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Salvation in Relation to the Coming of the Lord

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

OPENING SALUTATION (1:1)

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

Chapter 1 opens with a very simple salutation: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians.” Noteworthy here is the fact that as in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, no apostolic titles are mentioned. Only the names Paul, and Silvanus—which was another name for Silas—and Timothy were listed. Paul and Silas had brought the gospel to the Thessalonians on the apostles’ second missionary journey (Acts 17:1–9); later Timothy made a trip from Athens back to Thessalonica and reported to Paul what he had discovered (1 Thess. 3:1–6). The report was an epic of the steadfastness and faithfulness of the Thessalonian Christians. He told Paul that in spite of persecution the Thessalonians had a good testimony for Jesus Christ and were faithfully sharing the gospel message.

The first verse of this book includes a contrast between the position the believers had in Christ and their current *state* of persecution and uncertainty (1:6). Paul addressed them as “the church of the Thessalonians” which is “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Nothing could change their position, which included everything that was theirs because of being in Christ. They remained true no matter what happened. This young, persecuted church needed above all else to know that they were in God the Father and Jesus Christ. But they needed more than this knowledge.

Paul prayed for them with two words that would become trademarks in

his later epistles: “Grace to you, and peace.” How rich are the simple words “grace” and “peace.” Those without grace and peace are in utter poverty though they may possess all the riches of the world. Those with grace and peace are infinitely rich, though enduring persecution and sorrow as did the Thessalonians. Grace expressed the whole of God’s love and favor in Christ. Peace *with* God (salvation) and the peace *of* God (the daily assurance of His presence and care) are priceless possessions of the child of God. What richer jewels from God’s treasures could be asked for than these? While in a sense the Thessalonians already had God’s grace and peace, they needed its manifestation, its experience, its triumph.

A BURST OF PRAISE (1:2–3)

1:2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

The apostle began with praise to God for the believers at Thessalonica. This is more or less the theme of the whole epistle—his thankfulness to God for saving these Thessalonians through their faith in Christ. He breathed out this prayer from his very heart in verse 2. Verses 2–10 are one long sentence in Greek, with “give thanks” as the main verb. This entire sentence highlights all that Paul gave thanks for in the lives of these faithful believers. The emphasis was not on buildings, facilities, organization, structure, staff, curriculum, or budget. Not that these things do not matter, or that they cannot greatly help us. They are needed, but they are not the key. The focus here is on people. Paul gave thanks for the spiritual qualities of these believers.

Again something of the faithfulness of Paul’s prayer ministry is indicated in the phrase, “We give thanks to God always.” In the days and months that had passed since he left this little band of believers in Thessalonica whom he loved, Paul had been faithful in prayer for them. What a rebuke it is to many of us who serve the Lord that often our hearts are not burdened with the needs of God’s people. Nor are we thankful for the Lord’s grace in their lives, especially when they are out of sight and out of mind. But Paul gave his tes-

timony: “We give thanks to God always for all of you.” Of interest is the fact that Paul did not thank the Thessalonians; he thanked God.

This expression “for all of you” or “for you all” is significant. “You all” is used in the southern United States as an expansive, general expression referring to one person or many. Paul, however, used it very accurately here. He was thanking God for *all* of them. In each life and heart the Spirit of God had done His work in such a way that souls had been saved and were now bearing a faithful testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ. As we consider our own lives and testimony, do our pastors and Sunday school teachers—those with whom we work in Christian service—thank God for us *always*? Certainly there is a challenge to us here to be like the Thessalonians and so to live before God and our fellow Christians that they may thank God always for us.

1:3 Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

As Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, he thanked God for some of the great realities that comprise the salvation of the believer. The remaining verses of chapter 1 constitute a simple outline. First, in verse 3, Paul remembered what God had done through them and in them. Second, in verses 4–9, on the basis of what God had done, Paul knew certain things. Third, in verse 10 he expressed the hope of Christian salvation.

As he joyfully recalled his experiences with these Christians at Thessalonica, verse 3 states the reasons for his joyful recollection. Three famous words are in this verse, the trilogy of Christian virtues, “faith, hope, love” (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13). Since 1 Thessalonians was either Paul’s earliest letter or one of the earliest, this was the first time in his writings that these words appeared together. Paul was not thanking the Lord simply because in the Thessalonians there was faith, hope, and love, which certainly ought to characterize every Christian. He was thanking God for what these three things had produced.

