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# Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
Preface	vii
<i>Introduction to 1 Thessalonians</i>	1
<b>1.</b> Identifying the Elect (1 Thessalonians 1:1–10)	11
<b>2.</b> Fail-Proof Spiritual Leadership (1 Thessalonians 2:1–6)	31
<b>3.</b> Parental Pictures of Spiritual Leadership (1 Thessalonians 2:7–12)	43
<b>4.</b> A People to Be Glad for and a People to Be Sad For (1 Thessalonians 2:13–16)	55
<b>5.</b> Out of Sight, but Not Out of Mind (1 Thessalonians 2:17–20)	67
<b>6.</b> The Pastor’s Heart (1 Thessalonians 3:1–10)	75
<b>7.</b> A Pastoral Prayer (1 Thessalonians 3:11–13)	85
<b>8.</b> Excelling Still More (1 Thessalonians 4:1–2)	93
<b>9.</b> Abstaining from Sexual Sin (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8)	101
<b>10.</b> Shoe-Leather Faith (1 Thessalonians 4:9–12)	115
<b>11.</b> What Happens to Christians Who Die? (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)	123
<b>12.</b> The Day of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:1–3)	139
<b>13.</b> Night People/Day People (1 Thessalonians 5:4–11)	153

<b>14.</b>	Growing a Healthy Flock—Part 1: The Relationship Between Shepherds and Sheep (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13)	165
<b>15.</b>	Growing a Healthy Flock—Part 2: Dealing with the Spiritually Needy (1 Thessalonians 5:14–15)	175
<b>16.</b>	The Sheep’s Responsibilities to the Great Shepherd—Part 1: Joyfulness, Prayerfulness, and Thankfulness (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)	183
<b>17.</b>	The Sheep’s Responsibilities to the Great Shepherd—Part 2: Do Not Quench the Spirit; Respond to God’s Word; Be Discerning (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22)	191
<b>18.</b>	A Prayer for Complete Sanctification (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24)	201
<b>19.</b>	Paul’s Final Requests (1 Thessalonians 5:25–28)	211
	<i>Introduction to 2 Thessalonians</i>	217
<b>20.</b>	A Church to Be Proud Of (2 Thessalonians 1:1–5)	221
<b>21.</b>	The Vengeance of the Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:6–10)	231
<b>22.</b>	Praying for the Right Things (2 Thessalonians 1:11–12)	251
<b>23.</b>	How to Be Ready for the End Times—Part 1: Remember What You Know (2 Thessalonians 2:1–5)	263
<b>24.</b>	How to Be Ready for the End Times—Part 2: Be Strong and Courageous (2 Thessalonians 2:6–17)	275
<b>25.</b>	What the Pastor Desires from His People (2 Thessalonians 3:1–5)	291
<b>26.</b>	Work: A Noble Christian Duty (2 Thessalonians 3:6–15)	299
<b>27.</b>	A Prayer for Divine Enablement (2 Thessalonians 3:16–18)	311
	Bibliography	321
	Index of Greek Words	323
	Index of Scripture	325
	Index of Subjects	348

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# Identifying the Elect

## (1 Thessalonians 1:1–10)

# 1

**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 in 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. (1:1-10)**

The Thessalonians, like all believers, were the elect of God. That reality caused the apostle Paul to begin his first letter to them by simply pouring out his thanks for the divine gift of their saving faith. The only way believers can discern that someone is elect is after God has regenerated and sanctified that soul. Paul did not know the eternal, elective decree of God, but he could see whose lives gave evidence of genuine salvation (cf. 2:13).

