

Session 1: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

1 Paul, Silas^[a] 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 labor 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.

Main Idea: When we receive the gospel, God's Spirit enables us to follow Jesus with perseverance, joy, and power.

Head Change: To know that our faithful obedience can encourage others in their faith.

Heart Change: To feel the joy of being a disciple of Jesus despite the challenges our faith brings.

Life Change: To joyfully embrace a life of active obedience to God.

Open Who was your childhood hero? What did you admire about him or her?

Most of us as children admired certain people whose qualities or accomplishments we wanted to achieve ourselves. We want to be like the people we look up to—sometimes to the point that we imitate their words, actions, and goals.

As the apostle Paul begins his letter to the church in Thessalonica, he remembers how they became imitators of the apostles who brought the gospel to them. In this session, Ben Stuart, pastor of Passion City Church in Washington, D.C., explores how the gospel message changed the Thessalonians so profoundly, and how it can change us too.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10.

Watch

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Ben Stuart's teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions.

What are the four characteristics of a person in God's family?

When we respond to the gospel message, what does it do in our lives?

Show Session 1: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 (16 minutes).

Ben Stuart opened his teaching with important context for us to know as we study this letter from the apostle Paul. Thessalonica was a young church and dealt with issues that sound all too familiar to us—sex, work, Christ's return, and God's will. What do you think of the fact that the earliest Christians needed advice on these topics? In what ways can you relate to them?

Paul had a history with the church in Thessalonica. He founded the church but was forced to leave when opposition arose that threatened his life. Though he forged close relationships with the new believers there, Paul was unable to lead and mentor them for long. He wrote to them to celebrate their steadfastness and encourage them to continue living boldly despite persecution.

Thessalonians 1:1.

Paul opened his letter with a greeting and a blessing, which included “to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father . . .” (1:1). To be “in God,” Ben said, means to be enveloped or surrounded by God as if we were within a sphere, not alone or isolated in our faith. How does hearing that God remains with and near and around you encourage your faith?

Thessalonians 1:2–3.

Paul and his protégés, Timothy and Silas, thank God for the Thessalonians in their prayers. They were invested in the little church that was thriving, even while surrounded by a hostile culture. The churches we belong to must also strive for godliness within a culture that does not know or value God. What do

your prayers for your specific church sound like? What might you tell or ask God regarding the American church at large?

Paul's thanksgiving came from reports of the church's faithful and enduring good works, which were evidence of the Thessalonians' growing maturity in the faith. To what extent do you think of good works as evidence of strong faith? How do faith and works go together?

The Thessalonians lived out the primary virtues of the Christian faith: faith, hope, and love. Paul described their work and labor and endurance in spiritual terms. Similarly, our behavior reflects our spiritual soundness. In what ways can you identify your motives for doing good? How does hope help you endure opposition? To what degree does your faith influence your everyday work?

Thessalonians 1:4–6.

Ben laid out four ways to know if we are part of God's family from this passage: God chooses us, the gospel comes to us, it convicts us, and our lives change. Paul knew that God had chosen the Thessalonians because he could see that the gospel had come to them in power. Their lives were demonstrating the impact of the gospel they had heard. It wasn't just words—they were living out the Christian life. What do we communicate to others when we live out what we say we believe?

People can easily recognize hypocrisy. When they see a disconnect between our stated beliefs and our behavior, they may doubt that our faith has any truth to it. In Paul's words, receiving the gospel in word only is not enough. Our response to God's Word reveals that God has truly chosen. In what ways does your life show others evidence of your stated beliefs? In what areas of your life do you struggle to actively practice your faith?

We tend to discuss faith in personal terms, but Paul's letter addresses a community of believers. Every time he says "you" we should read it as "you all." Together they were displaying faith, hope, and love. In what ways do you see your church displaying the truth of the gospel as a community? If you were Paul writing to your church, which behaviors would assure you that, as a whole, your church had truly bought into the gospel and was empowered by the Spirit to reflect Jesus?

