

Message #3**I Thessalonians 1:2-6**

How many times have you had someone come to you and say, “I want you to know that I continually thank God for you and the reason I continually thank God for you is because I have seen evidence that God has specifically chosen you and is empowering you?”

Just imagine for a moment that the president of the company for which you work specifically came to you and said, “I want you to know that I always give thanks to God for you.” Now let’s assume that this particular leader is not one who is gullible or swayable and not one given over to frivolous words. It would thrill you. It would lift you up. It would motivate you to want to produce even more.

That is the way Paul opens this letter. In fact, Paul opens the letter with the main thought that we thank God for you and are praying for you, and then he uses a series of subordinate clauses that form one long sentence that runs clear to the end of **verse 10**. What this means is that Paul is stressing you are in our prayers always.

The point Paul is communicating to these Thessalonians is:

**GOD’S LEADERS THANK GOD FOR GOD’S PEOPLE IN THEIR PRAYERS
BECAUSE OF WHAT THE GRACE OF GOD HAS DONE IN THEIR LIVES.**

Now when Paul uses the plural “we” he wanted these Thessalonians to realize that his team was united in praying for this church. There was no disunity whatsoever on the apostolic team. He lets these Thessalonians know two realities about his prayer life:

Prayer Reality #1 - Paul and his associates always gave thanks to God for all the Thessalonians. **1:2a**

Now some of these Thessalonians, as we shall see, had some serious sin issues and struggles. But Paul and his team were still thankful for all of them. This team was united in mind in thanking God for all of these believers. This would indicate that no one was excluded from the prayer of thanksgiving. Spiritual growth and development takes time and Paul was thankful for all who had responded to God’s truth.

As one commentator said, there is no reason to believe that this Thessalonian church consisted of any less than the odd collection of people who form the average congregation today. But this team was non-selective in their prayer for the people of the church. The pronoun “we” would indicate that not only did these leaders pray individually, but they prayed collectively. So these three would get together and specifically pray for the Thessalonians.

This is a good point for all leaders of a church to remember. People at church are at different levels in their spirituality. They have different interests. They are at different economic levels. They have different accomplishments. They have different struggles and pressures. **But they all need prayer.** They all need the leaders of the church praying for them and thanking God for them, just like these three did for the Thessalonians.

All three, Paul, Silas and Timothy, had a close relationship with the Thessalonians and all three could thank God for all the people in this church. Now don't overlook the fact that the thanks was "to God," or as the Greek reads "to the God" (τῷ θεῷ).

What this means is that Paul and his team literally went to the one and only true God, as opposed to all of the false gods in false religions, and they specifically thanked God for the Thessalonians.

The habit of Paul and his team was to pray. He prayed about things that made him glad and things that made him sad. **What Paul and his team illustrate is that it is important that the leaders of a church pray for the church. There is power when leaders pray to the true God in a unified way for the church.**

Prayer Reality #2 - Paul and his associates always made mention of the Thessalonians in their prayers. **1:2b**

This Thessalonian church was on the specific prayer list of Paul, Silas and Timothy. D. Edmond Hiebert believes the fact that Paul said that they "always" prayed for them means that it was their practice to continually pray for them "never skipping a single day" (*The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 43).

Somehow men and women in the church have been duped into believing that getting together just to pray for people is insignificant. I knew of a woman who wanted others to think she was the most spiritual woman at church who would never think of getting together with the other women to pray for the people in the church. In fact, one said, "I need something more than just praying." What that self-centered person didn't realize is that other people need to be prayed for and that is obvious by the way Paul opens this book of Thessalonians. Let me pause here to thank all of the women of the church who meet every Thursday to pray for every family in this church. Let me pause to thank the men who get up early Friday morning to pray for the church and the ministry. Let me pause here to thank the men and women who come Wednesday to pray for the people. This kind of ministry comes right from the Apostle Paul.

Now if leaders like Paul and his team are continually meeting to continually pray and thank God for the members, there must be something for which they can thank God. Paul and his team were not delusional prayer people who would invent things for which they could thank God. They had real, specific collective prayer meetings in which they specifically prayed and thanked God for these people and they had reasons.

The participle “constantly bearing” means that these were things that this apostolic team continually remembered certain things. They always thought about these things and that caused them to thank God.

