

1 Thessalonians 1

I thought we'd have a look at Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, the first chapter. There's something a bit different about the Thessalonian church, compared to most other churches Paul writes to. The introduction might give us some hint of this:

1 Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

保罗，西拉，提摩太，写信给帖撒罗尼迦在父神和主耶稣基督里的教会。愿恩惠平安归与你们。

Normally when Paul introduces a letter, he usually makes sure he introduces himself as an apostle. He'd say something like, "Paul, called to be an apostle," "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ," or something similar. But in four epistles, two letters to the Thessalonians, Philippians and Philemon, he doesn't do that.

I suggest that the reason was that in most of Paul's letters, he had to deal with problems. He had to correct and rebuke the recipients, sharply in some cases. So it was necessary for him to show some form of apostolic authority, to make sure they took to mind what he said. But he didn't feel it necessary to do that to the churches in Philippi or Thessalonica. They were good churches. They didn't have serious problems like the others. Rather than correction, all they needed was simply encouragement. And that's why Paul wrote to them.

So it is possible to be a good church. Let's see what we can learn from a letter of encouragement to a good church. Maybe we too can learn exactly what constitutes a good church and how we can become one ourselves.

2 We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;

我们为你们众人常常感谢神，祷告的时候提到你们。

Before we look at the church itself, we can learn something from Paul's prayer life. Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian church. He gives thanks always for all of them. And he makes sure he always remembers them in his prayers.

I can't help thinking that this puts our prayer life to shame. When was the last time we gave thanks for anything? In prayer, we're all too eager to give God a long list of what we want, but we're so very slow in giving thanks when God has answered prayer. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he exhorts them:

Philippians 4:6

"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."

应当一无挂虑，只要凡事借着祷告，祈求，和感谢，将你们所要的告诉神。

We should be anxious for nothing. It's good to let our requests be made known to God, to pour out our hearts to God in prayer and supplication for the things we need. That's true, real heartfelt prayer. We don't just recite prayers but truly pray from the heart. But it should also be "*with thanksgiving.*" To really lift our anxiety about whatever situation we're in, we not only need to cry to God and cast all our cares upon Him, but we also need to learn to be thankful.

And that's not only for all our prayers that the Lord's answered in the past. That's tremendous in itself. But also we need to meditate on the abundance of things He's given us without our asking or even thinking of them. God showers blessings on us every day, and we just take them for granted. We almost assume that we've got a right to it all, when actually it's a tremendous privilege to receive anything from Him.

If we're truly thankful in our hearts, then:

Philippians 4:7

"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

神所赐出人意外的平安，必在基督耶稣里，保守你们的心怀意念。

3 Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father;

在神我们的父面前，不住地记念你们因信心所作的工夫，因爱心所受的劳苦，因盼望我们主耶稣基督所存的忍耐。

Paul particularly remembers, without ceasing, three things about the Thessalonians. Their "*work,*" "*labour,*" and "*patience.*" What have these three things got in common? I suppose "*labour*" is similar to work, but it's got a connotation of being a more arduous, tiresome, harder more prolonged form of work. But what have "*work,*" "*labour,*" and "*patience*" all got in common? The answer is, we're not very good at any of them. By nature all of us, whoever we are, tend to be lazy and impatient. We can all relate to the fact that we find work tiresome, and we find it very difficult to be patient.

Now, Christians would immediately recognise this as part of the curse that God put on the earth as a result of the fall of Adam:

Genesis 3:17-19

"Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

你必终身劳苦，才能从地里得吃的。地必给你长出荆棘和蒺藜来，你也要吃田间的菜蔬。你必汗流满面才得糊口，直到你归了土，因为你是从土而出的。你本是尘土，仍要归于尘土。

So, since the fall, we're just going to find work difficult and toilsome. Our bodies now have this inbuilt natural reaction against "*work*," "*labour*" and "*patience*." But, the Thessalonians were commended for having these things, and not giving in to their natural desire for ease in this world.

Not only that, but look what they're having patience in, and working and labouring for. They're not working for the things of this natural world, like their trade, or their business, or any of the things we normally associate with work and labour – although there is such a thing as the Protestant work ethic, and Christians should work hard in all these things – but they're commended for their "*work of faith*," "*labour of love*," and "*patience of hope*." These are spiritual things, not physical things.

"*Work of faith*." The NIV says "*work produced by faith*." If we have real faith in God, it should produce good works. This reminds us of what James said:

James 2:14-17

"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone."

