hope. These are unmistakable signs of the new life that has become apparent in them, as well as their ready response to the gospel. The Christian’s faith in Christ, love for Christ, and confident expectation that Christ will come again as He has promised are proof positive that he is among the chosen of God.

Election is probably the key theological concept to describe God’s initiative in the two letters to the Thessalonians. It becomes the basis for the later commands to lead holy lives (sanctification).

‘Brethren’ is the Greek word *adelphoi* (*ἀδελφοί*). The Greek perfect tense for ‘beloved’ (*ἠγαπημένοι, ēgapēmēnoi*) emphasizes the completed action in the past (here, God’s loving His people in electing them) that results in one’s present situation.

Our private and corporate worship would be transformed if we took more time to reflect on the blessings He has showered upon us. The Thessalonians were a working, laboring, enduring group of Christians. Any pastor would love to have church members like them! What lay behind this striking display of life? Not programs, superb organization, or management techniques. Rather, it was the faith, love, and hope produced by belief in the gospel. At heart, the greatest need of the Christian church in every age is for a continuous experience of the power of the gospel.

B. The Power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:5-8)

Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving is followed by an assessment of the impact of the gospel upon them. Paul knows the Thessalonian Christians are elect by two evidences. Firstly, Paul’s preaching produced changes in them. Secondly, the Thessalonians imitated Paul, in particular in spreading the gospel despite opposition after Paul left them.

1. Hearers (1:5)

a) The Gospel Which Came (1:5a)

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance...

(1) In Word

Paul gives the first evidence on which his confidence in the election of the Thessalonians is based – namely, that his preaching produced changes in their lives. Paul encourages the Thessalonians (and himself!) by reminding them of how God had changed them through his preaching. The gospel is a force to be reckoned with; it is dynamic. This is partly the thinking behind Paul’s choice of verb: the gospel ‘came.’ It was not so much a product which Paul and Silas delivered, put a power in its own right. Paul and Silas were the servants of a living, vital energy.

The gospel had come to the Thessalonians in ‘word’ (*λόγος, logos*). Preaching is important. Without it, people cannot hear and believe (cp. Rom. 10:14). Preaching as the mere human activity of speaking the gospel in words is not all that counts in people coming to saving faith. ‘Word alone’ here means speech unaccompanied by the convincing power of the Holy Spirit.

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Such speech, however eloquent and moving, would be ineffective in evoking faith from the hearers.

(2) In Power

The preaching did not come in word only, but also with power (*δυνάμει, dynamei*). Regardless of the erudition, the compelling logic, the soaring rhetoric, or the clever and interesting communication style, if the truth spoken is not accompanied by the power of God, it accomplishes nothing. The apostle is saying that the message had a special force about it that made it effective in the lives of people as they listened.

(3) In the Holy Spirit

This power to quicken the spiritually dead was connected with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He was the source or agent of this special convicting influence (John 16:8). Genuine soul-transforming power accompanying gospel preaching is the work of the Spirit energizing both the preacher and the hearer.

(4) In Assurance

Evidently, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were fully aware that the Holy Spirit was at work through them as they preached in Thessalonica. They were given a deep sense of the certainty of their message, boldness to proclaim it, and confidence that it would be effective.

The role of the Holy Spirit is of critical importance. His power was responsible for the ‘assurance’ (*πληροφορία, plērophoria*) the conviction in the hearts not only of Paul and Silas, but also of the hearers themselves, that their message came from God. This reference to the Thessalonians’ deep inward persuasion of the truth of the gospel as a token of the Holy Spirit’s work in their hearts, is more impressive and more lasting than the persuasion produced by spectacular or miraculous signs.

b) The Men Who Preached (1:5b)

...as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

Paul told the Thessalonian believers that the spiritual power manifest in his life and the lives of his fellow ministers affirmed the accuracy of their preaching. Paul’s experience in Thessalonica remains a model for gospel preaching in our generation. It reminds us that ultimately it is the gospel itself that God uses to save people (Rom. 1:16). Again, it teaches us that effective preaching of that gospel depends entirely on the work of the Holy Spirit.

We can enhance the creditability of our message by ensuring that our own character does not undermine the truth we proclaim. This is not a case of self-promotion, but a recognition that God had enabled them to live lives that were in tune with the message they preached.

2. Imitators (1:6)

And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit...

