

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 – “A Church Worth Thanking God For”

Who (Author):

Paul is the writer of these epistles known as 1+2 Thessalonians.

When (Date of Writing):

1 Thessalonians was written around AD 50-51. This makes this letter one of Paul's first writings of the New Testament and one of the earliest New Testament books.

- There's a couple different views as to when Galatians was written. Some believe it could have been written on Paul's second missionary journey, dating it to around AD 48-49. Some believe it was written during his third missionary journey, dating it to AD 54-55.
- Either way, 1 Thessalonians was one of Paul's earliest writings and first letter he wrote to a specific church.

Where (Location of Thessalonica):

Thessalonica was a happening city. It was a port city which saw much commerce come through here and it also had the Egnatian way passing through this city. The Egnatian way was a common trade route that connected Byzantium (modern day Istanbul in Turkey) with Rome [show map]. It's where East met West. Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia and the capital of that province [show map]. It's the second largest city in Greece today; Athens being the first.

Why (Occasion of Writing):

Paul wrote this letter while on his second missionary journey. And he wrote this soon after he ministered in Thessalonica. Here's how the whole story unfolded (it's written in Acts 16-17).

Paul, along with Timothy and Silas, were ministering through Phrygia and Galatia and wanted to continue on through Asia but the Holy Spirit forbid them to do so. So, they tried to go into Bithynia instead and the Holy Spirit once again forbid them. So, they came to Troas, and it was there that Paul received a vision from a Macedonian man saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). And so, they went immediately to a new unreached territory – Greece! First stop was Philippi, but there was no synagogue there. So, they went to the riverside where prayer was made, and they met some women there. One of them was Lydia from Thyatira. And the Lord opened her heart to the gospel, and she got saved. The Macedonian man turned out to be an Asian woman!

- When the Lord is leading be open to things looking different than perhaps you were expecting.

So here in Lydia's house the first church is forming in Europe. Things got a little wild in Philippi with a possessed slave girl which Paul eventually rebuked and delivered. This upset the people making money from her so they brought Paul and Silas before the authorities where they were beaten and thrown into prison. That didn't last long and they were eventually able to leave and they departed the city.

From here they came to Thessalonica and as he did, in typical Paul fashion, he headed straight to the synagogue to try and reach his fellow Jews with the gospel. Now many were persuaded and joined with Paul and Silas and joined to the Gospel more importantly. This lasted for three Saturdays (Sabbaths). But many of the Jews weren't persuaded. They instead went and selected evil men who were hanging out around the market to go and stir up trouble. They went to get Paul and Silas but couldn't find them. So they focused on Jason (their host) instead. They tried to incite them with being traitors and then gave the great description of these Christians – they're turning 'the world upside down' (Acts 17:6).

- It's possible Paul stayed a little longer than 3 weeks there, but what we do know is that he had 3 Sabbaths to minister at the synagogue.

So, Paul and Silas fled from the city at night at the direction of the brothers there. They came to Berea but the angry Jews from Thessalonica came there to stir up the crowds. So, Paul was sent down south to Athens by way of the sea. Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea with direction to come to Paul shortly. Paul eventually landed in Corinth where he wrote this letter to the Thessalonians a short while after departing from them.

What (Reason for Writing):

Paul was in Thessalonica for a short time and then was forced to leave. He didn't want this new church to feel abandoned so he sent Timothy to them to check in on them. Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth with a great report from the church in Thessalonica. Though it's not been easy living for Jesus, the church was going strong and not backing down. The fruit of Paul's ministry was taking root and people were growing in their faith.

Paul also wrote this letter to assure them in certain doctrines of the faith, primarily that of the return of Christ. In fact, Paul will make reference to the return of Christ at the end of every Chapter in 1 Thessalonians (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:16-17; and 5:23). These Christians were facing persecution and were beginning to

wonder if they've missed out on the Lord's return. What about those who died before Christ's coming? Paul writes to encourage them to not lose hope. In fact, because of the hope we have we need to live holy lives, not waiting passively but living enthusiastically as we anticipate our Saviour's coming. Paul's exhortation for this church is to keep pressing on because it will all be worth it.

