

A Model Church

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn together to the passage we read in 1 Thessalonians and chapter 1. We can read again at verse 4, sorry at verse 3, or we better begin at verse 2.

We give thanks to God always for you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour 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.

And in verse 6, you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. And so on through to the end of the chapter, really, as we look at some of the features that you find there in this description that he's giving here of the Thessalonians as he's writing to them.

The apostle is obviously pointing out some of the features of their life as a church, as a congregation. And I suppose if you wanted to look in the New Testament for a model church, a church that really would be a pattern as to how a church should be, then you would certainly have a difficulty in getting beyond the Thessalonians to find a better model of a church than what you find described by Paul as he writes to the Thessalonians here in these two letters, two short letters.

[1 : 3 1] They were a very young church. They weren't long established in the faith. And these were some of the earliest writings of the apostle. And yet he can commend them for so many things. As he writes to them, he brings up so many positive things so that he can even say that they are, in fact, an example to others as well in the way that they have received God's word, in the way that they're living out God's word.

And so that's why you could say of them that they are indeed a model church. And therefore, you could pattern yourselves on this church if you wanted an example of what a church should be like.

Now, as I prepare to leave you as your minister, having been these many happy years with you, there are many features in this passage that really would describe yourselves as well.

And it's, in a sense, really just presenting to you things that you are already doing at the moment, but that you will want to build on in the future. Because, let's face it, no congregation is dependent on any human being.

And it doesn't matter who a minister is or how long he may be in a place. A congregation has to actually depend upon the Lord who sends ministers, who takes ministers away, who brings others then to follow them.

[2 : 5 4] And it's in that pattern of ministry, very largely, that you find people's lives affected generation by generation. So, what we're saying really is here, today is a reminder to us of what we should be, whatever congregation we're of, wherever we're ministering, whatever congregation we minister to.

This is a model congregation, and it's been so gratifying and rewarding to me to actually find many of these features in yourselves, as I have sought to preach the gospel to you over these years.

So, let's look at what it's saying about this congregation in Thessalonica. There are two things really about them as a people that you'll find in this early part of the letter.

First of all, they're a chosen people. That's what he's saying to them there in verse 4. We know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you. Here is this church in a pagan setting, having had the gospel taken to them, and Paul, having preached to them, he didn't spend very long in Thessalonica, probably just a few months.

And yet, the church, as it was established, grew into this young, vibrant, positive church. And here he has said to them, we know that you have been chosen by God.

[4 : 15] And that's the first thing he really wants to mark. They are a chosen people. But then he tells them why he's able to say that about them. They are chosen because, secondly, they're an active people.

And they are active in three things relating to God's word. They are active in receiving God's word, as they were active, so they're still active in receiving God's word.

They're active in applying God's word. The way they live shows that they haven't just listened to God's word and heard it intellectually. They're actually applying it to their strands of life.

To their everyday lives as Christians. And thirdly, they are an active people in transmitting God's word. They're busy not just receiving, but they're also transmitting the word of God.

They're broadcasting it. What he's saying, as we'll see, is the word of God has sounded forth from you. It's made a noise from you outwards to the communities around you.

[5 : 19] So let's look at these two main headings. A chosen people and an active people looking mostly at the second one. You are beloved by God and chosen by him.

We know, brothers, loved by God that he has chosen you. Of course, you have to keep these two terms together. Loved by God and chosen by God. We know that God has chosen his people from all eternity.

He has saved people from all eternity. That God has given us in the Bible this doctrine of election, as it's usually called. And it's a difficult doctrine to handle.

It's a difficult doctrine to apply. It's a difficult doctrine to understand because we can't understand everything about it. And there are things like that, as we've seen many times in the Bible, that believers actually accept to be the truth, even though they cannot actually open it up and understand every single detail of it.

And it's the same with this doctrine of election, as Paul says to the Ephesians in the first chapter there at verse 5, that he has predestined them.

[6 : 31] They are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world by God the Father, having predestined us, he says, in love. In other words, love is something that is very much involved in this choice, in this election of God.

God's election is an act of his love. And we can't actually then ask the question, why did God love certain people to make them his people?

