

STUDY 1 – 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

The important thing to notice about chapter 1 is that it is a prayer! You'll remember from our introduction evening to the letter the context to this letter. Paul and Silas have spent just over 3 Sabbath days in Thessalonica preaching and teaching, and there had been great success amongst Jews and Gentiles. However there was also great opposition, and they had had to leave the city secretly and reluctantly. Paul had particularly grieved to leave this young church especially as they had to face the hostility of the Jewish authorities and he was desperate to hear news of their progress. As we'll see when we get to chapter 3 he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to find out about them, and he returned with good news of their progress. This news prompts the whole letter, and this opening prayer in particular.

Verse 1 names Paul, Silas and Timothy, the missionary team who are together at the time Paul pens the letter. The letter begins with what appears to be a standard address "To the church....." but in the light of what Paul goes on to write this statement is very significant. The fact that the Thessalonian church is growing and maturing is evidence of the source of their life – the fact they are "in the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ", part of the life giving vine Jesus speaks about in John 15. They have grace and peace, which come through the Lord Jesus.

The passion of Paul's prayer is noticeable as you read it. Don't let this become a stale piece of prose!! Note the words "always" and "continually" in verses 2 and 3. Paul loved this church, and was full of joy and relief at their progress.

But how could he be so sure they were progressing? Verse 3 begins the answer. Notice he begins with their response to the gospel before he goes on to speak of God's work. The two go hand in hand, and we must never so stress one that we ignore the other. Yes, the activities of verse 3 come because God is working in the Thessalonians, but when God is at work that will be shown by the fact that we are!

The signs of life in the Thessalonians are faith, love and hope. Paul often uses this trio of words in his letter to speak of Christian experience and activity, but what he stresses here is what they produce. True faith works, real love labours,

gospel hope endures (the words “produced by”, “prompted by” and “inspired by” are not in the original and are added by the NIV translators). As we continue through the letter we’ll see what Paul means by these things. Faith is not a vague feeling, but the right response to the objective content of the gospel (1:9-10), love is not the warm and fuzzy feeling, but the relationship we have with God and his people which is expressed by putting them first (see 4:1-10), and hope is the confident expectation of Christ’s return which brings in the completion of his work (see 4:13 onwards). But the important fact in 1:3 is that if we have faith, love and hope, they will impact on our behaviour now.

Paul then moves on to show that those things are evidence of a deeper reality which is God’s electing work. God has chosen this church. This fact is the reason why this is a prayer to God, not a sycophantic letter to the Thessalonians. Their progress in the gospel is because of God and his work, so he should be praised. The fact Paul praises God should therefore give the Thessalonians encouragement to keep going.

In verses 5-6 Paul reminds the Thessalonians of how they received the gospel. When they heard Paul preach they did not just hear words (vital as words are in preaching), but God was at work. In the context this seems to mean that God was at work in the Thessalonians, as the emphasis is on their response. God transformed their hearts and unblinded their eyes to hear his words and respond rightly in faith and repentance and joy to the gospel. Though this cost them dearly, and they faced great suffering for doing so, they could not be stopped. This is the Parable of the sower in action! Their response did not stop with a changed mind, it affected their behaviour as they started following Christ just as Paul and his team did.

Just as the fourth seed in the fertile ground in that parable produces a great harvest, so did the Thessalonian church. Another great evidence of God at work in them was that they did not keep the gospel to themselves. Although they were an infant church, they modelled what it meant to respond to Christ to the world around, and they spread the Lord’s message (verse 8). They were doing just what Paul and his team were doing (see 1:5-6), and the gospel was passed on.

In verses 9 and 10 we get a report of the message they were passing on, and the way they had responded to it. Notice how God centred the gospel is – they had turned from serving idols to serve the true and living God. Notice the centrality of the resurrection and the second coming. Notice also why the gospel is needed – not to deal with our felt needs, but to deal with the fact we are all going to face the coming wrath of God. Notice also that we know we’ve responded rightly to this message not when we assent to the fact, but when we “serve” God (re-emphasising the truth of verse 3).

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

How does Paul identify the church he is writing to? Why is that important (verse 2)?

How would you describe the tone of this prayer? (Perhaps quickly look at 3:1-6 to see the circumstances of Paul writing it).

If we have real faith, love and hope, what will that look like in our lives (verse 3)?

How did the Thessalonians respond to the gospel, and why did that give Paul confidence that they were chosen by God (verses 4-6)?

How would you use verses 7 and 8 to challenge a church or a Christian who believed they were “faithful” but not concerned about reaching others with the gospel?

Look at the description of the Thessalonians response to the gospel in verses 9 and 10. What is the gospel they heard? What are its main features? What was their response? How are we tempted to minimise any parts of this today (in either the gospel or our response to it).