

Paul's First Letter to Thessalonica
Living in God's Will
Lesson 1

This is the first letter to the Thessalonians and it was the first of Paul's letters. Paul wrote this letter while he was living in Corinth during the early period of his residence there in A.D. 52. We find this referenced in Acts 18:8 –11.

Timothy has just returned to Paul in Corinth coming from Thessalonica Macedonia. He brings Paul news of the church in Thessalonica.

Timothy had been sent to Thessalonica by Paul while the missionary team was in Athens.

Acts 18:1-5 After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. ²And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, ³and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working; for by trade they were tent-makers. ⁴And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. ⁵But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul *began* devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.



1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

Paul was surely thrilled to see Timothy and hear about life in Thessalonica. Upon hearing Timothy's report, Paul writes this letter, his first letter.

Timothy was a convert of Paul. His mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, are mentioned for their piety in 2 Tim. 1:5. We know nothing of his father but that he was a Greek according to Acts 16:1. Timothy is first brought into notice at the time of Paul's second visit to Lystra in Acts 16:2, where he probably resided, and where it seems he was converted during Paul's first visit to that place, according to 1 Tim. 1:2 and 2 Tim. 3:11. The apostle having formed a high opinion of his "own son in the faith," arranged that he should become his companion in Acts 16:3, and therefore circumcised him, so that he might conciliate the Jews.

Also with Paul was Silvanus. Silvanus is called Silas in the book of Acts. Silas is also a Jew and a Roman citizen.

In the very beginning of this letter we meet Paul's theology about Christ. "Lord Jesus Christ," is used by Paul. This was the "Jesus of history," the real and personal name of the Man of Galilee, whom Paul had once persecuted in Acts 9:5, but whom Paul, after his conversion, proclaimed to be "the Messiah."

[Acts 9:5](#) And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

This position and theology never changed with Paul.

[1 Thessalonians 1:2-5](#) We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; ³constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; ⁵for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Paul is going to pray for the people in the church at Thessalonica. He is going to pray for them and constantly give thanks because of three specific qualities about them. Here are those three qualities as they relate to the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Their work of faith – consisted of the activities that their faith in Jesus Christ has propelled them to do. Romans 6 – 8 teaches us that we are justified by faith, but faith produces works. This is not a new concept in the scripture. It was taught by John the Baptist, Jesus, and James.
2. Their labor of love – consisted of the toil or striving in Godly love. It is interesting that we find in Revelation 14:13 that one day the saints will cease this labor and the fruit of their labors will follow them to heaven.

[Rev. 14:13](#) And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!' " "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them."

3. Their steadfastness of hope – consisted of the endurance inspired by hope. Regardless of the setbacks and delays that they had faced and would continue to face, the Thessalonians were holding out, being patient in their hopes for their future. The church in Thessalonica was not an old church yet they had already grown to know the need to exercise the all important virtue of hope.

Here are the "all important virtues" – faith, hope, and love. Paul mentions them other places in the Scripture.

[1 Cor. 13:13](#) But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ had been delivered to the Thessalonians. It was delivered in these ways:

1. Word
2. Power
3. By the Holy Spirit
4. With full conviction
5. By the testimony of Paul and his fellow servants.

They had heard the word! They had felt the power of the word! It was delivered by God Himself. It was a gospel of conviction. It was a gospel of which Paul and his peers were living proof and examples. They too were steadfast in their understanding of the gospel for the sake of the Thessalonians!

[1 Thes. 1:6-10](#) You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. ⁹For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The Thessalonians had well received the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ from Paul. The lessons were deeply engrained in their lives. Everywhere the Thessalonian church members traveled, they were a true living example of the gospel that had changed their lives. They were living proof of a loving God to a watching world.

As Paul met new people who had already come in contact with the Thessalonians, Paul was overwhelmed by the testimony of their witness to the watching world. The Thessalonians had made a 180 degree turn from their old life. They were sold out to the Lord of lords and the true King of kings.

