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GREETINGS, THANKSGIVING,  
AND COMMENDATION

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1:1–10

SECTION 1: PAUL'S THANKSGIVING FOR AND  
COMMENDATION OF THE THESSALONIANS, 1:1–10

First-century letters began sensibly. Instead of requiring the reader to look at the end to find the signature, they began with the name of the writer, the name of the recipient, and some sort of greeting. First Thessalonians is no exception.

It is always interesting to observe how Paul introduces himself to the various churches and individuals to whom he writes. Sometimes he designates himself as an apostle (Gal. 1:1), sometimes as a servant (Rom. 1:1), but here without any additional descriptive word. He does, however, associate himself with Silas and Timothy (the latter appears in ten of Paul's epistles), not as coauthors but as a matter of courtesy since they were with Paul during the ministry in Thessalonica. The name *Paul* means "little" and was the Roman name given him at birth along with his Jewish name, Saul. It was common practice among the Jews to give a child both a Jewish and a Gentile name, and particularly would this have been natural with Paul, whose father was a Roman citizen. The Jewish name, Saul, is used until his ministry

turns to the Gentiles (Acts 13:9), after which his Gentile name, Paul, is appropriately used.

After being forced to leave Thessalonica, Paul and Silas went to Berea (Timothy was probably with them, though he may have joined them later, Acts 17:14). After they all met at Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2) and Silas to Macedonia, likely to Philippi, because Paul feared that the persecution might have spread there. Then all three met again at Corinth (Acts 18:5).

The recipients of the letter are designated as the “church of the Thessalonians.” The form of address is unique, for usually Paul says “to the church in such and such a place.” The difference emphasizes his individual interest in each member of this church. The position of these believers, while locally in Thessalonica and circumstantially in persecution, was spiritually in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The oneness of the Father and the Son as well as the oneness of believers with the Godhead is affirmed.

Paul’s greeting is “Grace be unto you, and peace” (the remainder of the verse as found in the King James Version is absent from better manuscripts). Grace, akin to the word *joy*, is that which causes joy, and in a Christian sense it means the undeserved favor of God toward the sinner in providing the free gift of salvation through the death of Christ. To us today, peace means the absence of war; but in the Old Testament it meant harmony between man and God and the resultant wholeness and prosperity of the soul. As used here, it of course has that Old Testament flavor with the Christian additive that the harmony was made possible through the death of Christ. The order of the two words is significant, for there can be no real peace until grace has been experienced in the heart.

#### THE CONTENT OF HIS COMMENDATION, 1:2–8

It was also conventional in ancient letters to open with a word of gratitude. Paul’s commendation of his readers, however, is not a matter of following convention, but it is a genuine expression of his feeling for them (cf. Gal. 1:6, where there is no

such commendation) and an attempt to raise their thoughts to God on whom was their dependence. The regularity of his thanksgiving for them (as expressed in the words “always” and “without ceasing” KJV) also shows that this was no mere perfunctory matter with him. Paul was practicing what he preached when he prayed for them “without ceasing” (this is the same word used in 5:17). The three particular things for which Paul was thankful form the content of the rest of the chapter.

#### THEIR WORK OF FAITH, 1:3a, 4–5

The first of the three things for which Paul gives thanks is the work of faith. This refers to the initial act of faith, which brought salvation to the Thessalonians, and it also includes the works that followed that initial act of saving faith. Because the Thessalonians’ faith exhibited itself in good works, Paul was certain that they belonged to God’s elect. They were those who were beloved of God. The word *beloved* is a perfect participle, which means that God’s love existed in the past and continues on to the present with unabated force.

Election proceeds from this love of God for His chosen ones (notice the same connection between election, or selection, and God’s love in Eph. 1:4–5). It also is the work of a sovereign or supreme God (Rom. 9:11), occurring before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) and involving the ministry of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13), the message through a messenger (Rom. 10:14, 17) and personal faith (2 Thess. 2:13). “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him [Jesus Christ] whom He has sent” (John 6:29). There need be no fear, only awe, in considering the doctrine of election, for if God could not have elected His people out of His sovereign love, none of us would have been saved.

It is sometimes said that one cannot know whether or not another is elect, but here Paul claims that very knowledge. His reasons are stated in verse 5, and they are based on the way the Gospel came to the Thessalonians during his evangelistic mission in their city. Verse 5 begins with “for” (“because”). There are three reasons that Paul knew the Thessalonians were among

God's elect. The first is negative—"not . . . in word only"; that is, not in any power that could come through the eloquence of speech. By contrast, the second characteristic is that it did come in power. Evidently Paul is not referring to miracles accompanying the preaching of the Gospel at Thessalonica (this would require the use of the plural of the word *power*) but to the sincerity and simplicity of the message as empowered by the Holy Spirit. Words, however eloquent, cannot change man's heart, but the Spirit using the preached message can and does (cf. John 16:7–11). The third characteristic of the work of faith was that it brought to the three missionaries complete assurance of the effectiveness of the message they had preached. "Much assurance" (KJV) is closely connected with the Holy Spirit (for there is no repetition of "in" before "much assurance") and means the confidence in the message that the Spirit brought to both the evangelists and the converts. For confirmation of what he has just asserted concerning his preaching, Paul appeals in the last part of verse 5 to his readers' knowledge of the truth of what he has just written.

#### THEIR LABOR OF LOVE, 1:3b, 6–8

The second thing for which the apostle commends his readers is their labor of love.