Paul suffered constantly and extremely for the cause of Christ, and he carried on his shoulders an overwhelming burden of responsibility and care for all the churches. He described his burden to the Corinthian church this way:

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:24-28)

In view of such severe suffering amid heavy responsibilities, it must have been refreshing and exhilarating for Paul to minister to the Thessalonian elect, whom in this letter he deemed worthy of nothing but commendation and encouragement. In the situation he experienced at Thessalonica, the believers displayed many characteristics that reliably identify the elect. He began his first letter to them with a recognition of those virtues. He arranged them under two categories: the Thessalonians' present condition (a faith that works, a love that labors, a steadfastness of hope) and their past conversion (a reception of the gospel in power and the Holy Spirit, a genuine imitation of the Lord, a joyful endurance in tribulation, a behavior that exemplifies all believers, a proclamation of the Word everywhere, a total transformation from idolatry, and an expectant looking for the return of Christ). Between those two lists Paul paused in verse 4 to affirm his understanding that the church in Thessalonica was elect. Before that, as usual, he opened the letter with identifying words of greeting for his beloved friends.

## PAUL'S GREETING

**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;** (1:1-2)

Though Paul was the most influential apostle of the early church, in his greeting to the Thessalonians, he did not identify himself as an apostle. Apparently in the Macedonian churches, his apostleship was never in question, because in neither of his letters to the church at Thessalonica, nor in his letter to Philippi, did he begin by identifying himself as an apostle. Those churches had not questioned his apostolic status, although he would later defend his integrity and sincerity (1 Thess. 2:1-6). Here he simply and humbly identified himself as **Paul**. And in the same attitude of humility he linked his co-laborers **Silvanus** (Silas) and **Timothy** to himself as if they were all equals.

Silas, probably a Hellenistic Jew, was a prominent member of the Jerusalem church who first accompanied Paul on the apostle's second missionary journey (Acts 15:40) and later was a scribe for Peter (cf. 1 Peter 5:12). **Timothy** was a native of Lystra (Acts 16:1-3), a city in Asia Minor. He was Paul's son in the faith (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1) and protégé. He toured with Paul on the second and third missionary journeys and remained near the apostle during Paul's first incarceration in Rome (cf. Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Philem. 1). Later Timothy served the church at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) and was himself imprisoned (Heb. 13:23). At the end of Paul's life, when Timothy was in Ephesus, he wrote the two inspired letters to him.

All three men knew the Thessalonian believers well. They founded the church in Thessalonica (Acts 17:4), and Timothy later checked on its well-being and brought back a positive report to Paul (1 Thess. 3:6). Because the Thessalonians were precious to all three of them, Paul included his coworkers' names in the greeting.

Paul's use of the Greek word translated **church** (*ekklēsia*) emphasizes the reality of the Thessalonians' election. *Ekklēsia* is related to the phrase *ek kaleō*, "to call out," and means "the called out ones," or it can mean "the elect ones," especially when connected with the phrase "His choice of you" (v. 4), which is specific. Paul was certain that the Thessalonians were among God's elect because he had seen the evidence of their transformation.

The apostle elaborated on the nature of the church with the somewhat unusual but wonderful expression **in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**, which demonstrates the Thessalonians' vital

and inextricable union with God and Christ (cf. 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:1). They participated in the very life of God and the life of Christ. There is an indivisible spiritual union between Christ and His own. In his New Testament letters, Paul taught that believers do not simply believe facts *about* Jesus Christ, but that they are *in* Him. He told the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). “For you have died,” he reminded the Colossians, “and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). That is the inexplicable and incomprehensible mystery of what it is to be a Christian—that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9, 11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:14) live within the believer and the believer lives in them in a sharing of divine and eternal life.

Significantly, in this profound statement in verse 1, Paul used the preposition **in** just once. Modifying the phrase **God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** with a single preposition emphasizes the equality of essence between Father and Son. It is also worth noting here that Paul used the Savior’s full title, **the Lord Jesus Christ**. That combines in one phrase all the major aspects of His redemptive work. **Lord** describes Him as creator and sovereign ruler, the One who made us, bought us, rules over us, and to whom we owe full allegiance. **Jesus** (“Jehovah saves”) refers to His humanity; it was the name given Him at His birth (Matt. 1:21, 25). **Christ** (“the anointed one”) is the Greek term for the Messiah, the one promised by God to fulfill His plan of redemption.

