



## 1 Thessalonians - Chapter One

### Summary of Chapter One

After the introduction (v.1), Paul begins with a thanksgiving to God for the saving benefits bestowed on them (vv.2-5), and then mentions the certain proofs of the success of the Gospel among them, which was notorious and famous in several other locations throughout the region (vv.6-10).

### I. 1 Thessalonians 1:1 - Salutation

Paul's opening to the letter is brief but typically Pauline.

<sup>1</sup> Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

### 1 Thessalonians 1:1

Paul makes no mention of his apostolic status, perhaps because there were no false teachers challenging it within the Thessalonian church. Silvanus and Timothy were co-workers with Paul during his second missionary journey.

Silvanus, or Silas, was a Judæan Christian: <<*Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers*>> (Acts 15:22), who had joined Paul after he separated from Barnabas: <<*The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord*>> (Acts 15:39-40).

Timothy, of Lystra in southern Galatia, was the son of a Jewish mother and Greek father and joined the ministry team when Paul passed through his hometown during the early stages of his second missionary journey: <<*Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a*

*Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek*>> (Acts 16:1-3).

Timothy had just returned from a visit to the church of the Thessalonians: <<*But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us – just as we long to see you*>> (1 Thessalonians 3:6), and his report is Paul's major source of information as he writes. While Silas and Timothy are included as co-senders, Paul is clearly the main author. The word translated church was a common term that is frequently used for any gathering or assembly.

In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Believers enjoy a mysterious union with both the Father and the Son, and hence are supremely secure and safe from spiritual harm.

Grace to you and peace. This is a typical Pauline blessing appearing in the introductions to all of his letters. Grace means God's unmerited favour; that is, the things received that are undeserved. This can be compared to mercy, which is when God does not apply the punishment that is deserved. Peace is not just the absence of conflict but echoes the OT concept of *shalom*, Hebrew for so much more than peace, where a person's life with God and with everything else is in ordered harmony, both physically and spiritually, and 'all is well' in their walk with God. This same peace cannot be known apart from God.

Peace was the benediction given by the priests in the OT era and grace was added, although it has always existed, as they sought peace with God, peace in their own conscience, peace with all whom they meet. All these are found only in grace, and that grace is of God. It comes from God the Father, who gives all good things, through the mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, the only means of receiving grace and peace in believers' lives.

## **II. 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3:13 - Thanksgiving and Encouragement**

**It is typical for Paul to include a thanksgiving near the beginning of his letters, with Galatians as a striking exception. In this letter it continues for the first three chapters!**

### **II.a 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 - The Thessalonians' Faith and Example**

Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians are evidencing the essential marks of the Christian life: faith, love and hope. Paul grounds his confidence that the Thessalonians are elect in two things: the undeniable authenticity and authority of those preaching the Gospel to them (v.5), and the exemplary nature of the Thessalonians' response to the Gospel (vv.6-10). First, he appeals to the fact that the missionaries' preaching was characterised by power, the Holy Spirit and full conviction. The genuineness of the Gospel was reinforced, as it always should be, by the evident integrity of its teachers.

<sup>2</sup> We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly <sup>3</sup> remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly is also a familiar statement in Paul's letters: <<*In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*>> (Colossians 1:3), <<*To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfil by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12), and: <<*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God*>> (Philemon 3-4).

Remembering indicates that Paul may be recalling the events of his mission to Thessalonica, or this may just be his standard prayer language.

Our God and Father. Because of their Jewish neighbours, the Gentiles would have been familiar with the idea that there was a Father God. Paul therefore shows the continuity of the one true God with the Gospel he is bringing, as he would later confirm to those in nearby Philippi: <<*To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen*>> (Philippians 4:20).