We don't know the answer to that. There is nothing given us to get behind the love of God and see something else as if it were a source for that. Though God's love itself is the source of his election and choosing of his people.

But now this is important. It's important that we accept that that doctrine is in fact the truth. But it's also important that we don't try and figure it out too much before we actually come to think of giving ourselves to the Lord and yielding our lives to him and coming to bow in obedience to him.

Because some people do that. Some people think, well, I can't just get my head around this doctrine of election and it's a problem to me. And I know from the doctrine of election that God's chosen people will be saved anyway.

[7 : 45] So if that's the case, then what's the point of me trying to believe or not to believe? If it's going to happen, it's going to happen. If it doesn't, then it doesn't. The Bible never encourages that sort of thinking.

Instead of trying to actually figure out this matter of election, if you're asking the question, How do I know if I belong to God's chosen people? Well, the answer there is in the rest of the chapter.

I know that I belong to God's chosen people because I've received God's word. Because I'm applying God's word. Because I'm transmitting God's word.

In other words, the answer to the question, how do I know, is I know that I'm God's chosen through my response to the gospel?

It's God's chosen people who believe in Christ. It's God's chosen people who repent. It's God's chosen people who embrace Christ. It's God's chosen people who want to glorify and acknowledge Christ.

[8 : 52] It's God's chosen people who want to live for him, who have him installed as Lord of their hearts and Lord of their lives. That's all the practical things that you and I need to actually get on with doing.

And if we get on with doing them, we really don't have to go far to look for an answer to the question, How do I know if I'm going to be one of God's elect, if I'm in the elect or not? I know if I'm living as a Christian.

If I'm living wholeheartedly in obedience to God, even though I have many defects in my life, even though I have still many things to learn, even though I'm coming short of everything God wants me to be, still sincerely and wholeheartedly, I want to live for the praise of God.

Therefore, I must be one of God's. That's the argument the apostle is giving them. We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you because, and then he explains, why they know that they are God's chosen people.

So the question for you today, you see, is not, and for me, the question is not primarily, am I really one of God's elect people? Am I within the elect chosen people of God or not?

[10 : 02] That's not the question. The question is, have I repented? Have I come to God with my sins and given them over to Christ? Have I come and given my heart to him? Have I accepted him?

Have I embraced him? Have I really and truthfully taken this gospel and taken it to heart so that I want to live for God? These are the questions.

And then you can begin looking at the issue of election, but not before then. And these are the great things that we want to focus on in our lives.

Yes, of course, every doctrine is important, as election is. But you have to come to it the way the Bible itself encourages us to come to it.

Because he now goes on to say that not only are they a chosen people, but they're an active people. And it's being an active people and the things in which they're active that really shows and proves that they are a chosen people.

[11 : 01] First of all, they're active in receiving God's word. Verses 6, 5, and 6, and 9 especially. If you look at verse 5 there, it says, Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.

And you have to really keep that whole sentence there together, or that part of it together. It's one sentence from verse 4. Because our gospel came to you not in word only, but in power also, and in the Holy Spirit, with full assurance, or full conviction.

In word, of course, the gospel came to them in word. The gospel comes to us in word. The gospel is God's message to us. And in his kindness, he has given it to us in a language that we are able to understand, in our own language, in our own native tongue.

The gospel came in word. Even though it says it's not in word only, it's still important to realize that God has sent us words.

A message in words, in this Bible, that is his word, for us to actually listen to, learn from, apply.

[12 : 20] But he's saying it didn't come in word only. It came also, he says, in power. In other words, this gospel, that came through the apostle to these Thessalonians, yes, it came in word as Paul preached the gospel, as he brought that to them in these words that he communicated the message by.

But he says, it came in power, and the power is one that changed lives. The power is one that changed lives all the way around. That put lives right with God.

You see, in the end of the chapter, that's what he's saying, that you turn to God from idols to serve the living and through God and to wait for his sons from him.

This is a revolution in Thessalonica. A Thessalonica that was steeped in paganism and in all the pagan practices of the day and could look back to their past in Greek philosophy as well as Roman thought.