我的弟兄们，若有人说，自己有信心，却没有行为，有什么益处呢？这信心能救他吗？若是弟兄，或是姐妹，赤身露体，又缺了日用的饮食，你们中间有人对他们说，平平安安地去吧，愿你们穿得暖吃得饱。却不给他们身体所需用的，这有什么益处呢？这样信心若没有行为就是死的。

Any old fool can say "I've got faith in God," "I believe in Jesus." But if their faith isn't showing itself through works, then we've got to doubt the reality of their faith. Christ said,

Matthew 7:20

"by their fruits ye shall know them."

所以凭着他们的果子，就可以认出他们来。

"*Labour of love*." Love isn't just a gooey feeling you get whenever you think of somebody – in the Christian context, Jesus. You have to work at love. And it's described here as labour – the more arduous, hard, prolonged type of work. For example, love is sacrificial:

John 15:13

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

人为朋友舍命，人的爱心没有比这个大的。

Love involves a life of service:

Galatians 5:13

“by love serve one another.”

总要用爱心互相服事。

And we're called to love people who we don't particularly want to love. Christ said,

Matthew 5:44

“But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you”

只是我告诉你们，要爱你们的仇敌。为那逼迫你们的祷告。

“Patience of hope.” The Thessalonians are commended for their patience. They don't seem to get impatient at all the frustrating things that happen in this world. That's because they're not putting their trust in the things of this world, but are hoping for something far, far better in the future.

By definition, to hope for something is to put our trust in something that we don't have now but will have later.

Romans 8:24,25

“For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.”

我们得救是在乎盼望。只是所见的盼望不是盼望。谁还盼望他所见的呢？但我们若盼望那所不见的，就必忍耐等候。

So, the Thessalonians are commended for their *“faith,” “love,”* and *“hope.”* Where have we come across these before?

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, there's a section towards the end of that letter which deals with spiritual gifts. Now, I'm not going to go into that subject, but right in the middle of the discussion on it, Paul inserts chapter 13. Many people in Paul's day were boasting in the spiritual gifts they had, or they thought they had, and Paul in chapter 13 brings them down to earth.

1 Corinthians 13:1-2

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.”

我若能说万人的方言，并天使的话语却没有爱，我就成了鸣的锣，响的钹一般。我若有先知讲道之能，也明白各样的奥秘，各样的知识。而且有全备的信，叫我能够移山，却没有爱，我就算不得什么。

And Paul concludes that there are only three things in this world, that we're to consider really important:

1 Corinthians 13:13

“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

如今常存的有信，有望，有爱，这三样，其中最大的是爱。

These are the three things that the Thessalonians are commended for, and these are the things that we should be concentrating on in our lives.

As I said earlier, naturally we're lazy and impatient. And that's just in the things of this world. It's even harder to concentrate on spiritual things, things we can't see. So, how could the Thessalonians have possibly attained to the level they were at, when by nature we find it so difficult? In fact, impossible?

The answer is that something had happened to them. They had become fundamentally different from everybody else. They'd somehow been changed from what they were by nature, into something completely new, something that God can now use to His glory. They'd been chosen by God to this end:

4 Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.

被神所爱的弟兄阿，我知道你们是蒙拣选的。

I was in a church once and there was a poster on the wall with a slogan in big letters, “God loves everybody.” I went home, and tried to find that text in the Bible. But it's not there. Now, don't get me wrong. There's a sense in which God does love everybody. He gives every one of us food and clothing, rain and sunshine. He gives all of us far more than we deserve, and we should be thankful to Him for His provision. But the main message of the Bible isn't actually about that. The Bible is primarily a book about a particular group of people whom God chooses out of this world to be His own:

1 Peter 2:9

“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”

惟有你们是被拣选的族类，是有君尊的祭司，是圣洁的国度，是属神的子民，要叫你们宣扬那召你们出黑暗入奇妙光明者的美德。

But, how can Paul possibly know that the Thessalonians were among these elect people of God? After all, he couldn't see their hearts. Surely only God knows who His elect are, because He's the only one who truly knows everybody's heart?

Well, yes that's true, Paul couldn't actually see their hearts to find out for sure whether they were God's chosen people or not. But he had seen their behaviour. He'd seen their outward fruit, their *“work of faith,”* their *“labour of love,”* and their *“patience of hope.”* And it'd become obvious that they'd undergone a complete change of nature after they'd heard the gospel message:

5 For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.

因为我们的福音传到你们那里，不独在乎言语，也在乎权能和圣灵，并充足的信心，正如你们知道我们在你们那里，为你们的缘故是怎样为人。

The gospel. By nature we're all sinful creatures. We spend our entire lives living for self, pandering to self, caring about nothing but ourselves and our own little pleasures. We don't live as we should live, as God wants us to live. If we carry on in our sinful ways and ignore Him, then eventually He'll have no alternative but to one day judge us and punish us according to our sinful nature. But there is hope. There is a way out. God sent a Saviour into the world, the Lord Jesus Christ. And all those who put their trust in Him, – I mean really put their trust in Him, not just say, “I believe in Jesus” and then carry on as before – all those who really put their trust in Him, shall not perish but have everlasting life.