Faith, love, hope are a common Pauline triad as used in Romans 5:2-5, Galatians 5:5-6, Ephesians 4:2-5, and 1 Thessalonians 5:8. The prominent final position here belongs to hope, which seems fitting in a letter so concerned with the end times. Elsewhere, Paul gives love the prominent position: <<*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love*>> (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Work, labour, steadfastness. These are the practical outworking of the Thessalonians' conversion. The work the Thessalonians do is a result or consequence of their faith, as confirmed by the Lord's brother in James 2:14-26. So, too, their labour flows from love, and their endurance or steadfastness comes from hope.

<sup>4</sup> For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, <sup>5</sup> because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake.

### 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5

The ultimate reason for Paul's certainty regarding the Thessalonians' election is that they are brothers and sisters beloved by God. God's love underpins election: <<*To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints*>> (Romans 1:7a),

and: <<*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will*>> (Ephesians 1:3-5), and is demonstrated by it: <<*As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors*>> (Romans 11:28).

Chosen, literally 'elected', uses the Greek *eklogē*, which also means selection, refers to God's antecedent sovereign act of appointing people for eternal life. Paul infers from the events of the mission that the Thessalonians were elect and therefore he can reassure them that they are forever secure.

The Father chooses Christians in his Son Christ Jesus, and this took place in eternity past, before the foundation of the world: <<*just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love*>> (Ephesians 1:4). This indicates, for all eternity, the Father has had the role of leading and directing among the persons of the Trinity, i.e. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, it does not indicate any hierarchical structure within the Godhead, for each person is fully and equally God.

God's election of Christians entails his predestining them to something significant, i.e. to adoption as sons, including both male and female believers: <<*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children*>> (Galatians 4:4-5). Hence, election and predestination in this context refer to God's decision to save someone. God's predestination gives his people tremendous comfort, for they know that all who come to Christ do so through God's enabling grace and appointment.

The gospel came in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. This describes just how powerful the proclamation of the Gospel is and how it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the recipients that allows people to accept their calling into God's service.

What kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. It is important for all Christians, whether those chosen specifically for ministry or those simply called into service, to live their lives with integrity, honesty and free from any form of hypocrisy. This is perhaps best encapsulated by Paul's words to the church in Rome: <<*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*>> (Romans 15:13).

<sup>6</sup> And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit,  
<sup>7</sup> so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

## 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7

Imitators of us and of the Lord. The Thessalonians followed Paul's example even as Paul has followed Christ's example, therefore they too are emulating Jesus. Paul often wrote about the examples set by him and his apostolic team, including: *<<We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything>>* (2 Corinthians 6:8b-10).

In spite of persecution you received the word with joy. The Thessalonians faced severe opposition from the outset, as recorded by Luke: *<<But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the market-places they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, 'These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.' The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go>>* (Acts 17:5-9). Paul and others confirm that suffering affliction is normal for those destined to be saved at the end: *<<it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us>>* (Romans 8:16-18), *<<Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted>>* (2 Timothy 3:12), and: *<<Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you>>* (1 Peter 4:12-14).

With joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. The remarkable joy in suffering that characterised the Thessalonian Christians was patterned after the joy of Jesus and Paul.

This strange news brought to a pagan region by some itinerant Jews about a man who had died and yet was made alive again had had such a dramatic impact on the people, through the work of the Holy Spirit, that they could not constrain themselves and simply had to speak out. In a similar sense, it was the same for Elihu as he listened to Job and his supposed wise friends but was convicted by the Spirit to speak out: *<<For I am full of words; the spirit within me constrains me. My heart is indeed like wine that has no vent; like new wineskins, it is ready to burst. I must speak, so that I may find relief; I must open my lips and answer>>* (Job 32:18-20).

You became an example to all the believers. The fundamental change that occurred in the lives of these people was so remarkable that others could not fail to notice and hold them up as shining examples of this new life in Christ. Paul would call on Timothy to be just such an example: <<**Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity**>> (1 Timothy 4:12).

Macedonia and Achaia were the two Greek provinces of the Roman Empire. Thessalonica and Philippi were in Macedonia, and Athens and Corinth in Achaia. See the regional map from around AD60.