1 Thessalonians Outline:

- I. The Coming of Christ is an Inspiring Hope – Chapter 1
- II. The Coming of Christ is a Working Hope – Chapter 2
- III. The Coming of Christ is a Purifying Hope – Chapters 3:1-4:12
- IV. The Coming of Christ is a Comforting Hope – Chapter 4:13-18
- V. The Coming of Christ is a Rousing Hope – Chapter 5 ¹

Summary Statement:

In this passage Paul expresses gratitude for the Thessalonian church for their steadfastness. We'll look at how they've been grounded in grace, are growing in Godliness, and have been guided by the gospel.

1. Grounded in Grace – 1:1

1:1 - 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.

Paul addresses this letter to the church of the Thessalonians. This was a new church but a growing church.

Church is the Greek word **ekklesia** and it means *the called out ones*. It's an assembly of people; a gathering. It was not an exclusive Christian term in this day; it referred to social, political and religious gatherings. It spoke of everyday people and everyday life. If you wanted to have a group come together, you put out the notice and you would *ekklesia* – gather!

It's become a term that represents what we know as church today.

- What's interesting is I hear too often these days that people are done with the church. That they don't need to gather with other Christians because the church is not a building. And they find reason after reason to withdraw rather than assemble.

¹ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed., Vol. 5, p. 370). Thomas Nelson.

- But the very concept of the church is to be gathered together. If I had a friend that said, *do you want to ekklesia* (as it was used in this day) and I said, *that would be great, I'm all about ekklesia*. And we set a time and a place, but then I just stay home, he'd be like, *where were you? I thought we were going to meet up?* And if my response is, *Oh, no I just met at my house, with myself. It's all good I still ekklesia'd*, you'd think I was nuts! And that's what's going on too much in Christendom today.
- Listen, we need the church. We are the church, it's true it's not a building, but it is the gathering of the saints. And you can't gather with the saints all by yourself in your pajamas. So come on, be the church.
- There's no perfect church, so don't be surprised if something or someone upsets you. But get over it. Don't leave and isolate and think you have justification because you've been offended. Walk in grace and forgiveness because we're here to worship the One who has shown us grace and forgiveness and learn how to live that out one to another!

And notice, it's a church that may be in Thessalonica, but it's more so a church ***in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ***.

We have a physical location as a church, but more importantly we have a spiritual location. We're seated with Christ in the heavenlies. We are in God and in His Son, Jesus, who is Lord over all.

- This would have been very comforting to this church who was experiencing some persecution and problems. God is with them! They're in Christ. They are His and He is more than capable of protecting and providing.
- May you see that we are more than just a church in the lower mainland, but that we are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the dual position we enjoy as believers. We may encounter challenges in our earthly status, but we have reason to rejoice in our spiritual status.

And if you've been around here for some time, you've heard me say this many times, but here we come to the Siamese twins of Scripture. ***Grace*** and ***peace***. And they're always used in this order. Why? Because you can't understand the peace of God until you know the grace of God.

- Grace is that unmerited favor of God. It's God bestowing blessing upon you undeservedly! He did that by sending His Son to die on a cross to pay the penalty for your sins. All so that you could be forgiven and reconciled to God. For those that know and have received this

grace, they now know the peace of God. Peace is the result of grace. And it's not just peace **from** God, it's peace **with** God.

- **Romans 5:1**, *"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,"*

Many people are living trying to earn their way to God and salvation. They haven't grasped the reality of grace! And if you don't know the grace extended to you then you will never have the assurance of your salvation.

This grace and peace is only found in God through a relationship with Jesus. No other religion can offer this. No other religion can provide peace because it's not by grace but by your works. And you never know if you've done enough. So, grace to you and may you know the sweet peace of God as a result.

2. Growing in Godliness – 1:2-3

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

Look at Paul's heart here, he thanks God always for this group and he prays for them. I'm sure there were some people in this mix that Paul would have rather not given thanks for. Every church has them. But these were people that God loved, that God was doing a work in, and they are unfinished works of art. Paul was excited to see how things began in Thessalonica and the lives that were changed and he gave God thanks for the work He was doing.