The duty of all men everywhere, is to repent of their sins, cry to God for mercy, and I mean really cry to Him, – not just come forward at the end of a meeting, sign a document, recite a sinners prayer, join a church or whatever – but really cry to Him, really cast themselves upon Him, really want to be changed and follow Him instead of living for self, these people will surely be saved to eternal life. God'll hear their prayer. They'll be made new creatures in Christ. They'll be given the ability now to get out of their lazy, impatient lives and begin to live a new life for God. That's the message we should be presenting to the world. That's the gospel.

There are only two possible types of response to the gospel message. The first is that the message comes to the hearer “*in word only*.” They hear the words, the words hit their eardrums, but no real change ever takes place inside them.

That could manifest itself in different ways: To some, the gospel message will just go in one ear, and out the other with no reaction at all. Others might get angry at the message, because, after all, it does tell people that by nature they’re sinners, and some might object to that. And there may be others who would even receive the message with joy initially, but, as in the parable of the sower, when trials or persecution or the cares of this world come into their lives, the gospel message is found to have meant absolutely nothing to them and they drift away. All of these receive the gospel message “*in word only*.”

But there are others – amongst whom the Thessalonians were, and amongst whom every one of us ought to be aiming to be – who do respond to the message and truly meet with God. To these, the gospel message does not just come “*in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance*.”

These people have been truly changed at a fundamental level, in their hearts, in their souls. To them the gospel isn’t just words, isn’t just theory, but it’s the power of God unto salvation. And they’ve become new creatures in Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:17

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

若有人在基督里，他就是新造的人。旧事已过，都变成新的了

If we’ve truly responded to the gospel message, the Holy Spirit will come into our hearts to dwell with us, and to guide us, and give us the full assurance that we’re God’s chosen people and have been saved from the judgment to come.

A lot of people think that truly born-again Christians, who’ve experienced this fundamental change, are arrogant, because they’re so sure that they’re saved. They’re so sure that they’re going to heaven. And I’m sure we can understand that attitude, because it appears to the outsider, to one who’s never experienced the new birth, that Christians think that they can sin all they like and still be saved in the end. But that’s not true.

When we truly come to the Lord and truly know His forgiveness and changing power, we really do get the assurance of knowing absolutely that we’re one of His and that He’ll never leave us nor forsake us. But at the same time, we get a new heart. This new heart, now hates sin. It only ever wants to do good, to please God. The very thought of sinning all we like is hateful to someone who’s been truly changed by God. We just wouldn’t think that way.

And look at what happened to the Thessalonians after they had experienced this real life-change in their hearts:

6 And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost:

并且你们在大难之中，蒙了圣灵所赐的喜乐，领受真道，就效法我们，也效法了主。

They became followers of the apostles and their teachings. We do that today, in that the apostles' teachings are given to us in the New Testament. Coming to the Lord gives us a love for His Word. We want to drink in this book. Now we're His, we can't get enough of this book. It comes alive to us.

But there were also consequences to the Thessalonians' new-found faith. They were persecuted. They received the word "*in much affliction.*" And if we become a true Christian, we'll be persecuted too. It's inevitable. Christ said:

John 15:18,19

"If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you."

世人若恨你们，你们知道（或作该知道）恨你们以先，已经恨我了。你们若属世界，世界必爱属自己的。只因你们不属世界。乃是我从世界中拣选了你们，所以世界就恨你们。

John 16:33

"In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

在世上你们有苦难。但你们可以放心，我已经胜了世界。

But at the same time as they were undergoing this persecution, they were also full of the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 5:3-5

"We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."

就是在患难中，也是欢欢喜喜的。因为知道患难生忍耐。忍耐生老练。老练生盼望。盼望不至于羞耻，因为所赐给我们的圣灵将神的爱浇灌在我们心里。

It was actually through the persecutions that they were under, that God was working in them the "*patience of hope*" that they had. Patience in this world because they had the sure hope of the next.

Patience in persecution or times of trial is actually one of our main witnesses to the world:

2 Thessalonians 1:4,5

“We ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer.”

甚至我们在神的各教会里为你们夸口，都因你们在所受的一切逼迫患难中，仍旧存忍耐和信心。这正是神公义判断的明证。叫你们可算配得神的国，你们就是为这国受苦。

And this new life and attitude of theirs didn't go unnoticed throughout the region:

7 So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.

甚至你们作了马其顿和亚该亚，所有信主之人的榜样。

8 For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.

因为主的道从你们那里已经传扬出来，你们向神的信心不但在马其顿和亚该亚，就是在各处，也都传开了。所以不用我们说什么话。

Paul didn't need to commend the Thessalonian Christians to the churches in the neighbouring areas, because they'd already heard about them, and their wonderful witness to the truth and to the new life they had in Christ. Would to God that we as a church could be such an example to everybody around of what it is to truly know Christ, and to be a company of believers who've had their lives completely changed by Him.

