

A Community Chosen in God

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1.

We're going to read the whole chapter as we did last Lord's Day evening. And in particular, we'll focus on verses 4 to 10. But let's read the whole chapter.

Paul, Silvanus, or Silas, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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.

[1 : 07] 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 and with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 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.

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.

May God bless that reading from his holy word as we turn to consider, as I said, particularly verses 4 to 10, the remainder of 1 Thessalonians 1, rather a number of points, in fact really two main points with a number of subheadings contained.

The two main points of the sermon this evening are going to be the evidence of salvation, and then the three subheadings that really tell us what are the pieces of evidence that tell that a person is in Christ, that he is or she is chosen by God, that has come to faith through the power, the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, that word that was preached through conviction, even the conviction of gospel truth.

[2 : 53] And then, secondly, to look at examples, the example that believers show to others that truly there is that saving faith within the believer.

And, of course, we have the example of Jesus and the apostles, or maybe even, as we'll see as Paul writes here the other way around, the example that the apostles showed that they were in Christ that pointed to the Lord Jesus.

And then, as we read there in the chapter, the example of one believer to another, or believers to other believers, the example of saving faith, that we show one to another.

And then, thirdly, if you like, the third subheading in the example to follow, the example of conversion. What are the practical, if you like, the practical evidences of conversion?

We'll see how that was shown in the case of the Thessalonian believers, because they were a community chosen in God, a community chosen by God.

- [3 : 59] Because, you know, of all the privileges that we know in the world, all the privileges that are before us in the world, the greatest privilege of all is to be counted amongst the community of God's people, the community chosen by God.
- You know, that privilege of being gifted faith, or having been gifted faith to believe, and that gift being given through the love of the Lord God, our Lord and Savior, that gift of faith given to you by God, the God of all grace.
- And then, of course, it's that privilege, and again, to be reminded again and again, that privilege that none of us deserve, that privilege that, you know, isn't anyone's because of some kind of merit in our own part, some kind of good deeds in our own part, that somehow God will notice and give us credit for?
- Absolutely not. The privilege that you know who are in Christ is all because of the love of God in sending the Lord Jesus to be our Savior.
- It's that privilege that the Apostle Paul knew. It's that privilege that the believers in Thessalonica knew. And it's the privilege that you and I know, you and I who are in Christ know.
- [5 : 21] You know Jesus as your Savior. And you know that through the indwelling witness of the Holy Spirit. And, you know, to build up your faith and your love and your hope to give glory to God for that great salvation.
- And again, as we said, to be reminded of these great truths. We're going to turn to this section in the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians and really look more closely, as we said, at the evidence of salvation in a believer's life.
- And as we've seen the passage progress, to consider the examples of grace that really speak of the sure mercies of God and all who are His.
- So let's look more closely then at the evidence of salvation. As we've seen, and as Paul has mentioned here, that evidence of having been chosen by God.
- Because when we started verse 4, we saw that Paul was really getting to the nub of the matter about the evidence of true saving faith. Faith in all who are saved by grace.
- [6 : 28] Faith in those whom he's writing to. And really all, not just immediate, those who are immediately recipients of this letter, but all, even ourselves this evening, for whom saving faith is known as that indwelling, by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.
- I mean, already Paul's mentioned, he's actually mentioned three aspects of the evidence of saving faith. He said that in verse 3, the work of faith, the labor of love, and the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- But now as he's addressing the church as his brothers and sisters in Christ, he's telling them, and he's telling you, he's telling us, you're loved by God. You're loved by God.
- And it's that privilege of being chosen by God because of the love of God for sinners. Sinners saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus. That, Paul's saying, that's evidence.
- The evidence of being chosen by God. And he says, the two things that show the evidence of having been chosen by God. The power, the power of the Spirit, and the conviction, conviction of gospel truth.
- [7 : 47] Because, you know, Paul came to Thessalonica. He came, he came bringing something. He came with the greatest commodity of all. He didn't come with silver. He didn't come with gold.
- He came with the gospel. In fact, he refers to the gospel, as you've noticed, as our gospel. That's what he's referring to, the good news of Jesus Christ.

