

God's Church; Foundation And Function

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[0 : 0 0] Now turn with me please to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and for a short time looking at the first part of the chapter verses 1 to 4 where Paul is writing here 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 you, 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.

And we have the advantage in looking at this letter to the Thessalonians, this first letter. It's a very long letter, as you know. But it gives us access to a very young church, young in the faith, young in terms of it being established.

It's one of the earliest letters written in the New Testament. And obviously they had not been together for long as a group of Christians. Newly formed, as we read in Acts, Paul hadn't been with them for a very long matter of months, really, before he had to move on through persecution and difficulty that broke out in Thessalonica.

[1 : 3 1] So they didn't have the advantage of churches like the Ephesians, for example, where Paul was able to stay there for much, much longer and educate and teach the people there, the Christians there, in the faith and build them up.

The Thessalonians didn't have that advantage. Nevertheless, as you read through this letter, you can see some of the features of the church that even, as Paul wrote it, they had come to be established.

And you learn how they were formed, the strengths that they had, the weaknesses they had, the problems that they faced, their relationship with the gospel, with the world around them.

All of that is accessible to you as you actually read through this short letter to the Thessalonians. And from that, of course, like the other letters, you glean so much for our own benefit, both for our personal development as individual Christians, but also and especially for our development as a congregation, as a church, as you read the features of the Thessalonian church.

A church that was created through the gospel, a church that existed to spread the gospel, as you find in the next chapter especially, when you find an emphasis on reaching out with the gospel, all the way through, indeed to the end of the letter, created through the gospel, spreading the gospel, but a church also shaped by the gospel in its life.

[3 : 0 0] And that's really, these are three essential features of any church that wants to be pleasing to the Lord and truly be known as a church of Christ in their community.

A church that's been created by the gospel, by God through the gospel, a church that exists to preach the gospel, to witness to the gospel, to spread the gospel, and a church that is continually being shaped in their spiritual life and in their life together by that same gospel.

And that's really what the Thessalonians were like as a church. So that's why you find, for example, in chapter one here, we're just going to look at the first four verses, which really describe the church itself, and then the rest of the chapters taking up with, mostly with the gospel.

So the church and the gospel go together in these three ways that we've mentioned. It's a church, first of all, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Looking at the church in these verses, both in its foundation and its function.

Its foundation, it's in the Lord Jesus Christ and in God the Father. Secondly, it's a church loved and chosen by God, particularly God the Father, though that's not mentioned.

[4 : 12] It just says, you have been chosen, loved. He has chosen you. God has chosen you. But when you go to the likes of Ephesians chapter one, the choice, the choosing, the election of God's people is there actually specified as an act of God the Father in God the Son, in Jesus Christ.

And that's what he's saying here. They were in fact chosen by God. And they demonstrated that they were in fact God's chosen people, as we'll see, by the kind of fruit that they bore in their lives and the activities that they were involved in as a congregation.

The church was in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, a church loved and chosen by God and a church, thirdly, marked by faith, hope, and love.

Very interesting that these three primary graces, as we normally call them, are actually mentioned here as features of or marks of this church in Thessalonica, remembering your work of faith, your labor of love, and steadfastness of hope.

So that's these. These are the three, faith, love, and hope. First of all, it's a church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And that gives us an understanding, really, of where the church, wherever the church is situated.

[5 : 38] We're here called the Church of the Thessalonians. But, of course, the church in its spiritual unity is one. What it's saying here is this is the church of God as it existed in Thessalonica, just as the church of God is here as it exists in Stornoway.

And here is Paul using this word church, this word assembly really is what it means literally. There are different ways of looking at it, but it's really a thing which fits in with the Old Testament assembly, the church in the Old Testament.

They were called by God, they were called out by God from where they were to begin with, and they were called together. So these are the two features of the word ecclesia, which means the church, the assembly.

God calls them out of the world in the simplest terms and calls them together to be a people for himself. So there's the two sides to it in this called people.

They're called out from the world. They're made into a people for God by himself, and therefore they're called to be together as a people. That's the kind of thing that he has in mind when he says to the church of the Thessalonians.

