

“Work, Labor, and Patience...”

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- 1 Thess 1:1-5 -

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace

to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, 3 remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, 4 knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. 5 For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

The church in Thessalonica had existed long enough to have begun to endure the same issues and struggles that such churches suffer through in our day. Their main man Paul was being slandered and attacked, Satan had sent false teachers and their false doctrine in amongst them in attempt to distract them from the authentic gospel, holiness had begun to ebb, and persecution, compromise, and discouragement were on their doorstep. Moreover, one of the main and repeating elements of this letter revolves around the second coming of Christ. Every chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with reference to the coming of Jesus Christ, and each reference relates the doctrine to a practical aspect of Christian living. Here is a summary:

- 1:10—salvation and assurance
- 2:19–20—soul-winning and service
- 3:11–13—stability in Christian living
- 4:13–18—strength in sorrow
- 5:23–24—sanctification of life

I mention this because we could gather around with the end-times junkies and pour over conspiracy theories and titillating tales of black helicopters and political intrigue, rather than stepping up to live in the light of our Redeemers imminent return. The aspects of His return that we **DO** have ...and we honestly do not have a lot of details, are all seemingly geared toward affecting *how we live our lives*, not how we pack our bags. Many folks are ‘prophecy’ people and their whole faith seems to revolve around the ‘hereafter.’ They are packed and ready to go, which is great, but they can then often seem slow to live out their faith here and now. These folks flock to prophecy conferences and gather around like gypsies with tarot cards and a crystal ball. Sadly, some churches shamelessly pander to this. I have seen new churches plants begin their first Sunday teaching with the book of revelation, which pretty much sets the tone of that fellowship right out of the gate.

Then there are those who frankly never think much at all about heaven and the second coming. It is often our human nature to block out the fact that everything we know of as our reality is going to ultimately pass away. After all, so many of us have invested so much into this world and its possessions, that it is a difficult acknowledgement to admit that there is no permanence to it all...whether we are personally raptured with the



corporate church or whether we individually pass on into eternity through death. The bottom line is we are just so briefly “passing through” this life...

So we can be overtly consumed with living for Jesus now...or perhaps just living in general, and forget that each of us has a divine “appointment” with the Master one day, and these few years here will seem like seconds in the grand scheme of things when eternity is considered. Ecclesiastes 9:10 reminds us: “*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.*”

This is likely Paul’s first letter, with only Galatians possibly vying for number one. 1st Thessalonians was written only about twenty years after the crucifixion and ascension of Christ. We are therefore very close to the ‘ground zero’ of early Christianity when we’re reading this letter.

Of the 5 chapters this letter is divided into, the first 3 chapters “look back” and the latter two “look ahead.” Such is fitting when compared to the Christian life. Both fit into the honest analysis of our walk in Christ. Indeed we all must “look back” as to where we came from or we are apt to forget and merely return there again like a salmon. But we must also keep our eyes upon what is “up ahead.” Where we are going...what we are being called to do and to be, and to fulfil the mission for which we were born. There needs to be a balance in this area. God has indeed called us to live out our faith today. To “serve” today while we can! Jesus said in the book of John (9:4) "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work." And He said...in prayer to His Father, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do." (John 17:4)

At the time of Paul’s letter, Thessalonica was a major metropolitan city and a strategic military center. It was like many cities today; a city of great wealth and power which invariably seems to lead to a cesspool of pleasures and fleshly pursuits. It was on Paul’s second missionary journey that he visited Thessalonica. He could not have hung around there for long...for he and his fellow travelers were soon hauled before the authorities with charges of treason. Thus it is very likely that Paul had left town long before this church began to really thrive. But despite its unconventional and yes audacious beginnings, **thrive it did**...and Paul later found himself down in the city of Corinth and penning both of these letters back to the church which had begun in Thessalonica. These two letters were on the rare side, for they were of the minority letters that Paul wrote that were not heavily corrective. He spoke to them as brothers...as *family*. There was certainly some teaching and correcting happening here but overall the letter seems to center around his attempts to encourage these new believers to stand fast in their faith...to not return to the worldliness and paganism of the world around them. To make their time here count. At least three times in this letter, Paul gave thanks for the church and the way it responded to his ministry (1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13; 3:9). Not every pastor can be that thankful.

Paul begins herein by presenting a model of a strong church. One that was busy about the work of the Lord. The picture he paints is one that should be our model also...an example that we should aspire to as a fellowship community. For Paul, such a church would have several innate attributes. Firstly, it would be a church that has ministers who are faithful to the church community. A community that is truly a “body” of Christ...made up of people not just a building with pews. A church founded upon God, standing firm in the scripture, and a place where the supreme gifts of grace and peace would be present and active. For Paul, that kind of church was a praying church and one that was fired up to serve.

The practical side of this letter is all about sanctification – how we grow in godliness, how we grow in grace, how we become more like Jesus Christ. Paul fills this letter with his urging to grow in holiness. Not just a **demand** for holiness, but practical instruction as to how to actually achieve it.

