



Sunday School Lesson for April 18, 2004.
Released on: April 16, 2004.

Study 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3:13. The Thessalonians' Faith
Questions and answers below.

TIME: A.D. 51
PLACE: from Corinth

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

2 We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;
3 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;
4 Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.
5 For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.
6 And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost:
7 So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.
8 For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.
9 For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye 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, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

6 But now when Timothy came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you:
7 Therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith:
8 For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord.
9 For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God;
10 Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?

Lesson Background

Thessalonica was a city in Macedonia founded by Cassander, an officer of Alexander the Great. It became the chief seaport of Macedonia, and it was a crossroads for trade routes in all directions. In 146 B.C. it became the capital of a Roman province and had a large Roman population as well as a Jewish colony.

The first epistle to the Thessalonians was written by Paul from Corinth about A.D. 51, soon after he had left Thessalonica. He wanted to confirm the converts he had made during his brief stay in the city (Acts 17:1-10). This letter shows that he had taught them most of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith during that short period of time.

Paul and his companions had very fond memories of the Christians in Thessalonica. They were commended for their faith, love, and hope in Christ. They had received the gospel readily and had become followers of the missionaries and of the Lord.

How to Say It

Achaia. Uh-kay-uh
Silvanus. Sil-vay-nus.

Active Faith (1Thessalonians 1:2-10)

Paul's letters, like many other letters written in his day, generally begin with a statement of thanksgiving to the deity for blessings received. The deity to Paul is, of course, the one true God. In 1 Thessalonians 1, Paul uses this thanksgiving to announce a major message of his letter: the authenticity of the Thessalonians' faith is linked to the spread of the gospel. The gospel has not only spread to the Thessalonians, but from them.

1. Was disunity a problem in the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians 1:2)?

The content of the letter begins with Paul and his companions expressing thanks to God for all the Thessalonian believers and saying that they were always mentioned in their prayers. This implied that there were no known disunity in the church in Thessalonica. You will recall that Paul had to deal with factionalism in the Corinthian church when he wrote to believers there (I Cor. 3:1-4).

2. What spiritual successes had believers there achieved (v. 3)?

Paul had fond memories of the Thessalonian Christians because of their spiritual successes. Paul now explains exactly what he gives thanks for.

Faith, love, and hope provoke constant activity, like Paul's constant prayer. Elsewhere Paul sharply distinguishes "faith" and works to stress that salvation is not earned by what we do, but is given freely by God to those with faith in Christ. Here he stresses the other side of the faith equation: real faith always produces real works (Ephesians 2:8-10; James 2:26).

"Labor of love" builds on the work of faith. Paul has in mind the way that the Thessalonian Christians, prompted by God's love, put love into action by sacrificing

time, energy, and money for others. Genuine love is more than saying, "You were always on my mind." Like genuine faith, it produces action.

In the New Testament, "hope" is more than just an optimistic wish for the future, as in "I hope that the weather gets better soon." Rather, hope expresses a confident expectation about the future, based on trust in God's promises. Paul connects hope to "patience," meaning steadfastness or endurance (2 Thessalonians 1:4). Our confidence that God always delivers His people makes any problem something that we can endure.

3. Paul constantly prayed for his new converts. Why is it important that we do the same? What methods can we use?

Satan likes to attack Christians at their most vulnerable times. "Babes in Christ" are his prime targets. Prayer not only helps keep Satan away, it also reminds us of our need to help in tangible ways.

Some churches promote prayer by publishing names of new Christians in bulletins and church newsletters. Such churches might do this for up to a year so that all members can be praying for them. (Do this only with the person's permission, however.) Every leader of the church should have the names and needs of new Christians recorded in personal prayer journals.

4. What confidence did Paul have regarding his readers in Thessalonica (v. 4)?

As he gives thanks for their faithfulness, Paul assures his readers that, by receiving the gospel, they have genuinely become God's people. Not only are they now Paul's brethren, they are beloved. They are the objects of God's favor, like Old Testament Israel (e.g., Psalms 60:5; 108:6).

Election is a term that has incited much doctrinal controversy! When placed alongside other Scriptures such as Acts 10:43 and Ephesians 1:4,5, our best interpretation is that all who respond with genuine faith to the gospel and its plan of salvation are the chosen people of God. God's "elect" do not believe because they were chosen; rather, they are chosen because they believe. God has foreknown our belief from eternity past. That's how He can decide in advance who will be in Heaven, and who won't.

5. The gospel came to the Thessalonians in words but also in what else (vs. 5,6)?

The good news of salvation had not come to the Thessalonians merely in the form of words. It had been backed up by the power of God made manifest through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The founding of the church in Thessalonica is recorded in Acts 17:1-4. Paul reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue for three Sabbaths, winning some of them to Christ, along with a large number of devout Greeks and several of the chief women of the city.

