

1 Thessalonians – Lesson 3

The Faith of the Thessalonians – Part 1

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5

1. What was Paul's *attitude* towards the Thessalonian believers? *Why* did he have this attitude?

Paul's primary attitude towards the Thessalonian believers was one of *thankfulness*; he was grateful for them, in a number of ways. First, he was grateful that they had embraced his gospel, and been converted to faith in Christ. His gratitude was *to the Lord*; he was grateful to God that the Spirit had converted them away from their deadness in sin, and brought them to new life in Christ. Second, he was grateful that they remained faithful to that gospel message. His gratitude was *to them*, for remaining true to the message in spite of the outward persecution that was trying to drive it out of them. Finally, he was grateful for their actions towards him; they prayed for him and remembered him and supported him in concrete ways. Again, his gratitude was directed *at them*, for they had proven themselves to be true partners in the gospel and brothers in Christ.

2. (a) What does it mean that Paul "*mention[s] them*" constantly in his prayers?

If we take Paul at his word here, this phrase probably means that Paul had a disciplined prayer life in which he would *specifically* and *directly* pray for the Thessalonian believers, along with all of the other churches that he had established; this phrase is used elsewhere in Paul's writings (e.g., Romans 1:10; Ephesians 1:16; 2 Timothy 1:3), so it seems reasonable to assume that Paul had a *list* of prayer concerns that he kept near, and would often lift up that list to the Lord whenever he would go to his knees. Additionally, given his nature as a Jew, and the tendency of Jews to be trained in forms of "rote" prayer, Paul would now (probably) "transform" that rote form of prayer into a continuous action of praying for the various churches and individuals as a part of that discipline.

- (b) What does this tell you about Paul's belief in the *concept* of prayer?

Given Paul's mentioning of prayer as central to his life, and knowing (even) the role of prayer in the life of Jesus, Paul *obviously* considered intercessory prayer a significant part of what it meant to be a Christian. Paul knew that the "success" of the gospel could never be his own; his own eloquence was never enough to convince stubborn Jews and Gentiles to embrace the message of Christ. And, he knew that the *continuing* faithfulness of those who had been converted would be outside of his power (especially as he was forced to leave areas, like Thessalonica, due to persecution). So, Paul was *reliant* on the nature of prayer to beseech God to act; Paul would put the "success" of his mission *entirely* in the hands of God through prayer, because his relationship with Christ Jesus made that obvious (see 5 below).

- (c) From v. 3, what three (3) things does Paul *specifically* remember (in his prayers) about them? What do you learn from these about the *state* of the believers in Thessalonica?

Paul asks of God three things in his prayers: 1) their "*work of faith*"; the action of trusting in Christ *continually* (i.e., persevering in their trust in Christ); 2) their "*labor of love*"; the results of faith in Christ that would lead to their love of others, including other believers and those outside of the faith (i.e., through the actions of love manifested in specific acts), and 3) their "*steadfastness of hope*"; the continuing belief by the Thessalonians that, in *spite of* persecution, they still retained the hope of the return of Christ to rescue them and draw them to him permanently. Paul's specific prayer requests imply that he believed that they were, in fact, trusting in Christ, loving others as a result, and withstanding the outward pressures coming against that faith by persecution. In other words, the Thessalonians were continuing to *be the church*, loving Christ and others through faith and the steadfastness of hope.

2. (a) What does Paul imply when he calls the church “*brothers loved by God?*” Why does Paul so often use the term “*brothers*” in his letters to refer to other Christians (see 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:7; 4:1, 10, 13, etc.)

The term “*brothers*” (which can be translated as “brothers and sisters”) is a *familial term*: it implies a family relationship between all who come to Christ by faith. By embracing the gospel, and being born-again by the Spirit of God, the Christian is *adopted* by God into a family unit that has God as Father, Christ Jesus as the “elder brother,” and every believer as a son or daughter within the family, possessing the full rights of position, status, and the inheritance of that family. This family is “*loved by God*” because it is a *unique* family relationship; a group of forgiven and adopted rebels brought into the family unit by the choice of God (i.e., his grace) and given the full status of belonging to his eternal inheritance, having the Son of God as their own “brother” before the Father. So, as Paul considers believers within this framework, he sees himself as simply as their brother; a fellow member of the family, brought into it by the same means, and possessing all of the same rights and privileges as a member of the household.

(b) From your favorite passage on the subject in the New Testament, briefly define and describe the doctrine of *election*. Why is this doctrine so *controversial*, yet *necessary*, in the church today?

As Paul says in Ephesians 1:3-4, God has *chosen* a people to bless with all of his “*spiritual blessings in the heavenly places,*” even from before the “*foundation of the world.*” Simply stated, election is the *choice* of God, in eternity past, to lavish his mercies on a specific subset of the human race, to reveal himself *intimately* and *personally* to them, to redeem them, to raise them from their spiritual deadness and rebellion, and to draw them to Christ by faith for atonement and the satisfaction of his holy demands. Election is within the decree of God to accomplish his purposes in creation by choosing a people *without any sense of their own merit*, a *personal* act for specific people to receive his love and mercy. The doctrine is controversial because it is *counter-intuitive* to our nature as “free” creatures with the ability to make our own choices. Pride within humanity strongly suggests that the “choice” of our destiny lies *entirely* within our hands and by our own devices; to suggest that God must choose who receives his mercy runs contrary to our sinful pride, and many reject the idea under the assumption that we “must” have an ability to decide our own destiny, otherwise we are not truly “free” creatures.

