

Joyous and Thankful

(1 Thess. 1:1–10)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 1:1–10, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 Tim. 1:15, Gal. 5:19–23, Dan. 12:2.*

Memory Text: “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (*1 Thessalonians 1:2, 3, ESV*).

Key Thought: Paul has many good things to say to the Thessalonians, at least when he begins writing to them in the first letter. What he praises them for is worthy of our attention.

Paul opens his first letter to the Thessalonians by emphasizing prayer and stressing how much he prays for them, which itself reveals the deep love and concern he has for the church there.

In this passage Paul then rejoices that the Thessalonians, on the whole, appear to be remaining faithful. Their lives offer abundant evidence of the life-changing power of the Spirit, despite the many challenges that they face.

Paul concludes his first chapter by remarking how the Thessalonians' openness to Paul and his teaching led them to become true “Adventists.” They were believers who lived every day in anticipation of the day that Jesus would come from heaven to deliver them from “the wrath to come.”

In this lesson we get an intimate glimpse of how new converts dealt with the challenges that come after evangelism has taken place.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 28.*

A Prayer of Thanks (1 Thess. 1:1–3)

In the opening words of 1 Thessalonians, we catch a glimpse of the selflessness of Paul. While he was clearly the author of this letter (1 Thess. 2:18, 3:5, 5:27), he gives recognition to his coworkers Silas and Timothy.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1–3. For what things are Paul, Silas, and Timothy giving thanks? What do these things mean in a practical sense? That is, how would they be manifested in daily life? For example, how is the “work of faith” expressed in how we live?

The opening of this letter is typical of ancient Greek letters, but with an interesting twist. To the typical Greek opener (“grace”), Paul adds the familiar Jewish greeting “peace” (*shalom* in Hebrew). “Grace” and “peace”—apt depictions of what an experience with Jesus is all about.

Who was Silvanus? The name reflects the Latin equivalent of the Aramaic name “Silas.” Jews who lived outside Palestine usually adopted Greek or Latin names to go along with their Jewish ones (this is how “Saul” became “Paul”). Silas was a Jerusalem Christian like Mark, who was one of Paul’s first traveling companions. By having trusted leaders of the Jerusalem church with him on his missionary journeys, Paul was doing his best to maintain unity in the church.

What group of words in 1 Thessalonians 1:1–3 has become famous because of the way they are used in 1 Corinthians 13? Which of them has the primary emphasis in 1 Corinthians, and why?

In his prayers, Paul concentrates on reality, not giddy spirituality. Faith provokes serious work. Genuine love produces much labor. And hope requires much patience. The stress in these words is on action, not abstract ideas. The order of faith, love, and hope varies in the New Testament, but the most important of the three is listed last in each case (see 1 Cor. 13:13). The order of these words in verse 3 underlines the importance of last-day events in Paul’s mind throughout the writing of these two letters to the Thessalonians.

Paul is also thankful before God because he remembers the way in which the Thessalonians have responded to the gospel. He probably hopes, too, that their positive emotional response to the praise Paul offers them will incline them to be more open to the concerns that he will soon express to them.

God Has Chosen You (1 Thess. 1:4)

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4. What does it mean that God has chosen or elected us? Does that mean we don't really have a choice? On the other hand, does it mean that someone who is not chosen by God cannot have salvation even if he or she wants it?

Verse 4 continues the same extended sentence that Paul began in verse 2, with “we give thanks.” One of the reasons Paul gives thanks to God is that he knows God has “chosen” the Thessalonians.

Some Christians have taken this idea of being “chosen” to an extreme. They want to move the believer away from any focus on lifestyle or behavior. Instead, they teach that our salvation depends on God’s choice rather than on our own. Such a teaching can also lead to the idea that God’s grace is only for a few and that, once saved, a person cannot choose to be lost.

How do the following texts help us to understand that salvation is our own choice? *Josh. 24:15, 1 Tim. 2:4, Rev. 3:20.*

Faith is impossible without God’s drawing power. Yet, in the end, God allows human beings to make their own decisions regarding Him and what He has done for us. And what He has done for us is to “choose” us in Christ. We have all been “elected” to have salvation. That some won’t be saved—won’t claim that salvation for themselves—reflects their choice, not God’s. God’s choice is for all humanity to be saved. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:4, God wants “all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (*NKJV*).