All of these things as they were part of this important strategic city of Thessalonica. And now Paul is saying, but this gospel came to you in word, but not in word only.

[13 : 31] It came with such power that it actually took you away from all of that pagan background and practice and established you in a whole new way of life. Your life was turned right round, upside down, or put the right way up, we should say, by this gospel.

It came to you in power. It worked such a change that it brought a revolution that you're thinking in your way of life and your attitude. You turned, you see how he's saying it, from, to God, from idols.

In other words, that's a complete about turn. From the idols you were saving, you turned from these and you turned to God. That's repentance. that's the revolution that the gospel powerfully brings when it comes, thirdly, in the Holy Spirit.

Where does the power come from? It doesn't come from ministers. It doesn't come from human abilities of any kind.

It comes through the likes of Paul or whoever's preaching the gospel. Yes. But it's in the, it says, not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit.

[14 : 51] That's the source of the power. That's the agent of the power. When he takes this word and that's something that you yourselves will want to pray and continue praying for because nothing better could happen in this congregation in weeks and months to come than that more of the work of the power of the Holy Spirit would be evident amongst you.

And I could pray for nothing better in actually leaving this particular congregation than that I would hear that the Holy Spirit is powerfully working amongst you through the gospel.

You can have all kinds of things in place and everything that you yourselves have in place by now and have developed over these years in association with the gospel and with its preaching are very valuable to you.

All the other kinds of meetings and fellowships of women and young people and teenage and all the rest of that as it goes together it's all to do with the gospel and it's all really important to us along with the services or supplementary to the services but the one thing you cannot do without is the Holy Spirit.

You can have all the rest but without the Holy Spirit they're empty. There'll be no power in them. They won't be effective. That's why he's putting together these three emphases.

[16 : 21] It came yes it came in word but not in word only. It came in word and in power and in the Holy Spirit and he finishes it off by saying with full conviction with full assurance and that's sometimes a problem for people because they read that and say well I don't have full assurance.

I wish I was 100% sure that I'm saved but that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about full assurance of what the gospel is and is about.

Full assurance about God's reliability about the love of God about the provision of God. Full assurance that what God has done in Jesus Christ is his answer to human sin and to human unrighteousness and to our lostness.

That's what the full assurance is about. When you're receiving the word of God and it comes to you in power and in the Holy Spirit it comes with that assurance in your heart that this is God's doing that this is God's work that this is not reversible by human beings that this has not been invented or originated with human beings.

It's all to do with the God and the Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ that Paul preached to the Thessalonians. And then you find in verse 6 something adds to that you became imitated of us and of the Lord you received the word with much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

[17 : 59] Despite the fact that they had much affliction in receiving the word in other words they were not finding it easy as a young church they didn't find it easy to embrace this gospel to embrace this Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar instead of the pagan gods all of these had gone all of these had been turned away from and publicly they were now living for this Christ and for this God and that was hard they were suffering for it much affliction came their way because of it but you see God doesn't leave his people in affliction and even when they have affliction they've got something else that brings them above the affliction and makes the affliction itself even meaningful as Jesus taught the disciples all this they will do to you for my name's sake you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit with that joy in your heart that only God himself can produce it's not dependent on human personalities it's not dependent on anything in ourselves it's not dependent on our own abilities of memory or anything like that again it's to do with the Holy Spirit that's why the Holy Spirit is so absolutely crucial to your life and to my life individually and as a congregation you received God's word you're an active people he's saying in receiving God's word in fact you could say that

Paul here again is maybe not just explicitly using language to do with athletics and with the games that were held in those days in Greek culture and Roman times going back to the Greek games at Olympia and so on Paul as you know uses images from that to help actually illustrate the gospel message for us in various parts of his epistles and there are elements or indications of that here as well because the word receiving actually means to give a great welcome to and as we'll see in a moment the way in which the word sounds forth is a word that has to do with making a great noise so when you think of well what it would be in those days perhaps would be the Olympic torch you still find it even when the Olympic games are held nowadays when whoever is the bearer of the Olympic torch it's usually the case at least that the torch is carried through the streets or the city wherever it's the games are being held and then everybody in the stadium the stadium is packed waiting for whoever the runner is that's been chosen to carry the torch into the stadium and then it's passed round maybe the same person or whoever comes and climbs the steps and lights the great

