

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast : 26/27 June 2021

No.: T1204

Speaker: Ian Britton

1 Thessalonians Chapter 1

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Today we commence a new series looking at the first epistle to the Thessalonians, starting with chapter one. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.

It will help us to understand the message of the book, if we understand a little bit of the history and background that it arises from. The book is called Thessalonians because it is the first of two letters, or epistles, that the apostle Paul wrote to Christians who lived in the city of Thessalonica in the first century AD. The church in Thessalonica was founded when Paul visited the city on what we call his second missionary journey.

Thessalonica is in what is today the country of Greece. In Paul's time it was the principal city of a region, ruled by the Romans, called Macedonia. Macedonia consisted of what is today northern Greece and a large part of what was once the country of Yugoslavia. Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia and Berea are other cities in Macedonia that are also mentioned in the records of Paul's missionary journeys in the book of Acts. Achaia was the region immediately south of Macedonia, and Corinth was its principal city. Achaia consisted of what is southern Greece today. Some of those city names will crop up when we read a section of Acts chapter 17 in a few moments. The area names will occur in the first chapter of Thessalonians itself.

Let me read verses one to ten of Acts chapter 17 to complete the historical context.

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying ‘This Jesus, whom I preach to you is the Christ.’ And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, ‘Those who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harboured them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king – Jesus.’ And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea” (Acts 17:1-10).

To summarise, Paul and Silas had left Philippi after the brutal treatment recorded in Acts chapter 16 and spoken on three consecutive Sabbaths in the synagogue at Thessalonica. Their stay might have been slightly longer than the three weeks, but soon afterwards some jealous people in the Jewish community stirred up a riot, and Paul and Silas were hurried off by the concerned Christians, to Berea, less than fifty miles away, in order to prevent the two of them being harmed. The next couple of chapters of Acts record how they left Berea after the trouble-causers from Thessalonica followed them there to stir up more hostility.

Paul went to Athens and preached there. Timothy and Silas remained in Berea for a short time, and it appears from chapter three of our epistle, that Timothy was sent to Thessalonica from Berea to see how the new Thessalonian Christians were getting on. After a brief stay in Athens, Paul had moved down to Corinth and that is where Timothy met Paul and gave him a positive report of how the Thessalonians were doing, which prompted the letter we are starting to study today!

[It is possible that Paul revisited Thessalonica on his third missionary journey. He certainly passed nearby on that trip, but no visit is actually recorded in Acts, so we would just be guessing.](#)

First Thessalonians is one of Paul's earliest letters, maybe the first. As we have said, it was almost certainly written from Corinth, and was therefore penned before Paul had ever been to Ephesus, and in the early part of his first visit to Corinth, so it must predate the epistles written to both those cities at the very least. The Thessalonians can only have been young believers, since Paul's visit was so short, and this letter was written so soon afterwards.

It's high time we actually read today's chapter!

“Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, knowing beloved brethren, your election by God. For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. 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. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Rather than break down this fairly brief chapter into sections, I will simply comment on each verse.

Verse 1 – Greetings

The letter is addressed from Paul and Silas, who had taken the gospel to Thessalonica, and Timothy, who had been Paul's messenger to see how the Thessalonians were getting on after Paul and Silas had to leave so hurriedly. Despite the brevity of Paul and Silas's visit, there was now a church in Thessalonica. Not a building, or an organised group with a membership list and a written constitution, but a group of believers in the Lord Jesus. These new believers were nevertheless, “In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” They needed no particular level of

experience, or maturity, to be counted as in the Father. He was their Father because they acknowledged His Son as their Saviour, and so they were included in Him. They were also in the Lord Jesus Christ because both He and the Father are altogether One, so to be in the Son is to be in the Father and vice versa.

Paul wishes them grace and peace. This is a common form of greeting in Paul's letters. They need the grace to live for their Lord, and they need the peace to live contentedly in a world that was, and still is, hostile to the Lord's cause. The Thessalonians were only too aware of this hostility. Paul speaks of both the grace and the peace coming from the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Father and Son that they have been placed 'in', have all the resources that they need. In a slight variation, Paul now speaks of "our" God and Father, that is, he connects himself with the Thessalonians as belonging to God.

Verse 2 – Thanksgiving and prayers

Again, it is common for Paul to assure the recipients of his letters, of his prayers for them. Sometimes, as here, Paul speaks of 'we', or 'our', thus indicating that the other people listed at the start of the letter are also praying for the believers. Paul, and once again this is his custom, commences by mentioning thanksgiving, specifically thanksgiving for the Thessalonian believers. It appears that before he ever makes any requests in prayer for the Christians for whom he is praying, Paul first gives thanks to God for them. I wonder if we follow the same pattern. How might it improve our attitude of heart towards fellow Christians if we regularly gave thanks to God for them? Paul's wording in this epistle is quite emphatic; "We give thanks to God **always** for you **all**." His thanksgiving then was both regular and comprehensive. I have always been amazed at the number of Christians for whom Paul prayed for on a regular basis. When you consider the travel, workload and persecution of this apostle, it is deeply impressive to see how much time he spent in prayer, and how much of that prayer was focussed on other people, rather than his own, private concerns.