The Thessalonians demonstrated their sincere faith by imitating Paul in that, despite persecution, they joyfully welcomed the message of Christ. Opposition could not convince them to give up on Christ—difficulty made them latch on to the hope and assurance they found in him. What kind of opposition to your faith have you experienced? How do you define persecution, and how does that definition compare to your experiences? What has kept you willing to endure hostility and remain close to God?

Thessalonians 1:7–8.

News of the Thessalonians' faithfulness began to spread throughout the region. They became an inspiring example of what God can do through obedient followers during persecution. How important is it to you to have an example you can look to when you face challenges? In what ways have inspiring examples of faith carried you through a difficult time?

Thessalonians 1:9–10.

Ben noted that Thessalonica was an important economic center with a booming trade in idols. Idols were handmade statues representing a deity people worshipped "gods." The people believed these deities made unique promises, offering them what they were lacking like health, prosperity, and peace. While we do not carve deities from blocks of wood and call them gods, we have the same impulse to worship things other than the true God. But just as the Thessalonians turned away from idols, we can trust and seek God to meet our needs. What are some of your most pressing needs, and how do you tend to meet them? What role does your faith play in helping you find fulfillment?

Ben said, we "turned from finding your significance and importance in things to finding them in God—a God you were truly made to serve, a God you were made to wait on, a God who truly can deliver you." Just as the Thessalonians turned from their idols to serve the living and true God, so can we. If you've figured out your own idols, what has revealed those to you? What strategies, verses, or prayers can help you turn away from them and toward God?

The gospel brings hope for today and the future because we have the Spirit with us now and we know Jesus will return. How does your expectant hope in Jesus affect your daily life now? If someone asked you why you live the way you do—with integrity and joy—how would you answer them?

Paul's letter begins with an overflow of gratitude and affection for the church he had to leave behind. His excitement about their steadfast faith in his absence brought him great joy, and he praised their godly example. What could it look like to encourage those around you through your example of faithful, loving, and hopeful living?

Last Word

Paul's letter began with enthusiastic encouragement, telling the small church surrounded by a hostile culture that news of their faithfulness had spread across the region. Their joyful obedience to Christ was noticed and applauded by Paul, his friends, and other churches. And what prompted their faithfulness? Knowing the true and living God and patiently waiting for the savior to return.

God himself was their reason for living with joy amid great suffering. He is our reason, as well. When we receive the gospel, we can know the joy that comes from expectant hope in the true God who loves us. As we commit to serving God above all earthly temptations, he will fill us with joy and use our lives to bless others.

1. Paul in Thessalonica

When we study Paul's epistles, it is important to investigate the cultural and historical context of each church or person to whom he is writing. Understanding the situation and story of the church or person will help us correctly interpret Paul's message. Many times, we can find the story of that person or church in Acts, the historical book of the New Testament. A Bible dictionary, commentary, or resource on cultural backgrounds can also help. Ask questions like:

Where else in Scripture is this audience mentioned?

What was Paul's involvement with this church or person?

What can we know about the conflicts the church or person struggled with?

What questions or concerns was Paul addressing?

In 1 Thessalonians 1:1, Paul mentions Silas (sometimes called Silvanus) and Timothy, two men who had been with Paul on his visit to Thessalonica. Paul and Silas were jailed in Philippi (Acts 16), and, upon their release, met up with Timothy and journeyed on to Thessalonica. Read Acts 17:1–15.

As was his custom, Paul first went to the Jewish community in a city to teach about Jesus. He spoke to those who understood the Hebrew scriptures and spoke a common language. By finding what he had in common with others, Paul was able to introduce the gospel peacefully and reasonably. In Thessalonica, his teaching also led to non-Jews being converted. What can we learn from Paul's evangelistic approach in Thessalonica? What practices could we adopt from his approach?

Not all the Jews were happy, however. Some formed a mob and, when they couldn't find Paul and Silas, grabbed other local converts in the streets. They accused Paul of preaching treason against Caesar, and those who believed him were joining in rebelling against Rome. Instead of facing the death penalty, Paul and Silas slipped out of town under cover of night. Consider the antagonism in Thessalonica toward the new believers Paul left there. How does understanding the context of their city clarify the significance of Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 1:6, where he mentions how, "in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with joy. . .?"