The gospel that he and his companions possessed as a gift, that great gift from God. But of course, it wasn't simply because the gospel was preached that convinced Paul of the fact that the Thessalonians were chosen by God.

Because as you know, just words by themselves don't indicate salvation. Paul's telling us that it's because the gospel came with, as he says, with power, the Holy Spirit, and with conviction, as we read there in verse 5.

Because, you know, the gospel isn't effective unless it's proclaimed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Unless the Spirit is present in the preaching of the Word and the receiving of the Word.

[8 : 58] It can't be salvation. And Paul's saying here, this is his conviction. In fact, this is his full conviction of faith that with the Spirit testifying to his Spirit, the Word that was proclaimed, that he proclaimed to the Thessalonians, that Word was accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit and with all the outworking of the Spirit's power, seen in the evidence of saving faith and what the Thessalonians were showing by their works of faith, by their labor of love.

And that convinced him that the Thessalonians truly were chosen people, that they truly were and are brothers in Christ. and let's pray that, you know, God grants that in all the preaching of God's Word, even today, in all the work of evangelism, the work of mission, that, you know, as a church, even this church and churches throughout the land, the gospel that's given as a gift and possessed as a gift, that that gospel that God gives to you, that it's proclaimed not just in word, but with power, with that life-changing power of the Holy Spirit and proclaimed with utter conviction of faith.

You know, it's been said and really has to be said that those who preach the Word should preach and always preach expecting conversions.

I have to ask myself as you have to ask yourself. Do you have that confidence, that confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit that the Spirit will use the Word of God and use that Word to change lives?

Because when I or anyone who preaches the Word can say that, yes, we have that conviction that the Word will not return empty, but accomplish what God desires, I pray that, you know, that truly is the conviction of all who proclaim the Word of God.

[11 : 01] I was certainly reminded of that just two nights ago. I was reminded of that on Friday evening when I was watching the online service of Colin McLeod's induction to Backfree Church and one of the speakers that evening, Friday evening, and also in the vows that Colin gave, that really was emphasized, this emphasis on conversion through the preaching of the Word.

Well, it was in the vows themselves, and I'm just amending them slightly, because in the vow that Colin gave, and it was mentioned by, as I say, one of the speakers, the vow is this in the motive for ministry.

Zeal for the honour of God, love to Jesus Christ, and desire of saving souls are the preacher's great motives, and chief inducements to enter into the function of holy ministry and not worldly designs and interests.

Zeal for the honour of God, love to Jesus Christ, and desire of saving souls. And it's that conviction, that conviction to see lives change through the preaching of the Word accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That was Paul's conviction. He mentions this in verse 5 when he speaks of his full conviction and proclaiming the Word of Truth as he did that there to the church in Thessalonica.

[12 : 28] And if you do it again in verse 5, you'll see that he's really encouraging the Thessalonians to realise that the gospel that he preached to them, that that gospel came with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction.

And Paul's saying that because, you know, Paul with Silas and Timothy as companions, they had that absolute certainty and assurance that the Thessalonians were truly chosen by God and that their salvation is secure.

And that conviction, whether it's 2,000 years ago with Paul or even today, that conviction doesn't go away. It's the conviction, surely, and must be the conviction of every minister who proclaims the Lord Jesus each and every Lord's Day.

Surely, it has to be the conviction of the missionary who proclaims Jesus to African tribesmen and women. It's the conviction of students who are training for the ministry that God will use them for the saving of souls and to the glory of God.

And I pray that you too will have that conviction of faith that God can and God will save. That God can and God will deliver from darkness and bring into light by the power of His Spirit.

[13 : 54] That He'll bring into light, the light, those who still are in the darkness of sin. So we pray that God will have mercy and that through the preaching of the Word by and accompanied by the Spirit will be those who are converted who give their lives to the Lord Jesus.

And those who do give their lives to the Lord Jesus, well, there are examples to follow, examples to show and examples to follow because that's what we see as Paul continues in certainly in verse 6, 5, well, beyond 5 into verse 6 and 7 and onwards because Paul wants the Thessalonians to be established in their assurance of faith, their assurance of salvation.