Think through what it means to know that you have been “chosen” by God, that God wants you to have salvation, and that to be lost is an aberration from God’s desire for all of us. What encouragement can you draw from this wonderful truth?

Assurance in Christ (1 Thess. 1:5)

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5. How do we gain the assurance that we are right with God? What three evidences in the lives of the Thessalonians indicated to Paul that they were right with God?

Verse 5 begins with “for” or “because.” In this verse Paul details the grounds for his conviction that the Thessalonians were “chosen” by God (*1 Thess. 1:4*). He is also underlining further reasons as to why his prayers are so filled with thankfulness (*1 Thess. 1:2*). Paul rejoices at the real-life evidence that the Thessalonians have responded to God and that He approves of them.

Paul begins the verse with rejoicing at a visible and outward sign of the Thessalonians’ position before the Lord. Their acceptance of the gospel was not merely a mental assent to teachings or doctrine. Their daily lives exhibited the presence and power of God. In everyday church life, things were happening that could be explained only as divine intervention. Prayers were answered and lives changed. The reality of their faith was being manifested in their works.

How does one know that the Holy Spirit is present and real in one’s life and in the local church? See *Gal. 5:19–23, 1 Cor. 12:1–11*.

The “fruit” of the Spirit is powerful evidence that God is actively working. Things such as love, joy, and peace can be faked only for so long, but in the day-to-day stress of relationships within the church, the genuine is eventually sifted from the false. When the Holy Spirit is a living presence, things that are not natural to sinful human beings start to become natural in the life of the believer. Christians find themselves doing acts of grace and kindness that would not have occurred to them before. Paul saw plenty of evidence that the lives of the Thessalonians had been changed by the supernatural working of the Spirit.

For Paul, the final evidence that God had chosen the Thessalonians was their deep conviction and inner assurance that the gospel was true and that God was real in their lives. Though such convictions don’t prove true in every case, strong assurance that we are right with God usually accompanies the genuine gospel.

How much assurance of salvation do you have? On what, in the end, must that assurance be based?

Doing What Paul Would Do (1 Thess. 1:6, 7)

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 7. What is Paul’s message there? How are we to understand this in light of the idea that Christ is our ultimate example?

Most translations do not show this, but in verse 6 Paul continues the same sentence that he began in verse 2 and carries it on through verse 10. The main topic of this lengthy sentence is Paul’s list of reasons for the thanksgivings that he recites in his prayers. Verses 6 and 7 add two items to that list of thanksgivings, building on the “because” (*NIV*) at the beginning of verse 5. Paul gives thanks (*vs. 2*) because (*vs. 5, NIV*) the Thessalonians have both imitated him and his colleagues and have themselves become an example to imitate (*vss. 6, 7*).

We often caution people that it is dangerous to imitate anyone but Christ. That’s true, because even the best of people will let us down sometimes. But in reality we need role models. People need each other at times for guidance, counsel, and help in working through specific issues and even hard times. Who hasn’t experienced the blessing of good counsel and of a good example?

Also, whether we like it or not, once we become leaders in the church, people will imitate us. How important, then, that “veteran” Christians live what they preach and model the things that they say.

At the same time, Paul has placed a couple of safeguards here. First of all, the imitation (*vs. 6*) follows the receiving (*vs. 5*). The primary focus of the Thessalonians was on receiving the Word of God and applying it directly to their lives through the Holy Spirit. God’s Word can always be trusted. Second, Paul directs them to the Lord as the primary model (*vs. 6*). What Jesus did, and would do, is a much safer model than what even Paul would do. After all, Paul was under no illusions about himself or his character (*1 Tim. 1:15*).

Having said this, however, Paul affirms their desire to imitate him as a beloved teacher and mentor and also to become models worthy of imitation themselves. In this particular case, what was being modeled was joy in suffering. Suffering can make one bitter or better. In the context of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, the Thessalonians discovered supernatural joy in the midst of suffering, just as Paul and Silas had earlier (*Acts 16:22–25*).