Verse 3 – Faith, hope and love

Verse three introduces one of Paul's most famous triplets; faith, hope and love; although the order here is faith, love and hope, and each one is associated with a verb, an action of the Thessalonians. He speaks of, 'work of faith', 'labour of love' and 'patience of hope.' These were the evidences of the Thessalonians' salvation. Their faith produced works of faith. This is in keeping with what James has to say in his epistle, specifically what he says in chapter 2 verse 18, "I will show you my faith by my works." Only God can see directly into human hearts and determine if they contain faith or not. Human beings, even apostles like Paul, can only see faith when it is evidenced by the works it produces.

Similarly, a love that only ever consisted of words, never going beyond verbal protestations of great affection, would be distinctly suspect. Real love will produce actions, labours of love; and so it did in the Thessalonians. When we talk about a 'labour of love' today, we imply not only that the activity is motivated by love, but that it is a pleasure for the labourer to carry it out. How happy it is when our service for the Lord is both driven by our love for Him, and something that we delight in doing because we love Him, and enjoy working together with Him.

But not all of our experiences are happy ones, and so we need the steady hope that produces patience and endurance. While it is a privilege and a pleasure to serve God today in this world, our hope is grounded in another world and lies in the future. To be without hope is utterly crushing and leads to despair. Let us thank God that we have a certain hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is also worth highlighting that, although, as we have been noticing, these actions are seen by human beings, they are also said in this verse to be, "in the sight of our God and Father", and it is good to be reminded that all that we do and endure is carefully watched over by Him.

Verse 4 – Election

A little startlingly, Paul now declares that he knows the Thessalonians are part of the elect! Election can be a controversial topic, but at its simplest, it denotes that God chooses us, and not the other way around. Paul is not claiming some special insight into God's eternal foreknowledge, as if he was able to peek into the Lamb's book of life and see the names written there! He is using the same logic that dictates we can 'see' faith by the works of faith. He is confident of the election of the Thessalonians on the basis of the work, labour and patience we have just been considering, but, more specifically, on the basis of the evidence he is about to cite in the next verse, that is, their response to the gospel.

Verse 5 – The evidence for the Thessalonians' election

When Paul says, "For our gospel did not come to you in word only." The "For" underscores on what basis Paul is confident of their election. It is because they didn't just hear the gospel but received it with: power, the Holy Spirit and much assurance.

But first, let's note that although it may not have come to them in 'word only', but it did come to them in word. If you remember what we read in Acts 17, "[Paul] reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and demonstrating." The gospel Paul preached was firmly based on the Word of God, which he explained and expounded to them. In verse eight, Paul will talk about the word of the Lord sounding out from the Thessalonians. It could only do that, because their faith was based on the word in the first place. But just hearing the word is not sufficient for salvation, it also came to them in power. This isn't emphasising that Paul was a powerful preacher, rather that the gospel had a powerful effect in transforming the Thessalonians. It also came in the Holy Spirit, again, not just because Paul was directed in his speaking by the Spirit of God, although doubtless he was, but because the Holy Spirit evidently worked in the hearts of the Thessalonians to bring them to faith, and then came and dwelt in them, as He does in all believers. Finally, the word came in much assurance. Because the gospel that Paul preached to them was firmly founded in God's word, and brought home to them by the Holy Spirit, it brought much assurance. Going back to Acts 17 again for a moment, what Paul demonstrated from the scriptures was that, "Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead", and "This Jesus, whom I preach to you is the Christ." A gospel based on the death and resurrection of Christ, and the certainty that Jesus is that Christ, will, if received through faith, always produce much assurance, and will be sufficient evidence of the election of those who receive it. Happily, Paul could also state that his manner of life, and that of Silas, underlined the reality of the gospel they preached, rather than undermining it. May God grant the same to be true about us.

Verse 6 – Followers

Since Paul and Silas were faithful followers of the Christ they were preaching, it was possible, and appropriate, for the Thessalonians to become followers of them because, in following them, they were becoming followers of the Lord. The Thessalonians were no 'fair-weather' believers, they had received the word, "in much affliction", but also, "with joy of the Holy Spirit." It may not be immediately obvious to us how 'much affliction' and 'joy' can go together, but that is because we have forgotten the deep joy of first experiencing the forgiveness of sins and the profound sense of peace with God that this brings.

Verse 7 – Examples

Now those who had followed Paul's example of faith and character, became examples themselves. Their example was significant enough to be seen by all the believers in their home region of Macedonia and in the region of Achaia to the south. This is how Christianity is supposed to work. Christians demonstrating a real faith that is being worked out in their everyday lives,

cause others to follow their example, then the example of those others impacts yet more people, and so the circle widens.

