

“We give thanks to God always for all of you. . .”

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

In 49 a.d. Paul, Silas, and Timothy brought the message of Jesus Christ to the bustling city of Thessalonica. They brought the gospel first to Jews in the synagogue and then to the Gentiles. Eventually opposition arose within Thessalonica and the church convinced Paul that he and Silas should leave Thessalonica or else they would be killed; persuaded, they left at night. Timothy apparently met up with them sometime later.

We can imagine that Paul, Silas, and Timothy might have felt like they had abandoned the infant church in Thessalonica. They had fled in the middle of the night and left the Thessalonians to face a hostile community. Much of 1 Thessalonians expresses profound relief and thankfulness to God 1) that the Thessalonians had remained true to God and 2) that they didn't harbor resentment toward them for leaving as they did (3:1-8). In lieu of a personal visit, Paul, Silas, and Timothy wrote this letter we call 1 Thessalonians primarily to express their affection and thanksgiving for the Thessalonians.

The thing that is so striking about the first chapter of this letter is how intently Paul, Silas, and Timothy wanted the Thessalonians to *know* that they were thankful to God for them. They weren't afraid that their thankfulness would make the Thessalonians prideful or complacent. No, they understood that such expressions of sincere thankfulness to God actually make a person or a church more humble and more inclined to follow God.

As I studied this chapter this week, I was struck by the fact that I am thankful for the same things in you, the good people of Faith E-Free, for which Paul was thankful in the Thessalonians. Our circumstances are different, but the gospel is bearing the same fruit among you that it bore among the Thessalonians. Just as Paul wanted the Thessalonians to understand and really “hear” why he was so thankful for *them*, I too want you to understand and “hear” why I am so thankful for *you*. The past several weeks we've been looking to the future to what we believe God wants us to pursue; but 1 Thessalonians makes clear that it's also good to look at the past and see what God has already done.

Greeting (1:1) Verse 1 reflects the standard form of greeting in Paul's day. First is the name(s) of the person writing the letter; then the recipients; then a greeting.

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.

When Paul wrote letters to churches (or individuals) it was common for him to list others who were serving with him at that time. This usually didn't mean that they co-wrote the letter, but here in 1 Thessalonians that may indeed be the case. I say this because most of the letter is written in first-person plural: “we give thanks. . .our coming to you was not in vain. . .we do not want you to be uninformed . . .” Only occasionally does this letter switch to first-person singular where it's obvious that Paul is addressing the Thessalonians: “. . . when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith. . .” (3:5; see also 2:18, 5:27). And so this letter was probably written by Paul, Silas/Silvanus, and Timothy with Paul inserting comments from him alone. [For the sake of simplicity when I'm preaching in 1 Thessalonians, I'll say, “Paul writes . . .” instead of “Paul, Silas, and Timothy write . . .”]

The greeting here is simply, “Grace to you and peace.” This wasn’t a cliché; it was their fervent desire that the Thessalonians experience God’s grace and the resulting peace as fully as possible. Grace is the favor of God that you can never earn. Peace is the wholeness/shalom that comes from a relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

Thankfulness (1:2) In verse 2 Paul expresses how thankful they were for the Thessalonians.

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

Beginning in verse 3 Paul launches into all the reasons why they were thankful for the Thessalonians and why he prayed for them (see also 2:13 and 3:9). Later in the letter Paul will address areas of doctrine (specifically the return of Christ – chapters 4/5) and areas of obedience (such as sexual purity – chapter 4). But first he wanted them to know how overwhelmingly thankful he was for them.

Thankfulness to God for your . . .

. . . faith, hope, and love (1:3-5) In verse 3 Paul mentions the classic triad of faith, hope, and love that he mentions elsewhere (such as Gal 5:5-6, 1 Cor 13:13, etc.).

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,

Paul recounts their faith, love, and hope in an interesting way. He mentions first their “work of faith” or “work produced by faith” (NIV). The idea is that their faith actually produced works. James 2 forcefully argues that genuine faith produces works. Paul had seen such works in their lives.

