

INTRODUCTION

Galatians and both letters to the Thessalonians were the first letters written by Paul. 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written during his second missionary journey from Corinth in 50–51AD (see notes on Acts 17:1–18:23). Paul’s missionary team consisted of Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy. After successfully starting a church in Philippi, Paul and Silas left for Thessalonica which was about a 5 day walk (100 miles).

Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica, went to the synagogue, preached the gospel over a period of three weeks (Acts 17:1–9) and some Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks, and a few prominent women in the city were converted (Acts 17:4). The gospel, however, was also met with much opposition.

Immediately, some unbelieving Jews stirred up a mob and went to the house where Paul was supposed to be staying. When they couldn’t find Paul they took the Christians they could find and brought them before the civil authorities accusing them of worshipping a king other than Caesar (Acts 17:7). In order to prevent more mob violence, Paul and



Silas were eventually smuggled out of the city under the cover of darkness and traveled about 50 miles (2 ½ days) west to Berea. Once again they went to the synagogue first, and many Jews and some prominent men and women among the gentiles believed (Acts 17:12). When the Jews from Thessalonica heard of the gospel spreading in Berea they went there to stir up people against Paul. This time the believers didn’t wait for another public confrontation (cf. Act 17:5–9), so Paul went to Athens while Silas and Timothy continued to do their evangelistic work in Berea. This probably happened in late October 49AD (Thomas, 231). Silas and Timothy joined Paul shortly after. “While in Athens Paul and his companions grew concerned about the stability of the Thessalonian’s faith in the face of the trials they were enduring. Consequently, he sent Timothy to determine how the church was doing and to build them up in the faith” (Beale, 14). Paul next went to Corinth where he was again opposed by some Jews (Acts 18:1–17); however, when Timothy returned from Thessalonica he gave a positive report that encouraged Paul (1 Thess. 3:1–9), causing him to write 1 Thessalonians almost immediately. He then penned 2 Thessalonians a few months later.

Chapter 1 might be outlined as follows:**Verse 1: Salutation****Verse 2: Introduces Paul's prayer of thankfulness for the Thessalonians****Verses 3–10: Outlines the grounds for Paul's thanksgiving****(1) visible evidences of their salvation (1:3)****(2) the fact that God had chosen them (1:4–6)****(3) the good reports concerning them (1:7–10)****SALUTATION*****1:1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.***

The letter begins as most ancient letters did by identifying the author and the recipients, followed by a greeting. Silvanus (the Latin form of the Greek name, Silas, as he is called in Acts) and Timothy were missionary companions of Paul (see above). Paul most likely includes them in the greeting, not because they helped write the letter, but as a courtesy since they were well known by the church in Thessalonica and they all had personal concern for the people and the situation there. Paul spoke for the group; the others were in agreement with the letter's content.

The word for "church" in Greek (ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*) means "assembly" and was used of many kinds of assemblies including political assemblies (Josephus) or unruly mobs (Acts 19:32). In the Greek translation of the OT (LXX) it was used of the solemn gathering of Israel (Deut. 31:30; 1 Sam. 17:47). Paul used the term for believers in general and of house churches that met in specific localities. Through the passing of time, *ekklesia* was adopted by Christians to identify their assemblies, distinguishing them from Jewish congregations which used the word "synagogue" for their gatherings (συναγωγή—Wanamaker, 70).

Here the church is described in two ways. It is "the church of the Thessalonians" since the church was in Thessalonica. But more importantly, it is the church "in God the Father and Christ." This delineates the church from any other assembly or association, whether Jewish or pagan. If "in" is instrumental in Greek, this would mean that God and Christ were the source of the church's life (Stott, 27; Wanamaker, 70; Best, 62; Hiebert, 39). In other words, the church is rooted in, living in, and drawing its life from the Father and the Son (Stott, 28). (However, it is also possible that this is a locative case, having a spacial meaning of "in union with God" or "in God's presence"—Green, 85). Paul may have chosen to write "in God. . ." instead of "to the church of God in Thessalonica" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), because in the face of opposition the church needed to be reminded that God is their source of strength and stability.

It should be noted that the epistle to the Thessalonians was written only 20 years after Christ's death and resurrection, and yet Paul was already speaking of the Father and the Son as equals. Throughout the epistle both names appear in such a way that they show that the function and position of the Father is also the function and position of Christ.