Now Paul gives some reasons why he thanked God for them. There are two general areas for which this apostolic team thanked God:

THANKFUL AREA #1 – They thanked God remembering their spiritual virtues. **1:3**

When the leaders thought about the Thessalonians, they were thankful because immediately God was working in them and that point was clearly seen in the development of the three key Christian virtues:

Virtue #1 - He continually remembered their work of faith. **1:3a**

Actually the Greek reads “the work of the faith.” This was a very specific faith and it inspired them to do a very specific work. There are different words used for “work” but this one (εργον) specifically has to do with positive work or action based upon their proper faith in Jesus Christ (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 178-179).

Had there not been any true faith, there would not be any true work. Now I think the article “the” is critical. Lots of people are involved in religious works. Lots of people go to church and do all kinds of things based on their faith or what they believe. In fact, when Paul wrote this epistle there were lots of idolatrous religions that people were involved in and they all had their works that people did.

None of that would make Paul and his team thankful. Paul did not thank God that people were involved in religions as if they are all good. He was thankful that these believers were in the true faith system and were involved in all kinds of action because of that. It is not any faith that is good; it is “the” true faith that is good.

This past week a car pulled down my driveway and it turned out to be a carload of Jehovah’s Witnesses. A man got out of his car and I immediately asked “Who do you represent?” He told me Jehovah’s Witness. I said I am not interested in talking to you but I do want to tell you this—you are going door to door propagating a lying heresy and you are going to face the condemnatory wrath of God because of what you are doing. He said, “Well we will see who is right.” I said, “I know I am right and you want to know why?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Their religious leader is dead and Jesus Christ is alive. You deny who Jesus Christ is and I know Him personally. Then you go door to door and try to convince others to believe your lies and you will answer to God and face His condemnation.” With that I turned and walked away.

I was not about to thank God for that carload of religious heretics who are going door to door promoting false religion. I was not about to say, “I am so thankful that you are involved in religious action.” The only way work matters is if it stems from a real, true faith in Jesus Christ.

Virtue #2 - He continually remembered their labor of love. **1:3b**

Again the Greek reads “the labor of the love.” So this is not just any labor and this is not just any love. The word “labor” used here (κοπος) is different than the word “work.” This word specifically has to do with fatiguing work that is troublesome (*Ibid.*, p. 254). So the word “work” has to do with positive work and the word “labor” has to do with negative trouble. The word “love” (αγαπη) is not the sentimental kind of love, but it is the kind of love that chooses the ultimate good and keeps at it even when things are difficult and fatiguing.

These Thessalonians put up with a lot of trouble and negative things that fatigued them because of their love for the Lord. They demonstrated this in a variety of ways. One thing we certainly know from the book of Acts is that the religious leaders put pressure on Jason and others who had supported Paul (Acts 17:6-8).

Now many religions and churches promote a loving toleration for anything and anyone. In fact, one leader who professes to be a Christian just addressed Planned Parenthood and praised abortion as if killing a life God creates is a virtue. Many churches are now involved in promoting and tolerating immoral behavior.

That is not the labor of love Paul is speaking about. Paul is talking about real biblical work that squares with the Word of God that is based on real biblical love for God and for others. You cannot possibly thank God if people are laboring because they love the wrong thing or sinful things.

Virtue #3 - He continually remembered their steadfastness of hope. **1:3c**

Again the Greek reads “the steadfastness of the hope.” So this is not any steadfastness and this is not just any hope. In fact, the hope is spelled out; it is a hope in our Lord Jesus Christ and a specific hope in the presence of God the Father.

This is the second time that Paul uses the three key names for Christ—Lord, Jesus, and Christ, and identifies God the Father. To have any hope of going to heaven, which is the place where Almighty God resides, you must believe truth about Jesus Christ. He is God (Lord), He is Jesus (Savior) and He is Christ (Messiah). **Without this belief you have no hope.**

The Thessalonians had this faith and hope and they remained steadfast in it. The word “steadfastness” (υπομονης) refers to a patient endurance (*Ibid.*, p. 462). These Thessalonians put up with many things because of the hope they had in God the Son and God the Father.

They truly believed that Jesus was God (Lord), He was the Savior (Jesus), and He was the Jewish Messiah (Christ). They also believed that they had the presence of God the Father with them through their relationship with Him.