Verse 8 – Witnesses

The next verse seems to shift the emphasis from the Thessalonians being an example to other Christians, to their passing on the gospel to non-believers, since Paul says, “From you the word of the Lord has sounded forth.” Also, the sphere of influence has increased further, so that it includes not just the two local regions but, “every place.” This is quite some testimony from a group of Christians who have only been saved for a few months! Once more, there is a beautiful combination of the word of the gospel, “the word... has sounded forth”, and the supporting witness of their real and evident faith, “Your faith toward God has gone out.” Paul states that he and those with him don’t need to tell people about the faith of the Thessalonians and the impact it has had on their lives; everybody can see for themselves how it demonstrates the power of the gospel that Paul and Silas had declared to them.

Verse 9 – Conversion

Verse nine and the start of verse ten, contain another of Paul’s triplets. It is probably one of the best-known phrases in this epistle, “How you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven.” The word used for turning to God is the word sometimes translated converted or conversion. The picture we are meant to have, is of a human race that, at the fall, turned away from God. We asserted our independence and turned our backs to the God who made us, and still loves us despite all our rebellion. To be converted is to be turned back round again to face the right way; to face towards God. This is what the gospel had done for the Thessalonians, and it was obvious to all who knew them.

The turning was also, “from idols.” The majority of the Thessalonian believers were from a pagan background and therefore spent their lives, until conversion, serving idols. In truth, when humanity turned away from God, we turned towards idols: we turned our back on God and looked to idols instead. Not many of us today have been involved in the worship of physical representations of false gods, but the idols of wealth, fame, self-achievement, lust, and many more, are before the faces of vast numbers of people. In turning to God, the Thessalonians necessarily turned their backs on the idols they had previously served. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “No man can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24).

The order of these phrases is important: the Thessalonians turned to God, from idols; not from idols to God. In the gospel we present the wonder of the love of God, and the glorious salvation He offers to a desperately needy world. We need to see our need and then the wonderful way God has met that need through His Son. We could preach a long time about the worthlessness of one idol or another, and say many true things about them, but it is the attractiveness of God Himself that is needed to convert people.

It is the same regarding the call to Christian obedience and faithfulness after we have been saved. Any number of sermons on the evils of looking to idols are unlikely to move us. What we need is to have the allure of our God and Saviour, and the delight of His company, clearly set before us, so that we turn again towards Him.

Up until now the Thessalonians had served their idols. They will have made offerings, attended feast days, and paid homage. Now, having turned to God, they were serving Him instead. This God was, “The living and true God”, in contrast to the lifeless and false idols they had served before. No doubt their service of the idols had been costly and time-consuming. In one sense, serving the living and true God demanded even more sacrifice of goods and time, but it would

have been done from love and gratitude, rather than from obligation, or in hope of deriving material benefits.

Verse 10 – The future

The final part of the triplet is at the start of verse ten, “and to wait for His Son from heaven.” Their hopes and prospects were no longer confined to this world. Indeed, their prospects in this world may have been significantly harmed by them turning to Christ. But their home was now in heaven, where Christ is, and they were waiting for Him to return from there, and take them to be with Him. With this triplet, the past, present and future of the Thessalonians, and of all Christians, since we all have the same Saviour, are all resolved. In the past, they had turned to God from idols – they had been converted. In the present, they were productively occupied, actively serving the true God. While serving, they were looking forward to the future, waiting for Christ to return from heaven. Does this describe your life as well?

In case there was any doubt about who God’s Son is, Paul specifies that it is the one, “Whom [God] raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” The faith of the Thessalonians, and of all Christians, rests not just on the identity of Christ as the Son of God, or even just on His death as a sacrifice to remove our sins. The resurrection is an essential element. We can wait for God’s Son coming from heaven because He is alive from the dead! We are absolutely confident that our sins are all gone because God, who abhors all sin, raised Him from the dead. This Christ, this Son of God, is Jesus; the one who lived as a man in this world, and now lives as a man in heaven. And this Jesus, “Delivers us from the wrath to come.” Paul is not referring to our being delivered from God’s wrath against our sins; that would be in the past tense, as something already accomplished. Paul is speaking about the future, that is, the wrath of God’s judgement that must one day be poured out on a world that flatly rejects His Son. Christians will not be subject to this judgement; although further discussion of how this will be achieved won’t be picked up until chapter four of 1 Thessalonians.

Closing thoughts

First Thessalonians is a predominantly happy book. It showcases the vital, vibrant faith of the Thessalonians, the love Paul had for them, the love they shared amongst themselves and the positive effect of a hope in the world to come on our lives here and now. May it have a positive, happy effect on our own Christian lives as we consider it.

Our God and Father, we thank You that You are still calling people to conversion today. You are turning men and women towards Yourself and teaching them to serve You, while waiting for Your Son’s return. Please teach us how to live out our faith, hope and love so that we are good examples to others and good witnesses to our Saviour, Amen.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians – Chapter 1, talk number T1204.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.