“Grace and peace” stir in the readers a sense of divine blessing and favor given to them by God. “Grace” embraces the gift of salvation but also is the continuous divine activity that empowers people to do His will. “Peace” was not an inner feeling, but was an expression of the condition that believers experience in relation to God and others. We are no longer in a state of enmity; we are at peace. “Grace and peace” embrace the totality of divine benefits that Paul wants those in Thessalonica to enjoy (Green, 86).

PAUL’S THANKFULNESS (1:2–10)

1:2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers;

Paul, Silas, and Timothy had feared that due to the persecutions the church was facing, some might collapse under the pressure and apostatize from the faith. But the church had remained strong and displayed the evidence of their salvation through their faith, hope, and love. Paul, on behalf of the three, began his letter by writing, “we give thanks. . .”

In the original Greek text there were no chapter and verse designations so they can, at times, fall in the wrong places. This is probably the case here. It is more probable that the word “constantly” in verse 3 goes with “making mention of you in our prayers” not “bearing in mind” (as in the NAS—below). In other words, Paul was “constantly making mention of them in his prayers” (ESV). *Constant* prayer is the way in which he *always* gave thanks (Wanamaker, 74). This is not just a nicety; as a Jew who was raised with the custom of regular prayer, Paul really did offer up prayer for others continually.

Many people feel thankful, but fail to direct their thankfulness toward God; Paul clearly understood that every good gift is from God so his thankfulness was pointed Godward. He prayed constantly, and his prayers were not just for himself and his family, but for others.

What were Paul and his colleagues thankful for?

THE GROUNDS FOR PAUL’S THANKSGIVING (1:3–10)

1. Paul was thankful for visible evidences of salvation displayed in their lives (1:3).

1:3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father,

First, Paul and his companions were thankful that the church was exhibiting fruits of salvation. In the short amount of time that they were together, the excellence of the Christian virtues Paul and his friends saw in the believers in Thessalonica were vividly impressed in their minds.

Faith, hope, and love are three qualities that often appear in Scripture as descriptive of Christian character (cf. 1 Thess. 5:8; Ro. 5:1–5; 1 Cor. 13:12; Gal. 5:5f.; Col. 1:4f.; Eph. 4:2–5; Heb. 6:10–12; 10:22–

24; 1 Pet. 1:3–8, 21f.) Paul had witnessed these qualities in their lives as did Timothy who had just visited the church and returned to report back to Paul (3:6, 8, 9).

Stott's observations (Stott, 29, 30):

1. Each quality is outward focused. Faith is directed toward God, love toward God and others, and hope toward the future. Faith rests in the past, love works in the present, and hope looks to the future. Every part of our lives is reoriented by regeneration. The gospel pulls us from our self-centeredness and points us to values outside ourselves.

2. Each quality is productive. Although faith, hope, and love are abstract nouns, they express themselves in concrete ways. Faith works, love labors, hope endures.

A “work of faith” is an activity that springs from faith. “Labor” is nearly synonymous to “work,” but the word *kopos* (labor; κόπος) refers either to the fatiguing nature of something or the magnitude of the exertion it requires. Tremendous effort is needed to love as we should (Jn. 13:34, 35; 15:13; 1 Jn. 3:10, 17 etc.). Just consider the two great commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–39). These two commandments cannot be accomplished casually. They require concentration, effort, endurance, and dying to self. Paul was thankful that the believers in Thessalonica demonstrated love like this—love that could only be generated by the Holy Spirit.

True hope is confidence in the future that leads to endurance (steadfastness).

These three qualities are, as Calvin said, “a brief definition of true Christianity.” They express the essence of the readers’ Christian experience and their presence among the believers in Thessalonica was a great encouragement to the missionary band that started the church there.

We should note that Paul had eyes to see the grace of God at work in people’s lives. He combined what he saw with prayers of thanksgiving and then told people what he prayed so that they could rejoice in God for the fruit He was producing in them.

2. Paul was thankful that God had chosen them (1:4–6).

1:4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;

In verse 3 Paul’s thankfulness was focused on the display of Christian qualities among the Thessalonians, but he was also thankful for *God’s choice of them* (1:4). The expression, “His choice of you” is another way of speaking of election.

The idea of election (being chosen or selected by God) has its roots in Judaism. In speaking to the nation of Israel, Moses said in Deuteronomy 7:7–8 “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers.” Moses also said in Deuteronomy 4:37, “Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them.”

In a similar way, 1 Thessalonians 1:4 ties God's love to His election. Paul calls the chosen "brothers loved by God" (ESV; 1:4). God's love and His election go hand in hand. God chose us because He loves us, but He did not love us because we are loveable; rather, He loved us because He is love. 1 John 4:10 says, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." God's prior election of individuals makes their faith sure.