Olympic flame and just imagine that stadium just waiting for this person to arrive through the gates of the door into the stadium and all of a sudden there they are here's the man with the torch or the woman with the torch and the stadium erupts they welcomed him they gave an enthusiastic welcome to the gospel that kind of reception you find I'm sure maybe even to a lesser extent perhaps maybe to a greater extent in some cases when you get a stadium at a football match a rugby match and especially if it's the home team that comes out through the tunnel you know what it's like you get the whole stadium then erupting or at least the supporters of that team erupting into a great crescendo of sound to welcome their team to encourage their team as they come onto the pitch well it's that sort of thing that Paul is saying here is true of the Thessalonians how they received the gospel they enthusiastically welcomed it they just received it as something that as if they'd been waiting and longing for it and you know that's how you find it very often in places where the gospel has never reached when it comes to influence those people wherever it may be if missionaries or whoever bring the gospel to a place that's never before known the gospel how often do you see this as they come to realize this message and what it's saying and as God blesses it to them they just get enthusiastic and welcome it whereas sadly in places where the gospel has been for generations people are so used to it people are apathetic or hostile or just don't want it how different to the Thessalonians they welcomed it with relish and then they applied

God's word and active people in receiving it and active people in applying it in verse 3 there you see he's saying remembering we remember this before our God your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ work of faith means an activity that faith has brought about in other words their faith in Christ their believing their accepting their trusting in him then produced these practical Christian works that they were demonstrating so it's the work of faith not describing faith itself as a work but as describing the practical outcome of being a believer of having this faith along with this work of faith you have this labour of love and the word labour there is specially chosen by the apostle to emphasise that there's real exertion and energy spent in this work it's not an easy going holiday type of activity it's a real energetic application to one's

Christian calling in life and there's a danger of course in over emphasising that side of things there's a danger in preaching the gospel that in preaching the gospel we just would perhaps sometimes and we have to sometimes but if we were to just emphasise all the time to yourselves that this is what God expects of you these are the labours and the rigours of the Christian life you would feel eventually overwhelmed there was nothing else but that and if it was just your shortcomings and how I'm my shortcomings and how we're coming so short of things of course we're coming short of things we don't need to be actually reminded and have that drilled into us week by week and although Paul is using this word labour to emphasise that there is of course an exertion and an application just like with an athlete there is this real input of energy into the Christian life he's calling it labour but he's calling it labour of love and it's not something that's forced out of you it's not something that you're doing against your will it's something that you do out of love just as the work that he's mentioned earlier is the outcome of faith so he's saying this labour is the outcome of love we're not slaves we're not people who have our minds taken over by in such a way as if you belong to a sect of some kind where you don't have your own freedom and you're just forced into doing things against your will this is the love that you have for the Lord the love that you have for his gospel the love that you have for his people the love that you have for his church the love that you have for lost souls that's what's constraining your labour that's what makes it the energetic application that it is that's what Paul is saying that's this model church you see their faith produces the work and it's also a labour of love there's an intensity about them but it's from their love that it grows and there is finally their hope is fixed on Christ there's hope these three great graces as they're often together in the Bible so they're together here there's faith and love and now hope and hope in our Lord

[26 : 49] Jesus Christ it's something that also comes in verses 9 and 10 you have turned from idols to serve the living God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come that's your hope that's the thing that your hope is set upon it's set upon the return of Jesus and as it's set upon the return of Jesus so your hope is desiring and longing towards that and it will be fulfilled then when he comes because it's hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and very often in Thessalonians in 1st Thessalonians indeed this word hope is one of Paul's favourite words it's something that he mentions more than once a few times and he relates it in chapter 4 as you know to dealing with the return of Christ and the resurrection of God's people from the dead from the graves dealing there with an issue in the church in Thessalonica they were a bit worried about what's happened to those believers who've died whose bodies have been buried and Christ hasn't come back yet what about them are they going to miss out on his coming and that's what he's dealing with in chapter 4 as you know so it's our hope in the Lord