Paul remained concerned about the vitality of the churches he left behind. He either visited them years later or sent others on his behalf to encourage local leaders and members to stay faithful, care for their communities, and remember the true gospel of Christ. After a few years away helping other new churches, Paul sent Timothy back to Macedonia, the region of Thessalonica (Acts 19:22). We will see in 1 Thessalonians 3:6 that Timothy had returned from Thessalonica with an update on the church, which prompted Paul to write this letter. His fatherly concern and affection remained strong despite time and distance.

2. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Living Faithfully

In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Paul affirmed the Thessalonians' vibrant faith in the gospel that had come to them not just in word "but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full assurance." The only way words about Jesus bring new life to hearers is by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul could tell the Spirit was actively working among them because he saw the fruit: their faith, hope, and love. The attitudes and behaviors of everyone who trusts in God and lives according to the Spirit's leading will be evident to onlookers.

Soon after Jesus was born, his parents brought him to the temple to be dedicated. An elderly man surprised them with a holy encounter.

Read Luke 2:25–35.

Simeon was a righteous man, an elder who believed the Scriptures in which God promised to send his Messiah. While he waited for that hope to be fulfilled, “the Holy Spirit was on him” and moved him to go to the temple the day Jesus’s parents brought him in to be dedicated. He obeyed the Spirit’s prompting and was able to experience the answer to his prayers. He saw Jesus, the promised Messiah.

What role did the Holy Spirit play in Simeon’s elderly years? What led to Simeon’s answered prayer?

In a similar way to how he guided Simon, the Spirit leads us to trust Scripture and act in faith. To what actions do you think the Spirit is leading you through our study of 1 Thessalonians so far? How can you imitate Simeon’s faith as you seek to obey the Spirit’s direction?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 and Romans 12:4–8.

The Spirit of God not only leads us to truth and righteousness but also gives special abilities to believers. He distributes different gifts so that we can serve the church in ways that meet various needs. When we exercise our spiritual gifts, we become the vehicles through which the Spirit shows up to work in the church. To what extent have you thought about the way Scripture describes you as one of the ways the Spirit works in the world?

In what ways do you enjoy serving your church? Where could the Spirit be leading you to use the gifts he’s given you?

As you listen for the Spirit’s leading, continue to seek his will from Scripture and wisdom from others that line up with Scripture. Ask him to show you where you can contribute to the life of your church family and the community to which you belong. As you trust and obey the Spirit, may you experience the joy that the Thessalonians felt.

3. The Joy of the Lord in Persecution

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Paul reminded the church of the way they imitated his example and, despite persecution, welcomed him “with joy from the Holy Spirit.” The connection between suffering and joy can be found throughout the apostles’ letters to different churches. What makes us able to experience joy in the middle of suffering?

Read 1 Peter 4:12–14.

Peter exhorted the church to expect testing and suffering for their faith and rejoice that they shared in Christ’s suffering. As Christ’s representatives, the way we suffer says a lot about who Jesus is. Such suffering, Peter said, should be cause for joy, because as Christ was glorified so we shall be. It’s a blessing, he said, to be ridiculed for the name of Christ because it means that the Spirit of God rests on us.

Whether major or minor, in what ways have you suffered for your faith in Christ? To what degree do you remember joy coming in the middle of those situations?

Do you consider your identity as a Christian worth suffering for? Why?

Jesus even told his disciples that suffering would come if they continued to follow him.

Read John 16:19–22.

Jesus compared the hardship his disciples would experience to the pains of childbirth. He encouraged them to consider the reward at the end of their suffering—as a mother endures labor with the expectation of holding her newborn, so we endure trials and suffering with expectant hope for Jesus’s second coming. Our joy is not always happy—laboring mothers often scream through the pain—but underneath we maintain a secure hope that we are assured a lasting reward on the other side. How do you react to the idea of suffering with joy? How do you differentiate between happiness and joy?

In what ways does a close relationship with God—resting in the assurance that his Spirit is with you—empower you to suffer well?

Joy is not a natural response to enduring hardship. It is a supernatural, Spirit-enabled response. The hope of Christ helps us see beyond the hard to the joy he has for us. Keep looking to Jesus for your joy during times of suffering.