[6 : 51] And that reminds us that the church is a community of people. A lot of people mistake the church for being something to do with formal services, even with buildings, that the church is thought of as a building.

This, of course, is not the case. The church building facilitates the meetings of the church where there is a church building, but the church itself is the people of God called out by him and called together by him to be an assembly of his people.

And so, that's why you find these other images in the New Testament. Paul especially mentions the church as a spiritual building, but also as a spiritual body.

We're looking at literal buildings as illustrative of the church and also of bodies as illustrative of the church, the way that the various parts of the body fit together and function.

So, the church is an assembly, a number of people called out and brought together by Christ, by God. But then he says, in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[8 : 02] Or, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The word in governs both the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, that's unusual because, as you know, Paul tends to say the church in and then he mentions the place, the church of God which is at Corinth or in Ephesus, wherever the church is situated.

That's not what he's doing here. He's saying, it's the church of the Thessalonians, but in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, he's really plunging them straight away.

This is a young church, remember. It hasn't had long to progress in its theological understanding, and yet, nevertheless, here is God plunging them into some pretty serious theology.

He says, here is what you, you are, here is how you've come to be who you are, but you are situated in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why is this?

Why has he decided to speak of them as in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, it's probably because they were already facing persecution, they were already facing many difficulties for being a church, for being Christians, for following Christ.

[9 : 15] So this is probably Paul really saying to them, your security and the advantage you have is that you are anchored in, you are bedded into, your roots are, your foundations are God himself and the Lord Jesus Christ.

God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's where you go to wherever you find yourself in some ways becoming unstable, and I mean that in terms of your spiritual walk with God or something that really has shaken you perhaps in terms of an experience that you have, the difficulties, the trials, they do tend to shake us up at times.

We may be losing your confidence at times. We may be wondering why certain things are happening to us as Christians in this world even if it's from people who are not Christians. We might say, well, why has God allowed such a thing?

Why to this extent? Well, he's reminding us that our foundation is actually not in the things of this world, not in our own experiences even, in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's where they are founded. That's where they are grounded. That's what they actually are set in, if you like. They're embedded spiritually. This young church, they need encouragement.

[10 : 33] They need to know where their security is against all that's actually meeting with them as they live as Christians in Thessalonica. They need to be assured that they are in fact firmly anchored in God, both in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In other words, Paul is saying, that's where you get your spiritual life from. That's where your life, that's where your connection is. That's the life that God has given you.

It keeps streaming into your church, into yourselves as a church from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And that never changes. That's how it is for ourselves as Christians in Stornoway.

We are a church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are a church of God and we are a church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Never forget that.

Never let the devil or any other influence take you away from the fact that that is where as a church, this is not just talking about our lives individually, this is our lives together as Christians as we serve the Lord, as we witness to Him, as we seek to make Jesus known in our communities.

[11 : 43] This is where we have our life, this is where we have a foundation, this is where our security, this is the rock on which we are set. That's the first thing he's saying.

This is a church in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. And secondly, the church loved and chosen by God. He says here, we give thanks for you, constantly mention you in our prayers, dealing with all the features of the passage, remembering before God your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.

For we know, brothers, loved by God that He has chosen you or that He chose you. Now, of course, that really brings up two things that are very closely connected here.

That's the choice of God or the election of God and the love of God. Brothers, loved by God and chosen by God.

The two things are always closely connected together. And of course, that brings us, again, this is amazing really that this young church is being brought into this really heavy theology for its own practical benefit.

[12 : 53] You don't get theology in the Bible just to study as theology. It's there, of course, to be studied as theology, but it's always for a practical outcome. And in fact, when you look at election in the Bible, and it's not just a New Testament term, God chose Israel, as we sang, as His peculiar treasure, His special treasure.

He chose them to be His people. He chose them out of all other peoples, but He actually chose them for a specific work, for a specific activity, for a practical life of devotion to Him and witness to the surrounding nations.

And in the New Testament, you have exactly the same principle in all of these churches that are mentioned. And especially with them, wherever you find election, that's a difficult topic, wherever you find election, you always find it connected with the practical life of the church or of the individual Christian as well.