And he's reminding them therefore at the end of verse 5 and then into verse 6, he's reminding them that their conduct, their behavior as Christians actually is evidence itself that they've been converted.

And we've got to look at this from, if you like, two perspectives and bring these perspectives together. Firstly, from the perspective of Paul and his companions because we read at the end of verse 5, you know what kind of men we prove to be among you for your sake.

So, the example of Paul and his companions, the example of saving faith shown to the believers in Thessalonica. But then there's the perspective of the Thessalonians, verse 6, you became imitators of us and of the Lord for you received the word in much affliction and with the joy of the Spirit.

[15 : 37] Let's bring these two aspects together because Paul had been with the Thessalonians for a particular period of time. He'd been with them, he'd lived with them, he'd preached to them and in that time he'd nurtured that young growing church and it was for the sake of those believers there in Thessalonica that Paul and his companions that they lived there in that Thessalonian community.

And as Paul says, there were very good reasons for Paul staying there, not just in his preaching, but to be an example to them because the young church was to imitate Paul and his companions.

But that's not any kind of, you know, arrogance, Paul's saying, no kind of illusions or delusions of grandeur. No, Paul himself, his life was hidden Christ.

And Paul's telling the Thessalonians that they became imitators of Paul and his companions and imitators of him and the Lord for good reason.

I mean, these Thessalonian believers, these Christians in Thessalonica, they knew Paul as their pastor. They knew Paul as their shepherd, as their guide.

[16 : 58] Paul would have been the first Christian that they'd ever met. And Paul directing them to the Lord Jesus to show what it means to live as Christ, to be like Christ in faith and faith and practice.

And it's Paul demonstrating the Lord Jesus in his life, demonstrating that to others. So these believers saw Christ in Paul.

This isn't the only time, in fact, that Paul instructs a church to be an imitator of him. You go to 1 Corinthians 4. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you don't have many fathers.

For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel, I urge you then be imitators of me. Because, you know, again, it's not some kind of, you know, ego trip that Paul was on.

Because Paul was in Christ. Paul had become a spiritual father to the church in Corinth. And we could say that Paul and his companions were spiritual parents to that young church in Thessalonica.

[18 : 05] He would see the Lord Jesus Christ in him and his companions. So these young converts there in Thessalonica, they looked to Paul and his companions as models of Christian living.

I mean, who else could they turn to there in that largely pagan city of Thessalonica? And as these Thessalonians imitated Paul's walk in Christ, the more they became imitators of the Lord Jesus.

So as the Thessalonians were imitating Paul, they were imitating the Lord Jesus. Now, that imitating, that imitation, if you like, that wasn't without a cost.

Because as we're told in verse 6, as we read there, for you receive the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. You see that what seems to be a disparity, but it's actually connection, affliction, and joy.

You see the connection between the Holy Spirit and opposition to the word from the enemies of the gospel. Because as we can work out, as the word was preached to the Thessalonians, as it was preached, the Spirit working in the lives of these people there to convert them, to bring these people to the Lord Jesus.

[19 : 31] But as that's happening, there's opposition to these believers as they're receiving the message, as they're receiving the message with joy and being converted. You could almost say inevitably there was persecution, there was hostility.

But despite these attacks, the attacks that the believers were facing, they're filled with the Holy Spirit. They've been converted through the preaching of the word.

They've been converted and they know the gospel. And that gospel brought joy to their hearts. And so that joy was so palpable in these believers that they wanted to live godly lives.

They wanted to show forth the Lord Jesus to others. Their faith, their faith, as we saw, was patterned in the faith of the apostles. And in doing so, they shone, they shone for the Lord Jesus.

You see that in verse 7. Other believers, believers in an area beyond Thessalonica, they noticed the example of these believers.

[20 : 38] These Thessalonians themselves became model believers. And so Paul tells us in verse 8 that the word of the Lord sounded forth, a bit like, you know, a loud trumpet sound just going beyond and reaching out to others.

