
A Commended Church

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

We have a friend who is a pilot of F4 Phantom jets configured for reconnaissance. He has received several medals of commendation for special and unusual service. One was awarded when, in riding in the back seat giving another pilot a check ride, the pilot was killed when a large bird came through the wind screen and hit the pilot full in the face. Ray was able to gain control of the aircraft, and under incredible conditions, return to base, flying from the back seat with few flight instruments, and land the fighter. It was an incredible feat of courage, ability and resourcefulness. He has further been commended with medals for action which cannot even be discussed.

So, I want you to think of this passage as a medal of commendation which God through Paul is awarding the church at Thessalonica. This is a chapter of commendation. Paul writes to say that there are things about them that brought him great joy. In writing these paragraphs, the apostle identifies the qualities in a church which please God and cause that church to be effective *in ways that conform to God's plan and purpose*.

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

In the days of the writing of the Scripture, letters were written following something of a standard form. A salutation identifying the author and the recipients would be followed by a section in which blessings, commendations and connections would be pronounced. Then would come the body of the letter consisting of "matters" which prompted the letter. This would be followed by an ethical section with its exhortations. The letter usually closed with greetings from friends.

The salutation identifies our author as Paul accompanied and assisted by Silas (Silvanus is the Latin form of his name) and Timothy. The recipients are the church located geographically in Thessalonica and spiritually in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The paragraphs in chapter one are the commendation and connection portion of this letter. Paul commends them by expressing his confidence in their salvation and by examining the character of their sanctification.

The Confidence in their Salvation

(v.2-5)

The letter opens as do most of them with an emphasis on prayer. The confidence he has in their conversion motivates Paul to pray for them.

Prayer is important in ministry. Let us not miss this. Thanksgiving and petitioning for others is an effective ministry on behalf of others. The power of ministry never rises higher than the prayers for and in that ministry.

Prayer was needed by the church. Too often, in the midst of our skills and our talents and our programs, we do not value prayer. We think that what we are doing is the essence of ministry and prayer is useful but not significant priority. We must make prayer the visible engine of all our ministry.

Expression of that Confidence**(v.3-4)**

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Due to the Fruit of their Salvation**(v.3)**

The faith, love, hope triad occurs so often in Paul's writings. It is the heartbeat of truly saved people. These concepts are fleshed out in the lives of the church.

Work of faith - how what you believe is being put to work. Can you be commended by specific things you are doing because of what you believe and would not do if your belief was different?

Labor of love - how your love is being expressed in laborious toil and sacrificial deeds. Can you be commended for hard labor which cost you much on behalf of those you love?

Steadfastness of hope - how your hope, that which is in Christ who is in heaven, is causing you to endure now. Could you be singled out for simply keeping on going because you are focused on Christ in heaven?

How our hearts ought to be encouraged as they resonate with resounding "yes" to this. Paul's confidence is expressed not only in his remembering and reflecting on the fruit of their salvation, but knowing the root of that salvation.

Due to the Root of their Salvation**(v.4)**

He knew with great confidence that they had been chosen by God; they were part of God's elect. This sentence causes me to reflect on the following:

It is possible to know if you are one of the elect. Reformed thinkers have not always agreed on this. Paul makes it manifestly clear that he is not discussing a theory of election, but the fact of God's electing *of them*. The grammar in this paragraph encourages us to say that if we can remember and reflect on these qualities then we can also know this fact.

Election is an expression of God's love. It is a doctrine which should not cause fear, but cultivate love to God. They were beloved of God because He had chosen them. That God has chosen us is an amazing manifestation that He loves us.

Election is personal. The detractors of this doctrine will try to say that election is not personal; that is to say, that God does not choose individuals. They say that God elected Israel as a nation. Others will say that God choose those who would become part of the corporate Body of Christ. Paul says, "I know God choose *you*."

How could Paul have this confidence? If election is God showing His love in choosing people, how can I really know, like Paul knew of them, that I am one of the elect? The rest of this paragraph and even further, the rest of this chapter answers that.