Paul continued the salutation with his common greeting **Grace to you and peace** (cf., for example, 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2). **Grace** is God’s undeserved favor to the sinner in the form of complete forgiveness of sin and the granting of eternal life, and **peace** is the result of that amazing gift of love. Paul desired that the Thessalonians would continually experience the fullness of God’s **grace**. They would then possess not only an unending **peace** with God, but an experience of **peace** in their hearts that always surpassed their human understanding (Phil. 4:7). **Grace** and **peace** are Christians’ daily portion—every day they receive divine **grace** to cover their sins and divine **peace** to assuage their guilt.

Because of his sincere wish that the Thessalonians constantly know God’s grace and peace, it was understandable for the apostle Paul and his companions to **give thanks to God always for all of them, making mention of them in their prayers** (v.2). Paul, Silas, and Timothy thanked God continually **for all of them** because all the Thessalonian believers were the elect of God.

The Thessalonians, because they were elect, were living for the honor of Christ. The apostle underscored his thankfulness for that reality by listing the first three qualities that proved God’s sovereign choice of them, which were manifest in their sanctification.

## THEIR PRESENT CONDITION

**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, (1:3)**

Here begins Paul's litany of praise to God for the evidence of salvation the Thessalonians presently displayed. He thanked God for their faith that worked, labor that loved, and hope that endured. This trio of Christian virtues was a favorite of Paul's (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4–5; 1 Thess. 5:8).

## A FAITH THAT WORKED

**constantly bearing in mind your work of faith (1:3a)**

Paul was **constantly bearing in mind**, or remembering, in thankful prayer these foundational spiritual qualities, the first of which was the Thessalonians' **work of faith**. A true saving belief in Jesus Christ will always result in the mighty **work** of God that produces change in one's nature or disposition. A **work of faith** is action representative of the transforming power of regeneration (2 Cor. 5:17). Simply stated, the elect engage in holy, righteous deeds to the honor of God. **Work** is the Greek word *ergon*, which refers to the deed, achievement, or function itself. Paul was confident of the Thessalonians' election because their **faith**—the authentic saving and sanctifying gift from God—was producing righteous deeds in their lives.

Paul's words here, however, do not in any way contradict his clear teaching elsewhere that salvation is by faith alone, apart from any human works. For example, in Romans 3:20–21 he declares, "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested." Paul goes on to assert that sinners are "justified as a gift by His [God's] grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith" (vv. 24–25; cf. 4:4; 5:1; Eph. 2:8–9).

However, the New Testament also stresses the active side of faith—salvation will necessarily produce holy conduct. Such teaching is not opposed to justification by faith alone through grace alone and, when properly understood, actually complements that doctrine. Paul is unequivocal early in the book of Romans that works flow from saving faith: "[God] will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who

by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life” (2:6–7). This does not mean people can *earn* salvation because of their good works, but rather that those works *verify* the reality of their faith.

Paul instructed the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10). And the reason believers perform good deeds is because God is at work in them (Phil. 2:13).

Paul described the believer’s transformation as going from one kind of slavery to another:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. . . . Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. (Rom. 6:16–18, 21–22)

The apostle James also taught that good works must be present in the lives of those who profess faith in Christ; otherwise that profession is not genuine.

But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected. . . . For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:18–22, 26)

Believers will sometimes disobey God’s commands and fail to do His will, but they will always long to obey (Rom. 7:18–20) and will manifest some true spiritual fruit of obedience (cf. John 15:5). Genuine saving faith is by definition powerfully inclined toward obedience to God, which leads inevitably to the **work of faith** Paul commended the Thessalonians for.