How did Paul know that God had chosen them?

1:5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

The effective working of the gospel (1:5) gave Paul assurance that they were chosen by God (1:4).

It is difficult to know whether verse 5 is describing the manner in which the gospel was preached to the Thessalonians (Is it saying that the preachers preached with power, in the Holy Spirit, and with conviction?) or how the gospel was received by the Thessalonians (Does this describe what the hearers experienced when the gospel was proclaimed?).

Most believe that verse 5 is describing the manner in which the gospel was proclaimed. First, Paul is talking about *how the gospel came to them*, not how the gospel was received by them. He says, "*the gospel came with power . . . etc.*" (by means of the messengers who brought it). Secondly, the latter half of the verse ties the first half of the verses to the preachers ("just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake"). In other words, Paul is most likely describing the historical situation when the gospel was preached in Thessalonica. It came to the people there through the missionaries in a fourfold manner: The gospel came (1) with words, but also (2) with power (miracles?), (3) in the Holy Spirit (the source of the power) and (4) with full conviction (the preachers were absolutely confident that what they proclaimed was true).

However, it probably isn't critical either way. What was preached was received. The gospel was received because the Holy Spirit was at work in the preacher and the hearers. Likewise, the preachers' conviction was passed to those who heard them (Beale, 51).

The vocabulary of the New Testament was drawn from the world in which the New Testament church was born. The word "gospel" or "good news" (εὐαγγέλιον *euaggelion*) was well known in the Roman Empire and was used of important or unparalleled events, particularly those related to the emperor. For example, the birth of Caesar Augustus was called "gospel." Other events that revolved around the emperor or decrees instituted by him were also called "gospel." The church countered the claims of an imperial gospel with the gospel of Jesus Christ (Green, 94).

Paul refers to the gospel in a variety of ways in his letters. Sometimes he calls it "the gospel of God" because God reveals it (God is an ablative of source; Ro. 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor. 11:7; 1 Thess. 2:2, 8, 9; 1 Tim. 1:11), or "the gospel of Christ" because it is about Christ and His salvation (Christ is an objective genitive; 2 Cor. 9:13; cf. Ro. 1:9; 2 Cor. 4:4; 2 Thess. 1:8). In Romans 16:25 he calls it "my gospel" (cf. Ro.

2:16) because God entrusted him with it and he preached it. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5 he calls it “our gospel” because it was the message that he, Timothy, and Silvanus proclaimed in Thessalonica.

Although verse 5 says that the gospel *did not come in words only*, that does not mean that it did not come with words at all. The gospel is a specific message with a specific content that must be communicated by someone in order for someone else to believe. Paul’s point is that the words were not just his own ideas; they came with power, and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction. In Romans 15:18–19 Paul said, “I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit.”

1:6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

Verses 6–10 are closely related to verse 4 and give more tangible evidence of the election of the believers in Thessalonica. If verse 5 is describing the manner in which the gospel was preached, verse 6 gives its immediate sequel—the Thessalonians’ response to it.

The evidence of God’s choice of the Thessalonians was seen in:

1. how rapidly they became imitators of Paul and Christ
2. how readily they welcomed the message
3. how willingly they endured suffering and adversity just as the missionaries and Christ had
4. the joy they had from the Holy Spirit

Such a transformation only happens when God’s elective purpose is at work.

“There had been considerable opposition in Thessalonica to the gospel, and so also to those who preached it and those who embraced it. The authentic gospel always arouses hostility, although the opposition it provokes takes different forms. But persecution had not deterred the Thessalonians. They had welcomed the message in spite of the suffering involved” (Stott, 35).

In the ancient world imitating people’s lives and conduct was part of moral instruction. Leaders were often put forth as examples to follow. Paul offered his own life as an example to follow (Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Gal. 4:12; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9). Christians viewed persecution as sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Acts 5:41; Ro. 12:12; 2 Cor. 4:8–10; 7:4; Phil. 2:17; Col. 1:24; Ja. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:6; 4:13–14).

Imitating Christ and the apostles “indicates the profound change which came over the lives of the converts. They began to follow the example as well as the teaching of the apostles (‘us’) and of Jesus, whose apostles they were. To welcome the message includes this. It is no mere intellectual acquiescence in the truth of the gospel; it is complete transformation of behavior through a close following of Christ and His apostles. We often think about the imitation of Christ, but probably do not pay sufficient attention to Paul’s repeated expectation to the churches to imitate him, as he imitated Christ” (Stott, 36).

