

## 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

The first century church in Thessalonica was a church with the right stuff! The people who worshipped there were dynamic, enthusiastic. They were role models of authentic Christianity, they were an amazing example to others.

How does Paul start the letter? The introduction in verse 1 is straight to the point. It begins with a single word, 'Paul.'

He's the penman of the epistle. He was the prince of preachers. As a missionary to the regions beyond, he took the gospel where man had never taken it before. He held city-wide crusades and planted scores of churches. He was a prolific writer and was in great demand across Europe, Asia and the Middle East as a Bible teacher.

Paul's vision for mission was as big as the world he knew, he wasn't guilty of dreaming too small. He knew he served a great God who could do great things through him if he placed his life at his disposal.

He's not on his own as he also includes Silas and Timothy in his greeting. Paul values them for who they are, he treasures their fellowship. He recognises their superb contribution to the ministry and he's big enough to acknowledge it. He doesn't feel threatened by their gifts. It's not a one man show, he's part of a team where they need one another.

Paul's the kind of person who doesn't mind who gets the credit so long as the job gets done. You can be too big for God to use, but you can never be too small!

The letter is addressed to 'the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' That's a double address. One tells

## "a church with the right stuff"

me where I am geographically, the other where I am spiritually. Our heart is in heaven and our feet on earth.

Paul wrote many letters during the course of his ministry but this one is different. It's the only letter that employs the phrase, 'the church of.' They were a company of called out believers enjoying a remarkable sense of unity. There was a bond between them, a wonderful feeling of affinity, a spirit of togetherness. What a church that must have been! They are connected!

'Grace and peace' is the blessing he offers them. You can never know peace in your heart without first experiencing the grace of God. Grace is something which comes to us which we don't deserve, which we can't repay. It stoops to where we are and lifts us to where we ought to be.

Peace is something that happens within us, a freedom from inner distraction, an internal rest, a feeling of well being, a spiritual wholeness.

There are some lessons we need to learn. One, God uses people, he didn't send an angel to evangelise Thessalonica, he sent a converted Jewish rabbi and a couple of his friends.

Two, there is power in the gospel of Christ, it didn't take years to set up a church in this great city. God's power was effective in changing lives and a church was up and running in less than a month. Three, Satan still opposes the gospel and persecutes the people of God. Before we look at the qualities of the church in verse 3, let's spend a moment with the apostle himself. When you read verse 2, we are given three insights into what makes Paul tick.

Number one, there is praise! Paul was a man with a song in his heart. Even when he found himself in a prison cell he quickly turned it into a place where he could celebrate the goodness of God. He preached about it, he wrote about it, he practised it. He thanks God for them.

The second great influence is prayer. The emphasis here is on their fellowship in prayer. He refers to 'in our prayers' and that implies they met together as a leadership team to remember the young church fellowship. That's where burdens are shared, battles are fought, and victories are won.

The third vital factor was people. He deeply cared for others. People mattered to him. He had a big heart for them. Not only a few of them or the ones that were easy to get along with. But every single one of them: the good, the bad, the indifferent.

You know and I know (and I was a pastor for twenty years) that no church is perfect and the folks in Thessalonica were no different from those anywhere else. They were human. They had their good points and bad points. But they were saved by God's grace and they were a real joy to the heart of Paul. They are exceptional!

Paul says three things about them: First, they have a creative faith. This is what Paul means by the phrase, 'your work produced by faith.' He's not speaking here about the initial act of faith at the moment of their conversion. That was saving faith.

The faith here is a faith that is active, a faith that works, a faith that performs, a faith that produces fruit.

Second, they have a redemptive love. He pays tribute to their 'labour prompted by love.' The

thought here is of toil, of weariness, and energy expended. It's all about cost.

What prompted them to do it? This is the kind of love that is prepared to sweat and sacrifice. It can only be interpreted in the light of Calvary. Such love will pay anything, give anything, and do anything for the sake of the gospel.

Three, they had an aggressive hope. Paul puts it eloquently when he says: 'your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.' This is triumphant fortitude, stickability and dogged determination. No matter what life threw at them, they were resilient and showed a cheerful spirit.

What inspired them? The answer's found in a single four letter word: Hope! Hope that it would quickly end, no! Hope that it would soon go away, no! Hope in the promised return of Jesus, yes!

They had a faith that was alive as they looked back to a crucified Saviour; a love that was aglow as they looked up to a crowned Saviour; a hope that was aflame as they looked forward to a coming Saviour. He shows them where they have come from, where they are, and where they are going.

The turning point came as a direct result of the truth we read of in verse 4. They are elect. We can be saved and know it. It means, in our lives, the darkness is dispelled, the doubts are dismissed and the devil is defeated.

There's a word of assurance for Paul says, 'for ye know.' There were no doubts. These words ooze with certainty. Then there's a sense of affinity for he calls them 'brothers.' This would indicate they were members of the same global family. He looked upon them as his

spiritual brothers and sisters. And there's a bond of affection for they are 'loved by God.' What does Paul know? 'That he has chosen you.' This is the cornerstone of our faith for it ensures that God gets all the glory for his work of grace in our hearts. Here's a great sinner, embracing a great Saviour, and finding a great salvation.

Paul took one look at them, he saw the quality of their life in Christ, he saw the fruit of the Spirit in their lives, that's when he sensed in the depths of his own heart that they really are the people of God. God called them, chose them, and claimed them.

Look at it like this: we are chosen in Christ, chosen by Christ, chosen for Christ. There's the mystery of God's grace, the marvel of his love, and the miracle of his salvation.

Look at what Paul says in verse 5. The word 'because' is a link word. It joins what has gone before with what follows after.

When the good news of Jesus was proclaimed, something incredible happened for it came to them 'not simply with words, but also with power.'