A LOVE THAT LABORED

### and labor of love (1:3b)

The second identifying mark of the elect is their **labor of love**. True Christians minister motivated by their love for others. Loving even one's enemies is an expression of the power of salvation (cf. Matt. 5:44; Gal. 6:10). Loving other believers is also evidence of salvation, as 4:9 explicitly states, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another." Peter affirmed this reality: "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" (1 Peter 1:22). The apostle John expressed this truth also when he wrote, "The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him" (1 John 2:10). He went on to state that such love is definitive evidence of salvation: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death" (3:14; cf. John 13:35; 1 John 2:9, 11; 3:10; 4:20). This **love** is part of the fruit of the Spirit produced in those led by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). **Labor** is the Greek word *kopos*, which denotes an arduous, wearying kind of toil, done to the point of exhaustion. Unlike *ergon* (**work**), which focuses on the deed itself, *kopos* looks at the effort expended in accomplishing a particular deed. It is an effort that strains all of one's energies to the maximum level. The noblest, most altruistic and selfless form of **love** (*agapē*) motivates this kind of spiritual effort. The apostle Paul referred to the spiritual effort believers make as they work to advance divine truth and the kingdom of the Lord because they sincerely love people.

Furthermore, beyond loving unbelievers and believers, Romans 8:28 identifies the elect—people included in God's eternal, saving purpose—as "those who love God." That is a basic characteristic of anyone who savingly worships the true and living God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is the real reason they love others:

Also the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast My covenant. (Isa. 56:6)

But just as it is written, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him." (1 Cor. 2:9)

But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. (1 Cor. 8:3)

Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love. (Eph. 6:24)

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (James 1:12)

For a detailed discussion of this love for God, see *Romans 1–8*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago:Moody,1991),483–85.

Authentic Christianity has always been defined by loving Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:14 Paul says,“The love of Christ controls us” (cf. Gal. 5:6). Those who are indifferent to that concern are on their way to hell, unless they repent: “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed” (1 Cor. 16:22). The Thessalonian believers’ **labor of love** was therefore another mark of their election (cf. 2 Thess. 1:11).

#### A HOPE THAT ENDURED

### **and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, (1:3c)**

The third evidence of election is **steadfastness of hope**. All Christians have a **hope in the Lord Jesus Christ**—a persevering anticipation of seeing His future glory and receiving their eternal inheritance.

The redeemed look for the glorious future appearance of the **Lord Jesus Christ** (see the discussion of 1:10 later in this chapter). Paul stated that salvation instructs believers in that **hope**: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:11–13).

The apostle could encourage and teach others regarding this great **hope** (Rom. 5:1–2; Eph. 1:11; Col. 1:27) because he was so confident of it in his own life: “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8).

Peter opened his first epistle with announcement of the blessing of God that transcends all blessings—“a living hope, . . . an inheritance . . . in heaven for you, . . . protected by the power of God, . . . at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:3–7). This hope is the same hope Paul referred to when he wrote, “For in hope we have been saved” (Rom. 8:24).

**Steadfastness** is from the Greek word *hupomonē*, which conveys the idea of endurance or perseverance; literally, it denotes the condition of staying under pressure. It is closely related to the theological concept the Reformers called “the perseverance of the saints” (cf. Rom. 2:7; 2 Thess. 1:4; Rev. 14:12)—that is, Christians will hold fast to their hope until the end. There is nothing that should cause a true Christian to lose his trust in God’s promises: “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4–5). For believers, true hope is a strong longing and groaning to “be at home with the Lord” (see 2 Cor. 5:2–8).

The Thessalonians’ **hope** (*elpis*) was firm because it was anchored **in** the unchangeable **Lord Jesus Christ**. The writer of Hebrews richly expressed the security of this **hope** when he wrote:

so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 6:18–20)

The context indicates that the “two unchangeable things” are God’s promise and His oath (v. 17), which make the believer’s hope in the gospel impossible to change. Further, his hope is secured by the intercession of Christ, the eternal High Priest, and kept safe within the impregnable heavenly sanctuary where He stands guard over His own (7:25; cf. 4:15–16). **Hope** transcends mere human, wishful anticipation and rests confidently in the consummation of redemption that Scripture says will certainly occur when Christ returns. Such **hope** will inevitably cause believers to triumph over the struggles of life because it derives from the type of true faith the Thessalonians received from God.

