

A Church to be Thankful For

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

20 Sep 09

It's with a great deal of anticipation that I ask you to take your Bibles and open to First Thessalonians. First Thessalonians, is where we're really going to start studying through this wonderful book and I want to begin tonight by just reading chapter one as we approach our study of this letter written by the apostle Paul. First Thessalonians chapter one. "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come."

As we come to our study of this great epistle you'll notice that it has a standard opening, or greeting at the very beginning. As is typical in letters of that time, the writer is identified first, and in this case the writer is Paul. Silvanus and Timothy are listed with him. Silvanus is also known as Silas, always referred to as Silas in the book of Acts. They were with Paul as he writes this letter. They fully endorse what he's writing, but it is Paul who is writing the letter. Chapter two verse 18 and other places make that clear, that Paul's the writer of this letter. And you'll notice something a little different here. Paul does not identify himself as an apostle as he starts off this letter like he normally does. He doesn't identify himself as an apostle in First Thessalonians, nor in Second Thessalonians, or to the Philippians either. All three of those churches were in the region of Macedonia. He doesn't identify himself as an apostle in any one of those letters. That's probably because of the very close relationship he had with those churches and probably because his authority was not questioned in any of those churches so he didn't have to state and remind them that he was speaking as an apostle. We know that Paul founded this church on what we call his second missionary journey. And he started that journey with this man Silas by his side. Silas had been a leading man in the church in Jerusalem according to Acts 15:22. Silas was a prophet according to Acts 15:32, probably a Hellenistic Jew. He was a roman citizen who was also Jewish. And he joined Paul on this second missionary journey. Now not long after they started that journey they added Timothy to the team according to Acts 16:1. Timothy lived in Lystra. As they passed through they added Timothy to the team. Timothy was a young man who was well spoken of by all the brethren and he became a faithful co-worker with Paul for many years. Now Silas and timothy are with Paul. He's in the city of Corinth as he writes this letter to the church in Thessalonica. Timothy had just returned from

Thessalonica giving a good report about the church there to Paul and that's what led to the writing of this letter.

So, first in this letter as in normal letters, the writer is identified, Paul and those who are with him. Next we are told who the letter is written to. It's to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This letter is written to a church. A specific church. The church in Thessalonica. But not only is this church identified in terms of its location, but in terms of its spiritual character. And that's an important thing to take notice of. The word translated church, the word *ekklesia*, was a very general word. It's just used to speak of an assembly of people. It could be any assembly of people. In fact in Acts 19, three times verses 32, 39, and 41, this word *ekklesia* is used to describe the angry mob that assembled in the city of Ephesus. This word *ekklesia* was commonly used to refer to a Greek political assembly. *Ekklesia*, the word itself means to call out and that was the idea, you were called out of your homes to go to this assembly. And some of you might remember in school you might have had assemblies, you were called out of your classrooms and you went to the auditorium for the assembly. Now that's the idea behind this word, the basic meaning of this word. The word was also used to speak of religious assemblies. So before this word took on its distinctly Christian character, it was necessary to identify what kind of assembly you were speaking about. And notice how Paul identifies this assembly of believers in Thessalonica. He says that they are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now that's a great concise definition of a church. They are people who have come to God through the Lord Jesus Christ and now they enjoy a position of being in God and in Christ. They have a redemptive relationship with God. Notice that it says that they are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The 'in' there refers to both the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And so it speaks of their essential equality. The Father and the Son are equal. It speaks of the deity of the Son. And this is a uniquely assembly. They are in God which distinguishes them from any secular or heathen assembly and they are in Christ which distinguishes them from any Jewish assembly. This is a distinctly Christian assembly that he's writing to.