Jesus Christ that's the application of God's word the work of faith the labour of love the steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and this turnaround in life that's involved in waiting for the return of Jesus and finally there's transmitting of God's word then active people in receiving the word in applying the word but also in verse 8 in transmitting the word he says for not only has the word of God 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 amongst you and so on now sounded forth there in verse 8 it's really like we said earlier a word which means making a great noise a word which was used at times of the ringing of a bell like a church bell for example although they're not very common nowadays when you hear church bells ringing they make a great noise it's difficult to not be woken if you're still asleep when church bells go off maybe that's one of the purposes of them so that people wouldn't stay in bed and would go to church certainly difficult to sleep through church bells so that's sort of great noise that he's talking about there and if he's using this imagery as we said of athletics or of a stadium or of games you can think about the same thing if you were living near

Ibrox or Parkhead or any of the stadia in Scotland if you were in your house or flat or whatever you wouldn't actually have to go out and look and see whether there was a game on or not you would hear it the noise would be coming from that stadium you would be able to immediately calculate that stadium is full of people there must be something going on there must be a game going on even if you have no interest in football at all or in rugby if it's Murrayfield or whatever you know there's something going on and you know what it is that's going on in that stadium because that noise is reverberating out from it from that crowd that's the kind of thing he's saying here these Thessalonians were really making a noise for Christ the gospel was being sounded forth from them and you see he's saying in Macedonia and Achaia not just in the little circle around their own locality people were actually talking about these

Thessalonians and what was happening amongst them and how they had come to embrace this gospel and this Jesus this Lord and this resurrection idea they were talking about that all through these regions the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia not only that but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything what a bonus to an apostle or a preacher or a missionary what Paul is saying is even without us saying anything people are talking about your faith your faith is being communicated by you so that it's being noticed and taken account of and in fact he says your faith in God has gone forth everywhere a remarkable thing he's saying there about how vibrant and how in the best sense how noisy these

Christians were the stir they were making about their faith and surely that's something that you yourselves have experienced and I would like to think that this congregation is going to continue and even increasingly make a greater noise for Christ I hope from Stornome I'll be hearing your noise I'll be hearing this reverberation of spiritual energy and sound as you communicate the gospel as you transmit the gospel the word of God as you live out the gospel as you actually speak to people about the gospel as the Holy Spirit works amongst you I hope it will be said of you as well I'm sure it will under God and by God's grace and by God's blessing that we can say from wherever we end up not only has the word of God sounded forth from you in Point and in

[32 : 59] Stornome and in Lewis but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere what a great thing that would be something to aim for something to keep doing in the work of the Lord because you see these people they had no social media no Facebook no tweets no Twitter accounts no websites none of all that modern stuff that we have and that is indeed such an advantage to the gospel but remember it's the Holy Spirit that changes lives they had no media of that kind but just look at the coverage that they had for the gospel by the lives they lived by the witness they testified about the

Lord and by the fact that when the Holy Spirit is at work not only are we receivers of the word but we're also transmitters of it we're both things at the same time we go on receiving and as we receive we transmit we send out the message the signals come and we receive them the signals leave us and go out so that others will be blessed from it too a model congregation a model church and many of these features are indeed characteristics of yourselves you receive God's word it's been an absolute privilege preaching the gospel to you because I've said it I've said it many times I've said it over the years nowhere else have I found a better reception for the word of

God than with yourselves you are applying God's word you have a work of faith and a labour of love and a steadfastness of hope and you have been transmitting and you want to go on transmitting this word of God irrespective of who is or isn't here that's what God has given to you so that your faith too is and will be spoken about elsewhere let's pray gracious and almighty God we thank you for the gospel and we thank you for its power we thank you for the privilege of promoting it whether in preaching or in witnessing we give thanks for the way in which you promise to be our guide and our stay and for the way in which your own word will not return to you empty but will produce that which you have purposed we pray that you continue with us now throughout this day hear us we pray for Jesus sake amen house peace peace peace peace peace peace peace