In verse 10 Paul uses the phrase "the wrath to come." At first glance we might think that Paul is speaking about the time of the tribulation after the snatching away of the church. That same topic will be covered later in this letter, but here it seems that Paul is speaking of another event. In the big picture, everyone who has rejected Christ will be doomed to the wrath of eternal punishment. In the same sense, everyone who has accepted Jesus as their Savior will be exempt from the eternal wrath, living eternally with the Lord Jesus. Eternal life with the Lord, where ever He is, becomes our reward for putting our faith and trust in Him. So it was with the Thessalonians, they were exempt from the wrath of hell and eternal punishment because of their trust in the Lord.

[1 Thessalonians 2:1-2](#) For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, ²but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.

It is clear that verses 1 and 2 focus on the importance of Paul's visit to the Thessalonians just a few years before. The impact of that visit changed their lives and the lives of countless people who lived in the area around them. The testimony that Paul ascribed to them in chapter 1 affirms that fact. Remember the words of Paul:

[1 Thessalonians 1: 8](#) For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. [9](#) For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,

Paul's influence for the gospel of Jesus in Thessalonica was not in vain in any sense of the word. But more than that, the reception of the gospel from Paul by the Thessalonians was a welcomed comfort compared to the reception he had just left in Philippi. Philippi, up to this point, was still a great disappointment.

I think it is important that we remember what happened in Philippi. Here's the text from that event. Read Acts 16:11 – 40 and enjoy the story!

[1 Thessalonians 2:3-4](#) For our exhortation does not *come* from error or impurity or by way of deceit; [4](#) but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts.

The heart of Paul's words focus on the source of his encouragement. His encouragement does not come from the Thessalonians or any other man. His encouragement comes from God and God alone.

[1 Thessalonians 2:5-6](#) For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed-- God is witness-- [6](#) nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.

Since Paul's encouragement came from God and God alone, the words of men meant nothing to Paul. It is for that reason that Paul and his associates could present the gospel purely, forthrightly, directly, succinctly, and honestly. When the desire for man's glory is taken out of the picture, and the focus is solely on God's approval, the heart of the message being delivered is pure and truthful. Paul and his associates had every right to assert themselves over the Thessalonians, but they did not.

[1 Thessalonians 2:7](#) But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing *mother* tenderly cares for her own children.

When Paul and his associates came to the Thessalonians the first time, they treated them in a loving and caring way. The text states, "like a nursing mother tenderly caring for her children." Paul cared for the Thessalonians like they were nursing children. Even though he was addressing an audience of adults at Thessalonica, he knew they had no knowledge of the Lord at first and were like newborn babes when they came to the Lord during Paul's visit. He

nursed them along like babes. He did not expect them to care for him; on the contrary, he cared for them.

[1 Thessalonians 2:8](#) Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.

The love that was shared between the Thessalonians and Paul must have been a bond that can only be described and understood in the relationship that parents have with their children. Paul had an investment in the Thessalonians like a parent's investment in their children. That investment brings a bond of love that little can shatter or break. The best part about this is that the Thessalonians loved Paul just as much as he loved them!

[1 Thessalonians 2:9](#) For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, *how* working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

Very few children truly know the hardship and labor that the parent goes through to provide and care for them. Only when they become adults and have their own children does the reality set into their minds and they begin to respect the struggles that their parents must have gone through. The same is the case with Paul and the Thessalonians except that these were adults that were aware of Paul's own struggles. While sharing the gospel and nursing the Thessalonians to maturity in Christ, Paul provided for his own self by laboring as a tentmaker. Paul was a bi-vocational minister. He did not have the luxury of being able to minister the gospel 100% of his time. If Paul wanted to eat, Paul had to work! Yes, there were some that provided an offering to Paul, but on the whole, Paul was on his own. He had to make a living to provide for his temporal needs just like you and me. Paul gave more to the Thessalonians than they ever gave to him. He was never a burden to them.

[1 Thessalonians 2:10-12](#) You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; ¹¹just as you know how we *were* exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father *would* his own children, ¹²so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Paul uses the words, "devotedly, uprightly, and blamelessly" as he speaks about his ministry to the Thessalonians. His behavior with them was above reproach, impeccable, and Godly!

