

# 1 Thessalonians 1: The gospel brings joy

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.

2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

## Thoughts

3 of them writing to a group of believers in Jesus.

They begin with thanks, they're grateful for this Church and that means they often pray thanks for them. - DO WE? Only pray for others when sick? or pray thanks for them and their faith?

They seem particularly grateful for their work, labour and endurance - which seem to be the fruit or outcome of faith, love and hope - three key pauline concepts.

So, again a consistent message - not saved by our work or labour, but saved in order that we might work and labour in a godly way.

And now a description of these Christians - brothers/sisters, loved by God and chosen - all comforting 1st mention of the gospel in v5 - a message that came with power, the Spirit and conviction. This is a helpful summary of seeing the gospel at work - power to change, spiritual reality and conviction of sin and faith. Also a reminder that we will never convince anyone into Christian faith - it's a message we share but the power is God's.

It produced a changed life in Paul and associates, and then (v6) it resulted in a change of life amongst them, even during suffering.

They in turn become a model for others in the way the gospel shapes their life.

Turning away from idols and turning to the living and true God who rescues us from the righteous anger on our sin.

## Illustrations

Thankful for a gift that makes a big difference to your life... What about a gift that changes your life, and as a result it changes other people's and they in turn change other people's?

And what if that gift doesn't only change their life, but gives them life forever?

## Applications

Is our motivation for bringing people to Jesus a guilt trip or a love story?

**MPP: Paul writes with thanks to the Thessalonian Christians as the gospel he shared is powerfully at work amongst them**

**MPS: Are we thankful for the gospel that is God's power for salvation and transformation?**

## TALK

### INTRODUCTION

Christmas gifts - what were your favourites? One that really makes a positive difference in life? New coffee machine, just in time for lockdown 3 :) makes a difference. Hopefully before too long it will make a difference to others as well, they can enjoy some good coffee at the vicarage! Maybe even convert them to coffee eh? My secret secondary mission - *“all flavour has been given to coffee therefore go into all the world and brew decanters”!*

What about a gift that really changes your life? How thankful would you be?

What about a gift that enables you to change other people's lives? Even more thankful I think

What about a gift that enables you to enable others to change other people's lives? Off the scale

What about a gift that does all of that and it's not just changing lives, but bringing eternal life.

That's where we begin - with the gift of the good news about Jesus.

But let's start with a little context:

Thessalonica was a city in modern-day northern Greece, now called Thessaloniki. It was a key city in Paul's day, a port on the junction of two major Roman roads. Paul first visited Thessalonica during his 2nd missionary journey taking this good news out to the Gentiles. We can read that account in Acts 17, I just want to read a few verses:

*When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. Acts 17:1-4*

So the Church was founded by Paul preaching the good news - Jesus is the Messiah who died and rose again.

And it's this good news that is at the heart of his letter to that Church.

And it's the same good news that can be at the heart of our lives - unchanging good news, who doesn't want that?!

### I. 2-6 Real Good News makes a real difference

The gospel which saved Paul and these believers, came with **power and conviction**. (v5)

And power + conviction equals transformation. Transformation of beliefs - Jews and Gentiles together welcomed the message even in suffering, as God's power to save. Transformation of their lives - Paul says, you know how we lived among you and he's seen their **work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.** (v3)

The real good news makes a real difference.

Good news that Jesus has died for our sins, conquered death, risen, ascended and sent his Spirit.

It's not the news that everything will suddenly be perfect.

Too many people don't believe or quickly fall away because they think God is going to act like their personal assistant - treat prayer like Alexa!

Rather it is a powerful, spiritual conviction of the heart that leads to: **faith, love, and endurance inspired by hope.**

Real good news makes a real difference. It's real.

A lot of people buying online at the moment, and you do need to be a bit careful that you're getting the real deal. I heard of someone who thought they were buying some lovely new furniture, only to open a package about this big, they'd missed the tricky small print that it was dolls furniture, hidden down the listing. You probably don't need to sit on a tiny chair to establish if it's the real deal!

The real test of the gospel is not that our lives are suddenly filled with health, wealth and prosperity. Paul makes the point that they welcomed the message amongst suffering.