What kind of role model are you in the church? What ways in which you conduct yourself about your life are good for others to follow? What ways aren’t?

Further Evidence of Faith (1 Thess. 1:8–10)

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:8–10. In what ways does this passage offer additional evidence of the Thessalonians' faith?

Paul continues the sentence that began in verse 2 by explaining how he knows the Thessalonians have become a model, or type, to the other believers in Macedonia (where Thessalonica was located) and Achaia (where Corinth was located).

First, they were a model of evangelistic effort and success. From them the word of God “rang out” (*NIV*) into both of these provinces and beyond. Paul also considered them to have a model faith because of their openness to him and the gospel. They were willing to be taught. They were also willing to make radical changes in their lives, such as giving up idols and other popular forms of worship.

Communication was relatively rapid in the ancient Roman world, thanks to well-built Roman roads and widespread travel. So, the claim that their faith was known “everywhere” may indicate that people in places such as Rome and Antioch had already made reference to it in their communications with Paul.

It is also true that people want to live up to the high expectations of others. Praise contains an implied expectation. By praising their faith in such an overwhelming fashion, Paul was encouraging them to grow in that faith more and more.

It seems there was something uniquely remarkable about their conversion. As pagan idolaters they had to overcome two major barriers. First was the “crazy message” about some man who was dead and came back to life again. Then there was the fact that it was a crazy Jewish message. Many Gentiles probably laughed when they heard the Christian message. The Thessalonians didn't. Instead, they completely rearranged their lives in light of the gospel.

“The Thessalonian believers were true missionaries. Their hearts burned with zeal for their Saviour, who had delivered them from fear of ‘the wrath to come.’ Through the grace of Christ a marvelous transformation had taken place in their lives, and the word of the Lord, as spoken through them, was accompanied with power. Hearts were won by the truths presented, and souls were added to the number of believers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 256.

Read again 1 Thessalonians 1:10. What's Paul talking about? What is the “wrath to come”? What does the resurrection of Jesus have to do with the point he is making? Why is this promise so crucial to all that we believe? See 1 Cor. 15:12–17; John 11:24, 25; Dan. 12:2.

Further Study: “The arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia, during Paul’s sojourn in Corinth, had greatly cheered the apostle. They brought him ‘good tidings’ of the ‘faith and charity’ of those who had accepted the truth during the first visit of the gospel messengers to Thessalonica. Paul’s heart went out in tender sympathy toward these believers, who, in the midst of trial and adversity, had remained true to God. He longed to visit them in person, but as this was not then possible, he wrote to them.

“In this letter to the church at Thessalonica the apostle expresses his gratitude to God for the joyful news of their increase of faith. . . .

“ ‘We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.’

“Many of the believers in Thessalonica had ‘turned . . . from idols to serve the living and true God.’ . . . The apostle declared that in their faithfulness in following the Lord they were ‘ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 255, 256.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Dwell more on the question of role models, other than Jesus. What advantages and disadvantages come with them?
- ❷ Paul spends a great portion of this letter giving thanks to God for the Thessalonians. What role can, or should, thanksgiving play in our worship experience, both personally and corporately?
- ❸ If people around you were looking for evidence of your church’s faith, what would they find? How could, or should, things be different?
- ❹ Why is affirmation of others so important? At the same time, why must we be careful as we do this?
- ❺ Think through again how important the doctrine of the Second Coming is to our faith. What good reasons do we have for trusting in something that’s so radical, that’s so unlike anything that has ever happened before?

Summary: Paul found much joy in offering thanks to God for the abundant evidences of His work in the lives of the Thessalonian believers. In sharing the content of his prayers with them, Paul hoped to motivate them to continue growing in the faith and in their outreach efforts toward others.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Thessalonians 1:1–10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend that accepting God’s gift of salvation in Jesus results in a fundamental change in the way a person thinks and acts.

Feel: Be grateful to God for the work He does in the lives of sinful humans.