The **steadfastness of** those who have been given that **hope** fulfills Jesus’ promise in Matthew 24:13, “The one who endures to the end, he will be saved.” That was not a novel concept, but one solidly based on Old Testament teachings, such as Proverbs 4:18, “The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day” (cf. Jer. 32:40). The spiritual path of the righteous does not go from light to darkness; it goes from dim light to full light. It becomes ever brighter as the person’s work of faith increases, his labor of love intensifies, and his hope perseveres more and more. Like the Thessalonian believers, those whose faith is genuine are those whose **hope** the Savior secures in heaven and, by the Holy Spirit, empowers to persevere to the

end (cf. Job 17:9; John 8:31; Phil. 1:6; Col. 1:21–23; Heb. 3:6, 14). Hebrews 6:10–11 compares with what Paul wrote here: “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.”

#### AN UNDERSTANDING OF ELECTION

#### **knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; (1:4)**

Verse 4 signals the transition from the preceding statement (v.3), which describes Paul’s confidence in the Thessalonians’ present spiritual condition, to the following section, which focuses on their past conversion (vv.5–10).

**Knowing**, from a form of the Greek verb *oida*, could also be translated “seeing,” or “perceiving.” Here Paul used it to express his perception that the assembly in Thessalonica was genuine.

The phrase **brethren beloved by God** contains some familiar New Testament terminology. **Brethren** (*adelphoi*) is a common word for the children of God in Christ. **Beloved by God** translates a perfect passive participial phrase in the Greek (*ēgapēmenoi hupo [tou] theou*), explaining the reality that Christians are recipients of the sovereign love of God (cf. Deut. 7:7–8).

When Paul told the Thessalonians he was certain of God’s **choice of** them, his words were in perfect harmony with New Testament usage (cf. Matt. 24:22, 24, 31; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10). Christians are the elect, chosen of God solely by His sovereign, loving purpose, apart from any human merit or wisdom. God in eternity past sovereignly chose all believers to salvation, drawing them to Himself in time, by the work of the Holy Spirit (John 6:37, 44; Rom. 9:15–16; 1 Cor. 1:9; Eph. 1:4–6, 11; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; cf. Acts 13:46–48; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). Jesus instructed the disciples, “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit” (John 15:16). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit elected not only the apostles but also all who have believed throughout history. In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed, “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours” (John 17:9).

As 1 Thessalonians 1:6 and 9 suggest, man’s will participates in conversion in response to God’s promptings. Thus true evangelism is a call to repent and believe (e.g., Acts 20:21).

## THEIR PAST CONVERSION

**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. (1:5–10)**

Paul's certainty regarding the Thessalonians' election encompassed his memories of their past conversion. The apostle confidently set forth those memories in verses 5–10 as reasons affirming their salvation.

## A RECEPTION OF THE GOSPEL IN POWER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

**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. (1:5)**

The first past indicator (and the fourth one overall) from the Thessalonians' conversion that attested to the genuineness of their election was the divine power revealed in the preaching of the gospel to them. When Paul said the **gospel came in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction**, he was not just describing the Thessalonians' experience but his, Silas's, and Timothy's, when they first declared the saving news in Thessalonica. Paul and the others were so deeply identified with the message of salvation and its power that he called it **our gospel** (cf. 2 Thess. 2:14), though it was from God (Rom. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:2, 9) and concerned the atoning work of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:1–4).

First, Paul asserted that **power** was revealed because the message **did not come to** the Thessalonians **in word only**—it was not merely talk. It was not simply the words themselves that mattered, although any message—including the gospel—by definition has to con-

sist of words setting forth the message (cf. Rom. 10:8, 14; 1 Peter 1:22–25). Faith does come by hearing those words of truth, but the transformation process involves far more than that. Regardless of the erudition, the compelling logic, the soaring rhetoric, or the clever and interesting communication style, if the truth spoken is not accompanied by the power of God, it accomplishes nothing. But when empowered by God as it enters the prepared soul, the gospel truth saves (cf. 1 Peter 1:23–25).

Jesus indicated the inability of all sinners to believe the truth when He said, “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19–20). Along those lines, Paul taught the Corinthians, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:3–4; cf. Eph. 2:1). He had already told them that the “natural man” cannot understand the gospel (1 Cor. 2:14). Barren words of truth alone, no matter how well presented, cannot penetrate such spiritual blindness and deadness. “For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20). God has to powerfully awaken the dead soul and open the blind eyes so the truth can regenerate (Eph. 2:4–5).

