

The Full Picture

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 February 2026

Preacher: Gavin Smith

[0:00] The background to this letter, what occasioned it, we've already been reading in the book of Acts. We saw there of the visit that Paul, Silas and Timothy had made to that city, the reception, they got there and what happened thereafter.

I want to look with you this evening at this chapter in its entirety and that means we have to narrow down what we're looking at. So I want to try to do our consideration this evening by asking and seeking to answer three questions.

Firstly, who wrote the letter? Secondly, what are we told about the Thessalonian congregation? And finally, what was the outcome?

And I hope that in each of these we will learn to see the full picture. First then, who wrote the letter? However, since we commonly call this letter Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, the question seems to answer itself. And then we notice what we're told at the beginning.

[1:22] Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. These three who had visited Thessalonica proclaimed the gospel there as we saw earlier.

But even with that expanded list of authors, is that all we can say about authorship? I recently came across a comment by an older Scottish minister who had been looking at one of Paul's other letters. And in dealing with the authorship of that, he writes, Paul the Apostle, or rather, Paul the Holy Spirit's instrument, and Amanatius in writing it.

And Amanatius is a big word for, effectively, the secretary. See, this minister had remembered, but we might tend to forget, that Paul's letters, and the rest of her scriptures, they're all part of God's word.

Yes, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy wrote this particular letter. But much more, it is the work of God the Holy Spirit.

[2:54] Elsewhere, Paul tells us, all scripture is breathed out by God. It is literally God's word.

And Peter, who wrote his own letters, says, No prophecy, prophecy in the sense of forth-telling, and therefore applying to any part of the Bible, no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man.

But men spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Now, we may not understand how the Holy Spirit carried along the writers of scripture, but we must never forget that he did so, because it's only then that we see the full picture.

Only then do we remember that the reasons why scripture is so widely used in our services is not just that's what we do here. Nor is it because the human authors are so important that we must pay attention to what they wrote.

It is because it is the word of God, breathed out by God. Some years ago, Janet and I lived in a hill tribe village in North Thailand.

[4:35] And on one occasion, a senior missionary who worked with the same group of people, the Hmong, visited us. And the headman of our village wanted to pass on to this other group of Hmong that this missionary worked with.

And he said to them, to the missionary, tell them, we are the Hmong who place branches on the grave.

It seems a strange thing to tell anyone. But it seems that this was how this group identified themselves. This marked them out from others.

It's what made them different. It's something they held on to. It was important to them. I wonder, are we people who similarly hold on to the word of God?

See it as some characteristic of us that might make us distinct and different from others. Something that's important to us. Something that identifies us.

[5:48] Not just something we do. We were reminded, those of us who were at the prayer meeting and weddings the afternoon, that Zephaniah's prophecy starts, the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah.

And Colin then noted that, from Calvin, that Zephaniah didn't just introduce his own ideas, but Calvin says he was the announcer of celestial truth.

But you see, Paul, Zephaniah, all the other writers of Scripture, they were all human. They were all capable of making mistakes.

But God, the Holy Spirit, is divine. He never makes mistakes. And because of that, God's word is utterly trustworthy.

Because it is God's word. We drive on the left as we travel around Glasgow, at least I hope we do. But we don't see signs all the time telling us to drive on the left.

[7:07] We see plenty of other signs, which we may or may not pay attention to. We don't see these ones. And yet we know it's what we're meant to do and we know there are terrible consequences if we don't.

Now we're, in Scripture, we're not always reminded that God's word is God's word. inspired by God the Holy Spirit as he carried along the human writers.

But if we fail to remember, then there are consequences. We can easily fall into the trap of thinking, well, this is just a human writer's opinion.

Then deciding, well, we don't much like that opinion. And we prepare for ourselves, think. I don't imagine I'm the only one who's come across things in the writings of those purportedly evangelical or Christians who speak in that way.

Telling us what Paul says and then finding reason to say, well, I'm not at all sure about this. Even came across someone recently who said that about something the Lord said.

[8:25] it's an outlook that's surprisingly prevalent today as it reflects the revealing mindset of the world.

But it's also an approach to Scripture that's deeply dishonoring to God and deeply harmful to ourselves. Now, as we read the Bible for ourselves, this portion in Thessalonians at any other portion, when we hear it read by others, when we hear it preached, we should always be remembering this isn't just someone's opinion, someone's truth, which we can put against some other opinion, some other truth.

This is God's Word. This is God's truth, the eternal truth, the truth which we can trust, which we can take a stand on, which we can depend on and have confidence in, and to which we should render full obedience.

That is the full picture. But secondly, what in this chapter are we told about the Thessalonian congregation?

Verse 3, we read of their work of faith, their labour of love, their steadfastness of hope. Other translations have work produced by faith, labour prompted by love, endurance inspired by hope.

[10:08] Sometimes we speak of someone coming to faith, and that could give us the idea that it's a sort of one-off thing, but not for the Thessalonian believers.