- Regardless of how people make you feel, thank God for them. Every soul is of value and is in the process of being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ.
- And if they're really annoying you, then all the more reason to pray for them!

As Paul thinks about the church he brings to mind some of the good characteristics they exemplified. And here we see the 3 great Christian virtues at work: faith, hope, and love.

1:3 - *remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father,*

Work of faith – We're saved by grace through faith, not of works (Eph 2:8-9). So what is a work of faith? It's our faith that is demonstrated by our works.

- **James 2:18**, *"But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*
- If Jesus is truly our Lord, then that should be evident in **how** we live.

Labor of love – When you love something or someone it's hardly a labour, right? Think about Jacob who worked for Laban for 7 years to be able to marry Rachel. *"And it seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her"* (Gen 29:20).

- Our love for Christ should outweigh any trial or hardship we endure. He's worth it all. One day we'll recognize that the temporary struggle seemed like a day in comparison to what we gained in Christ.

Patience of hope – Hope breeds patience. Remember, Biblical hope is not an uncertainty, it's a confident expectation. We're to be patient when things aren't always going our way because we have hope that things are not going to remain that way. We don't give up but it's this patience of hope that allows us to endure and face trials with courage. This hope is centered on a risen Saviour who is coming again!

These Christian virtues will be mentioned again by Paul. *"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*

Faith looks back to a crucified Saviour.

Love looks up to a crowned Saviour.

Hope looks on to a coming Saviour.

3. Guided by the Gospel – 1:4-5

1:4-5 - knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵ 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.

Paul calls these believers in Thessalonica brothers. Though they've come from very different backgrounds. He's a Jew. They're primarily Greek. They've come out of pagan idolatry, Paul's been a worshipper of Yahweh. Yet, in Christ we're all one. There's a love for one another. We're family.

Some translations render this verse *'loved by God'*. And what God loves, we certainly should as well.

And not only are they loved by God, they are elected by God, or chosen by God. These terms have caused lots of debates whether we're chosen by God or we choose God. Free will vs. God's sovereign choice.

But this does not need to get overcomplicated in that God's election does not negate our freedom to choose Him.

- Israel was chosen of God simply because He loved them. In the same way that God chose Israel corporately, He has chosen the church corporately to carry out His purposes. It's not that the church has replaced Israel, but the parallels are the same.
- So if you're saved, you're part of the chosen. Nobody can ever say, *'I'm not saved because God didn't choose me.'* His invitation is given to all.

And the fact that they were elected by God was evident in the way they received the gospel. The gospel was brought to them by Paul, Silas, and Timothy as they spoke the truth, but it was accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We know that words are needed to share the gospel, but those words need to be directed of the Holy Spirit, and we need the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the listeners. The Holy Spirit was working in these Thessalonians to assure them that what was being said was true.

- We can think we need to be a clever communicator to be an effective witness, but the Lord is not relying on us to put together some well crafted argument. He just needs us to open up the Scriptures and speak the truth and the Holy Spirit does the saving. He convicts of sin.

And the greatest witness is just living a life that is consistent with the gospel. Paul said, ***you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake***. He hasn't been saying one thing and living completely contrary to that. His life was a witness to these Thessalonians. They saw the power of the Holy Spirit at work in Paul, Silas, and Timothy. They saw a genuine love for the people that flowed out of the love they had for God.

It's been said: 'The best sermon is a holy life.'

What kind of sermon is your life preaching?

We'll see next week in the remainder of the chapter how these Thessalonians were living a life that revealed the power of God and modeled the good news.

Points to Ponder:

1. Live your calling, not your comfort.

You're in Christ before you're in this world. Let your identity in Him shape your priorities, not your surroundings.

2. Let your faith show, your love serve, and your hope be steadfast.

This church was known for its work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope. Don't just say you believe; live what you believe.

3. Depend on God's power, not human performance.

The gospel came "in power and in the Holy Spirit." What God begins in the Spirit He doesn't want you to maintain in the flesh. Rely on Him.