Second, he also constantly remembered their “labor of love” or “labor prompted by love” (NIV). They worked hard because they loved so much. Paul will return to the Thessalonians love in chapter 4. There he will acknowledge it as a strength and challenge them to “excel still more.” But here he simply remembers that their love was a hard-working love; they didn’t merely love when it was easy or convenient.

Lastly Paul mentions their “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” or “endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (NIV). Hope is confidence that God will come through for you. A person who has hope doesn’t give up when things look bleak; the person remains steadfast and endures. Paul noticed that type of endurance in the Thessalonians.

When I think about you, the people of Faith E-Free, I see these same things: faith that produces works, love that works hard, and hope that causes you to endure. I see these virtues all the time in our ongoing ministries. Many of you spend numerous hours every single week teaching classes, serving on a worship team, serving with Alpha, taking care of our facilities/grounds, etc. I see our elders investing massive amounts of time and energy in leading this church. You work hard in ministry. You face difficult situations: resolving conflict, solving problems, etc. You do all sorts of things that only paid pastors do in many churches.

There are all sorts of other ways that you sacrifice for the cause of Christ. I think about this prayer team we're sending to India. Being part of that team is a significant "labor of love" requiring lots of faith, hope, and love. Some are taking time off work to be on the team; all are taking time away from family. I love serving in a church in which people aren't afraid to sacrifice and serve at personal cost.

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

Isn't it a striking thing that Paul communicates to the Thessalonians that he knew that they were his **brethren beloved by God** and that he knew that God had **chosen them**. Their faith, hope, and love were evidence that they were beloved by God. When a person experiences God's love, s/he has the resources and the confidence to exercise faith, express love, and maintain hope.

Paul goes even farther when he says that he knows of "His choice of you." This is the language of election: God sovereignly choosing people to be His own. This is one of those doctrines that we need to keep close to the original context or else we'll try to make it answer questions that it was never meant to answer. Here the reason Paul mentions that he knows that God has chosen them because of the fruit he has seen in their lives **and** because of their response to the gospel (verse 5). The doctrine of election is meant to encourage believers after they have believed in Jesus that their relationship with God was initiated by God in love. This doctrine is meant to bring the believer to the humbling realization, "God **wants** me. God isn't merely putting up with me. He chose me to be His own."

Verse 5 emphasizes that Paul had good reason to be confident that the Thessalonians were chosen by God.

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.

We'll talk about the Thessalonians' response to the gospel more when we consider chapter 2. But for now notice that the gospel wasn't "just words." The good news about Jesus' death and resurrection was accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. We don't have recorded in Acts that miracles occurred in Thessalonica, but the power of the Holy Spirit can be manifested in many other ways. Perhaps the simple presentation of the gospel was powerful; the fact that it was presented in "full conviction" (instead of half-hearted or luke-warm) was powerful. Whatever the specifics, the Thessalonians' response to the gospel and their subsequent faith, hope, and love convinced Paul of the sincerity of their relationship with God. **And he wanted them to know as much!**

You may never had anybody tell you what I am about to say to you . . . I can't say that anybody has ever said this to me. But here goes: As I look over this room and think about your faith, hope, and love, it is so obvious to me that you are "beloved of God" and even "chosen by God." There is really no other explanation for the lives that you are living. You are giving yourselves so wholeheartedly to the cause of Christ that it's plain to me that God's love is sustaining you and that God has sovereignly chosen you. As individual believers and as a church, you should have the conviction, "God wants me. God wants us. He doesn't merely tolerate us. He initiated

this relationship and He will sustain it.” I believe that God wants you to live with that conviction.

Thankfulness to God for your . . .

. . . joyful perseverance (1:6-7) In verses 6 and 7 Paul remembers how the Thessalonians had persevered through opposition.

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

Paul wasn't afraid to challenge people to imitate him because he was imitating Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). The Thessalonians had become imitators of Paul, Silas, and Timothy and of the Lord. Specifically the Thessalonians imitated their pattern of “receiving the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” Paul and Silas were their immediate example to imitate in this regard. Acts 16 records how these two had actually sung praises to God at midnight while in prison in Philippi. Acts 17 records how they had suffered persecution well in Thessalonica. When they left Thessalonica for other cities, the Thessalonians took up this pattern of having joy in the midst of tribulation. They didn't merely endure it; they persevered with the joy of the Holy Spirit. As a result, they became an example to all the other believers in that region.