It was ongoing, and it evidenced itself in how they lived their lives. You see, they had not fallen into the trap that the Galatian congregation fell into.

You remember, they had started in faith and trust in God, but then, through the influence of false teachers, they had started to try to do things for themselves, not tempting, not depending on God and his grace.

If you remember, Paul was appalled by that change. But not here. The Thessalonian believers continued to trust, continued to depend, continued to look to God, to cry to God for his continued gracious empowering in their lives.

God is have faith in someone or something, is to express a need.

[11:38] We are creatures. God is creator. We are sinful. God is holy. Until God works in our lives, we are dead in our trespasses and sins.

needless. But God is redeemer. We are needy people, but God is able to meet our needs.

We don't deserve such love and care, but God is gracious. do you have some need this evening?

And in your need, have you expressed your faith in God by crying to him? And continuing to cry to him?

We may have many needs, but of course of them all, the greatest need we have, the one shared by everyone in this world, I need to be right with God.

[13:00] And this is the promise. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. everyone.

But we're also told there of the Thessalonians' labor prompted by love. Now, the love that's being referred to is the Thessalonians' love, but it in turn mirrors God's prior love, the love God shows to his people.

And that is a costly love. It costs God the life of his one and only son, the son he loves. And as we mirror God's love, it will also be costly for us.

That, I think, is why we're told that the Thessalonians labored at it. It was hard work, it took effort. Not something simply done when it was convenient or when it suits us.

And of course, love here isn't a wishy-washing feeling as the word is often used today. No, God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[14:25] And our love, mirroring that prior love of God, will also be costly. A love shown to God, a love shown to others, made in the image of God.

What just happened? We'll need to work at it. The third thing we are told of the Thessalonians was their endurance inspired by hope.

What kept the Lord Jesus going as he made his way to the cross? We're told in Hebrews, it was for the joy set before him.

That was the hope that helped the Lord to persevere, to endure. And because of his endurance, what a wonderful hope is held out to us.

Some aspects we enjoy now, some are yet to come. But what a hope. Forgiveness of sin, new life in Christ, everlasting life, adoption into God's family, resurrection to new life, and ultimately sharing the glory of our Lord as we share his presence.

[15:45] No more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain. That is a hope worth trusting in and enduring for.

Just after that phrase, the end of verse 3, we read these words, in our Lord Jesus Christ. These words could be seen as just applying to the phrase that's immediately before them, the steadfastness of hope, the Thessalonians.

But I think it applies to all three things we've been looking at in verse three. Faith, hope, love, and hope. And I do so for this reason. All these words are relational words.

Your faith in something or someone. You have love for someone or something. You have hope in someone or something.

and we're told that these Thessalonians had faith, hope, love, and hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[17:10] Focusing in and where these things were placed is very important because it immediately excludes any other explanation, any other reason that they might have these things.

From surveys we learn that many people today believe that there are several ways to come to God. The way doesn't matter, they say, so long as you are sincere.

No. There is one way. There is one mediator given between God and man. We come through him. or we don't come at all. As our Lord himself tells us, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. But to get the full picture of the Thessalonians and their relationship with God, we need to read further.

[18:19] look at verses 4 and 5. 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.

God had loved them. We are told here of the work of God that had taken place in their lives. God had loved them.

As we've seen, Paul tells us elsewhere, God shows his love in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. God had chosen them, even as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world.

That gospel message came to them, not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. It's very striking when I was preparing for this evening.

reading through that passage, the passages we read in Acts and in this chapter, to see how many references there are to the work of the Holy Spirit and the lives of his people.

[19:55] Remember what we saw in Acts just a little while ago, the way Paul and his companions were guided to Troas. God the Holy Spirit said, no, not that way.

No, not that way. And they were left pointing down to Troas. Of course, that's where the vision of the man of Macedonia came to Paul.

Paul. I wonder if you've ever known that shaping, directing work of the Spirit in your life.

Very probably, it's not something we can explain, but we can sense it. God working, God directing, God guiding. the Spirit is constantly at work in the lives of God's people.

A few verses later, we saw it in Lydia's life. Remember the lady outside Philippi that Paul and the others spoke to were told the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was telling her.

[21:14] And as a result, she became a believer. And for these Thessalonians, God had been at work in their lives long before.

They gave this evidence of faith that's recorded in verse 3 of this letter. And that order, I think, really sums up the gospel.

God works. we respond. Indeed, it's the form of the covenant that we repeatedly read of God making his covenant with us.

God works. We respond. Remember how the Ten Commandments passage begins. And God spoke all these words saying, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

And then God states what our response is to be. God had saved his people. They now had to live as his saved people.

[22:31] God sometimes, usually preachers, you'll hear speaking of indicatives and imperatives. Indicatives are the statements in scripture of what God has done.

Imperatives are the responses God's people, the people in whom and for whom these things have been done are called to make. And the order is always the same.

God acts first and then we respond. Now why do I stress this?