There is one more aspect here in this letter we should mention. And that is Paul's clear call to fellowship and community. We need to acknowledge this crucial issue, because it can be a spiritual killer if we ignore it. We can't live the Christian life without one another. We need community and accountability. We need shared lives. We need communion with our brothers and sisters if we're going to live this life in safety and growth. It was important to the church in Thessalonica, and it's critical for us here today also.

Chapter 1

1:1

Paul the apostle was the author of this letter, as well as it's earthly authority. However it seems he was at least at this point accompanied by Silvanus and Timothy as he wrote it...or as he dictated it, as was often the case with Paul. Now Timothy was a guy we know, however Silvanus was a fella who never really achieved great fame nor given great credit. He clearly worked closely with Paul, but we never hear too much about him at all. However, if one were to peruse through history as well as the Bible as a whole, you would find that God has often used unknown, unsung servants like Silvanus for His glory and He still seeks to use men and women significantly but still with no promised accolades.

We may feel inadequate and unworthy, but the fact is that God desires our *availability* more than our *ability*. Clearly, Silvanus was available for God's use. It did not matter whether he was called to "play second fiddle" to Paul. Apparently Silvanus did not seek glory for himself, but only for his Lord. If God were to call you to such a ministry of anonymity, would *you* accept it?

1 Samuel 30:24 speaks of such...*"We share and share alike — those who go to battle and those who guard the equipment."* "Guarding the equipment" meant staying back from the front line to "take care of the supplies." David told those who went out to battle the Amalekites that those who stayed by the stuff would also receive the same share of the reward as those who fought on the front lines. Are you willing to "stay by the stuff"? Because there is a very real ministry of prayer and financial support for those who go to the mission field and out to exercise their calling and their gifts. Such a role is equally important in the results and the reward. And I have no doubt that ultimately you will receive an "equal share" of the bounty of blessings as those who fought out front and in the more public roles.

Now Timothy, he played a different role. Paul had personally took him under his wing and mentored him. He then went on to play a significant role within the early church, although still not a primary leader on par with Paul himself. Timothy was however...what we would call, a "player." God had called him to something else...something different than Silvanus. It was certainly "nice work if you can get it" from our perspective...but in the sight of God his work was equal with that of Silvanus, and equal to ours. There are no 'small' rolls in God's dimension.

Paul wrote this letter with a heart of simplicity, gentleness, and affection. It lacked the implicit controversy that seemed to follow much of his other letters. Paul wrote it to the 'church'...the "ecclesia" in Thessalonica. Such is more than a building or even an organization. Ecclesia goes further than that. It stresses that we are a people called out of the world (an elect assembly) unto the Lord to represent Him in a fallen world. Ecclesia means the 'assembled people of God.' This is who Paul was writing to....both then and today to us.

Paul finishes verse 1 with his moniker greeting...his wish for all of us: "grace to you and peace from God." And as always...such only comes in that order. First we receive his grace, and then we receive his peace. If we can't or won't get our hands around that grace, we will never have any real and lasting peace. Isa 26:3 *"You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You."*

“To the church of the Thessalonians *in* God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul tells us that all this comes from being “in” God and Christ. Such denotes an “intimacy of union.” Such speaks of grace and peace...

1:2-3

Paul says it was always with thanks that he prayed for them. I think most of us have a lot to learn about prayer and our approach to the Father! The fact of the matter is we can be so bent upon ‘moving forward’ in what we deem as worldly or even religious advancement, we can forget where we have come from. We can forget to stop and be thankful.

Therefore our advancements frankly may or may not be God’s. They may just perhaps be our own plans and not the plan of God at all! Indeed Paul always wanted more from and for the believers, but unlike many of us, he had not forgotten how far they had already come. He had not forgotten their “work of faith, their labor of love, and their patience of hope.”

As I already mentioned, this letter speaks into the issue of how we are to live...*how the church in Thessalonica was to live*, in light of and up until the return of Christ and the end of our fight. Paul was blessed by what he saw in these believers...they exercised *without ceasing* a “work of faith.” It’s interesting that Paul refers to this issue of faith as a “*work* of faith.” Rarely, if ever, do we think of faith as “work.”

Once some folks asked Jesus “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” And Jesus replied “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.” In this sense, faith is an act or deed. It doesn’t just “happen.” It requires decision and action on our part. Yes, *even effort*. And then to live it out is a daily act...one that requires consistency, faithfulness and yes even tenacity. One thing for sure is that faith is not a passive sport!

Our faith is essentially the child of God acknowledging his Creator...the sinner acknowledging his Savior. And that expression ‘work of faith’ also includes the life of faith which follows conversion. Our “acknowledgment” of faith is more than in the head. It is in the hands, and feet, the very life manifest of the believer.