Of course no one can see faith, love, or hope; they are immaterial qualities. But they can be manifested and expressed in definite, tangible ways. They show themselves in life, and that is what is referred to here. The first two

concepts, faith and works, are often contrasted—especially in Paul’s later epistles. But here they are joined together; that is, a true faith is manifested in what we do. A true faith produces works. That is why James wrote that faith without works is dead (James 2:26). Not that works are a substitute for faith, but true faith in Christ brings a salvation that will in turn change the life and works of the believer.

Not only was a work of faith evident among the Thessalonians, but also a labor of love.

Love is more than a sentiment. It is a driving, motivating force in the heart of the believer who loves the Lord, and because he loves the Lord he is willing to labor; he is willing to work where it is difficult; and he is willing to bear the burden.

Added to the labor of love is “steadfastness of hope,” that is, hope that produces patience. What kind of hope is it that produces patience? This is a calm, sure, trusting hope. Christians can have patience in hope because they are sure their hope in Christ will be fulfilled. Thus it was in the Thessalonian church. They not only hoped in God, but their hope produced patience in their hearts even in the time of trial and affliction which had overtaken them. Charles Swindoll summarizes the visible fruit that was produced in the lives of the Thessalonians. “The Thessalonians’ unseen attitudes of faith, love, and hope were like hidden roots that produced the fruit of good works, loving labor, and patient endurance. How lush and fragrant these qualities were in Paul’s memory now that he was so many miles away. . . . In his heart he carried with him a bouquet of encouragement, gathered from his brief encounter with the Thessalonian believers.”¹

The mention of faith, love, and hope and what they produce is so significant that some have used verse 3 as an outline for the rest of the book.

OUTLINE BASED ON 1 THESSALONIANS 1:3

I. The Work of Faith (1:1–3:13)	Past
II. The Labor of Love (4:1–12)	Present
III. The Steadfastness of Hope (4:13–5:28)	Prospect

Verse 3 concludes with something that is most significant. It tells us that Paul regarded the Thessalonians' work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in Christ not simply as the way he saw these things, but as they were in the sight of God. This brings us to a pointed question that all of us can ask ourselves: What does God see in our hearts? A real trust in Him? A real love for Him? A real hope for that which is a part of our Christian faith? Paul saw the outward evidence of these things in the lives of the believers at Thessalonica, but God looks at the heart. Paul was able to commend these Christians as he remembered not only what he saw, but what he knew God saw. God looked not just to them, but through them into their hearts and lives.

PAUL'S KNOWLEDGE OF THE THESSALONIANS (1:4–6)

1:4–6 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 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. 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.

The second great theme of Paul's thankfulness to God was what he *knew* about these believers. He knew these things about them because they had trusted in God and received His wonderful salvation. In verse 4 Paul called attention to this with a reference to their election by God. How can a person know that someone else is chosen by God, that he or she is one of the elect of God? Considering the fact that Paul and Silas had ministered to these Christians only a few weeks or months, it is amazing that these believers were taught the doctrine of election.

Many modern-day Christians who have gone to church all their lives know very little about election and many other major Bible doctrines. The Bible indicates that God not only saves us, but that He chose us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). Election is a doctrine often not understood completely but believed because the Bible teaches it. Christians are the

elect of God because God chose them before they chose Him (John 15:16; Rom. 9:10–23). While much mystery exists in divine sovereignty and human responsibility that we will never fully understand here on earth, the doctrine of election can be boiled down to one simple question—who makes the first move, God or man? Scripture teaches that God makes the first move (John 6:44). He draws the sinner to Himself and imparts salvation by His matchless grace.

But this raises another question: How can anyone know the elect of God? Who of us has ever seen the Book of Life? How can anyone really know that another person is one of God's elect? Verses 4–6 give the basis of Paul's confidence in connection with the Thessalonians and, at the same time, the basis for our faith and assurance that God is able to save those who trust in Christ. For example, one reason Paul believed the Thessalonians were saved, and why he knew their election was of God, was the way the gospel had come to them (v. 5). It came "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" or assurance—literally, "in full measure." Their salvation had not been simply an emotional experience, nor had they been swept off their feet by Paul's scintillating oratory. This was unmistakably the Spirit's power at work in the hearts of both Paul and his new converts. Further, it had been confirmed by the way Paul and his companions had lived among them (v. 6). God's power had been clearly manifested in their lives as well as in their testimony.