Do: Seek to be more positive and expressive about the evidence that he or she sees of spiritual growth in the lives of others.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Transforming Grace

A Paul begins each one of his letters with the words *grace* and *peace*. Why do you think that Paul used these words at the beginning of every letter that he wrote?

B Why do you think Paul repeatedly refers to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in the first ten verses of this letter?

C On the basis of what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10, describe the change that took place when the Thessalonians became Christians.

II. Feel: Grateful to God

A Learning to be grateful to God is an important part of the Christian life. What reasons does Paul list for his thankfulness in 1 Thessalonians 1:1–8? Do you have similar cause for being thankful? If so, what reasons can you share?

B Becoming a Christian marks a fundamental change in a person’s life. For some the change is dramatic while for others it is gradual. How has your life been transformed by God’s grace?

III. Do: Affirming of Others

A How have others encouraged you in your Christian experience?

B In what ways do you seek to encourage others in their walk with God?

► **Summary:** Christians should be thankful for the way God’s grace can transform a person’s life and be encouraging of those in whose lives His Spirit is at work.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: It is important for Christians to recognize, and be grateful for, the ways in which God transforms human lives. It is important also to be willing to share words of encouragement with those in need.

Several years ago, during an attempted coup in Africa, a father was worried for days about the safety of his son and his family who lived near one of the presidential palaces that had been overrun by rebels. News finally reached him that his son and his family were safe, though they were not allowed to leave their compound. While the father was greatly relieved at the news, he was still a little worried, because his son's family was not completely out of danger.

Have you ever experienced a situation like that—one in which you were encouraged about news you had heard but still a little worried about how everything would work out in the end? That is exactly how the apostle Paul felt after hearing Timothy's report about the condition of the believers in Thessalonica. He was encouraged to hear that they had remained faithful, but he was still a little worried as they faced continual persecution.

Knowing how easy it is to forget what God has done for us, Paul begins his letter by affirming and reminding the believers in Thessalonica of all the ways in which God has been working in their lives. And because spiritual discouragement is a typical response to persecution, the apostle also reminds them of how valuable they are to God. God loves them; He chose them for Himself. They should not become discouraged. God is on their side.

Paul's words of encouragement bring to mind a story that illustrates the importance of the need of encouraging one another spiritually. The story is about a discouraged new convert who came to talk with the well-known Chinese Christian, Watchman Nee.

“No matter how much I pray, no matter how hard I try, I simply cannot seem to be faithful to my Lord. I think I'm losing my salvation.” Nee said, ‘Do you see this dog here? He is my dog. He is house-trained; he never makes a mess; he is obedient; he is a pure delight to me. Out in the kitchen I have a son, a baby son. He makes a mess, he throws his food around, he fouls his clothes, he is a total mess. But who is going to inherit my kingdom? Not my dog; my son is my heir. You are Jesus Christ's heir because it is for you that He died.’”—Lou Nicholes, *Hebrews: Patterns for Living* (Longwood, Fla.: Xulon Press, 2004), p. 31.

Consider This: What can we learn from Paul’s affirmation of the Thessalonians regarding the ways in which we should affirm others?

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Paul’s Favorite Words (Review 1 Thessalonians 1:1–8 with the class.)

The opening three verses of 1 Thessalonians introduce us to five of Paul’s favorite words: *grace*, *peace*, *faith*, *hope*, and *love*. Paul refers to each of these words again and again in his letters. Because they were central to his understanding of the gospel, it behooves us to look briefly at them.

Grace: Paul’s understanding of the word *grace* is rooted in its use in the Hebrew Scriptures. The word originated from a Hebrew verb that literally means “to bend down.” It conveys the idea of a person bending over to help someone stand up who has fallen and cannot help himself. From this concept, the word *grace* came to mean the act of extending favor or kindness to another person and often someone who did not deserve it. In the Old Testament, as in Paul’s letters, God is the One who is typically described as extending grace.

Peace: Peace for Paul does not refer to a quiet stillness like a peaceful meadow. Paul’s concept of this word again comes from the way in which it is used in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Old Testament the word for peace is *shalom*. It has a very positive concept to it. It means to be complete, to be whole, to prosper, to be in health. This peace can be found only in God, who gives it as a gift to His people (*Ps. 85:8; 1 Chron. 22:9, 10; Num. 6:24–26*).