Such obvious **power** to quicken the spiritually dead comes from **the Holy Spirit**. Genuine soul-transforming power accompanying gospel preaching is the work of the Spirit energizing both the preacher and the hearer. Jesus alluded to this truth when He promised the apostles just prior to His ascension, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Paul knew the preaching at Thessalonica bore divine power because of the **full conviction** (“much assurance,” NKJV) he had as he delivered it. Commentator Leon Morris gives a helpful perspective on what Paul meant here:

The third point is that the gospel came “in much assurance.” There is no repetition of the “in” in the Greek. The effect is to link these words very closely with the foregoing. Assurance [*plêrophoria*] is not some human device whereby men persuade themselves. Rather it is the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit working within believers. Some have felt that the assurance meant here is that which came to the converts as they put their trust in Christ, and this may not be out of the Apostle’s mind. But his primary meaning is the assurance that the Spirit gave to the preachers, for Paul is dealing with the way he and his companions

came to know the election of the Thessalonians. They had the assurance in their own hearts that, as they were preaching, the power of God was at work. The Spirit was working a work of grace. (*The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 57–58)

Paul and his fellow preachers were Spirit-empowered, confident, assured, and bold men who depended on God's **power** working through them and in their hearers to effect salvation.

To emphasize his point about the power of the missionaries' preaching, Paul closed verse 5 with these words: **just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake**. He told the Thessalonian believers that the spiritual power manifest in his life and the lives of his fellow ministers affirmed the accuracy of their preaching. The apostle (and no doubt Silas and Timothy, as well) was truthful, humble, selfless, gentle, caring, passionate, and compassionate toward the Thessalonians. He worked among them with his own hands so that he would not have to accept any money from them (2 Thess. 3:7–8). The Thessalonians had not only heard the gospel preached, they had seen it lived out in Paul, whose life was a rich example of the power of the gospel he preached (see 2 Cor. 1:12).

#### A GENUINE IMITATION OF THE LORD

#### **You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, (1:6a)**

The fifth identifying mark proving the Thessalonians' election was that they **became imitators of Paul and of the Lord**. **Imitators** (*mimētai*) is the word from which the English term *mimics* derives. This transforming work occurred at the moment of salvation when the Thessalonian believers became new creations (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). Patterns of holy living immediately began replacing the old sinful ones (cf. Eph. 4:22, 24). The Thessalonians, in the middle of a pagan environment, without any veteran church leadership, had in the power of the Holy Spirit become **imitators** of the apostle, his co-laborers, and—most important—Christ. Salvation starts the work of sanctification (cf. 1 Peter 1:1–2). As Paul reminded the Romans, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–4; cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15).

The Thessalonian believers' lifestyles started becoming far different from the sordid, idolatrous paganism of their past and from the legalistic self-righteousness of the Jews in their city. They had become **imitators** of Jesus Christ. Paul commanded believers to pursue that reality as a way of life: "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). He told the Corinthians that it was a progressive experience of sanctification by the Holy Spirit that moved them upward to increasing levels of glory, more and more into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

#### A JOYFUL ENDURANCE IN TRIBULATION

### **having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, (1:6b)**

A sixth identifying mark that confirmed the Thessalonians were truly elect was their **joy** in the midst of suffering and hardship. No matter how difficult circumstances become, true Christians do not lose their ultimate **joy** because the Holy Spirit dispenses it to the elect. The kingdom of God *is joy* (Rom. 14:17).