Paul moves to his second evidence on which he bases his confidence in the election of the Thessalonians – that is, their imitation of him and the Lord. Upon hearing the gospel, those who welcomed it were radically changed. The Thessalonians became ‘followers.’ This translates a Greek word (*μιμηται, mimētai*) which can also be rendered ‘imitators’ (it actually lies behind the

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English word ‘mimic’). Paul portrays *himself* as the one whom his readers are to imitate. In the apostle’s view, this imitation of himself is related to imitation of Christ.

The Thessalonian believers’ lifestyles started becoming far different from the sordid, idolatrous paganism of their past and from the legalistic self-righteousness of the Jews in their city. They had become ‘imitators’ of Jesus Christ.

It cost them severe suffering to do so, but even this could not smother their joy given by the Holy Spirit. ‘Joy’ in the midst of suffering is a characteristic of those who are truly elect. The Greek word rendered ‘affliction’ or ‘tribulation’ is *thlipsis* (θλιψις), which means ‘intense pressure’ as opposed to something mild. It is a term applicable to the various kinds of hardship which Christians have to endure because of their faith and witness.

Acts 17:1-9 does not describe persecution directed against the Thessalonian converts in general; rather it is against the missionaries and secondarily against their hosts (‘Jason and some of the brethren’) that the rabble is stirred up by disapproving Jews. It might be expected that, when the missionaries got away safely, resentment of them would be turned against their followers. After Paul and his company had left Thessalonica, it is likely the unbelieving Jews and pagan Gentiles intensified the persecution.

A changed life is still the best evidence that we have become Christians. Many rely heavily upon their inward feelings and moods or on past spiritual experiences for assurance that they have eternal life. Feelings and frames of mind can change, however, and experiences can be deceptive. A radically new lifestyle, coupled with the inward joy of the Holy Spirit, is much safer ground upon which to rest our hopes.

3. Examples (1:7)

...so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.

The imitators became ‘examples’ which other believers were imitating. ‘Example’ is the Greek word *typos* (τύπος, ‘exact reproduction’), from which the English word ‘type’ derives. The Thessalonians became like blueprints for others throughout the region to build their lives on (cp. 1 Jn. 2:6).

They, in their turn, became impressive advertisements for the transforming power of grace. News of their conversion soon reached all the believers in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, which were separate Roman provinces. Macedonia was the province in northern Greece that contained Thessalonica, as well as Philippi and Berea. Achaia was the southern province of Greece that included such prominent cities as Athens and Corinth. Likely as not they were all facing the same sorts of trials as the Thessalonians, but perhaps not with the same courage. The Thessalonian preachers made an impact on all those ‘who believe’ (πιστεύουσιν, *pisteuōsō*). ‘Those who believe’ could be considered as a definition of true Christians.

4. Proclaimers (1:8)

For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

Then these examples became enthusiastic advocates for the gospel which they had received. The church in Thessalonica became a missionary church. ‘Sounded forth’ (ἐξήχηται, *exēchētai*) is used only here in the New Testament and means ‘to blast forth’ or ‘to sound forth very

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intensely.’ Outside the New Testament, the term was used to refer to a blaring trumpet, or rolling thunder. The perfect tense form of *exēchētai* indicates the church’s bold, continual trumpeting of the gospel message. Paul used this word to emphasize the intensity of the preaching. The believers in Thessalonica published the good news to such effect that it was audible over a wide swath of territory. They became a sounding board, as it were, continually bouncing the message outwards in all directions.

How did this come about? It may be that the Thessalonian Christians, upon accepting the word, patterned themselves upon the apostle and his helpers and became preachers of the gospel in Thessalonica and its surrounding towns and villages. Even if they did not become preachers in this sense, their transformed lives must have spoken loudly to others. But a greater part of the explanation for the rapid spread of the preaching was the location of Thessalonica. Not only was it a harbor, but it was situated on the famous road, the Via Egnatia. Travelers passing through the busy port city, either on the east-west Egnatian Way, or by visiting the bustling harbor, would hear about these things and gossip reports at their various stopping points. In this way news of what had happened in Thessalonica would soon spread. Had Priscilla and Aquila heard the news as they traveled east along the Egnatian Way from Rome, and then told Paul and his friends about it when they met them in Corinth?

On a later occasion Paul thought fit to boast to the Corinthian Christians about the achievement of the churches of Macedonia (including Thessalonica) with special reference to their generous giving (2 Cor. 8:1-5). At this earlier stage, however, he and his companions had no need to boast at Corinth or elsewhere about the Thessalonians’ faith: the news had gone ahead of them.

All of this contributed greatly to Paul’s ongoing missionary work. When he and his companions arrived in a new place, they did not need to mention their visit to Thessalonica. Many times in Paul’s travels Christians knew about the events in Thessalonica before Paul told them. News of this event was so well known that people themselves could report what kind of reception the missionaries had received there. Presumably this made them the more eager to hear what the missionaries had to say.