Faith: True faith for Paul is much more than just head knowledge; true faith manifests itself in action (*compare Gal. 5:5, 6*). Faith is always a response to what God has already done for us.

Hope: The hope Paul mentions is not “wishful thinking.” It is a confident expectation in the return of Jesus (*1 Thess. 1:10*). This hope was the source of the patience and steadfastness that encouraged the Thessalonian believers to be faithful during persecution.

Love: The love manifested by the believers in Thessalonica was not merely a warm, sentimental feeling. Paul says that their love was rugged; it “labored.” This type of love is not natural to humans. The word in Greek is *agape*. Before Christians began to use this word, it was rarely used in the Greek language. Christians used it to refer to a love not rooted in outward attraction or

self-gratification but the kind of selfless love seen in the life of Jesus.

Consider This: Grace. Peace. Faith. Hope. Love. Why is it difficult, if not impossible, to describe the gospel without returning to these five words?

II. Paul's Gospel Message (*Review 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10 with the class.*)

What was the essence of Paul's gospel presentation to the Gentiles in Thessalonica? While Luke provides no indication of this in Acts, we find some clues in what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10 in which he reminds the new believers of what he has taught them. Based on these verses, we come away with the following picture.

The very first step that Paul would have taken in presenting the gospel to Gentiles would have been to argue against the existence of the pagan deities being worshiped by the Thessalonians. Because Paul refers to the "living and true God" (*vs. 9, ESV*), he certainly would have argued that the so-called pagan gods were dead and false. The only true God was the God of Israel, the God who made the heavens and the earth and chose and blessed Israel as His people. Given that Judaism was widespread in Paul's day, it is likely that many of the pagans had heard of the Jewish God before. Paul probably appealed to stories from the Old Testament in his attempts to convince his audience of the power of this one God over all the earth.

After convincing the Gentiles that the God of Israel was the one true God, Paul argued that Jesus was this one God's only unique Son. Whether Paul said anything about Jesus' life before His death is uncertain, given that he does not do this in the rest of his letters. What is certain, however, is that the apostle talked about how Jesus' death (*1 Thess. 5:10*) and resurrection (*1 Thess. 4:14*) were "necessary" in order to restore sinful humans in right relationship with God. And most important, he talked of how this same Jesus would soon return from heaven (*1 Thess. 2:19, 3:13, 4:13–18, 5:1–11*) to judge those on the earth.

Consider This: Based on the content of Paul's gospel message, including the five words that were essential to his explanation of it, what do you think Paul meant when he said that the gospel came to Thessalonica not in word only but in power?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Thought Questions:

- 1 In what ways is the triad of faith, hope, and love used elsewhere in the

New Testament (*see 1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4, 5; 1 Thess. 5:8*)? In what ways can these characteristics be emphasized more fully in the life of the church today?

2 Paul includes the turning from idols as part of the conversion experience of the Thessalonians. What types of idols might people need to turn away from today in order to follow Christ?

Application Questions:

1 News of the transformation that took place in the lives of the Thessalonians reached all across Greece. What type of reputation does your church have in and outside of your community? And how could a church increase or improve the way in which its faith “sounds forth”?

2 In what way does your faith “work,” your love “labor,” and your hope remain steadfast?

3 Paul often talks about the power of the gospel (*Rom. 1:16, 1 Cor. 1:18, 2 Cor. 12:9, Eph. 1:19, 1 Thess. 1:5*). In what ways have you experienced the “power” of the gospel?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The following activities will help to make the information in this lesson more personal. Be sure to encourage people to be brief in their responses in order to discourage one or two people from dominating the conversation.

Activity:

1. Invite people in class to share about the time when they first understood the gospel and decided to accept Jesus as their Savior.
2. Have class members briefly share specific ways in which their lives have been transformed by the gospel.
3. Ask the class to briefly share experiences where they were spiritually encouraged by something that someone said or did for them.
4. Have class members list ways in which they might provide spiritual encouragement to struggling believers.