<sup>8</sup> For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

### 1 Thessalonians 1:8

For the word of the Lord sounded forth. This may refer to evangelistic activities or, more likely, the news of the Thessalonians' newfound faith. Either way, what transpired in Thessalonica resulted in the Gospel being proclaimed far and wide, no doubt aided by the fact that Thessalonica was strategically located. Paul would again call for this work to be continued: <<**Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you, and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith**>> (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2).

In every place where your faith in God has become known. News of the Thessalonian church was spreading far and wide, a positive reputation was growing, just as it did for the church in Rome: <<**First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the**>>

**world**>> (Romans 1:8). Therefore, Paul and his ministry team have no need to speak about it.

Merchants travelled freely in the region and those that had come to faith were able to expound the Gospel to those they met on their travels and to report the changes they were seeing in Thessalonica and, indeed, the other locations that they so frequently visited.

<sup>9</sup> For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

### 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

The Greeks from other areas report that the Thessalonians had repented of their idolatrous past, had committed themselves to serve God, and were waiting for Jesus' Second Coming, which are the key traits of genuine Christian conversion.

What kind of welcome we had among you. Good hospitality was shown equally to strangers as well as to those who were well known, which was seen from ancient times, such as the example of Abraham welcoming strangers: <<*He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.'*>> (Genesis 18:2-5), and another stranger on a journey: <<*He answered him, 'We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; and I am going to my home. Nobody has offered to take me in. We your servants have straw and fodder for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and the woman and the young man along with us. We need nothing more.'* The old man said, 'Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square.' So he brought him into his house, and fed the donkeys; they washed their feet, and ate and drank>> (Judges 19:18-21). Jesus explained the importance of such a welcome that Paul and his team had received from the Thessalonians: <<*But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest'*>> (Luke 9:47-48), which seemed to have exceeded the cultural norm.

How you turned to God from idols. The word Paul uses for turned is the closest he comes to technically describing someone's *conversion* to Christianity. It indicates what happens when someone stops going in one direction, turns around and goes off in a completely new direction. He had called on those in Lystra to do the same when they had tried to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods because a man

had been healed: <<*Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them*>> (Acts 14:15).

Living and true God. In contrast to idols, God is the only real deity: <<*God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you"'*>> (Exodus 3:14). Only he is of any value to people with all pagan idols being worthless: <<*There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell*>> (Deuteronomy 4:28), <<*You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak*>> (1 Corinthians 12:2), and: <<*Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods*>> (Galatians 4:8).

Wait for his Son is the first of many references to the Second Coming of Christ in this letter.

When Augustus defeated his rivals and became emperor of Rome and its enormous subjected lands, he declared that his adopted father Julius Cæsar had become a god. When Augustus himself died in AD14 his successor Tiberius did the same for him. Therefore, both Augustus and Tiberius, while they lived, were styled as 'the son of god'. To ask these new Christians to give up their pantheon of idols was hard enough, but to cease their worship of the all powerful self-styled 'son of a god', and then publically acknowledge the true Son of God, was both dangerous and quite remarkable in the way the Thessalonians had so willingly responded to the work of the Spirit within them. Peter had been the first to recognise Jesus as the true Son: <<*Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'*>> (Matthew 16:16).

Whom he raised from the dead. This may anticipate 4:13-18, where Paul affirms the Thessalonians' hope for the deceased on the foundation of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the foundational truth of the Christian faith: <<*But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power*>> (Acts 2:24).

Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. This may anticipate 5:1-11, where Paul emphasises that the Thessalonians are not destined for wrath at the final judgment, which is based on the words of Jesus: <<*The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath*>> (John 3:35-36).

This first chapter has been Paul's way of saying thank you to God for the remarkable transformation of the Thessalonian people in such a short period of time, and his way of encouraging them by letting them know he is so thankful.