But to do that, we've got to be different from the world. It's a popular teaching today to say that we should “be like the world to win the world.” No! Too many churches today are spending their time trying to imitate the world in their dress, their music, their attitude and their lifestyle. The thing is that Christians behaving like the world, just makes the world laugh at them and they'll just walk away, they'll think we've got nothing to offer them.

But if they see us living out the Christian life, producing the fruit of the Spirit, being different from them in the right way, – not just dressing peculiarly, or being cranky or being different for difference sake – then that's what's needed. That's the witness.

9 For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;

因为他们自己已经报明我们是怎样进到你们那里，你们是怎样离弃偶像归向神，要服事那又真又活的神，

The nations around knew and could clearly see the change that had taken place in the Thessalonians. They'd turned from their old life, their idols, and been completely renewed from the inside. Now they worshipped the living and true God. They'd now got a new world-view. They no longer had any interest in the empty religion of their forefathers. Now that in itself would invite persecution. We must pray to God for wisdom how to deal with it.

Once we've come to know the living and true God for ourselves, we can't carry on any longer in empty religion. We find it pointless, vain and empty. We want to live the new life that God has put in our hearts, and we no longer have a desire to carry on the old life. And not only that, but we want everyone else we come into contact with to have this new life too.

It's not surprising that people who've never experienced the new birth, won't understand us. Maybe they'll laugh at us, ridicule us or even kill us. But we now serve the living and true God. It's a completely different lifestyle from the world. Despite the difficulties of not being understood, our job is to be a clear witness to everybody around us of the new life that can be had in Christ.

10 And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

等候他儿子从天降临，就是他从死里复活的，那位救我们脱离将来忿怒的耶稣。

And the other main thing that stood out in the witness of the Thessalonians, was that they now produced the fruit of patience in their lives. They wait.

Now, waiting sounds pretty uninteresting, but that's what we should be doing. We should be waiting "*for His Son from heaven.*" The return of Christ is the Christian's sure hope. We've already got a token of this by the fact that He was raised from the dead and shewed Himself to many witnesses whose testimony we've got in this book. It's the return of Christ that we are waiting for, and it'll be obvious when He comes.

I knew someone once who was brought up in a church which believed that, instead of waiting for Christ coming again, we should rather be waiting for what they call "the rapture." This is the idea that one day all the Christians will suddenly disappear from the earth and be "raptured" into heaven, leaving all the unbelievers behind, none the wiser for what had just happened.

This man told me that when he was about eight years old, this teaching really frightened him. He kept waking up in the middle of the night wondering if "the rapture" had happened, and he'd been left behind.

And there are also many sects and organisations that frighten people into thinking that the return of Christ has already happened. And of course, only the initiated in the sect come to realise this.

The Jehovah's Witnesses thought Christ would come again in 1914, and when he didn't, they just changed their teaching and said that, well, actually he did come, but invisibly. Now, if you believe that, you'll believe anything.

And no less than 90 million people really believe that Christ has come again in the form of a farmer woman from Henan province in China. I don't know why on earth people believe this, but they do.

But Christ won't come secretly. We needn't bother about whether we've missed Him. It'll be obvious when it happens.

Matthew 24:27

"For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."

闪电从东边发出，直照到西边。人子降临，也要这样。

That's the event that Christians are all patiently waiting for. It's a sure hope.

And look at this. "*Which delivered us from the wrath to come.*" If we become new creatures in Christ. If we repent of our sins, renounce the world and follow Him, then we too can have this sure hope within our souls now. We don't have to wait for Judgment day to find out if we've made it or not. We can know today.

Note the word "*delivered*" is in the past tense. He's already done it. On Calvary 2000 years ago, Christ took upon Himself the sins of all those who would come to Him. He's paid the price for their sins in His body on the cross, so they don't have to pay themselves.

Don't wait and think that you can come later, or that you can still earn your way to heaven. You can't. Cry to Him for mercy now. Accept His free and unmerited pardon. Repent of your sins, and come to Him. And you too can become like these Thessalonians. A marvelous example to all the region round about. Having a real heartfelt, powerful change in their innermost being, that completely transformed them into becoming what God wanted them to be.

May each and every one of us not rest until we've made sure that we've come to that position personally for ourselves, and truly and fully experienced the salvation that Christ can give us.