So the word spread so much. Paul says that the faith of the Thessalonians went everywhere. Maybe a slight exaggeration perhaps, but certainly went so far beyond Thessalonica itself.

And so much so that Paul's saying, I don't need to do what these Thessalonian believers are doing. They're doing it by their witness. They're doing the work that God has given them to do to proclaim the Lord Jesus by their witness, by the evidence of their true saving faith.

And there are certainly lessons, certainly lessons for each one of us in the example of the Thessalonians. And surely the first lesson is this, from what we've seen in the passage, the lesson of having a consistent witness, having a consistently strong faith that's going to have wider repercussions even beyond the immediate church, the immediate congregation.

because when a body of believers is living by faith and showing the love of the Lord Jesus even within the congregation itself and beyond, that testimony is going to extend far and wide.

[22 : 07] Because that's what the witness of a church should just, should be just that. You know, have you heard, have you heard how they love one another? Have you heard how they support one another?

Have you heard how they support the disadvantaged, the poor, the sick, the suffering? Have you heard how they take their stand against the opposition of the world? But not just in reference to a body, a collection, a community of believers.

What about the witness of a humble, faithful, individual believer? That witness that travels far beyond geography and even history? the consistent witness of faithful men and women of God, men and women who are now in glory.

Their witness that's spread so far beyond their immediate location. Their quiet face that was demonstrated in acts of love for God and for their neighbour.

That quiet faith that reached beyond and reached beyond themselves, beyond their locations, that reached far and wide so that many knew of their witness and God honoured through these many silent witnesses.

[23 : 28] Of course, you know, in the true sense of love, that self-giving love of the believer, you don't do it for your own glory. You do it for the glory of God. Even the witness of a church isn't to bring glory to the church, absolutely not, but you're doing what you're doing for the sake of the Lord Jesus, for the sake of the gospel, so that others will turn to the Saviour and know him as Lord and God.

And so it's for each one of us to be consistent in our witness, in your witness, for the Lord Jesus and through the Lord Jesus. So consistency in witness, consistency in faith.

But then coming back to faith, we see that the Thessalonians were actually defined by their faith. Right there in verse 8, it was their faith in God that Paul tells us was known everywhere.

Let's read again, your faith in God has gone forth everywhere. Is that how others see this congregation? Your faith in God, is that the renown? Is that what defines even this congregation?

Are you characterized by your faith in the Lord Jesus? You know, over 200 years ago, Highland Christians were actually characterized by their faith.

[24 : 49] They were called in a very sort of derogatory way, people who sneered at them, but the people who sneered at these Highland believers, they called them, those who sneered at them, they called them the people of the great faith.

Now that may well have been a derogatory way of speaking of these believers, people who hated the gospel, but the point was there, these godly Highlanders, they showed a commitment, they showed a constant faith in God that others noticed, even sneeringly, but others noticed that they had a faith that certainly these people themselves didn't have.

Are we a people of the great faith? That great faith, that saving faith, that true saving faith, well that faith of course is going to be demonstrated in action.

As we saw there in relation to the Thessalonians as we read there in verse 9 and 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 to be raised from the dead Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

And in these last two verses of this chapter, Paul's showing the way that the believers received the word of God, how they received it, how they showed it in their lives.

[26 : 16] And they did a number of things that demonstrated their faith. That faith, as we said, that became so well known for miles and miles around.

The first thing that these believers did, we might say, was to turn from idols. That was the decisive moment. That was the decisive turnaround, if you like.

It wasn't something that they sort of hesitated over. It was a complete and completed action. They turned from idols, that mark of conversion.

It was a complete break from their polytheistic, their multi-god pagan past. So the Thessalonians, they demonstrated their faith by turning away from these pagan idols because these idols would have once dominated their lives.

Every aspect of their life would be in some way directed, or so-called directed by a pagan idol, and their work, and their rest, and their play. But they're no longer going to live.

[27 : 22] They're no longer going to live their lives determined by these objects of wickedness. They're going to do something, having turned from idols.

They're going to serve, and that was the, if you like, the further evidence of their faith, of saving faith. They would serve the living and true God.