The end of verse 3 is critical. Paul did not just thank God because of the way he saw them, but because of the way God saw them. God saw their faith, their love and their hope.

THANKFUL AREA #2 – They thanked God remembering their election. **1:4-5**

Paul had not been in this church long, but in the short time he was there, he taught them about the doctrine of election. It is very clear from **verse 4** that Paul wanted these Thessalonians to think in terms of the fact that they had been specifically chosen by God.

In fact, Paul specifically says one of the reasons for which we thank God is because we know that you have specifically been chosen and elected by God. In Ephesians, Paul specifically says that this elective choice was made before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). God chose us before we chose Him (John 15:16; Rom. 9:10-23).

Now people can quibble about this doctrine of election all they want, but when you get right down to it, as Dr. Walvoord observed, the issue comes down to this question–“Who makes the first move in salvation, God or man?” (*I & II Thessalonians*, p. 24). **If you base what you believe on the Bible, the answer is God.**

The word “chosen” (εκλογην) means to specifically choose something and not choose something else (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 140). This word is used six times in the New Testament (Rom. 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28; I Thess. 1:4; II Pet. 1:10). When it is connected to the theme of salvation, it always presents the idea that God makes a specific choice to bring a sinner to salvation. This is what it means and this is what Paul wanted these Thessalonians to realize.

Paul went into all kinds of cities and, comparatively speaking, few, as opposed to many, responded to his grace Gospel. He wanted the believers to realize that their response was due to the fact that God had chosen them.

This doctrine of election is a blessed doctrine. Some believers miss the blessing of it because they think that what God wants them to do is to go through life arguing with God about whom He doesn't choose. What God wants His people to do is to focus on the fact He chose them. You see, this doctrine of election means you are beloved of God and you are part of the brethren or family of God.

Now in the book of I Thessalonians, as we have already observed, a major theme is the prophetic truth of the coming of the Lord. How does the doctrine of election fit into this theme? Well the doctrine of election is that which guarantees the believer will be raptured. The doctrine of election secures the future.

Now grammatically speaking, **verse 5** gives us two assurance points that Paul and his team had concerning their election:

Assurance Point #1 - Those chosen responded to the power of the Gospel. **1:5a**

When a person is truly elect of God, there will be a full assurance and full conviction of the fact that they are a sinner and they need a Savior, and this work will be wrought by the Holy Spirit. Salvation is not simply some emotional experience; it is something that is rooted in the power of the Spirit of God.

Assurance Point #2 - Those chosen responded to the people presenting the Gospel. **1:5b-6**

Notice Paul says “our gospel” came to these Thessalonians. The Gospel of God’s grace does not just mystically or magically show up by a bunch of tracts floating down from heaven. Someone who knows the good news of the grace Gospel must proclaim the good news of the grace Gospel. One commentator said God will never use anyone who doubts grace. As Denney said, God cannot work through a man who doesn’t have a handle on truth.

God elects people to salvation but He uses the proclamation of the Gospel to do it and that Gospel must be proclaimed by somebody who knows the truth. Paul and his team were the ones given the responsibility to take the truth to Thessalonica and those who were chosen responded. There are two ways they responded:

(Response #1) - They recognized true men of God. **1:5b**

These Thessalonians saw a vast difference between Paul and his team and all the other religious people. Their character matched their message. They saw the integrity of these men and how they were willing to endure difficult things to teach them the Word of God. Paul and his team demonstrated they were true men of God by their conduct.

(Response #2) - They imitated true men of God. **1:6**

Now we will address this more next time, but carefully notice where true imitation lies; in “the word.” These Thessalonians saw the focus that Paul and his team had on the Word of God and they imitated it.

They received the Word of God no matter what the trial or trouble; they stay focused on the Word of God because they knew that is how they experienced the joy produced by the Holy Spirit.

This is important. They did not receive the Word of God because they thought it would make them healthy and wealthy. They received the Word of God in the context of much trouble and they demonstrated a joy in the Word, which is clearly produced by the Holy Spirit, which is clearly an indication of election.

These people started taking in the Word of God and applying it to their own lives. It is no wonder Paul could thank God for them. They loved Jesus Christ and they loved the Word of God. Any church with that focus is a church for which we may always give thanks.