There's a saying, “What you win them *with* is what you win them *to*.” The point is that you need to accurately portray what it means to come to faith in Christ and walk with Him. If you give someone the impression that if they come to Christ their life will all of a sudden their problems will be gone, then they'll be committed to a life without suffering. And when suffering comes, it will be incredibly disillusioning if not catastrophic. Paul, however, told churches early on, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The Thessalonians understood that they would face opposition if they were devoted to Jesus. When Paul realized that they were an example to others of how to persevere joyfully, he gave thanks.

I am so very thankful for how many of you have persevered (and are persevering) through some very difficult circumstances that had the potential of shaking your faith.

Some of you face conflicts within your own family because you are seeking to follow Jesus. Members of your immediate or your extended family think you've gone off the deep end. They don't really understand why you do some of the things you do and why you don't do some of the things they do. And no amount of explanation seems to matter. You are experiencing the dynamic Jesus described when He said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. “For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD.” (“Matthew 10:34-36)

I can think of all sorts of other ways that you have joyfully persevered through trials. Some of you have faced (or are facing) chronic illnesses and conditions that limit the things you can do and that cause intense physical pain. It's one thing to endure pain and discomfort for a few days or weeks; but some of you have endured for years. And you've trusted God through it all.

Some of you have faced personal losses that leave many people bitter and self-centered – death of a young parent or a spouse or even a child. But you have come through those losses with deeper dependence and more compassion for others. Some of you have experienced incredible relational pain – whether divorce or the loss of another close relationship – and you’ve endured well. You’ve trusted God when you felt like your life was over; you’ve looked to God to meet needs that others used to meet; you’ve allowed God to refine you through it all. In these ways you are a wonderful example for the rest of us. For that I am thankful to God.

Thankfulness to God for your . . .

. . . reputation and influence (1:8-10) In these verses Paul expresses how much he appreciated how the Thessalonians’ reputation (and therefore influence) extended all across that region of the world.

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. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

This had to be a satisfying thing for Paul, Silas, and Timothy. They were hearing from people all across the region about the reception that *they* had received from the Thessalonians. People in other cities knew about the Thessalonians’ faith; they knew that the Thessalonians had turned away from dead idols to serve the one, true, living God; they knew that the Thessalonians were living in anticipation of the return of Christ (something Paul will address in some detail in chapters 4 and 5). The bottom line is that because of their faithfulness to God, the Thessalonians’ reputation spread all across Macedonia and Greece. They therefore had influence far beyond Thessalonica.

Believe it or not, I hear about your reputation and influence on a regular basis. When I tell people that I’m one of the pastors at Faith E-Free, they often mention, “I know some people who go to that church.” And they proceed to tell me things that they appreciate about those people. This past week I met someone in the grocery store who mentioned three different people from Faith with whom she used to work. It was obvious that she had real respect for those individuals. I’ve had people tell me, “My doctor goes to that church . . . he prayed for me in his office.” I mention all of this to say that I thank God for the reputation you have in this community. It’s obvious that you have an influence in the workplace and in your neighborhoods.

Your reputation extends beyond Manhattan. We participate with other E-Free churches in Kansas and Nebraska and the KC Metro area to plant churches and to encourage church health among existing churches. A number of people from Faith have been involved in these efforts – some in very sacrificial ways. When we go to Midwest District conferences we often have people recount something that they appreciate about this church or about someone in this church. I’m filled with gratitude for the way you serve and give yourselves so sacrificially.

As you know, people from Faith serve as missionaries in other parts of the world. Personally, when I’ve visited India and in Hungary people from the missionary community have expressed

how much they appreciate this church. There's a genuine appreciation for the way we care for those whom we've sent and for the way we're engaged in what God is doing in those places. Be encouraged that your reputation – and therefore your influence – extends across this city, this region, and literally across the seas.

Like Paul with the Thessalonians, I am thankful to God for you. Of course, if I notice these things, God notices them all the more. And that should be satisfying. Be encouraged that the gospel is bearing good fruit in your lives.