This power is a work of God's Spirit which gives authority and authenticity to the message. It brings glory to God, not man. It highlights the explosive nature of Scripture. It's dynamite. No matter when or where gospel truth is preached, God is actively working.

The message also comes 'with the Holy Spirit.' Only he can illumine the darkened mind, only he can quicken the enslaved will. We need God to work, but he works by his Spirit.

Paul says it came 'with deep conviction.' The message was clear, the response was excellent. Hearts were opened, deaf ears unstopped, and scales fell off their eyes. From darkness to

light, from death to life, they became a redeemed community. They proved that the gospel actually works.

Paul shows us three more virtues of this thriving congregation in northern Greece. First, he talks about their endurance in verse 6. They were men followers, we read 'they became followers of us and of the Lord.' They were walking in the footsteps of Paul and, in so doing, were walking in harmony with Christ. Paul and his friends lived out the gospel before them. They clothed the gospel with human skin. That's what made the difference. They were glasshouse Christians, people could see right through them, they had nothing to hide. That's why they looked upon them as role models.

Your life and mine are real stories that are constantly read by people around us. I ask the question: Am I a stepping stone or am I a stumbling block? It seems to me, when they looked at Paul, they saw Jesus.

It wasn't easy being a Christian in their day. They willingly counted the cost, they gladly paid the price. There was nothing cushioned or comfortable about their Christianity. In fact, the intensity of their suffering is such that Paul describes it as 'severe.' The pressures were enormous, the stress was unbearable, the strain meant they were on the verge of cracking up, their nerves were frayed, the going was tough, a real struggle from dawn to dusk. But ...

'In spite of severe suffering they welcomed the message.' They received the word of God with gladness. They loved the word. They couldn't get enough of it. They were hungry for it, they were drinking in every word that was spoken,

they were sitting on the edge of their seats, and they kept coming back for more.

How were they able to do it? 'With the joy given by the Holy Spirit.' The odds were stacked against them. But they had joy. Real joy. Wonderful joy. A joy deep down in their hearts.

Yes, the trials were there, they didn't go away; but, as only he can, he makes it up to them in another way. Their lives are richer. They are buoyant when all is sinking around them.

According to verse 7 they are exemplary for they became a model church. No other church in the New Testament is referred to in this manner, so it's a unique honour to be hailed as a pattern worth adopting. They got it right. They weren't perfect, but they were ideal. They left a lasting impression as pace setters for their generation.

From up north in Macedonia to south in Achaia, there was a real sense that God was doing some new thing. All of Greece was influenced in one way or another by the church at Thessalonica. There was something special about them.

Paul says in verse 8 they are evangelistic. They passionately believed in outreach. Have you ever stopped to think about it: the church that does not reach out will pass out!

These folk had a sense of responsibility to others combined with a sense of accountability to God. They were debtors to the grace of God; but they were out there on the frontline paying their debt to those outside the family of God. They were as excited about election as they were about evangelism.

We read, 'from you sounded out the word of the Lord.' That suggests they were all involved in evangelism. The 'you' is personal, it's as

individual as it can be; at the same time, it is corporate for none are left out. There was no way any of them could opt out if they didn't feel like it or didn't feel up to it. They were reaching their friends, neighbours and colleagues with the greatest story ever told. What about the message? It was a pure gospel for it was Christ and nothing else. It was a full gospel for it was Christ and nothing less. It was a plain gospel for it was Christ and nothing more. That's good news in a mad, bad, sad world. It's the gospel as it really is.

Turn with me to verses 9 and 10 where we observe that they have been set free to find perfect liberty in serving Jesus as bondslaves. Why is that their attitude to life? When bad things are happening to good people, why are they still on track, why have they not lost their keenness to serve Jesus? Here's why!

Look at their emancipation. Conversion is a life changing experience. It's something radical and causes men to march to the beat of a different drum. It's a personal encounter with the living God; and when men meet God on a one-to-one they can never be the same again. 'They turned to God'. That's repentance and regeneration. We go on to read, 'they turned to God from idols.' That's separation. They made a choice, followed by a change. A change of heart, a change of mind, a change of will. A change of life coupled with a change of lifestyle.

They didn't turn to God because they were disillusioned with life, or because they felt they had had enough, or because they were fed up with all that life was throwing their way, or because they were at the end of their tether and living their life on the flip side.

It was the character of God that won them over. It's always that way. In his light, all else fades into oblivion. Before him, everything pales into insignificance.

They turned to one who is 'living'. That tells me our God is not dead, he's alive. And they turned to one who is 'true' and that indicates our God is not deceitful, he's real.

When you explore the teaching contained in verse 10 you quickly realise it's all about their sense of expectancy. Here is the climax of our faith, the moment we've been chosen for.

What are they doing? Well, they are 'waiting for his Son from heaven.' This is what makes life really worth living. We have something to live for today and so much to look forward to in all our tomorrows. We know the best is yet to be.

And they were zealously working for the Lord. Like John Wesley they wanted to be 'up and doing for Jesus.' They really believed that his

return could happen at any moment. It was imminent. That's what drove them on.

When he returns he will 'rescue us from the coming wrath.' His is a rescue mission that will not fail. Christianity is the only religion with the happy ending.

They were working, watching, and waiting. It's all in the present tense which means they were living today in the light of tomorrow. They were standing on the tiptoe of expectancy.

Just like them, our future is as bright as the promises of God. What a great fellowship they were, they fervently believed in the coming again of Jesus Christ. They were excited about eschatology. That's always a mark of a great church.

These folks are connected by grace to the gospel and to one another - they're growing in grace - and they're going to the ends of the earth with the message of grace. My friend, that's a church with the right stuff!