In saying that the Thessalonians knew what manner of men they had been, Paul was reminding them that the missionaries had been sincere and not hypocritical. In other words, their preaching was backed up by their honest behavior. They (including Paul) had shown themselves to be utterly sincere and completely sold out for Jesus, and the Thessalonians can remember that. Their genuineness is another source of confidence that the gospel is for real.

When the new converts in Thessalonica had heard the gospel and seen it in practice, they had become imitators of the missionaries and of the Lord they represented. This had caused them considerable persecution, led by unbelieving Jews. Using thugs, called "lewd fellows of the baser sort" (Acts 17:5), they had set the city in an uproar. They had hauled Jason, along with others, before the city officials to be accused of turning the world upside down. Paul and Silas were sent out by night to go on to the town of Berea (vs. 6-10). In I Thessalonians 3:2-5 Paul also referred to afflictions suffered by the Thessalonian believers.

The latter part of I Thessalonians 1:6 says that the believers in Thessalonica received the word of God "with joy of the Holy Ghost." In spite of the persecution they experienced, they considered the gospel to be well worth the suffering involved in accepting it.

6. How did the Thessalonian believers become examples to others (vs. 7,8)?

One of the signs that the Thessalonian church was genuine was the desire of its people to be examples to all other believers in Macedonia and Achaia, the names of the northern and southern parts of the Greek peninsula. The whole church became an example, or model, for other churches to follow.

The sounding out of the gospel from Thessalonica may have been accomplished in various ways. Some of the believers must have made trips to other locations to witness for Christ. Others may have carried their testimonies with them as they pursued their business interests along the trade routes that spread out in all directions. Still others may have won travelers to Christ while they were in the city and then encouraged them to witness when they traveled on again.

It seemed that everywhere Paul and his colleagues went, the faith of the Thessalonian believers toward God had already been reported; so the missionaries did not have to repeat it.

7. Paul notes how a seemingly insignificant people became powerful examples of faith to others. How have you been influenced by such people? How have you passed this influence on to others?

Answers will be highly individual. Many will speak of parents who, though just "ordinary" people, showed day in and day out how to live with faith through trials, fears, and tears. Some will mention seemingly "no-name" preachers, teachers, youth leaders, and church members whose steady examples, steadfast interest, words of encouragement, cheerful spirits, considerate and thoughtful deeds, and regular prayers made (and make) profound differences in how they live.

With the power of the Holy Spirit within us, there is no reason all of us "ordinary" Christians cannot have extraordinary influence on the people around us. There are many opportunities to do kind deeds to hurting people, and we have no excuse for not making a lasting impact on someone's life.

8. What does the mention of turning from idols to serve God tell us about the makeup of the Thessalonian church (v. 10)?

Paul here mentioned others who were bringing reports of what had happened in Thessalonica. Apparently most of the Thessalonian believers were Gentiles. Jews and proselytes to Judaism would not have been involved in idol worship, but pagan

Gentiles would. People were reporting how these had turned from idols to serve the living and true God.

While active in service, the new believers waited with a sure hope for the second coming of God's Son from heaven. This was Jesus, whom God had raised from the dead following His crucifixion and burial so that those who trust in Him can be delivered from the wrath of judgment to come on sinners. The Thessalonians' faith in what Christ had done the first time He came to earth motivated them to believe that He would come again and do what was prophesied.

Growing Faith

(1 Thessalonians 3:6-10)

In the verses between 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 3:6 Paul recounts his labors among the Thessalonians and summarizes the circumstances that have kept him from returning. He stresses the example of his own faithfulness, the reality of hardship for God's people, and God's ongoing work in the midst of that hardship.

Recent events help Paul make his point. Concerned for the welfare of the Thessalonian church, Paul sent Timothy to visit those Christians. Timothy has now returned to Paul with an encouraging report.

9. What kept Paul from visiting Thessalonica when he wished?

Timothy had returned from his visit to Thessalonica with good tidings for Paul and Silas and anyone else who had been concerned about the church undergoing persecution there. This did much to alleviate the frustration Paul and Silas must have felt when they had been hindered by Satan from visiting Thessalonica themselves (2:18).

10. What did Timothy report to Paul and Silas about the church in Thessalonica ((1 Thessalonians 3:6)?

Timothy came back with a report that the believers in Thessalonica were strong in their faith and in their charity, or love. We deduce from this that they were holding firmly to the Christian doctrines they had been taught and that their love for God and others was still operating and vibrant.

