

Paul was basically chased into Thessalonica by persecution. He was on his second missionary journey, a trek of maybe one thousand miles or more into two continents over land and sea. Along the way he proclaimed the good news of Jesus and took heat for it. He spent a night in prison in Philippi. He may have left but trouble followed. After he arrived in Thessalonica for three straight weeks he met with people and told them about Jesus. But persecution found him there too. Quickly he was pushed out and was on to the next city and the next after that.

The Thessalonians who heard and believed what Paul proclaimed were thankful. He wasn't exactly what they were used to for traveling preachers. Most wanted something from them. Money, provisions, a free place to sleep. Paul proclaimed something other than what they usually heard and he did it while under persecution. They really had no reason to believe him. But they did. The reason wasn't in Paul.

That's why Paul wrote them back this letter, the first to the Thessalonians. He wanted to express his thanks. As we continue this sermon series called One, we listen as Paul thanks the Thessalonians but he also thanks the reason they are who they are.

### **Thanks for you being you**

Three weeks was short to try and teach and preach to people all about what God wanted them to know. Try to cover creation, sin, grace, Jesus, the Triune God, baptism, Lord's Supper, election, and end of the world all in just three weeks. It takes me ten and I don't even scrape the surface of what the Bible has to teach. They were just baby Christians when Paul was run out of town. Paul felt he had to write, give them something, encourage them through what was likely heavy persecution against them. How could these new Christians be expected to stand up against persecution attacking their new faith?

The news was good though. **"We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."** Paul was thankful. The report from the city was that these new Christians were standing strong in the face of persecution. While under attack, even these baby Christians were producing faithful work, loving labor, and hopeful perseverance. Of course none of their own doing. Paul was thankful for the Thessalonians, but he was even more thankful for what God was doing in the Thessalonians.

God chose them. God called these Thessalonians personally out of the sinful world by the gospel. He brought them into a relationship with himself through Christ. God the Holy Spirit worked faith in their hearts. **"For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction."** The gospel power worked in them a faith so deep it did what faith does, it produced work. Good works, the Thessalonians living their faith. Lives completely changed. The source of that change was their faith. The source of their faith was the Holy Spirit. Therefore the source of their faithful good works was the Holy Spirit.

The short time and the small amount of actual teaching Paul could do was supported by the life he lived. When Paul was gone the Thessalonians remembered how he lived and they imitated that way of life. **"You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."** A joyful message had penetrated their hearts. They not only heard it from Paul, they saw it in Paul. Love flowed from him, God's love in him showing itself to others. That joyful message in word and deed produced love in them. Love for God. Love for others. They imitated Paul's love. Since Paul was already imitating the love of Christ, when the Thessalonians imitated Paul they were imitating Christ.

These new Christians were facing persecution and suffering. They could have avoided it all by giving up on Christ and Paul's message. But during the attacks against them they remained hopeful. When the attack was fiercest they clung to Christ. Even when times of trouble came others around them knew of their strong hope in Christ. Even during trouble the Thessalonian's hope sent aide to others. **"The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere."** There was hope and joy to give and share. The spirit of giving and hopeful perseverance while under attack became known. All over anyone who heard about the Thessalonians wanted to imitate their hope. Since the Thessalonians were imitating Paul who was imitating Christ, anyone who imitated the Thessalonians also imitated Christ.

If Christianity were just the latest fad or the next big thing it would have long ago faded from the scene. Who would hold on to something that brings pain and persecution? Who would follow a Savior who died horribly? Who would stick up for something that challenged worldly thinking and put barriers between people? While we might not face the persecution and attacks the Thessalonians did, it isn't hard for us to see what we do face. A mountain of criticism every time we stick up for our faith. Friends and even family figure us foolish for believing in something you can't see. The community would rather hold to its rights than give them up in service to someone else. A sinful nature so steeped in sin that without a clear word from God we wouldn't even know how utterly sinful and dead in our sins we were. That puts us apart from God and apart from each other.

That's what makes the words on the page of the Bible so incredible. They're not simply words. They're God's own power. The power of a Savior. The working of God the Holy Spirit in your hearts is found in those gospel syllables. We hear the same as what Paul proclaimed to the Thessalonians the first time he was in their town, **"He reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."** Jesus rescues you from the coming wrath. He alone saves you from sin. Hope springs from Christ's death on the cross for you. Once separate, Jesus provides you a connection to God. The Holy Spirit works faith in him deep into your heart. Faith that then connects you to each other. Even among the worst of circumstances the power of the Holy Spirit overcomes. The power to stand up to attack is his flowing through you. He holds you up and gets you through. I am thankful for God being who God is, bringing you to faith and keeping you in faith till today and beyond.

And I'm thankful for you being you. You're Christians and you live that each day. The conviction the Holy Spirit has worked in your hearts produces faithful works, loving labor, and hopeful perseverance. Faith doesn't sit inactive on your hearts. It looks for ways to show itself. Faith moves you to a willingness to care and love. Faith drives your desires to strengthen the relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

While it's true you and I are free in Christ and not subject to anyone, love from Christ forms love for Christ which is willing to subject yourself to everyone and serve them. Love from the Lord is clearly seen in you being willing to sacrifice your own comforts in worship to be more accommodating to guests. Christ's love moves you to be willing to flex and give up your rights for the benefit of others.

Even in the midst of suffering you still have hopeful perseverance because of Christ. You imitate Christ. Others are noticing. That message is ringing out in the community. I was at a meeting on Thursday of various community organizations all doing things to serve. I had opportunity to mention the things you're doing, letting the homeschooling group meet here, letting the Y play soccer, polling location, HOA meeting place, just to name a few. Among this group, these things were noticed. People were grateful and said so. The woman sitting next to me thanked me for you being you. That's just one example. You're doing it in your own lives too. Don't think people aren't noticing how far you drive to get to church, how you come with almost no sleep but still are here, bring young children who are missing their nap time, work at teaching your children that time with the Savior is important, come even though your body tells you to stay at home in the chair. And more. People notice. These actions provide the opportunity for the gospel to ring out.

So, thank you for being you. I can say with Paul, **"Therefore we do not need to say anything about it...they tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."** Thank God for his work among you, not simply with words but with his love and power. Thank God he brings you into his family and causes your faith, love, and hope to spring to action. And thanks for you being you.