Despite the negative social consequences they experienced from believing the gospel, the Thessalonians received it with the joy of the Holy Spirit; that is, the source of their joy was the Holy Spirit Himself. This is important for it reminds the readers of the proof of their election—joy under such circumstances has no natural explanation.

“Wherever the gospel goes and people respond, there is joy – joy in heaven among the angels over sinners repenting, as Jesus said, and joy on earth among the people of God. This pattern of outward opposition and inward joy has often been repeated in the long history of the church” (Stott, 35).

3. Paul was thankful for the good reports he had heard concerning them (1:7–10).

1:7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

As a result of receiving the gospel in the midst of great suffering and remaining faithful, this young congregation became an example to the other churches in the region (1:7). Those who take Christ and His apostles as their model inevitably become a model to others (Stott, 36). As Leon Morris has put it, “the imitators in their turn are imitated” (Morris, 59). Chrysostom comments on this verse saying, “Illustrious and admirable men do not shut up their virtue within themselves, but by their good report benefit many, and render them better” (Green, 100).

It is marvelous to see the effect of the gospel on those who receive it. It may mean persecution and consequent suffering. But it also involves inward joy through the Holy Spirit, the imitation of Christ and the apostles in changed lives, and the setting of an example to others. Four new relationships seem to be implied—the opposition of the world, the joy of the Holy Spirit, the imitation of the Lord and his apostles, and being a model to the rest of the church. (Stott, 36).

1:8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

Verses 8–10 explain *how* the Thessalonian church became an example to other Christian congregations.

The city of Thessalonica was in a key location; it was a hub that connected many other areas in the empire. It had governmental, economic, and social control over a vast region. When Thessalonica was reached with the gospel, it impacted all of Macedonia, Achaia (map above) and beyond. Their testimony was so widespread that Paul and his companions had “no need to say anything”; that is, they didn’t need to tell anyone what had happened—everyone had already heard.

In verse 8 the church is described as an example in two ways. First, they were outspoken about their faith. The “word of the Lord” or “the message of the Lord” (the gospel) sounded forth from them. The verb translated as “sounded forth” (ἐξήχέω—execheo) is used of a clap of thunder, the loud cry of a multitude, or the blast of a trumpet and describes the powerful manner in which the gospel went out. “The gospel proclaimed by the Thessalonians made a loud noise, which seemed to reverberate through the hills and valleys of Greece” (Stott, 37).

Secondly, they were an example in that their lives exemplified gospel transformation. Their “faith toward God” (their conversion experience) had also “gone forth.” This is elaborated upon in verses 9–10.

1:8 (because the gospel and the testimony of the Thessalonians’ changed lives had spread everywhere) . . . **we** (Paul, Timothy, Silas) **have no need to say anything** (to anyone about the reception of the gospel in Thessalonica)

1:9 For they themselves (the people in Macedonia and Achaia) **report about us** (Paul, Timothy, Silas) **what kind of a reception we** (Paul, Timothy, Silas) **had with you** (the Thessalonian believers), **and how you** (the Thessalonian believers) **turned** (1) **to God from idols to serve a living and true God,**

1:10 and (2) **to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.**

In other words, Paul, Timothy, and Silas didn’t need to tell anyone about how the gospel had impacted the believers in Thessalonica (1:8b), because that news had become known far and wide (1:8a). People knew about the reception the missionaries had had there and were spreading the news to others (1:9a); they also knew of the transformed lives of the believers in Thessalonica—that they turned from idols to serve God and that they were awaiting the return of Christ (1:9b–10a). The word was out: “Something extraordinary is going on in Thessalonica: a new society is coming into being with new values and standards, characterized by faith, love, and hope” (Stott, 38).

In sum, the good news that was ringing forth from Thessalonica included both the gospel message and their relationship to Christ; as Paul says, not only did the gospel itself “sound forth” but “*your faith toward God has gone forth*” as well.

More specifically, their faith was seen in that they:

- (1) had made a decisive break with idols
- (2) were actively serving God
- (3) were patiently waiting for Christ to return

Three verbs summarize what everyone was hearing: they “turned . . . to serve . . . and to wait.”

You turned from idols (1:9a)

It was widely known that the Thessalonian believers had turned to God from idols.