And the evidence of that is here, because you see here they're saying, He's saying, we know, brothers, love that He has chosen you because our gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

And along with that, He's mentioning what they're actually doing. Their labor of love, their steadfastness of hope, and their work of faith. In other words, the evidence that they have been chosen by God is not because they're going around saying, I've got great theological knowledge and understanding of God.

[14 : 36] It's because of what they're doing. It's because of their service for the Lord. And we have to keep emphasizing that to ourselves as well as to those who maybe have a difficulty with this whole issue or doctrine of election where they make misuse of it.

And it's very easy to make some misuse of it because you will find people, I'm sure you've come across them, that will say, well, I don't understand this thing about election. I don't really want to accept it either.

It seems rather discriminating on the part of God or unfair on the part of God that he chose some and didn't choose others. But election, you have to say to them, well, if you really want to be saved, don't start thinking about what election is and to try and get into the mystery of it.

Give yourself to Christ. Trust in Christ. Believe in Christ. Serve Christ. Love Christ. That's the evidence of someone who's been elected.

So when you're presenting the gospel or witnessing to the gospel with somebody who's unsaved and especially with somebody who really finds this a problem or a stumbling block indeed to accepting Christ, don't keep dealing with the election side of it.

[15 : 58] Keep to the practical responsibilities and requirements that God requires of us all until that person comes to be in Christ and to accept Christ because that's really then when you can start looking more deeply at the issue of election as a doctrine.

But until that moment with people who are not saved, focus on what is required or emphasized in the Bible as to what they are required to do.

Repent. Believe. Trust. These are the things that the gospel calls us to do. And it's in doing them, it's in fulfilling them that we give evidence that we are God's chosen people.

So here is what he's saying to them again. We know, brothers, that he has chosen you because of these things. The evidence of election is in a response to the gospel.

You can find the same thing in verse 9, verses 9 to 10, where people are reporting about the Thessalonian Christians. 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 through God and to wait for his son from heaven.

[17 : 19] They gave evidence that they were God's chosen people, which we know is something that happened in eternity, and yet, nevertheless, they were giving evidence of it because this is what they were.

They had turned from idols to God to serve him and to wait for Jesus to return. That's how they were demonstrating that they were God's chosen people.

But then there's this emphasis on love as well, you see. It doesn't just say that they were chosen by God. We know he says brothers and, of course, sisters.

Females are included in that word as well. Brothers loved by God. Because election, actually, is God's loving choice.

And that's hugely important. When you actually go to Ephesians, that first chapter of Ephesians, is where you really find those two things, again, clearly united together and made even clearer there because what he's saying there is Ephesians 1, verse 3, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.

[18 : 40] Then you see there's the practical outcome that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption. It's the same thing essentially as electing them.

It's God's predestinating will. This is what he predestined. This is what he did in eternity, from all eternity. But he says it was in love that he did this. You see, election is not something just cold and mathematical or something that's just like a formula that God had in his mind and just worked out in a sort of calculating way as if there was no warmth or anything to it.

Sorry, some of you might find that in your own estimation that mathematics has a warmth to it. I couldn't do it very much in school.

That's why it continues to be something without much warmth for me. But others, of course, find it a fascinating subject. But what I'm saying is we tend to think of mathematical formula or scientific formula as just things that are set out for you.

You work through them. You reach a certain conclusion. That's it. Very matter of fact. God's election is an election in his love of his people.

[19 : 55] It is a setting upon them of his own divine love before they ever existed actually. According, as Ephesians says, according as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, in love he predestined us.

Don't let anybody persuade you or try and persuade you that election is just a very cold doctrine. Or that it's a doctrine that really gives you something to do producing fatalism or apathy whereby some people will say, well, if election is really true, I don't need to do anything, then I'll be saved anyway if I've been elected by God from all eternity.

That's not what the Bible encourages us to think. Like I said before, the Bible presents us with our responsibilities to believe, to repent, and so on. And then it explains to us that all of that actually ultimately is rooted in God's election when we do come to repent and to believe and to trust in Christ and to love Him.