C. The Deliverance of the Son (1 Thess. 1:9-10)

Paul provides us with a graphic picture of conversion. He traces three distinct elements and designates their conversion in both positive and negative terms.

1. Converted from Idols (1:9a)

For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols...

What had people heard about the apostle’s visit to Thessalonica? They had heard, firstly, that as a result of it some of the Thessalonians had turned to God from idols. ‘Turned’ (*ἐπεστρέψατε*) is from the verb *epistrephō*, which is used to indicate the fact that in the sinner’s conversion there is a turning in the absolute opposite direction (cp. Acts 9:35; 2 Cor. 3:16). Because Paul says this, we can say that they bulk of Paul’s first readers were converts from paganism rather than from a Jewish background. Paul’s stress on their former depravity in idol worship serves to highlight the wonder of their conversion. The Thessalonians abandoned all polytheism and embraced only God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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From the record of Acts 17:1-9 the impression might be gained that the Thessalonian converts were mainly Jews and God-fearers; but evidently more evangelization was carried on in the city than Luke reports: the missionaries must have stayed longer than the two or three weeks during which they were granted the hospitality of the synagogue.

In the wider sense, an idol is a God-substitute. The fallen imagination is so fertile that human beings down the centuries have invented thousands of idols. Idols need not be figures of wood or stone. Essentially anything that claims God's right to our total devotion is an idol. The quest for wealth and power is a modern form of idolatry. So too are selfish ambition, obsession with sport, infatuation with people, and addiction to drugs, sex, or food.

2. Serving the Living God (1:9b)

...to serve the living and true God...

Secondly, they had decided to serve the living and true God. The word Paul chose for 'serve' (*δουλεύειν, douleuein*) means to serve as a bond-slave, which was the most demanding form of servitude. There is a double movement involved in conversion. As well as turning *away from sin and self*, those who are converted turn *to God*. Changes of this sort witnesses powerfully to the gospel. It often speaks far more loudly than words.

Paul makes a twin contrast between the service of God and the folly of idol-worship. To begin with, *God is alive; the idols are not* (cp. Ps. 115:5-7). Secondly, *the living God is true; the idols are false*. Those who serve them devote their lives to promoting a lie. In contradistinction to 'idols,' which are lifeless and a hoax, Paul describes God as 'living and real' (cp. Jer. 10:10). Because He alone is the 'living God,' He alone is 'real' (*ἀληθινός, alēthinos*).

3. Waiting for Christ's Return (1:10)

...and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Not only did converts exchange their allegiance and experience a reorientation of their lifestyles; they also became gripped with eager anticipation. Having turned to the living God, they began to wait for His Son from heaven (this is the only place in the Thessalonian letters where Jesus is called the Son of God). It was to this return of the Lord that the Thessalonians looked with such eagerness. The expectation of these great events captivated the minds and hearts of the early Christians. 'To wait' (*ἀναμένειν, anamenein*) includes an ethical component, as it encourages us to live in righteousness. Those who wait are bound to live holy lives so as to be ready to meet Him. Waiting is a recurring theme in the Thessalonian letters (1 Th. 2:17, 19; 3:13; 4:15-17; 5:8, 23; 2 Th. 3:6-12).

The usual emphasis of the word 'delivers' (*ρῴομενον, rhyomai*) is on God or Christ rescuing, or delivering, Christians from a difficult situation. It denotes the deliverance that only God can provide. 'Wrath' (*ὀργή, orgēs*) describes God's settled opposition to and displeasure of sin. In this context the 'wrath' is God's eternal judgment against sin. One aspect of the deliverance accomplished at the Second Coming includes God's legally acquitting, or justifying, us publicly at the last judgment.

In this short opening thanksgiving section Paul explicitly mentions the Second Coming twice (1:10), and strongly implies it once (1:3). In verse 3, 'hope' aids us in persevering during trials. 'To wait,' at the beginning of verse 10, encourages us to lead holy lives to honor Christ when He

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returns. The final part of the verse reminds us that we shall avoid the ‘coming wrath.’ These texts show us that the Second Coming should often be part of our thinking and has multi-faceted implications for us.

Their serving of God was coupled with a patient realization that all will not be finally put to rights until Jesus returns in power and great glory to make all things new. Our ultimate hope for a just society does not rest in the heroic labors of Christian people in the present but in the intervention of the Son of God at the end of time. When Jesus does return, He will save His people from the wrath to come.

For next time: Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12.