Following our “work of faith” comes a “labor of love.” Work? Labor? These are words we tend to avoid, huh? The fact is, love doesn’t come natural to us, despite what we say. Loving people has to be purposeful and it requires effort. Many of us just are unwilling to labor at loving. The fact is, many of us are just unwilling to labor at anything concerning our new life, except maybe at trying to avoid laboring. Where did we ever get the idea that Christianity meant ‘easy street’ and was a passive act of mere reception on our part? The church in Thessalonica understood it. They didn’t just talk the talk, they lived it.

It’s incredible just how much effort we will put into the things of this world, and how little we will give the kingdom. We will strive for our vocation, for money, for possessions, for a spouse and family. But where does kingdom fit into all of it?

Lastly, Paul acknowledges their ‘patience of hope.’ The word ‘patience’ can also be translated “steadfastness.”

They *endured*. They endured persecution, evil treatment and near constant opposition. In fact, they did more than just endure. They actually thrived despite it all! The commentator Phillips calls it their “sheer dogged endurance.” Will they say the same about us? Will they say the same about you? Will we stand in patience as we await our Lord’s return or will we...like the parable Jesus told in Matthew 24, begin to beat up on the other

servants...begin to party and get drunk, because we think our Lord will not return soon? Plenty have done so...lost their patience and went on back to the world.

1:4

We could read this verse as “We know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you.” The fact is, the longer you walk in Christ...the longer you work in faith, labor in love, and stand in your endurance of hope...the more you will realize that we never found Christ, He found us. And man, did some of us give Him a run for His money! We were difficult, cagey, and stubborn. And yet, here we are! And He certainly didn't choose us because of our personal and intrinsic value! Most the time, I think I am just trouble for the Master! D. L. Moody once said, “I'm glad the Lord chose me before I was born. I don't think He would have chosen me after I'd done some living!” Ahhh, indeed!

Be careful here that you don't attribute this statement to equal the hyper-Calvinist position that God chose some and rejected others...not giving them a chance for salvation, in fact *making* them say no to him and thus dooming them to hell without a chance for redemption. That is contrary to scripture and frankly a different God than I know and follow. It's not “elect” in that fashion unless we are the one controlling that divine choice...because it's the same word in the original as 2 Peter 1:10 that says “*Wherefore ... brethren ...give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall...*” If we can diligently work to make my “election” sure than I clearly play a part in this relational dynamic, and indeed you do. It's called “free-will.” 1 Timothy 2:3-4 says “*God our Savior, ...desires **all** men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.* And Romans 10:13 says “*...**whoever** calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.*”

But Paul says he knew...the church knew...they were chosen by God. Chosen to be loved, chosen to be saved, chosen to serve Him, chosen to further the kingdom of God. Perhaps it was just that that made them work at faith...labor in love, and be patient in hope. Maybe it was just the fact that they knew God chose them for salvation...as he has inexplicably for all of mankind, and that was enough. If God...*creator of the universe*, found them, picked them up, and called them His own, nothing else mattered.

1:5

Paul knew that the gospel was more than just talk. It was more than just words and credo and religious persuasion. It was about the supernatural power of God being manifested through us...actually lived out in this world! It is about being filled with the Holy Spirit...the very presence of God in all of our living, our choices, our very essence.

For these believers, *...as well as for us today*, it was about more than just church attendance or an acceptance of a belief system or a neo-political stance. It was about a supernatural way of living where our maker and our Savior has our backs and guides our steps. Not just once at the cross or once at our redemption moment. But all day long...our whole lives long. In all this, they were...*we are...* “**assured...**” And because of that assurance, we live in Him in all things. “We love Him, because He first loved us.” We are... **sure**...

I wonder just how many of us relate to the gospel of Jesus as fact...as a discipline, as an act of obedience, but have never known the gospel “in power.” Perhaps there has never been the supernatural... the miraculous poured out in your life? Such seems readily evident in many of you as your life testimony is that Jesus is without the power to change you or affect your worldly station.

We as modern Christians go to church, read our Bibles, and walk relatively moral lives. We verbally testify of God's gospel truth, but rarely is there a real manifest of God's ‘gospel power.’ Perhaps it is because the first is

merely spoken and believed, and the latter has to be lived. So we can thus assume few of us have ever known such a force outside of ourselves; one that joins with our living to further God and kingdom. Have we known this 'power' to manifest real and concrete change in our lives? Have we experienced that unearthly force which is stronger than our emotions and deeper than any worldly dream?

Paul knew this power. He knew that side of the gospel...that manifest of God's power played out in his own personal life and ministry. And it wasn't just his imagination either, because he set his very life out there for everyone to see and said "*look...do you see the supernatural of Christ manifested in my life? Do you see the attributes of the Spirit?*"

Paul says you know what kind of men we were among you! They knew because of their interaction...their 'rubbing shoulders'...their sharing lives with Paul and his 'boys.' And the whole issue had little to do with what Paul *said*, and far more with what He *did*.

You see, if we are truly filled with the Holy Spirit of God, then the 'power of God' will be evident in our living. Jesus gave us the 'gospel'...the "*died for man's sins, ...was resurrected, ...and lives in heaven at the right hand of God...so we might be saved...*" He gave us that gospel to move the world but it all began right here when it moved us..."