The source of all that is in God Himself and God's electing love. Well, why did He love them? Why did He elect them? Because He loved them.

He chose them in love. And you know, that's one of our greatest encouragements and assurances for our security and to know our security.

[21 : 24] If your assurance depended on the strength of your own faith, for example, or the amount to which you can say you love Christ, you would not really have that much assurance or if you're anything like me, you wouldn't have that much assurance or sense of security, would you?

But when you actually take the teaching of Scripture on God in love, His own everlasting love, His unchangeable love, actually choosing a people for Himself before eternity so that they would be His people in this world and be holy and be servants of His, that's security for you.

Nobody can break into that. Nobody can actually spoil that. Nobody can dismantle that. There's nothing in the whole universe. There's no power in earth or elsewhere that can actually get access to that security that you have in God's electing love.

that's where you have to rest. That's where you find your ultimate ground of security because that's what is really immovably secure for you.

That's what He's saying to these Thessalonians then. He's guiding them as we said at the beginning. Because they're a young church, they need to be fed spiritually. They need to be given something that will assure them that they are in Christ that they have that security which they don't find anywhere, can't find anywhere else.

[23 : 04] So this is what He's saying. You are in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. And we know that He has loved you and chosen you because of what you now show in your lives as Christians.

And you know, we can't then get beyond that and say, well, why did He love them? We can say He chose His people because He loved them. In His love He chose them.

That's where our election comes from. It comes from the love of God. But we can't then go another step and say, well, where does the love of God come from? Or to put it another way, why did He love us?

We can't answer that question. We can only just go as far as to say, well, because He's God and God is love. But isn't it enough for us to know and He has revealed it to us that He has chosen us because He loved us from all eternity in Christ.

That's where we have unshakably to rest for time and eternity. And then it's important, of course, from that too, that just in passing, that we really show people that the church has to be defined according to what you find in Scripture.

[24 : 33] And how we think of the church ourselves is important. What is it? What does it mean to belong to it? Well, this is Paul defining the church to the Thessalonians that they will understand who they are, why they are what they are, how did they come to be where they are in Christ, in God the Father, tracing it all the way back to His electing love.

The church is not a human institution. It's not like some sort of club that human beings have brought together and decided thousands of years ago whenever to start and it's kept rolling on since then.

That's not what the church is at all. The church is God's society of people brought about by His electing love and power and through the Spirit as Paul says in the Holy Spirit you received our gospel in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much conviction.

Further evidence that they were chosen by God. So it's a church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and then thirdly very briefly it's a church marked by faith, hope and love.

Of course we notice there that He's thanking them as well giving thanks to God thanking God for them rather for all of you constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

[25 : 56] But remember these three important qualities that they have as each of them as each of these is in itself important but He puts them together because they actually if you like flow out from what God has done in their lives and what God has done in settling them in Himself.

First of all He says we've noted this and it's something that every Christian has and that Christian people have together. First of all He's saying that we remember your work of faith your work of faith and the word that He uses there is important because it's an activity that's related to their believing.

He's conjoining the two together similar to in fact reminds you of what James is doing as we've been seeing through the Bible study on Wednesday where James is so emphatic that faith is not just an act of the mind it's not just something that you do as believing in Christ it's something that shows itself in a lifestyle because faith He says without works is dead.

It's not faith in the proper spiritual sense. Well here He says your faith your work of faith the work He's not regarding faith itself as a work but a work that's attached to the practicalities of their lives as Christians is inseparably connected with their faith with their believing.