The crowning evidence was in the way the Word was received. Preaching the Word is one thing; receiving it is another. In verse 6 three things are highlighted concerning the way they received the Word. First, they received it in such a way that they became followers of Paul and "imitators of us and of the Lord." Second, they received the Word in deep affliction. They did not receive the Word because it was easy to receive; they received it in spite of the persecution they knew would follow. Third, they received the Word with the joy of the Holy Spirit. In other words, in spite of affliction and trial there was the evidence of the Spirit's ministry in their hearts because they had the unspeakable joy that comes from the Holy Spirit. The Word was received in such a way that they knew and Paul knew they were really saved.

THE THESSALONIANS' GOOD TESTIMONY (1:7-10)

1:7-8 So that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 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.

Verses 7-8 are the capstone of it all. Not only had the Thessalonians received the Word of God, but their salvation was manifested in their lives and testimony: Because they had really trusted in Christ, their salvation resulted in such a transformation of their lives that they became examples to all who believe.

The word "example" is the Greek word *tupos* from which we get our word "type." This term originally referred to the mark left by a blow and came to mean "image" or "pattern." These new believers served as a pattern or example; they were being used by God to "shape the lives of all the other believers in Greece."² Thessalonica was the chief city of Macedonia, which is northern Greece. And Achaia, the southern part of Greece, had Corinth as its principal city. Paul was writing to the Thessalonians from Corinth. This model church, however, was not just a pattern for all the other Greek churches. Paul added that the group was so alive and active that everyone knew what was going on in their church.

In other words, Paul was not required to tell people about how wonderfully God had been working in the Thessalonian church. The testimony went out everywhere without his help. People all over Greece had heard of their testimony and were following their example. One reason for this was that Thessalonica was on a major trade route, the Egnatian Way, and people passing through Thessalonica came in contact with the aggressive evangelism and testimony of these Christians who lived there.

In our day many people come and go in our cities and towns and never come in contact with any vital Christianity. That apparently was not true in Thessalonica, for as the Word spread it was widely known that God had done a wonderful work. The Thessalonians were preaching the Word, and the

testimony of their faith in the Lord was reverberating throughout all of Greece. As Swindoll says, “As Paul moved through Macedonia, where Thessalonica was located, and Achaia, where Corinth was located, he would start to proclaim the gospel, then stop short in amazement. Still echoing down the canyons and through the streets was the word of the Lord spoken by the Thessalonian believers. Their Christianity was contagious and spreading faster than Paul could travel.”³

1:9–10 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, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Timothy told Paul how God had worked in the Thessalonians after Paul and Silas had departed. They had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. This expression does not say they turned from idols to God. Rather, they turned *to* God *from* idols. They did not reform their ways first and then turn in faith to Christ. Instead they first placed their faith in Christ and then left their idols. Ray Stedman emphasizes the importance of this order. “You do not leave your idols for some reason and painfully try to find God. What happens is that you discover something of the beauty, the glory, and the greatness of God; and, seeing that and wanting it, you are willing to forsake the cheap and tawdry things you once believed could satisfy.”⁴

The word “turned” in the Greek New Testament is in the aorist tense, which means that they turned once for all. It was a single, definite act. In a single, deliberate, decisive choice, they turned to God from idols. As a result of trusting in the living and true God, they served Him. Also of interest is the fact that the Thessalonians did not simply add Christ to their religious views. They did not make Him a part of their overall belief system. There was first addition and then subtraction. They added Christ and subtracted their idols.

Paul referred to the God they turned to, in contrast to their dead idols, as “the living and true God.” Thessalonica is about fifty miles north of Mount

Olympus, the home of the pantheon of gods according to Greek mythology. Mount Olympus with its cloud-encircled peak is visible from Thessalonica on a clear day. The Thessalonians were steeped in pagan idolatry, yet the power of the gospel penetrated their lives as evidenced by their turning to the true God and turning their backs on idols. This indicates that the majority of the Thessalonian believers were Gentiles saved out of pagan religion.

As Paul thought about the faith and testimony of these Christians, young as they were, ignorant of many truths we know today, there was nevertheless assurance in his heart that they were really saved. He knew they were brothers and sisters in Christ, beloved of God; he knew they were elect of God by the evidence of the transforming work of salvation manifested in their changed lives.