So the author Paul is identified and the recipients are the Christian assembly or the church in Thessalonica. They are both identified here in the beginning. And then Paul gives a greeting, which is also standard, but it's anything but formal. He says grace to you and peace. Grace, we know the definition of grace, it's divine favor. It's the unearned love of God. And peace, well that's the effect of grace. It speaks of the health of a soul when by grace everything is made right between us and God. So we know peace. And he says grace to you and peace. They already possess these things, as believers they already possess the grace of God, they have already experienced the grace of God. They have already experience the peace that comes along with that grace. But Paul's desire is for them to experience it in an increasing measure. So this is how the letter opens up.

And I want to highlight the fact that it's addressed to a church and it contains instruction for the church. The church is central and the church is for believers. And it's important to say that in these days. We meet as a church to do what a church should do, as the Bible tells us. The church needs to worship, the church need to fellowship, the church need to be equipped. Church is for the church. How is that for a profound statement? Church is for the church. It's a place for Christ's sheep to be fed. And that needs to be said today because so many churches today are trying to everything they can to attract the goats.

And the sheep aren't being fed like they should be, like the need to be, like they ought to be. This is a letter that is all about the church. And this church, in Thessalonica, it's a church to be thankful for.

As Paul says in verse two, "We give thanks for God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers." Now that's also kind of a normal thing for Paul. He expresses thanks at the beginning of each one of his letters that we have in the New Testament, except the one to the Galatians. But, as we saw last week, this Thessalonica church is a model church in many regards. In fact you might have noticed in verse seven where he says, "You" speaking of the church in Thessalonica, "became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." This church was providing an example that other churches could follow. It was a model church and it's a church for which Paul is thankful.

Now we could spend a lot of time talking about the role of thanksgiving in the life of a believer. Thanksgiving is one of the predominant characteristics of a true Christian. And Paul provides a model of thanksgiving. You see it here in verse two. When we get to chapter two verse 13 we'll see him say, "For this reason we also constantly thank God." In chapter three verse nine he says, "For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account." You're going to see Paul constantly expressing thanks to God. And this will really get developed when we get to chapter five verse 18 where he gives us the command to give thanks in everything. Thanksgiving is a predominant characteristic of a true believer. Paul provides an example of that. But as we look at this first chapter we want to look at Paul's offering of thanks for the Thessalonian church. And as we do we'll take note of three features of his thanksgiving and how they relate to him and to this church, features that will bring out why the Thessalonian church was a church to be thankful for.

And as Paul writes this, and as he makes these comments here in this first chapter, this is really affirming to the Thessalonians. I mean, this is a happy letter to get for them. For this letter to show up and to hear Paul say these things about them, boy that's an encouragement to them. That's affirming to them. And while it's affirming to them it's going to be really clarifying for us because as we see the things that he gives thanks for, that helps us know what really matters, what's important in the church. So it will be a really clarifying thing for us.

But let's look at Paul's giving of thanks. And the first thing that we want to notice, the first feature of his thanksgiving is that Paul's thanksgiving was comprehensive. Verse two, "We give thanks to God", how often? For how many? Pretty comprehensive, huh? "We give thanks to God always for all of you making mention of you in our prayers." Every time Paul, Silas and Timothy got together to pray, they would include thanksgiving for the Thessalonians. That's what he's saying there. Every time we get together and pray, this is part of what we pray about. We offer up thanks for you. This giving of thanks wasn't random or sporadic. This was their regular habit. And this prayer and giving of thanks was not only comprehensive because it was done all the time but because it included all of the Thessalonians. And to me that's an amazing statement. He says we give thanks all the time for you, every time we meet to pray we're giving thanks for you guys and we're giving thanks for every one of you. That's an amazing statement to you. He says we're giving thanks for all of you. No one is excluded from this. It's a totally inclusive thing. No matter how obscure the individual might have been in that particular fellowship, every single one of them was included in these prayers of thanksgiving. That's an amazing thing.