The Grounds of that Confidence**(v.5)**

Here is how Paul knew. See the connective?

The Impact of the Message

The preaching of the gospel in their midst were not merely things that were said, but were attended or accompanied by:

Power - In the whole of this book, the power of the gospel, is in converted people and transformed lives.

Holy Spirit - Think about this. The gospel came with the Holy Spirit. The gospel became the channel by which the Spirit brought them to spiritual life out of their spiritual deadness.

Full (deep) conviction - The gospel gripped them, convicting them of their sin and sinfulness, bring deep repentance and genuine conversion.

The Character of the Messengers

The connection here is somewhat difficult. Paul may be referring back by saying that he knew they were chosen just as they well knew what kind of people they proved to be. He may also be pointing forward to why the believers modeled their lives after him.

What ever the connection is supposed to be, it is very clear that Paul is grounding their confidence in the message in the character and conduct of the messengers. The text literally says, "You know of what sort we had become among you for your sake." Though the gospel came in power attended by the Holy Spirit convicting people, God's men came giving themselves up for the new believers, which became more evident the longer they were with them.

How we need ministers of the gospel, missionaries and Christian leaders whose lives are lived in such a way as to ever increase their converts confidence in the their ministry.

In a sense, the character of the messengers was imparted to the new believers.

The Character of their Sanctification

(v.6-10)

The church is to be commended because of the characteristics of its sanctification.

⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and 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 delivers us from the wrath to come.

A Discipling People

(v.6-7)

The essence of discipleship: modeling after others in pursuit of becoming a model for others.

Following Models

(v.6)

They eagerly embraced the Word with the joy and delight of the Holy Spirit even though it was coming to them in the context of the pressure of affliction and suffering.

This caused them to look to models to imitate. They found them in Paul and in the Lord.

Discipleship involves both the communication of truth and the illustrating of lifestyle. I have carefully selected mentors whose lives and ministries I have emulated as it seems true to the Word and true to Christ. We need to do this as individuals as well as a church.

We follow mentors as they follow Christ. We eagerly embrace and welcome and receive the Word. We accept the shaping power of affliction and suffering. And we give our affections to the control of the Holy Spirit so that He might awaken them with joy and delight.

Becoming Examples

(v.7)

They became examples to other believers. The word here refers to a mark made by a blow, an impression, a stamp made by a die. The impression on them by the process of verse 7 formed them into living examples. This is the goal of discipleship – transforming beginning believers through discipleship so that they make disciples of others.

Their discipleship involved an eagerness to receive the Word, a willingness to emulate mentors, being shaped by the powerful blows of circumstances, suffering and pressure while delighting in the sanctifying work of the Spirit. In the end, they became sharply defined imprints and examples for other believers.

An Evangelizing People

(v.8)

Paul commends their evangelism for the clarity of its message and scope of its impact. Their evangelism involved “sounding forth” so that everyone heard about their faith. They told their story. And it was heard all over the place.

Notice that Paul does not commend them for the size of the response. It does not matter how many “decisions” were made or how many came down the aisle or how many were baptized. Paul is not Bible notching. Paul does not commend them for the supposed evangelism of just living it before the lost.

They were evangelistic because they heralded the Word, they told their story, their testimony. Evangelism is essentially telling the story of the Christ and His Cross within the context of a life honoring to the Lord. They had done it so effectively that Paul (probably speaking in hyperbole) does not have to say anything!

A Maturing People

(v.9-10)

Now watch this carefully. When their evangelism had gone full circle and came back around to Paul, their understanding of truth had grown and matured significantly. There is a growing clarity in their ability to express what their conversion and continuing in Christ meant. Watch this by a comparison of verse 3 with verses 9-10.

Verse 3	Verses 9-10
work of faith	turned to God from idols
labor of love	serve a living and true God
steadfastness of hope	to wait for His Son from heaven

These are not strange categories for us.