The real test of the gospel is whether it produces faith in Jesus, love for Jesus and endurance even through suffering because of the hope we have in Jesus.

The real good news makes a real difference.

## II. 7-10 Real good news deserves to be shared

Let me just read those last few verses again:

**And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (7-10)**

We see the gospel shared in their actions - they're a model of faith

We see the gospel shared in their speech - the Lord's message rang out from them

We see the gospel in their worship - they turn from idols to worship the living and true God

It would be an odd thing to get good news and keep it to yourself.

Even if it's just good news for you, you still want to tell people - I got that job, I won a competition, my results came back negative - it's nice to tell people good news.

It's even more important if the good news is relevant to them - if we love Jesus and we love people we will want them to come to know him. We will want them to receive this good news, we will want them to be forgiven so that they can be saved when he returns in judgment.

Real Good News deserves to be shared - and like them it's all encompassing.

It's not a debate between whether we only speak the good news or live the good news.

Real good news makes a real change and transforms how we live and how we speak and everything we do.

Let me finish with a question for you to take away.

Imagine your life like a newspaper, all the things that have happened to you, affected you or you've been involved with in some ways... where is this good news of Jesus in your paper? Is it tucked away on a remote page, it's there but most people don't get that far? Or is it the headline? The bold central picture - Jesus loves me, Jesus died for me, Jesus will come again to bring me home?

## COMMENTARY NOTES

### Andy Johnson - Two Horizons Commentary

“The church is truly itself only when it responds to the Spirit’s enabling by participating in God’s mission to address the consequences of human rebellion and ultimately bring creation to its intended destiny.”

- I assume that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians sometime between 49 and 52 CE, possibly a few weeks, but more likely a few months, after he left Thessalonica
- The two letters are therefore probably the earliest extant letters of Paul, and hence also the earliest extant Christian writings.
- These Thessalonian letters are clearly epistles and do indeed exhibit certain characteristics that are common in some types of ancient letters as these are described in the ancient epistolary handbooks.
- Paul’s letters are clearly rhetorical documents attempting to make persuasive arguments to their audiences. As such, they do utilize various rhetorical strategies
- however, use of Greco-Roman rhetorical categories, particularly in formally specifying the species and arrangement of Paul’s argumentation, is simply one heuristic device among others that may or may not be helpful to explicate how Paul’s arguments actually work.
- while I do think that such arguments for its non-Pauline authorship have some force, I remain unconvinced.
- they fail to provide a convincing historical setting in which launching such a document would make better sense than simply attributing the letter to Paul in the first place.
- If someone knew 1 Thessalonians as part of a corpus of Pauline letters that had begun circulating in the late first or early second century, and if the theology of 2 Thessalonians really is so different from that of 1 Thessalonians and the rest of Paul’s letters, how would the person have hoped to persuade anyone—at least anyone familiar enough with Paul or his corpus to care about a writing in the name of Paul—that 2 Thessalonians was from Paul?
- Paul and Silas were in Thessalonica over a time period that included at least three Sabbaths. While Acts does not tell us what they did during the week, 1 Thessalonians would lead us to imagine that Paul was publicly proclaiming the good news
- on the Sabbath, as was Paul’s custom, he entered the synagogue and began attempting to persuade those gathered there, not only that it was scripturally necessary that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, but that, indeed, Jesus was that Messiah (17:2–3).
- It is clear that a great many devout Greeks (i.e., nonproselyte synagogue adherents) and a good many leading (Greek) women who were at the synagogue were persuaded and joined themselves with Paul and Silas (17:4).