Now, Paul was certainly aware of the imperfections that existed in the lives of the Thessalonians. It's not like because he gives thanks for all of them they must all be really perfect Christian people. No they're not. They're normal Christian people. He's aware of their imperfections. In fact in chapter three verse 10 he says, "As we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith." They had some things that were lacking in their faith. But yet Paul is giving thanks for every single one of them. And Christians do differ in their levels of spiritual maturity but there's always something of Christ in each one, therefore there's something to give thanks for in each one. Everyone. All of them. But this is a humbling thing to read a statement like that. We can all be convicted over how little time we give to prayer. I won't go down that road. But I could make us all feel really bad really quick by doing that. We're not very comprehensive in that regard in terms of time, but we can also be guilty of being very selective in our prayers. We pray probably mostly for ourselves. And then for selected others. Our family, we pray for our families. We pray for our close friends. We pray for those who have really big problems, health problems, or whatever else. We pray for those. But, in reality out of the whole church, how many do we actually give thanks for on a regular basis? This is quite a statement about Paul. I think there's something significant for all of us to take note of in what Paul is saying here. Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians all the time and all of them. We'll learn a lot about the church as we look at what Paul expresses his thanks for, but we got to begin by thinking about the comprehensive nature of Paul's thanksgiving. All the time, for all of them.

Notice though too who Paul directs his thanks to. Remember, this letter was prompted by a good report that Paul had received about the church from Timothy, but this is not a letter congratulating the Thessalonians. He's not just patting them on the back for how well they're doing. He's giving his thanks to God. His thanks are addressed to God. "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers." His heart is filled with praise to God for what's going on in this church. We saw it in chapter three verse nine and I just read it for you. "For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account." All the good things are going on the Thessalonica, all that does is makes us praise God for what He is doing. And that's because spiritual success ultimately comes from God. The ultimate credit goes to the One who gives the spiritual progress. And that's God. He's the One causing the growth in this church. He's the One to be thanked. All of our experiences need to be viewed in relation to God, and thanks need to be given to Him. Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian church, and his thanksgiving, it's comprehensive. It's all the time, and it's for all of them. It's an amazing statement.

So we see the comprehensive nature of his thanksgiving. Let's look at the content of his thanksgiving. In verse three, "Constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father." Paul's prayer and his thanksgiving, they weren't just empty words. You can see that his words were prompted by the constant reminder of the content of the Christian living that was being practiced among the Thessalonian believers. He's reminded so frequently about the kind of lives that the Thessalonians were living that it was constant, as he says in verse three. He's constantly bearing in mind these things about them. As you can see, Paul's constantly remembering their faith, their love, and their hope. All three of these qualities are possessed by all believers and they're frequently referred to by Paul and other New Testament letters in a group

like that: faith, hope, and love, love faith and hope. They are grouped together. In fact we're going to see again when we get to chapter five and verse eight. He says, "But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith, and love and as a helmet, the hope of salvation." These are things that are frequently grouped together throughout the New Testament. First Corinthians 13:13 says, "But now faith, hope, love, abide these three, but the greatest of these is love." These are characteristics of all true Christians. They all go together. Galatians chapter five verses five and six says, "For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love." There again you see the three of them mentioned, you see the three of them grouped together. Characteristics of Christians. Colossians chapter one verse three and four sound similar to First Thessalonians. It says, "We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." Again there you see those same three characteristics grouped together. We can see them also in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews chapter six verses 10 through 12. It says, "For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitator of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." So there again you see those same three being brought out as characteristic of Christians. Hebrews chapter 10 verses 22 to 24 says, "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." You just keep bumping in to these three all over the place. First Peter chapter one verses 21 and 22 says, "Who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart." There you have them again: faith, hope, and love.

So Paul is identifying those things, those characteristics of the Thessalonians and he's constantly bearing them in mind and they provide the spark for him always giving thanks for them. But notice how Paul speaks of these Christian characteristics here in First Thessalonians 1:3. It's not just faith and love and hope, but it's the work of faith, and the labor of love, and the steadfastness of hope. In other words, to turn those around, you can say it's a faith that works, it's a love that labors, and it's a hope that is steadfast. And that really helps when he puts it like that to clarify what the bible means by faith, love, and hope. First just to consider what he says about faith here. Biblical faith always works. Biblical faith, saving faith, genuine faith, it always works. Biblical faith isn't speculative. It's always energetic and productive. Because you see, faith is a total response of a man to God and it always includes obedience. True faith always issues in obedience, in work because it's the commitment of a total person to God. So the work here speaks of the result or the effects that come out of a genuine faith. Now this isn't including works in salvation. This isn't saying faith plus works gets you saved. What it is saying is genuine faith produces works.