*The intensity of their labor, 1:3.* The word Paul uses for labor in verse 3 means "fatiguing work" and differs from work in the phrase *work of faith* in that it includes the cost associated with the labor.

*The proofs of their labor, 1:6–7.* They performed their labor of love in spite of "affliction." The word in verse 6 means severe difficulties, not simply discomfort. Becoming a Christian does not guarantee a trouble-free life.

*The extent of their labor, 1:8.* Love is that which seeks the highest good for the one loved, and since the greatest good one can do for an unredeemed person is to bring him the Gospel, a labor of love would mean the sounding out of the word of the Lord. This the Thessalonians did to the point of fatigue (cf. Rev.

14:13) in Macedonia, Achaia, and every place (v. 8). The word translated “sounded out” is picturesque. The Greek letters simply changed into English characters spell our word *echo*. Thus the picture is of the message of the Gospel so stirring the strings of the Thessalonians’ hearts that it reverberated in strong and clear tones to all Greece and everywhere. That which was sounded out was the word of the Lord, a phrase that is “used here with direct reference to the Gospel-message (“a word having the Lord for its origin, its centre, and its end”)” (Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 12). The exact phrase is used elsewhere by Paul with the same meaning only in 2 Thessalonians 3:1. This is the only church Paul calls a pattern, not only to the pagans but to other Christians, for to labor in sending forth the Gospel is the greatest work of love anyone can perform.

#### THEIR STEADFASTNESS OF HOPE, 1:3c, 6–7

The third thing for which the converts are commended is their steadfastness of hope. This word in verse 3 is *hupomone*, which does not denote a negative and passive resignation to persecution or problems, but rather a positive and optimistic fortitude in spite of indignities suffered. The Christian’s confident expectation is in his Lord and particularly in the return of the Lord. This same idea concerning our hope is emphasized in the first chapter of the second epistle.

Such hope always shines brightest in the midst of persecution, and the Thessalonians knew much about this even in their short Christian experience. They had been under such pressure and affliction that Paul likened their case to his own and to the Lord’s (v. 6). But their suffering was accompanied by joy inspired by or originating from the Holy Spirit (the genitive “of the Holy Spirit” is that of source—a joy that comes from the Spirit). The Christian is never promised a bed of roses (see John 16:33), but even in affliction he may always experience joy that the Holy Spirit brings to his heart (cf. John 16:22).

Because of this, the Thessalonians became examples to other believers in Greece (v. 7). The word “example” is *tupos*,

from which we get the English word *type*. It originally meant the mark of a blow (cf. John 20:25); then it came to mean the figure formed by the blow; and thus its resultant meaning is “image,” or “pattern” (Heb. 8:5). The meaning, then, is that the conduct of these believers served as a pattern for other Christians in the two provinces of Greece: Macedonia (the northern part of Greece, of which Thessalonica was the chief city) and Achaia (the southern part of Greece, of which Corinth, the place of the writing of the letter, was the principal city).

#### THE CONFIRMATION OF HIS COMMENDATION, 1:9–10

Paul makes a very daring statement in verse 9. He says in effect that anybody (both Christian and pagan) could tell what was going on in Thessalonica, so active was the group there. It was not merely a matter of the missionaries’ commending the church, but anyone you might ask would say the same thing.

#### THE THESSALONIANS’ FAITH CONFIRMED, 1:9b

Their faith was confirmed by those around them who continually (the verb “show” [see KJV] is present tense) testified to the fact that these Christians were different because they had turned to God from idols. The phrase “turned to God” also shows that the majority of the church were from a Gentile, not a Jewish, background.

#### THE THESSALONIANS’ LOVE CONFIRMED, 1:9c

Their labor of love in disseminating the Gospel is confirmed in the phrase “to serve the living and true God”(KJV). “Serve” really means to serve as a slave, and the Old Testament picture of the perpetual bondsman is in Deuteronomy 15:16ff. In our Lord’s humiliation, He took “the form of a bond-servant” (Phil. 2:7), and Paul too delights to call himself a slave of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1). Truly these Thessalonians did become followers of him and of the Lord (v. 6) in willing slavery to Christ, their Master.

## THE THESSALONIANS' HOPE CONFIRMED, 1:10

*The character of their hope.* That patient endurance of hope is expressed in verse 10 by the word “wait.” Actually the Greek word is a compound of the usual word for *wait* preceded by a preposition that intensifies the idea but which also means *up*, when standing by itself. In English we might capture that intensive meaning by actually translating the preposition as part of the meaning of the verb. Thus the meaning is: They were waiting up for their Lord. Do you not see the outlook of expectancy, triumphant hope, and constant endurance displayed in the attitude of waiting up?

*The content of their hope.* Their waiting up was for a person, and as Christians we wait not so much for an event as for a person.

*The center of their hope.* That person for whom we wait up is identified in three ways. He is the Son, the divine One. He is Jesus, the human One. He is the deliverer from the wrath to come, and that deliverance is complete, for it is out of (*ek*) the coming wrath.

This was the report of those who lived with the believers and who watched their lives day by day, as well as those who lived in distant regions and heard of their witness secondhand. It is a convincing testimony to the power of the Gospel to change lives, which power has not diminished over the centuries and which testimony ought to be just as clear today.

## SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Think of some specific afflictions believers whom you know are experiencing.
2. Are you someone whose Christian walk should be imitated?
3. Without radio, TV, tapes, videos, books, the Internet, etc., how could verse 8 have been accomplished?
4. What is the wrath to come (see Rev. 6:12–17)?