These believers had salvation as was wonderfully manifested in their lives, but they also had a glorious hope. One of the most precious things about the Christian hope is that it goes on and on and on. Salvation is not limited to the present; it is also for the future. In verse 10 the truth of the Lord's coming is introduced—a truth prominent in every chapter in 1 Thessalonians.

Of significance is the fact that in such a brief period of ministry Paul not only led them out of darkness into the light in the gospel, but he also faithfully preached to them the truth of the Lord's coming. By contrast today, many people who go to church year after year never hear the precious truth that Christ who came to Bethlehem so long ago is coming again and that we can be looking for that wonderful return of the Lord for His own. How sad and unfortunate that preaching and teaching about the Lord's coming is seldom heard in many churches.

But Paul was faithful to present this hope to the early Christians. So in verse 10 he reminded the believers in Thessalonica that they not only had turned to God from idols (v. 9)—a present work—but they also had a new hope for the future: “To wait for his Son from heaven.” The word “wait” is in the present tense. This expresses the notion of imminence; that is, Christ could come at any time. Many things *may* happen before He comes, but nothing must transpire before He can come. The Thessalonians had turned to God in one decisive act, but there remained the constant, day-by-day expectation of His return.

In other words, they were constantly looking for the return of the Lord at any time for His saints. The word “wait” is a compound word. It has a prefix attached to the beginning of the word that means “up.” So we might translate verse 10, “and to *wait up* for his Son from heaven.”⁵ Like a parent anxiously waiting up for a teenage child to return home, or a wife waiting up for her husband to get home from a long trip, these believers were waiting up for their Lord’s coming. Are we doing the same today?

The chapter closes with the reminder that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is the One who is coming (v. 10). In one short verse several great doctrines are gathered together: (1) Christ’s second coming: to “wait for his Son from heaven”; (2) the resurrection of Christ: “whom he raised from the dead”; and (3) the salvation Christ purchased in His first coming when He died on the cross: “who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Wrath is coming! The closing chapter of 1 Thessalonians presents this fact very graphically. Some believe that “the wrath to come” here refers to God’s eternal wrath in hell. This is possible in light of the preceding context that deals with their salvation. However, these believers would have already been well aware of their deliverance from that judgment. It seems better in light of what Paul would teach in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–9 about the coming time of wrath on earth and the mention of Christ’s coming in 1:10 to take this as a reference to the future day of the Lord, the time of great tribulation.

Make no mistake. A day of judgment is coming, a time when God will judge this sinful world. Nearly two thousand years ago, Christ on Calvary delivered us from the wrath to come—that is, He delivered all who would trust in Him, all who would receive Him as their personal Savior. These Thessalonians who lived so long ago had come into the glorious truth that Christ had died for them. They were delivered from the coming wrath that will be part of the day of the Lord. This supports the pretribulation view for the timing of the Lord’s coming that we will discuss in more detail in 1 Thessalonians 4–5. For these believers and for us the coming of the Lord is a glorious event we can look for each day with keen anticipation and with hearts filled with expectation.

First Thessalonians 1 constitutes a challenge to every thinking Christian. We are challenged to ask, What do people think of us when they pray for us? Do they remember our work of faith, our labor of love, and our steadfastness of hope? When they think of us, are they assured of our salvation? Do they see in our lives the evidence that the Word of God has come in power, that we have been transformed, that we have been made true followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we exercise our faith in the midst of affliction and trials, that we have the evidence of the joy of the Holy Spirit and a transformed life so that our testimony is spread abroad? Is that true of us?

And like the Thessalonians do we have the living hope of the Lord's coming, the same One who loved us, who died for our sins that He might deliver us from the wrath to come, and who was raised in victory over the grave? This letter was written many years ago to Christians who long since have left the earthly scene, but the truth lives on. May the truths of this chapter not only live in the written pages of God's Word, but may they also be manifested in our hearts and our daily lives.

NOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Contagious Christianity: A Study of I Thessalonians*, Bible Study Guide (Anaheim, CA: Insight for Living, 1993), 5.
2. Richard Mayhue, *First and Second Thessalonians: Triumphs and Trials of a Consecrated Church* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1999), 55.
3. Swindoll, *Contagious Christianity*, 7.
4. Ray C. Stedman, *Waiting for the Second Coming: Studies in Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1990), 15.
5. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 30.