Second he mentions a love that produces labor. The word labor there is a word that speaks of effort. It refers to the cost involved, and the toil, the exertion, the extraordinary effort that is a result of a real love for God. A real love for God will make extraordinary efforts. It'll put out a great amount of energy. It's the kind of love that is willing to sacrifice self. This labor, the word labor here is talking about wearying, laborious toil. And that's because our love for God is patterned after His love for us which was supremely demonstrated in the giving of His Son, who gave His life, who sweat drops of blood, for us. So out of love for God we'll put out strenuous effort in our service of Him because we love Him. If faith results in work characterized by obedience to God's word, or holy living, than a love that labors is seen expressing God's love toward others, serving them, forgiving them, ministering to those in need, reaching out to those that are lost. Makes great efforts, motivated by love for God. All Christians have a faith that works. All Christians have a love that labors.

Also, third, they have a hope that is steadfast. Steadfast is a word that speaks of endurance or perseverance but there's nothing passive about this word. It's one of those great Greek words *hupomone*. It's one of those words that sounds like it should be on the menu at an Italian restaurant. I'd like a little chicken *hupomone*. But his words steadfastness, or endurance, it's not just saying it hangs in there. It's not passive like that. In fact this kind of steadfastness is heroic. It's brave. It's courageous. It's aggressive. It's manly, would be the way to describe this word. It speaks of a persistent zeal. It's the kind of hope that overcomes obstacles. That overcomes trials. That overcomes persecution and suffering. It puts aside self-pity and discouragement when things get hard. This kind of steadfastness doesn't know anything about self-pity. And the Thessalonians were facing persecution. I mean, people had run Paul out of town. And these people were facing opposition but they were steadfast in their hope. Hope in a Christian context always speaks of an air of certainty. It's not, well I hope I'm going to get through this. There is a certainty about it. First Peter 1:3 it's called a living hope and it's inspiring in the face of difficulties. Our hope is a settled certainty. It is the absolute assurance of heaven. And that's because it's rooted in our Lord Jesus Christ. You see it there, it's a steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. His resurrection and life guarantees my resurrection and life. Because He lives, I will live also forever.

You see the object of our faith and our love and our hope, it's focused on Christ. And we live in the consciousness of God's presence as it goes on to say there in verse three it's, "In our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father." And I think that this is seen in a very positive sense here. My heart is focused on Christ and God is with me. Isn't that what we talked about this morning? His name will be called Immanuel. His name translated will mean God with us. My faith as a Christian is focused in the Lord Jesus Christ and I live in the consciousness that God is with me all the time and this faith produces work, this love produces labor, and this hope produces steadfastness. It's that focus on Christ that makes this faith, love, and hope active and expressive.

Paul's thanks for the Thessalonians includes this content. These things he remembers which provide a satisfactory portrayal of the nature and scope of Christian living. Faith, love, hope. You can look at it this way: faith rests on the past, on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Love works in the present, reaching out and expressing the love that God has shown to us. And hope looks to the future with certainty, with assurance, and it's all because of Christ. And I think that this says something really significant as regards to the church and the focus of our ministries. Who doesn't want a church that

works? That lives obedient, holy lives. Who doesn't want a church like that? Who doesn't want a church that labors? A church that goes all out, willing to give themselves in service to the point of exhaustion because of the extraordinary effort that everybody is putting out. Who doesn't want to be a part of a church like that? And who doesn't want a church that steadfastly perseveres in tough times and never wallows in self-pity or discouragement but always presses on with a sense of certainty and confidence? Who doesn't want to be a part of a church like that? That's a church to be thankful for.