Paul also uses three words as he addresses his work with the Thessalonians. Notice the words "exhorting, encouraging, and imploring." These are the same three things that every parent should do with their children as they attempt to raise them in the fear and admiration of the Lord. Paul was doing just that! Paul was a spiritual parent to the Thessalonians! It should be the goal of every parent to raise their children into a maturity that allows them to be responsible adults in the world in which they live. When speaking of spiritual things, the desire of the spiritual parent is the same. Each child of God must be trained to be a spiritually mature child of God. That maturity includes the essence of being worthy to be called a child of God with all its benefits and rewards.

[1 Thessalonians 2:13](#) And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted *it* not as the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

The Thessalonians had obtained the maturity needed to be worthy of God. They had willingly accepted the word of God from Paul and grown in that word. The word of God had changed their lives.

[1 Thessalonians 2:14-16](#) For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they *did* from the Jews, ¹⁵who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, ¹⁶hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

Now we begin to see a reason for Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. The Thessalonians were suffering under the same persecution that the Christian Jews had suffered. The first followers of Christ were Jews. Yet, it was their own Jewish tribal members who were persecuting them for their belief in the Lord. So too with the Gentile believers in Thessalonica, their own Gentile countrymen were persecuting them for their beliefs in the Lord. Persecution against those who belong to the Lord comes from all people, of all nations, of every tribe and tongue, who fail to accept the Word of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. When the government fails to hear the Word of the Lord, and when they persecute those who believe in the Word of God, their sin heaps up against them. The sin that will cause a person to face an eternity of punishment is rooted in the rejection of the Word of God and the message of that Word which is found in Jesus Christ. The Thessalonians who had accepted the Word and were facing their own fellow countrymen who wanted to deny them of their choice to follow the Lord Jesus.

[1 Thessalonians 2:17-18](#) But we, brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while-- in person, not in spirit-- were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. ¹⁸For we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, more than once-- and yet Satan thwarted us.

Paul had not forgotten the Thessalonians! While he could not be with them physically, he was with them spiritually! They were his children in the Lord and he never forgot to thank God for them. They were facing an onslaught of persecution and he wished to be there with them, but Paul was facing his own persecutions. "More than once" Paul says he wanted to go to Thessalonica, but it just was not possible.

[1 Thessalonians 2:19-20](#) For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? ²⁰For you are our glory and joy.

Notice that Paul uses the three words "hope or joy or crown." To these three words he links the word "exhortation." Who is it that Paul wants to be "exhorted in hope, or exhorted in joy, or exhorted in a crown?" It is the Thessalonians! Paul is proud of them! Paul knows that the

Thessalonians are one of his crowns that he will be able to lay at the feet of Jesus at His coming! The Thessalonians are Paul's glory and joy! To Paul, they represent one of the best gifts he could offer the Lord. May it be that we all have a glory and joy in the form of a people whose lives have been changed for the Lord because of our selfless work for Him.

[1 Thessalonians 3:1-5](#) Therefore when we could endure *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone; ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, ³so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. ⁴For indeed when we were with you, we *kept* telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. ⁵For this reason, when I could endure *it* no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain.

Paul had evidently not heard from the Thessalonians in a while and therefore he sent word that he wanted to hear how their journey in the Lord was progressing. As the text states, Paul was afraid that the Thessalonians might have fallen into some sort of sinful state.

[1 Thessalonians 3:6-8](#) But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, ⁷for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; ⁸for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

The report was encouraging and relief came to Paul with the arrival of Timothy and the condition of the church in Thessalonica. The church had not missed a beat. They were still plodding along in a true and faithful walk with the Lord.

[1 Thessalonians 3:9-10](#) For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, ¹⁰as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

Paul's words are expressing his great joy and thrill that the Thessalonians have not wavered in their faith. They are one of Paul's successful ministries. They are the fruit of Paul's work in the Lord. Not all of Paul's ministry plants were in the same condition. Some were struggling at every point. Paul just does not know how to explain to the Thessalonians the heartfelt excitement that he has over their faithfulness to the work of the Lord.

[1 Thessalonians 3:11-13](#) Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; ¹²and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also *do* for you; ¹³so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

The only thing Paul can say, and rightfully so, is a prayer for the Godhead to continue guiding the Thessalonians in their work.