Paul and his colleagues were also encouraged by the fact that the believers in Thessalonica remembered them with affection and had as great a desire to see them again as their mentors did to see them.

When souls are won to Christ, people are saved from perdition and given hope of eternal bliss. A secondary result is that lifelong friends are made of those who were once on the wrong road and alienated from God and from believers. Paul, Silas, and Timothy rejoiced in having a deep bond of love connecting them to those who turned to Christ under their ministry. We can do the same. Those who draw closer to Christ should draw closer to each other as well.

11. Thinking about Timothy's encouraging news, how might one of your previous ministers be encouraged (or discouraged) by news of the progress (or regress) of your church since he's been gone?

We can evaluate progress (or lack thereof) partially in terms of numbers: attendance trends, baptisms, and transfers of membership are examples. Attitudes such as enthusiasm, love for one another, and harmony are more difficult to measure, but are no less vital. Which areas your students mention will reveal what each thinks is relatively more important.

It is important not to allow this discussion to turn into a negative gripe session. To keep the conversation constructive, you can suggest to your students that they think in terms of where the church should be six months from now, and what your church should start doing right now to ensure that that report would be an encouraging one. Then get to it!

12. How did Timothy's report affect Paul and Silas (vs. 7,8)?

Paul said that he and his companions were comforted by the faith of the Thessalonian believers, which: was helpful in balancing the stress they felt in the midst of affliction. Things had not gone well for Paul in Corinth. He had been strongly opposed by unbelieving Jews in Corinth and had to be encouraged by God in a vision that many souls would be won in that city (Acts 18:4-11).

Timothy's report that believers in Thessalonica were remaining faithful lifted the spirits of the missionaries. In saying that they lived if the Thessalonians stood fast in their faith, Paul's language here seems extreme, but in fact it is very reasonable. His burden of concern is like death to him, so receiving a good report about the Thessalonians is like new life. Now that he knows of their faithfulness, he counts his joy as an example of the new life that Christians have.

Christian lay people today should realize that their pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and other leaders are human and need similar encouragement to continue in their ministries. They should be told periodically that their work is appreciated and is bearing fruit. A builder can admire the tangible thing he builds. An artist can admire his painting. Christian leaders have to be content with noticing spiritual development in their people, which is often shown in intangible ways.

13. In their excitement some Christians overstate how "rosy" the new life in Christ is. What can we do to avoid misleading new or potential believers in this way?

Honesty is important. That means we must make an effort to give a realistic picture of the Christian life. We can emphasize several things. First, trials and suffering are common to every human being, including believers. Second, some trials (persecution, slander, etc.) will come because we are Christian. Third, God uses hardships to improve our character and make us stronger. Fourth, God also promises us strength to see us through our trials and provides an eternal hope that makes our temporary suffering bearable (See Romans 5:3,4; 8:17,18; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-9; 4:13-17; 5:10).

14. Why did Paul say he wanted to perfect what was lacking in his readers' faith (vs. 9,10)?

God's grace is always so great that His people can never repay it (v. 9). Paul reflects on that truth now as he thinks of his "joy" because of the Thessalonians' faithfulness. The people of God know that the greatest joy is seeing God at work in His people. For Paul this joy is almost like the joy of Heaven!

Paul longs to be reunited with the Thessalonians. Christians naturally feel a "holy restlessness" to be reunited when separated from their spiritual family. The great reunion is in Heaven, of course, but God gives us a foretaste of that reunion whenever we gather as His people.

Although the Thessalonians have been faithful, they have not "arrived." True Christians are always growing Christians, and Paul wants to contribute to the Thessalonians' growth-to perfect their faith. Do you think you have "arrived" in your Christian life, or do you admit that you have growing to do as well?

Until God directed them back to Thessalonica, Paul's desire was that the believers there would increase and abound in love toward one another and all people. This would help them move toward establishing their hearts in holiness and make them guiltless on the day of Christ's second coming with all His saints (1 Thess. 3:11-13).

CONCLUSION

The Eye of Faith

In a world where sin seems to hold sway, God's people can easily feel lonely and discouraged. But the eye of faith sees more than just outward appearances. It sees God's work going forward in the lives of God's people. It sees past the hardships and disappointments, and recognizes the victories. It looks forward to the final victory. Seeing those things, it yields a life of faithful service: faith, love, and hope put into action.

PRAYER

Father, help us to walk in the faithful path of the Thessalonians, now long gone. And may others walk in our faithful path, long after we are gone, until His return. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"...be thou faithful unto death" (Revelation 2:10).

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

The next lesson takes us to the heart of Paul's message to the Thessalonians with his teaching on the Lord's coming. Students can prepare by reading 1 Thessalonians 4:1 through 5:28.

I hope you enjoyed this week's lesson !