(c) How can Paul be *certain* that the Thessalonians were “*chosen*” (v. 4)?

Paul can be certain that the believers in Thessalonica were, in fact, chosen by God *because they responded to the gospel that was preached to them*. The elect are “manifested” in the world (i.e., who the elect *are*, in time and space) because they respond in faith. The reprobate (i.e., those who are “passed over” by God) do not respond; their response shows that they are not chosen, because the power of God is such that *his choices will come to fruition*. In other words, the election by God of a people is not a “passive” choice on his part, which just “happens” to come to pass; no, it is an *active* choice which *will* result in the elect coming to faith. His choice *becomes* reality, for nothing that an infinitely powerful God decides *cannot* but come to pass.

3. (a) From v. 5, list the ways the gospel “*came*” to the Thessalonians. Why does Paul call it “*our gospel?*”

Paul says that “*our gospel*” came to them: 1) in word; it was *articulated* before them with the necessary details of what makes up true faith (i.e., as an *objective* set of knowledge that leads to repentance and faith); 2) in power: it was a message that had the ability to *transform them* (i.e., the message actually produced *conversion* in them by making them see their sin, and causing them to turn from it to Christ; see 3b below); 3) in the Holy Spirit; it was delivered to *the heart* by an agent of God himself (i.e., the Holy Spirit used his divine power to remove their hearts of rebellion and antipathy so that they could hear and believe; see 3b below); and 4) with full conviction; it had its *intended* effect by causing the Thessalonians not only to embrace it, but to *fully embrace* it through the entire course of their existence (see 3c below). It was “*our*” gospel because it was not just the message of Paul, but the message of the entire missionary team, the Spirit of God, the word of Christ himself, and the very decree of the fullness of the Godhead. In other words, it wasn’t just the “simple” message of a man, but the message of the entirety of the church.

(b) What does it mean that the gospel came to them “*in power*?”; what kind of *power* does it hold? What does it mean that it came “*in the Holy Spirit*?”

To say that the gospel came to them “*in power*” is to say that it was a message full of the power of God to transform them in every way. The message actually produced a *real change* in the Thessalonian believers; they had been *converted* from dead sinners to living followers of Christ, and that was a *real power* emanating from its proclamation. The gospel has the power to *radically transform* dead sinners: to raise them to life and utterly change their existence. To say that the gospel came to them “*in the Holy Spirit*” is to indicate the *agent* of that power, the Spirit of God. The message may have been just “words,” but in the hands of the Third Person of the Trinity, the message included his power to remove stony, rebellious hearts and replace them with a nature that can love God and seek to follow Christ by faith. In other words, the gospel is more than just a proclamation; it is the *means* used by the agent of God himself to deliver the transforming effects of God’s decree into the lives of his elect.

(c) What does the term “*full conviction*” imply about the *effect* of the gospel upon them?

To say that the gospel came to them “*with full conviction*” is to say that it had its intended effect upon them: it transformed their entire way of thinking about Jesus, and about the ways of God revealed through him. It brought them to their knees to repent of their sin and to trust in the promises of God manifested in the person and work of Christ. In other words, it *convicted* them, not only of their sinfulness and guilt and shame before a holy God, but of their need to believe in what had been revealed about Jesus and to remain faithful to what they had learned.

4. What “*kind of men*” did Paul and his companions “*prove to be*” while in Thessalonica (v. 5). Why was this essential to their embrace of the gospel that Paul preached to them?

The implication of this phrase is that Paul believed that he and his team had been *consistent* between their beliefs and their practices while in Thessalonica; they had preached a message and lived a life that were consistent with one another. In other words, Paul assumed that his behavior amongst them demonstrated that *he believed his own message*; they would not be able to accuse him of being a hypocrite (i.e., insisting on one thing from the Thessalonians while living in a way *opposite* from those demands themselves). No, Paul believed that his consistency of character was a good *representation* of the gospel; Paul trusted in Christ and lived out a life of holiness *just as he was demanding from them*. For Paul to live differently than his message would have given the Thessalonians reason to *reject* the message; if radical transformation is at the heart of the gospel, then those delivering that message should demonstrate such transformation *in themselves*, otherwise the message is ripe for rejection.

5. How does Paul’s *attitude* towards the Thessalonians, and his trust in both the *message* he preached and the *example* he portrayed, give *you* confidence to proclaim the gospel?

Paul was just a man; his message was a simple one with little power *in itself* to accomplish anything. To tell people that Jesus was the Christ and that he had risen from the dead is fundamentally “foolish” to the average person hearing it, and Paul was no different from anyone else trying to get people to believe it. It is the same for all of us: we are small, with a simple message, proclaiming it to a world full of people who think we are fools. Yet, Paul was astoundingly successful in preaching that message: many came to faith, churches were planted, Scripture was written, and the apostolic church has grown for hundreds of centuries. The reason for his success is simple: *it was not his message!* He was simply the *instrument* that the Spirit of God used to accomplish great things. Paul’s attitude, his trust in the message, and the example he portrayed were all *tools* in the hands of Christ to advance a powerful message of conversation and conviction. This is what we need to remember: although we are insignificant, we preach a message backed up by *the full power of God*, and it will be successful as the Lord has planned. Thus, our confidence is not in ourselves, *but in the Christ who has ordained his message to find and convert the elect*. We need only preach faithfully; God will do the rest.