- although the English translations and the commentators assume it to be so, it is not completely clear whether Paul and Silas had success in convincing any Jews in the synagogue in Thessalonica.
- Whatever the case historically at the church's beginning, 1 Thess 1:9–10, 2:14, and 4:13 imply that, by the time Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, his rhetoric is primarily directed toward a Gentile audience (male and female).
- We are not told how much time transpires between Paul's success in persuading some Gentiles to adopt a noticeably different pattern of life that declares the kingship of Jesus in v. 4 and the time the Jews from the synagogue in Thessalonica instigate a riot in v. 5
- While the characters outside the new community might interpret their aims and actions as in direct competition with Rome as a politically seditious movement, this is not the way Luke narrates the view from inside the community.
- In Thessalonica, which had been granted the status of a free city, there was on offer a salvation story that would have been heard alongside of Paul's "good news" (euangelion) of God's "salvation" (sōtēria).
- It was the imperial "good news,"<sup>35</sup> a story about a savior (sōtēr), a son of a god (Augustus) who had brought peace and security to the empire and whose coming was indeed "glad tidings" (euangelia) for the world.
- From Augustus onward, kyrios (lord) was used as an imperial honorific, and Augustus's successors could also be called sōtēr (savior).
- Both titles were rooted in the larger salvific narrative, where the inhabitants of the empire were depicted as having been granted charis (grace or favor) by their benefactor, Caesar.
- when Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Augustus was understood to have experienced a postmortem translation and was depicted as still exercising his universal rule in the presence of his deified father, Julius Caesar.

### 1:1 The Letter's Prescript

- Both letters come from Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, with no further description of who they are.
- Paul, Silas, and Timothy are depicted as being present at the founding of the church in Thessalonica (17:1–9),
- The avoidance of idolatry and sexual immorality, which is constituent of Israel's response to their call to be a holy people, is also assumed of the (Gentile) church in both Acts and in 1 Thessalonians.
- The word ekklēsia is often used in the LXX in reference to the called and gathered people of Israel whom Yahweh had redeemed and from whom he demanded loyalty,
- together with the language of "beloved by God" (v. 4), "election" (v. 4), and "calling" (2:12; 4:7; 5:24), the term ekklēsia connects this Gentile audience to the story of God's dealings with Israel, marking them out as a redeemed, visible people whose public practices are to make clear the character of Israel's God.
- In the larger Greco-Roman world, ekklēsia commonly referred to both informal (e.g., Acts 19:32) and formal public gatherings,
- Paul modifies the standard epistolary prescript by adding a description of his audience as being ἐν (en, "in, by") God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- as Paul depicting the audience as in some way located in God and the Lord, Jesus Christ, or is he thinking of it as being established by God and Christ? It may not be necessary to make an either/or choice in this case.
- Paul certainly understands this audience both here and in 2 Thess 1:1 as existing by means of the actions of God and Christ.

- “To be in Christ is to be in God and to be the ongoing recipient of God’s Holy Spirit (4:8); this is, in Paul’s earliest letter, an indication of his experience of a trinitarian participatory holiness.
- the shalom that has been divinely provided flows from God’s provision of saving justice (dikaiosynē),
- which restores and reconciles relationships between God and humans, as well as relationships between people who had been at odds with each other.
- As we will see, a community that has been granted it will also be called upon, as a Spirit-inhabited community, to act as God’s channel of granting that shalom to others in Thessalonica.<sup>17</sup>
- The use of kyrios to refer to Jesus permeates not only Paul’s letters but also the entirety of the New Testament. While in some contexts it carries no divine connotations (e.g., Matt 15:27), other contexts use language from OT texts that originally refer to Yahweh and apply it directly to Jesus as kyrios (e.g., Rom 10:13; 1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 3:15–18; Acts 2:21, 36; Mark 1:2–3).
- Such linguistic practice is all the more significant when one recognizes that the NT continues to use kyrios to refer to God as well (e.g., Rom 11:34; Mark 13:20; Luke 1:6).
- Hence, both God the Father and his Son, Jesus, share the divine name, or identity.
- The cumulative effect is to include Jesus as Lord in the unique identity of the one God of Israel in a way that makes the relationship between the Father and the Son constitutive of that God’s identity.
- the identity of the God whom the Thessalonians had encountered included the Father, the Son, and the Spirit and was constituted by the reciprocal relations between them.