They turned from idols, they turned to serve the living and true God. That, if you like, was the positive expression of their faith. That showed that they were servants of God.

God. And, you know, when Paul speaks of them as servants, as you turn to God from idols to serve, it's this language of slavery, this language of slavery, this serving, in other words, complete surrender, complete submission.

You might think, well, there's the paradox, you know, in the one hand, a slave of the Lord, and yet, knowing that freedom, freedom from all the dead, destructive way of life that these believers had once known.

[28 : 29] But now, as slaves to the Lord, servants of the Lord, knowing that freedom, that joy of the Lord, and being willing to serve.

You know, Paul himself, in Romans 1, verse 1, described himself as a slave, as a servant of Christ. He was willing, willing to serve, willing to submit. As these Thessalonians were willing to serve, and willing to submit to their Lord and Saviour.

And, well, who did they serve? Well, we're told here in verse 9, that they serve God, the living and true God. Because before their conversion, these Thessalonians, yes, they were enslaved, but they were enslaved to dead, false gods.

Their lives were just in a state of ruin and total destruction. But now they turned from these dead idols. They turned from these dead gods.

These gods that had enslaved them to sin. And now these believers, they're being transformed, and transformed not by a dead god, but by the living and true God.

[29 : 42] So from being enslaved by many gods, these dead, false gods, they become willing, willing servants, willing slaves, slaves of God, the one true living God.

And every Christian, likewise, you rejoice in being that servant of the Lord Jesus as you serve the living and true God. It's not a burden.

It's not a burden. Jesus said, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. If you follow the Lord Jesus, you know that freedom to serve and to serve with all your strength and all your might.

Because, well, you know again from Scripture, you know in your hearts, that service, the service, the sign of eternity, the service in his name, is that prelude to that time when Jesus will return again and restore all things to himself, just as we were thinking latterly this morning.

So we see there in the first half of verse 10 that, if you like, this was another aspect of the evidence of these believers that they were waiting for God's Son from heaven.

[30 : 57] They turned from idols. They turned in order to serve the living God and to wait for the return of the Lord Jesus. Serving, waiting, they go hand in hand.

Somebody's written this in Christian terms, serving is getting busy for Christ on earth, serving on earth, while waiting is looking for Christ to come from heaven.

Serving and waiting. If you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, then you're serving him on earth, but you're doing that with an eye to the Lord Jesus' return because you know that your labor in the Lord here on earth isn't in vain.

you serve and you're committed with true conviction of faith that yes, you are serving the living and true God.

But you know there's a day coming when that service is going to cease and there'll be that new heaven and new earth. Yes, you'll serve a new and that new heaven and new earth and I pray that by faith you await that time.

[32 : 08] You're looking forward to that day, that eternal day. As we read this morning, Revelation 22 3, no longer will there be anything accursed, but this throne of God and the Lamb will be in it and his servants will worship him.

You know, the faith and the witness of these Thessalonian believers still resonates. We hear it 2,000 years beyond their time on earth. These were young, in many ways young believers, young in faith anyway, and yet their witness showed even a maturity in their shining for the Saviour and they were doing that in troubled times.

What of you in these troubled times? Are you going to stand for the Lord and give a good example for him in your steadfast faith, in your love, and your hope in Christ?

Are you going to testify by your word and action that Jesus is yours and you're his? Are you going to show it by an unashamed witness? I pray that God will give you that strength, the strength by his spirit, to be bold, to be bold for him in these dark and difficult days, and that you'll serve him here on earth as you await his return from heaven, and that you serve and await with that joy of the Lord as you show your love for him, as you seek to serve him all the days that God gives you.

Amen. Let us pray. Our heavenly Father, you've given us work to do, work in order to serve you. May we serve you with all our heart, with all our strength, with all our soul, with all our might.

[33 : 57] Let us be those, Lord, to serve you, not in any way in a sense of foreboding, but Lord, may we serve you from the heart in that glad service of your name.

Give us, Lord, we pray that strength to look to you, to know that our strength is found in you and from you, and that what we do, we do in your name and for your glory.

Hear us, Lord, as we commit even our service to you now. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.