Paul again noted that the Thessalonians had **received the word**, which was simply a reiteration that they had believed the gospel and been converted. But they did so **in much tribulation**, that is, in severe suffering that began when Paul first preached. As recorded in Acts 17:1–4, and noted earlier, Paul and his fellow missionaries launched an effective evangelistic ministry spanning three Sabbaths in the Thessalonian synagogue, after which they continued their work in another location for several months—long enough to receive two collections from Philippi (cf. Phil. 4:16), be employed (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8), and care for the church in depth (1 Thess. 2:7–11). As a result of the transforming impact of that gospel ministry, the Jews hurled tremendous persecution and opposition against the apostle:

But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. (Acts 17:5–10)

After Paul and his company had left Thessalonica, it is likely the unbelieving Jews and pagan Gentiles intensified the persecution. Paul later reflected on that assault: “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out” (1 Thess. 2:14–15).

The Greek word rendered **tribulation** is *thlipsis*, which means “intense pressure,” as opposed to something mild. So the new believers in Thessalonica experienced severe persecution, but the genuineness of their salvation transcended that affliction so that they never lost their **joy** (cf. 1 Thess 3:4; 2 Thess. 1:4; in contrast, see Ps. 51:12).

The Thessalonians’ responding to persecution and suffering **with the joy of the Holy Spirit** was reminiscent of the apostles’ reaction early in the book of Acts. After the Sanhedrin flogged them, ordered them not to preach the gospel again, and released them, “they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41).

But one should not consider those Spirit-filled responses of joy strange or incomprehensible—joy is a divine benefit of the Christian’s standing in Christ, one of the “spiritual blessing(s) in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Romans 5:1–4 declares:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope. (Cf. Acts 16:22–25; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 4:4.)

Mere human joy will die under persecution; **the joy of the Holy Spirit** will transcend it and grow. Yet again, though such joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), all believers are called on to pursue greater and greater joy (Phil. 4:4).

A BEHAVIOR THAT IS EXEMPLARY

**so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1:7)**

A seventh indicator of the Thessalonians’ election, and an extension of the others, was their exemplary conduct. They went from commendable

imitators of Paul and Christ to those whose own Christian lives became worthy of imitation. The church had become **an example to all the believers**, a model for even older, more mature Christians to follow. **Example** is the Greek word *tupos* (“exact reproduction”), from which the English *type* derives. The Thessalonians became like blueprints for others throughout the region to build their lives on (cf. 1 John 2:6). **Macedonia** was the province in northern Greece that contained Thessalonica, as well as Philippi and Berea. **Achaia** was the southern province of Greece that included such prominent cities as Athens and Corinth.

To illustrate this specifically, the Thessalonians were among those believers Paul cited to the Corinthians as models for giving and financial stewardship. The Thessalonians were in deep poverty, likely because of the persecution they underwent. Yet they gave liberally and sacrificially to help the needy believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1–5), thus demonstrating a pattern of godliness, and again in a sacrificial way proving the reality of their election.

#### A PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD EVERYWHERE

**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, (1:8–9a)**

Another characteristic that verified salvation’s power in the Thessalonian saints was their faithfulness in the proclamation of the gospel. **The word of the Lord**, the divine saving truth of the gospel, **sounded forth** from the church in Thessalonica. **Sounded forth** (*exēchētai*) is used only here in the New Testament and means “to blast forth” or “to sound forth very intensely.” Outside the New Testament, the term was used to refer to a blaring trumpet, or rolling thunder. The perfect tense form of *exēchētai* indicates the church’s bold, continual trumpeting of the gospel message.

From the time the church was founded, its proclamation of the gospel trumpeted out, **not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place**. Because Thessalonica was a hub of travel and trade, people coming through **Macedonia** from east and west along the Egnatian Highway heard **the word of the Lord** from true believers, as did those who visited the city by ship and used its port facilities. Apparently the Thessalonians who ventured out from the city also carried the gospel with them to **Achaia** and to **every place**. Paul pictured their proclamation as a

constant sound, increasing and echoing into a wider and wider circle as the church made the most of a strategic location from which to proclaim the truth.

Their influence was so clear and extensive that Paul said he had **no need to say anything**. In fact, news of the Thessalonians' salvation and subsequent powerful witness was so convincing that Paul said the people who heard the testimony of the church could **themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you**. Rather than Paul telling people he met in his travels about what God had done in that city, people were telling him what was becoming commonly known. Every church could wish for such an impact and reputation.