The verb translated ‘turn’ became an almost technical term for conversion, which is a turn from sin to Christ, from darkness to light (Acts 26:18; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9), and from idols to God. Luke in particular uses it repeatedly in Acts (Acts 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20; 28:27). It would be difficult to exaggerate how radical is the change of allegiance which is implied by the turn from idols to the living and true God. For idols are dead; God is living. Idols are false; God is true. Idols are many; God is one. Idols are visible and tangible; God is invisible and intangible, beyond the reach of sight and touch. Idols are creatures, the work of human hands; God is the creator of the universe and of all humankind. Besides, Paul knew what he was

talking about. Not only had he inveighed against idolatry when addressing the pagans of Lystra and the philosophers of Athens, but the Thessalonians could themselves see Mount Olympus, about 50 miles south of their city, where the Greek gods were supposed to live. (Stott, 39)

To serve the living and true God (1:9b)

The claim to turn to God from idols is manifestly bogus if it does not result in serving the God to whom we have turned. We must not think of conversion only in negative terms as a turning away from the old life, but also positively as the beginning of a new life of service. We could say that it is the exchange of one slavery for another, so long as we add that the new slavery is the real freedom. In this way authentic conversion involves a double liberation, both *from* the thralldom of the idols whose slaves we were and *into* the service of God whose children we become. (Stott, 41)

And to wait for His Son from heaven (1:10)

People throughout Macedonia and Achaia also heard how turning to God affected the Thessalonians' perspective of the future. They were now anticipating the return of the Son from heaven.

It is immediately noteworthy that 'serving' and 'waiting' go together in the experience of converted people. Indeed, this is at first sight surprising, since 'serving' is active while 'waiting' is passive. In Christian terms 'serving' is getting busy for Christ on earth while 'waiting' is looking for Christ to come from heaven. Yet these two are not incompatible. On the contrary, each balances the other. On the one hand, however hard we work and serve, there are limits to what we can accomplish. We can only improve society; we cannot perfect it. We shall never build a utopia on earth. For that we have to wait for Christ to come. Only then will we secure the final triumph of God's reign of justice and peace. On the other hand, although we must look expectantly for the coming of Christ, we have no liberty to wait in idleness, with arms folded and eyes closed, indifferent to the needs of the world around us. Instead, we must work even while we wait, for we are called to serve the living and true God.

Thus 'working' and 'waiting' belong together. In combination they deliver us both from the presumption which thinks we can do everything and from the pessimism which thinks we can do nothing. (Stott, 41, 42)

Jesus, the one who will return from heaven, is described as the one whom God raised from the dead (1:10).

"The resurrection not only publicly declared Jesus to be the Son of God but was also the beginning of God's new creation, the pledge that He will complete what He has begun" (Stott, 42). The Thessalonians believed that Jesus rose from the dead which also means that they believed He was alive. This gave them confidence in the prospect of His return in power.

Jesus is also described as the one who rescues us from the coming wrath (1:10).

The coming of Christ is tied to His future role. When He comes He will save His people from the wrath of God on the Day of Judgment.

The statement is truly a play on the name 'Jesus', which means 'savior.' Already He has delivered us from the condemnation of our sins and power of our idols. But when He comes, He will accomplish the final stage of our salvation: He will rescue us from the outpouring wrath of God. God's wrath is neither an impersonal process of cause-and-effect, nor a passionate, arbitrary or vindictive outburst of temper, but His holy and uncompromising antagonism to evil, with which He refuses to negotiate. One day His judgment will fall. It is from this terrible event that Jesus is our deliverer. (Stott, 42)

When Christ returns, He will sort the believing from the unbelieving, saving the former and judging the latter (Matt, 25:31ff.). The implication is that the Lord's return lay at the heart of the Thessalonians' faith; their zeal and radical Christian experience was due to their belief that Christ would come again.

There are a number of important lessons from 1 Thessalonians 1.

First, we should be faithful in praying for one another. We should be looking for and giving thanks for the grace of God we see in others.

Secondly, we should tell each another of the grace we have seen in them and let them know we have been thanking God for it.

Thirdly, we should be a church that zealously passes the gospel on with such fervency that it reverberates throughout the islands.

Finally, we should live out the gospel within our community. Not only should the gospel itself be proclaimed, people should be able to see for themselves the radical change that has taken place in our lives. "No church can spread the gospel with any degree of integrity, let alone credibility, unless it has been visibly changed by the gospel it preaches. We need to look like what we are talking about. It is not enough to receive the gospel and pass it on; we must embody it in our common life of faith, love, joy, peace, righteousness and hope" (Stott, 44).