Then He mentions secondly their labor of love and labor there is a strong word labor of love the labor that comes from their love the effort the energy that they expend spiritually in their service for Christ that's how their love comes to the fore practically in their lives they have faith and they have love because they're God's chosen people but the faith and love that they have are each of them tied to specific work to specific activity on their part the work of faith and the labor of love love is a very tiring thing I don't mean that in the wrong sense but love is a tiring thing because love is something that you bring us that brings you a sense of commitment or you actually know a commitment in the love that you actually are showing or exercising in its practical outcome if you love somebody even on an individual basis that's something that takes a lot of energy takes a lot of effort because it's going to be tested it's something that you have to work at improving it's something that you as you go along is always going to be under threat from the devil from other forces in this world that's where a relationship of love is such an important thing it's a labor of love even in that sense of course what he's talking about here is the church in

[29 : 22] Thessalonica as they're actually laboring for Christ as they're expending a lot of energy in their service for Christ he's uniting that with their love your work of faith your labor of love and thirdly he mentions here the steadfastness of hope it's a word which means endurance and that's what they're showing in their lives practically that's important because they are facing persecution difficulties challenges just think of the church in China tonight it's been in the news for some weeks a big clampdown on the church in China except as the authorities they wanted to be or whatever they wanted to be like they don't have the liberty to do what we do they don't have the liberty to act as we do or even to show out what they believe as they would want to it's very much controlled although of course no power in this world can control

God at work thankfully but nevertheless that's what they're facing just imagine how important that passage this kind of passage would be to the church in China tonight where they would be assured that despite all that they're suffering and all that's being done to them they are still anchored in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ that's their foundation and here they would be assured that they actually are chosen by God and loved by God and they go back to that to reassure themselves that the whole purpose of them being in the world is that they're there as God's people he has chosen them to be what they are and whatever the world does whatever the authorities do nevertheless they have a work of faith and a labour of love and a steadfastness of hope because hope of course takes you beyond this life whatever our hope might be with regard to promises fulfilled in this life promises attached to the gospel for example hope by and large is something that takes you out of this world beyond this world the hope of eternal life the hope he says here at the end of the chapter which really amounts to waiting for his son from heaven the return of

Christ and that against all the difficulties they're facing they're showing a steadfastness of hope it's from your hope as well as your faith and love too but it's hope especially that's connected with steadfastness perseverance just pressing on as you can and as you are able to as a Christian or as Christians together so the whole phrase really is very much a definition of our Christian faith it's very succinct it's a summary really he's saying here your work of faith your labour of love and steadfastness of hope but what a challenging definition that is because that's really what describes God's church wherever God's church is to be set are found in this world so let's take our comfort from these terms tonight let's take out our stimulation for our spiritual growth and our service for

Christ let's take these terms for our assurance for our sense of security and for our thankfulness too like Paul is saying here that together we can share in the blessings that are part of this being the church of Christ that we are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ that we are loved and chosen by God that we are marked by faith and love and hope God will bless these thoughts let's close in prayer Lord our God we thank you for all the definitions that you give in your word of your church and of how your church has come into being how you maintain your people and how you empower them to progress we know Lord that we find ourselves so far short of what your word calls upon us to be in the standard of our lives we know that we are

Lord ourselves so much in need of your own Holy Spirit daily to give us further quickening encouragement and empowering us against the powers of the world against the devil and against the flesh here Lord what or in the midst of the darkness that is so largely a part of our society that you are able to call people from darkness to light and you're able to establish for yourself a church in places where at the moment no such people exist Lord help us we pray to realize that all that we are is grounded in yourself and give us day by day to progress spiritually as we seek to serve you as a people receive our thanks here the prayers of your people pardon our sin for Jesus sake

[35 : 18] Amen Let's now conclude once again singing to God's praise this time from Psalm 65 65 on page 82 Verses 1 to 5 In Zion praise awaits you Lord to you our vows will pay to you all people will come near you hear us when we pray when we were overwhelmed by sins and guilt upon us lay you pardoned all our trespasses and washed our guilt away how blessed are those you choose and bring within your courts of grace we're filled with blessings in your house in your most holy place with awesome deeds of righteousness you answer us you answer us O God our saviour hope of further seas and all the earth abroad and page 82 verses 1 to 5 in Zion praise awaits you Lord to you our lives will pay to you all people will come near you hear us when we pray when we were overwhelmed by sins and guilt upon us lay you pardoned all our trespasses and wash our guilt away how blessed our odious you choose and bring within your hearts of grace we're filled with blessings in your house in your most holy place.

With all sandpings of righteousness you have set us, O God, our Savior, hope of fairnesses and all the earth abroad.