#### A TOTAL TRANSFORMATION FROM IDOLATRY

### **and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, (1:9b)**

A sure evidence of the Thessalonians' election was that they submitted to a new Master. Salvation meant a decisive break with pagan religion and a redirecting of one's whole life. The Thessalonians abandoned all polytheism and embraced only God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul expressed this change as their having **turned to God from idols**. **Turned** is from the verb *epistrephō*, which is used in the New Testament to indicate the fact that in the sinner's conversion there is a turning in the absolute opposite direction (Acts 9:35; 11:21; 26:18,20; 2 Cor. 3:16; cf. Luke 1:16; James 5:20). Such conversion entails repentance, a turning **from idols** and in faith submitting to the Savior alone (Acts 20:21). Such turning is far more than merely changing one's belief about who Christ is—it is a complete reversal of allegiance, **from idols to serve a living and true God**. The word Paul chose for **serve** (*douleuein*) means to serve as a bond-slave, which was the most demanding form of servitude. Paul knew that the Thessalonians had turned from slavish devotion to false, dead, demonic **idols** to a new and welcome slavery to the one **living and true God** (cf. Rom. 6:16–18).

#### AN EXPECTANT LOOKING FOR THE RETURN OF CHRIST

### **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. (1:10)**

A tenth and final mark that indicated the church in Thessalonica was truly God's elect was that its members waited **for His Son from heaven . . . that is Jesus.**

Those who love Christ long for and anticipate His return. The apostles displayed such a desire when they saw Jesus' ascension:

He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9–11)

Paul unquestionably affirmed that the One who once ascended to heaven is also the One believers **wait** for, the One **whom He** [God] **raised from the dead, that is Jesus.** The reference to the Resurrection establishes the ground for the return of Jesus Christ. God **raised Him from the dead** because He was pleased with His sacrifice for sin and because He wanted to exalt Him to the heavenly throne from which He will return to exercise His sovereign right to rule as King of Kings (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10–12; 5:30–32; 13:33–35; 17:31; cf. Rom. 1:3–4; 2 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 1:19–23). The word for **wait** is used only here in the New Testament and refers to expectant waiting—sustained, patient, trusting waiting.

To have an expectant looking for Jesus' return from heaven is just one more important aspect in this first chapter that defines a Christian. Waiting is a recurring theme in the Thessalonian letters (1 Thess. 2:17, 19; 3:13; 4:15–17; 5:8, 23; 2 Thess. 3:6–12). In two of his other letters, Paul described this attitude of waiting as follows:

In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Tim. 4:8)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. (Titus 2:11–13)

The true believer eagerly looks forward to Christ's return because he knows it brings to fulfillment and satisfaction God's eternal purpose, which is, as Paul stated it, to rescue **us from the wrath to come.** **Rescues** denotes the deliverance the Lord provides. He is the Rescuer,

Deliverer, and Savior of those otherwise headed for divine judgment and eternal punishment. In the ancient world, the idea of divine wrath was accepted, but there was no genuine hope of rescue from it. By contrast, in the postmodern world the idea of divine wrath is rejected, so the Rescuer is not needed or heeded. *Orgē* (**wrath**) describes God's settled opposition to and displeasure with sin. In this context the **wrath** is God's eternal judgment against sin. Some believe **the wrath to come** refers to the Great Tribulation, and see this rescue as the promise of the pretribulation Rapture, expounded upon later in this epistle (see chapter 11 of this volume). But the immediate context of Paul's discussion of election and salvation rather than eschatology rules out temporal wrath and points to eternal **wrath**, as does the wrath mentioned in 5:9—"For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

These ten marks of the elect are true of every genuine follower of Christ. But from time to time it is possible for even true believers to lose touch with those realities in their lives and to live sinfully inconsistent with their position in the body of Christ. Peter urged his readers, "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you" (2 Peter 1:10). It is not that they need to convince God—He already knows who constitutes the elect. But there is nothing more assuring for those who profess faith in Christ than to know their true spiritual condition by means of these ten spiritual benchmarks.