There are idols of our heart that we must turn from by turning to God. These idols are lies we believe which cause us to treasure anything more than we value God.

We need a fresh sense of toiling hard at serving God for the love of it. Do you understand what we mean when we say that we, for the love of God, must be doing sacrificial deeds of love for one another? "All that matters is faith working by love", Paul wrote the Galatians.

Are we a people marked by our expectant waiting of Christ from heaven? His resurrection and ascension into heaven assures us that He will return again.

Verse 10 brings us to the first of many references to the Lord's return. Many of us were brought up in churches where only one view of prophecy, one eschatological schema was taught and tolerated. Many of you hold very strongly to a particular view. It is not my purpose, nor the purpose of Paul in Thessalonians, to lay out some schematic of events which will end the debate too often dividing the differing views. When in the interest of defending our schema, we lose the holiness and expectancy that the *Parousia* is to produce, we have greatly erred. But if we have no eschatology which energizes our holiness and focuses our expectancy on Christ coming from heaven, then we equally err.

So then, is the final phrase of this paragraph assuring us that we will not go through the whole period commonly, but incorrectly, called the tribulation? Will we be delivered from 7 years of wrath? Or is this verse assuring us that we will be delivered from the shortened period of wrath poured out on an unbelieving world when Jesus comes? Or is this verse assuring us that we will never experience the wrath of God in hell?

Notice something with me. The Greek preposition *ek* occurs three times in this portion. It means to come from out of the midst of. So, is Jesus coming from out of heaven? Yes. Was Jesus raised up from out of the dead? Yes. So we will be delivered from out of the midst of wrath. Frankly, this verse simply assures us that when the wrath of God falls, the saints will be delivered from out of its midst. In other passages we are reminded to consider Noah and Job.

I assure you loved ones that Jesus is coming. When He comes He will come in glory for those who believe and wrath upon those who do not. And a great will be the glory for the saints for we will be delivered from the wrath on the sinners.

And where will you be on that fateful day?

Reflect and Respond

What motivates your praying? The praying of the New Testament often has very different priorities, perspectives and purposes than ours. We see this in how Paul framed and focused his prayer. In the Fall this year, we will be looking at the prayers of the Apostles to help us grow in this.

We may have a genuine confidence that we have been chosen by God for salvation. That confidence arises from all that the gospel promise and produces in us.

To be a commended church the people will be a Commissional people. They will seek to send and spread the gospel to their neighborhoods and to the nations. Being commissional means that we see the intricate connection between the work of the Spirit in our evangelism and our edification.

Gospel people will leave their mark, their pattern on the lives of others. They will exemplify what the gospel does in them and thus will do in others.

In closing listen to John Stott on the final paragraph of our text.

The [more] sophisticated idols (that is, God-substitutes) of modern secular cities are equally powerful. Some people are eaten up with a selfish ambition for money, power or fame. Others are obsessed with their work, or with sport or television, or are infatuated with a person, or addicted to food, alcohol, hard drugs or sex. Both immorality and greed are later pronounced by Paul to be forms of idolatry, because they demand an allegiance which is due to God alone. So every idolater is a prisoner, held in humiliating bondage.

Then, through the gospel and the grace of God, in many cases suddenly and completely, the prisoner turns to God from the idols (whether superstitious or sophisticated) which have so far controlled his or her life. The experts call it a 'power encounter', for it is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ in which the spell of the idol is broken and the superior power of the living and true God is demonstrated. People are amazed and filled with awe, and they spread the good news.

The history of Christian missions contains many examples of such power encounters. In each case a deliberate Christian challenge is thrown down to the false gods which previously held sway in the community. Sometimes the challenge is conversion itself, as people are rescued by Christ from an evil power which can no longer hold them. At other times the challenge is made by new converts who dare to defy their former gods. Then, when no harm follows, the supremacy of Christ is acknowledged and more conversions take place. [Stott, p. 39-40]

This is what the gospel does in calling, creating and transforming modern pagans. Has the gospel done that transforming work in your own life?