Because in every other religion in this world the order is reversed. More, in the thinking of this world the order is reversed.

men and women want to do and then expect God to respond to them. Men and women are convinced if only they will do the right thing in sufficient measure God will have no alternative but to accept them and their efforts.

[23:49] It wouldn't take too many people if you went out this evening into Crow Road and started speaking to folk and asking them to find that attitude displayed. The world so often rejects the gracious offer of salvation God makes because it's determined to follow its own way, to do its own thing, to earn its own salvation, to have a reason for boasting.

But as we're told, with grace there is no boasting. The good news of the gospel message is that God has done what we are utterly unable to do for ourselves.

And so that gospel order must be upheld. God acts, we respond. it's possible that there are some here this evening who have heard of this Lord Jesus Christ, the one mediated between God and man, who left glory, took human nature, becoming both God and man, the God man, who lived the life of righteousness, no fault, no blemish, no sin, yet died in the place of sinners, paying their debt, winning for them his righteousness.

And yet they are still relying on their own efforts. People who have heard, some for many years, of a saviour who saves, a saviour who invites all to come in faith and love and hope, but they haven't done so.

Tonight, that gracious offer is still open. You don't deserve salvation, none of us do, and you can't earn it, but you can receive it.

[26:14] Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. That's what the Philippian jailer was told. And he did just that and was saved.

Oh, you. God worked in the lives of these Thessalonians, loving them, choosing them, convicting them by the Holy Spirit.

And we've read of the response, faith, love, and hope, the work, the labour, the perseverance displayed by them. And that wasn't done in their own strength.

They had started with a trusted dependence on Christ, and that was continuing. Their hope was in the gracious God who had started a good work in them, that he would bring that work, his work, to completion.

And that's why I think we read in verse 2 of the chapter. Paul says, we give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

[27:30] I wonder as we've read of the Thessalonians, faith, hope, and love, you might thought they were going to be praised, they were being commended, but no, it's God who receives the thanks.

God had acted in grace, and that was recognised, and so God was given thanks. And surely the prayers made that are mentioned in that verse ask that God would continue to act in their lives and in his grace, that they in turn might continue to be enabled to respond in faith and in love and in hope as they continued to depend on him.

thirdly, and much more briefly, what was the outcome?

Let's look at verses 6 to 10. We read, and you became imitators of us, son of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and 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, 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.

[29:31] That change that we've been reading about in the life of the Thessalonians was evident. It was noticed, it was reported on by other believers, both in Macedonia and in Achaia.

Think for a moment of the impact that would have to see and hear of fellow believers who had turned to God from idols to serve the true and living God and had done so in the face of much affliction, would surely have encouraged others to imitate them, even as the Thessalonians were told, had imitated Paul and his companions and imitated the Lord.

Those who trust in the Lord have an opportunity responsibility both to give and to receive encouragement.

I believe it's one of the reasons we're gathered into congregations, not just for the convenience of ministers, that we can speak to everybody in a one and not do it individually.

God has gathered us into a community. We're first gathered into the covenant community, where we hear and see and learn of both our great need and the offer of saving grace.

[31:08] God intends that covenant community to be an environment in which we are surrounded, immersed in nurturing teaching and encouraging examples.

And it is in that environment as God the Holy Spirit works in our lives, just as he worked in the lives of the Thessalonians, that faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

But surely that encouragement is meant to continue just as the Thessalonians continue to encourage those in their area. Are we encouraging folk around us in our congregation this evening? Are we receiving encouragement from them? Like faith, love, and hope, giving encouragement to others, receiving it from others, is something we have to work at.

Perhaps like me, you're surprised in these verses not to read anything of the Thessalonians being a bright, shining gospel witness in Macedonia and Achaia and the rest of the world.

[32:39] Were there changed lives invisible people to the world around them? But then we remember the words of the Lord Jesus and we see the full picture.

By this, said the Lord, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another.

Changed lives are noticed and not just by fellow believers. As that same gracious Lord who worked in the lives of these Thessalonians works in ours, may it be noticed and may it encourage our fellow believers but more than that, may it be used by God to bring change to life and Thornwood, Partick, those around us.

And then the thanks and the praise and the glory will properly and deservedly be the Lord's for he has acted.

He has done it. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for your most wonderful work of grace.

[34:30] so often we fail to grasp the fullness of it. Lord, as we've read of your work of grace in these Thessalonian Christians and in Philippi and in other places, days long ago, may it encourage us to look to you, to cry to you today for that same grace, that same working, for you are that same loving God.

Amen. Let's close our service singing in Psalm 84. Psalm 84, this is a psalm that speaks of God's courts, his dwellings, his house, and we have to remember what we heard from the minister last Sunday evening, that these things today don't mean physical buildings.

We're talking about God and dwelling his people. That journey of faith that God's people are on is spoken of in the final stanza that we're going to sing.

Let me just read it. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, those who have a pilgrim's mind. Pools from autumn rains refresh them, springs in Baker's Valley they find, strength increasing, Zionward. They go on their way to God.

[36:20] to go to the people who in people who are in the