

Study 2: 1st Thessalonians Chapter 1

Introduction

In studying the Thessalonian letters, we need to keep in the forefront of our minds that they are written to a congregation that is only a few months old, and has been left (essentially) leaderless. They were however, very active, and christianity spread like wildfire from them despite their state of persecution and affliction.

Body of the Study

What are the key introductory thoughts that Paul uses?

The characteristics of the Thessalonian church

Outreach from Thessalonica

Reports of news from Thessalonica

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *In what ways do the Thessalonians demonstrate the three graces – faith, hope, love, – in this chapter?*
- *Read the entire letter from the view of the Thessalonians: You are new christians, are suffering affliction, and have been left leaderless by circumstances outside of anyone's control. What feelings does Paul's letter bring out in you – how does it make you feel?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 2 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 2: Chapter 1

Introduction

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Body of the Study

What are the key introductory thoughts that Paul uses?

With his usual style of “signing his letter” at the beginning, Paul writes with Silas and Timothy. Silas (who’s full name was Silvanus) and Timothy had joined Paul in Athens, and he then immediately sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to get news of the brethren. By the time Timothy reported back, Paul had moved on to Corinth, and it is from there that the letter was sent. Silas and Timothy were Paul’s co-workers during his time in Thessalonica, and were well known to the brethren. Some writers suggest that Paul sent word to Berea for Timothy to go and visit the brethren. If that were the case, then the letter could have been written from Athens, however that is not consistent with 1:3:1-2 where Paul says that Timothy was sent from Athens.

Despite the fact that Paul had had to leave quickly and unexpectedly, Paul had not forgotten about the Thessalonians and *always thanked God for them all and continually remembered them in his prayers* (1:1:2). In like manner, Paul requests the Thessalonians to *pray for him* (1:5:25). They had their hearts alight for the Lord with their *work produced by faith*, their *labour prompted by love*, and their *endurance inspired by hope* (1:1:3). They needed to ensure that the flame was kept alight, and that they *did not put out the Spirit’s fire* (1:5:19). When Paul was there, he was an example to the brethren, and they knew *how he lived amongst them* (1:1:5) so much so, that they *became imitators of Paul* (1:1:6) and *a model to all believers* (1:1:7). The Thessalonians were evangelistic, since *the Lord’s message rang out from them and their faith was known everywhere* (1:1:8).

However, they needed to *show respect to those who were working amongst them* (1:5:12) and *hold them in the highest regard* (1:5:13). There was some concern for the state of those who had died in the Lord, but they need not worry since *the one who calls us is faithful* (1:5:24) and *we need to keep blameless at his coming* (1:5:23), as we *wait for His Son from heaven* (1:1:10). As confirmation of His power, *the gospel did not just come with words, but also with power with the Holy Spirit* (1:1:5) and the ultimate proof is *Jesus having been raised from the dead* (1:1:10). Therefore we can be assured of our salvation and *Jesus rescuing us from the coming wrath* (1:1:10).

This does not mean that we can rest on our laurels, and just as Paul set an example among them, so they should *warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, and be patient with everyone* (1:5:14)

The characteristics of the Thessalonian church

Paul gives us a key view of the inside of the Thessalonian church. Even although they were young in the faith, they were active, faithful, and evangelistic. Paul describes them in terms of the three fundamental pillars of christianity: *Faith, Hope, and Love*. They were *working* for the Lord as a result of their *faith*; *labouring* because of their *love*, and *patient* because of their *hope* in the Lord (1:1:3).

They had very quickly grasped the faith, and had modelled themselves after Paul, Silas and Timothy, and “...became followers of us and of the Lord...” (1:1:6 NKJV). However, these things did not come without difficulties. We only need to look at the problems that Paul experienced with the Jews in Thessalonica for an example. Not only did they stop him teaching in the synagogue after three weeks, but after he had withdrawn and gone to teach the Gentiles, they pursued him and had him run out of town. Paul’s host Jason was arrested when they could not find Paul and brought before the authorities on a charge of treason (teaching that there is another King apart from Caesar) (Acts 17:7). Even after Paul had left the city, the Jews pursued him in Berea (Acts 17:13) so that he was forced to leave that city as well. Paul writes that the Thessalonians had “...received the word in much affliction...” (1:1:6 NKJV). Despite the problems, they had become Christians “...with joy of the Holy Spirit...” (1:1:6 NKJV)

Outreach from Thessalonica

Along with the church at Philippi, the Thessalonian church was very strategically placed in the Egnatian Way. The gospel could spread in both directions along the way as far as Rome in the west and Byzantium in the East, as well as all directions from the sea port. Thessalonica was a much larger city than Philippi however, and so the opportunities for the gospel to grow and spread were much greater.

The church was not only active in outreach, but in their manner of living they “...became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe...” (1:1:7 NKJV). Under Roman rule, Greece was divided into two areas – Macedonia in the north, and Achaia in the South. Macedonia remains today, but the southern area is again called Greece. We need to remember that Paul had only been in Thessalonica for about 3 months, and had probably only been gone for about a further 3 months when he wrote the letter. So, here we have a church that has only been established for around 6 months that already has a reputation amongst all of the congregations in the area, and beyond the immediate area “...for from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place...” (1:1:8 NKJV).

Clearly, the church was active, and working hard to evangelise not only the immediate area, but using their strategic location to reach out beyond their local area.

Reports of news from Thessalonica

Although the church was very young, they were active, and reports about them had spread around as they spread the gospel. Rather than Paul having to tell people about the faith and action of the Thessalonians, he was hearing news about them from others “...for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...” (1:1:9 NIV).

We can see from here that many of the Thessalonian Christians were Gentiles, since the Jews already served the living and true God, and (hopefully) would not have to turn to God from idols.

Paul makes a final comment (for the chapter) concerning the resurrection. As we serve God, we are waiting for His return from heaven, and we will face the judgement with Jesus as our advocate so He will “...deliver us from the wrath to come...” (1:1:10). Jesus can only bring about this delivery because He was “...raised from the dead...” (1:1:10). Consequently, the assurance of Jesus’ resurrection translates into the assurance of our salvation. Later in the letter, Paul will write much more on the resurrection. The question that the Thessalonians had was *what happens if we die before the Lord returns?* Our assurance is secure and sure, and can be guaranteed because of the fact of the resurrection of Christ.