But we have to take notice of the fact that those outward expressions are fed by inward realities. The outward expressions come because there is an inward reality. The inward realities of faith, love, and hope that every Christian possess. Sometimes we can be guilty of just focusing on the externals. And we try to get people to act the way they should by guilt or by pressure or by just working on their emotions. None of those approaches are going to produce lasting results. You just wind up with a bunch of tired, exhausted people who wish they hadn't done all the things they got pushed into doing. What have to be fed are those inner realities. Believers must be built up in the word of God. Our faith must be fed by Biblical truth, especially truth about the object of our faith, that is, the person of Christ. Our love must be stirred up by the understanding of the overwhelming love that God has demonstrated to us in Christ, and by the security of that great love as it's revealed to us in the scriptures. Our hope must be anchored and strengthened by the truth about our future in Christ. Some day we're going to be with Him. I need to be reminded of that. That helps me to deal with the temptations and trials of today. And the truth about a certain and a sure future with my Savior inspires me to live for Him today. No matter what happens on that day. And how can I ever feel sorry for myself when I know what awaits me in heaven? How do I know about what awaits me in heaven? Well, God's word tells me. Those inner realities of faith, love, and hope have to be fed by the truth of God's word. They need to be strengthened by the truth because everything in our world is going to tell us something else. This is where the emphasis needs to be. So many churches today, they just work on the emotions. They maybe do it through music or through sermons that are more like pep talks than Bible exposition. Now, there's nothing wrong with emotions necessarily. But right emotions are the byproduct of a strong and growing faith, love, and hope.

I'm afraid that a lot of times the church today, like I said, is just guilty of trying to get goats to live like sheep. We need to produce true sheep. And then feed that new nature that they have in Christ and we can only do that through the ministry of His word. That's the only way it's going to happen. Last time we said that Paul probably was in Thessalonica maybe three to six months. That's it. Three to six months before he was run out of town. Next week we're going to start in to verses five through 10, unless you want to stay here till like 11:30 tonight. There we'll see the conviction from which Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians. There were things about them that he knew, you see verse four starting off with knowing, there's certain things I know. Those things feed his thanksgiving. And again as he affirms these things that were true of the Thessalonians it's going to greatly clarify things for us. But what we're going to see in those verses is Paul make a number of concise statements. Like verse four, "Knowing, brethren beloved of God, His choice of you." Now that opens up a really big subject. Divine, sovereign election. God's choice of you. Does Paul launch in to a big discussion about that? No, he just states it. What does that imply? That during those three to six months he taught them all about this. He makes a number of

concise statements just like that one which implies that the Thessalonians knew some things. He didn't need to explain what he was talking about. They knew what he was talking about, which implies that Paul did an awful lot of intense teaching during those three to six months that he was with them in Thessalonica. So, what I'm trying to tell you is, even though this is a short passage, verses five through 10 can take a while to open it all up because he's making statements and he's referring to things they obviously understood but we want to open it up, unpack it a little more so that we understand. Point is, the things that he saw in them, faith that works, the love that labored, the hope that was steadfast, he saw those things because those inner realities had been fed. Fed through the ministry of God's word so they were developed and mature and active, even though it had been a relatively short amount of time. Let me just conclude our time for tonight by saying this: I hope that this helps us all to realize the importance of thanksgiving in the Christian life. The importance of giving thanks. We have so much to be thankful for. I mean, just think how much time you can spend if you took the church calling list and gave thanks for each person on the list. It's the kind of stuff Paul did, except I don't think he had a calling list. I don't think he had a cell phone. But he gave thanks for all of them. He had a thanksgiving that was comprehensive. And think about the content of his thanksgiving, the things that he was thankful for, those spiritual realities that were evident in their lives. That's plenty for us to think about tonight and just to allow the weight of all that we've looked at here. Just let that sink in as we think about a church that's to be thankful for and what it means to be thankful. Let's pray.