## 1:2 Faith Working through Love, Resulting from Paul’s Faithful Ministry

- As was typical of ancient letters, after the prescript Paul begins the letter with a thanksgiving section.
- in 1 Thessalonians Paul mentions giving thanks to God regarding the audience again in 2:13 and 3:9 and never seems to make a clear break in the text until starting the petitionary prayer at 3:11.
- The effect is to make it unclear where any identifiable thanksgiving section stops and the body of the letter proper begins.
- We will assume that the letter’s first major section begins with a thanksgiving in 1:2–10,
- the body of the letter starts in 2:1–12, and the first major section ends with Paul’s petitionary prayer for the audience in 3:13.
- In this first major section (1:2–3:13) Paul attempts to reinforce and shape the audience’s understanding of who they are and how they ought to conduct their life together
- by focusing on (1) the audience’s “faith working through love” as their thankful response to the gospel, and (2) the model of Christian living manifest in his own faithful ministry and concern for the audience.
- The focus of 1:2–10 is on Paul’s thanksgiving for what God has accomplished among and by the addressees.
- Paul gives thanks for the audience primarily because of God’s election of them (1:4), which is evident because of the way his gospel came (ἐγενήθη, egenēthē) to them (v. 5) and because of what the audience themselves became (ἐγενήθητε, egenēthēte, vv. 6–7) as a result of their reception of this good news (vv. 6–10).
- Paul begins the body of the letter in 2:1–12 by enlarging on the way his gospel came to the audience,

- In 2:17–3:10 Paul focuses on what has transpired in his relationship with the audience since he left Thessalonica, including his concern for their bearing up under persecution and Timothy’s good report regarding their faithfulness.
- The latter evokes another expression of thanks for the audience in 3:9–10 before Paul finishes off this first major section with a petitionary prayer (3:11–13) that touches on important themes of the second major section of the letter, namely, holiness and eschatology.
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- **1:3–10 Thanksgiving for What God Has Done among and by the Thessalonians**
- Paul begins the section by giving his audience reasons<sup>33</sup> why he and his cosenders are always giving thanks to God for them.
- They are doing so, first, because they remember the audience’s work, labor, and perseverance (v. 3), and second, because they know that God has elected the audience (v. 4).
- it makes the most sense to take the three genitive nouns (faithfulness, love, hope) as indicating the origin of the noun that precedes them.
- In any case, the point is that the nouns before each genitive noun (work, labor, perseverance) derive from, and embody a particular form of, the noun that follows it.
- As we will see, in 1 and 2 Thessalonians such exertion and hardship is depicted as having a cruciform character, that is, as laborious activity connected with proclaiming and embodying the gospel for the sake of others.
- the word πίστις (pistis, “faithfulness, loyalty, faith, trust”) in 1 Thessalonians (v. 3), Paul is recalling this cruciform work of the audience that was engendered by their pistis (faithfulness, faith).
- many translators and interpreters fail to acknowledge the larger field of meaning of pistis. While its semantic range includes belief and trust, in 1 and 2 Thessalonians Paul most often uses pistis in the sense of faithfulness or loyalty,
- pistis in these letters has in its very essence an element of fidelity and obedience.
- Michael Gorman’s words appropriately describe the way Paul uses pistis in these letters: “Faith is humanity’s appropriate posture before God. It is devotion, total commitment, faithfulness.”
- he gives thanks for their work that flows from, and embodies, their believing allegiance or total commitment to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Second, the audience’s labor flows from their love (ἀγάπη, agapē), which means that their love is embodied by activities requiring exertion and hardship.
- The sort of love to which Paul is referring, then, is not simply an inner emotion “but a total disposition of one’s life that involves deliberate choices and determined effort.”
- It is embodied in the kind of self-giving practices Paul narrates in 2:6–12, practices that exhibit a cruciform structure paralleling the actions of Christ in Phil 2:6–8.
- Third, the audience’s perseverance is their capacity to endure suffering under extreme pressure (like Paul himself, as in 2 Cor 6:4; 12:12),
- a capacity that is engendered by and embodies the hope they have for the royal coming (παρουσία, parousia) of the Lord Jesus Christ, as in 1:10, and the salvation it brings.
- while faith(fulness) and love can indeed be distinguished, they cannot be separated. In fact, it is precisely the audience’s pistis and agapē that form the content of the good news that Timothy reports back to Paul in 3:6.
- Their love is something that Paul prays that the Lord will enable to increase and abound (3:12). And their hope clearly needs refining, lest they grieve “like those who have no hope” (4:13).

- Hence, in spite of all the positive things Paul will go on to say about this audience, it is clear that their life together, like that of any flesh and blood church of any time or place, is a work—both divine and human—in progress.