



Expressions of Thanksgiving (part 1)

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

1. How Paul Expresses His Thankfulness (verse 2)

2. When Paul Expresses His Thankfulness (verse 3)

3. Why Paul Expresses His Thankfulness (verse 4)

Tonight, we are going to look again at this church we have focused our attention upon in recent Sunday nights - The church of the Thessalonians. This is the church that was established by Paul and Silas in their brief visit to the city of Thessalonica (as Luke records for us in Acts 17). As you recall, his visit there was very brief. Luke records for us that Paul preached in the synagogue for 3 Sabbaths. Perhaps Paul and Silas remained on another few weeks ministering to the "great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks" (Acts 17:4) who had been converted under his ministry. Perhaps they were out of town by the next Sabbath. We don't really know. But we do know that his ministry there was brief.

You will also recall that many of the Jews didn't take kindly to the message that Paul and Silas preached. For they ran him out of town. Their friend Jason gave the city authorities a pledge that they would not be a problem again (Acts 17:8). We don't know exactly what this pledge was. Perhaps it was a financial bond that Jason gave to the city as a token that Paul wouldn't return to the city. Perhaps it was merely a promise which Jason gave to the city with an understanding of punishment if Paul and Silas returned. At any rate, it satisfied the politarchs (the 5-7 city authorities) of Thessalonica. Quickly, that night, Paul and Silas were sent away. Luke tells us that they were sent away "immediately" (Acts 17:10).

Now, the fact that Paul and Silas left so quickly and so unplanned created several issues for Paul. He was concerned about the Authenticity of Their Faith. And, he was concerned about the His Reputation Among the Thessalonians. These are really the two over-riding issues which caused him to send Timothy to Thessalonica to see how they were doing. We can discuss "authenticity" in terms of two pieces of paper. One is a \$1 bill. The other is a \$5,000 bill that I made. One is authentic, and one is not. Authentic means "real".

He was concerned about the Authenticity of Their Faith. We see this in chapter 3, verse 5, when Paul gives his reason for sending Timothy to them, ...

1 Thessalonians 3:5

For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain.

"To find out about your faith." Paul wanted to know whether or not their faith was authentic. Paul wanted to know if they were persevering in their faith. Paul wanted to know if they were rocky soil Christians, who would fall away when "affliction or persecution" would come "because of the word." (Matt. 13:21). Paul wanted to know if the Thessalonians "had gone out from us, because they were not really of us" or whether they "had remained with us." (as John put it) (1 John 2:19). Paul wanted to know if the Thessalonians were like Simon the Sorcerer, who was baptized by the apostles, and yet, later was found to be a false disciple. (Acts 8)

"And our labor should be in vain." Paul was concerned with his labor while among the Thessalonians. He wanted to know if his time among them was profitable or not. He was concerned whether his labor among them had produced any lasting fruit. In the next verse, chapter 3, verse 6, we see Timothy's report.

1 Thessalonians 3:6

But now (i.e. just now) that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you.

His news was good news -- like gospel good news. This is rare for Paul to use this word to describe general "good news" which didn't refer to the "good news" of salvation. In fact, only here and in Rev. 10:7 is the word used here for "good news" used in any other context than the message of the good news of the cross of Christ.

The first portion of the good news was that the Thessalonians had indeed continued in the faith. "...has brought us good news of your faith and love." They possessed a faith that continued on. Their faith was such that it was still present when Timothy had returned to them. Though affliction and persecution came, they were persevering. They were good soil Christians (Matt. 13:8). They had not "gone out from us, because they were not really of us" -- they had "remained with us" (1 John 2:19). Their faith was authentic. Paul told them in chapter 2, verse 1 that their visit to the Thessalonians "was not in vain." His visit had produced lasting fruit.

Not only did Timothy's report comfort Paul as to the Authenticity of Their Faith, but it also comforted Paul concerning His Reputation Among

the Thessalonians. He was concerned about the Authenticity of Their Faith.

And he was concerned about the His Reputation Among the Thessalonians. Now understand that his concern about "His Reputation" didn't come from a desire to be a man-pleaser - as if he wanted to make sure that people thought highly of him. No, he even said in his epistle that he was not seeking to "please men, but God, who examines the hearts" (2:4). He also said that he did not "seek glory from men" (2:6). His concern was that "his reputation" among them might have an adverse effect on the message that he proclaimed. Meaning that if the accusations against him -- that his message came from error, that his message came from impurity, that his message came by way of deceit, that his message came by pleasing men, by flattering speech, with pretext for greed -- then there would be consequences. If people accused Paul of such things, then the message wouldn't be understood. The message would be open to attacks. That is why Paul was concerned with his reputation.

Additionally, the fact that he left Thessalonica so quickly could do nothing but hurt his reputation. People could say "See, if Paul really loved you, he wouldn't have skipped town so quickly." This is why Rob Provost stayed so long in Albania when the fighting was getting bad a couple of years ago. This is why Dr. Bob Hockman stayed in Ethiopia when things got dangerous, rather than leaving. It is a demonstration of love to stay with people, especially in the difficult times!

But the good news was that the Thessalonians always thought kindly of Paul.

1 Thessalonians 3:6

But now (i.e. just now) that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you.

Notice that in verse 6, there are two things which Paul considers to be "good news." First was "your faith and love" - Their Authentic Faith". Second, "you always think kindly of us" - Paul's Reputation. So Paul found out from Timothy that these believers in Thessalonica had looked upon Paul in a positive light: they think kindly of Paul. That is, they had good remembrances of Paul during his time in Thessalonica. They remembered that during his time there, his life was one that truly cared for the Thessalonians. They remembered that his message didn't come from error or impurity. They remembered that his message didn't come by way of deceit, by pleasing men, by flattering speech, or with pretext for greed.

In fact, these Thessalonians were "longing to see us just as we also [long to see] you." This word, translated, "longing" is a word which might be translated, "to have great passion." The KJV translates this word here, "desiring greatly." Notice the comparison here. The Thessalonians had the same desire and passion to see Paul and Paul had to see them. Paul tried several times to come see them, "but Satan thwarted him." (2:18). The whole reason why Paul wrote this letter, was because he longed to see them, but couldn't see them. So, he sent Timothy to find out how they were.

Now, these two concerns of Paul -- He was concerned about the Authenticity of Their Faith and he was concerned about the His Reputation Among the Thessalonians -- really govern his whole letter. Chapter 1 is Paul's response to hearing of the Authenticity of Their Faith. Chapter 2 is Paul's response to hearing of His Reputation in Thessalonica. Chapter 3 explains this context. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 are Exhortations of Paul in response to issues that Timothy told him in his report. So, we can finally now begin to look at 1 Thessalonians, chapter 1. I have taken 3 ½ sessions to get to the first verse. I don't feel too bad, because I found out this week that John Calvin preached 46 sermons on 1 Thessalonians.

In verse 1, we simply have a greeting, which is quite standard to Paul.

1 Thessalonians 1:1

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.

In this greeting, Paul identifies the author and the recipients, and gives his greeting. Paul gives three pieces of information.

Author(s)

Though it lists Paul and Silvanus (i.e. or Silas) and Timothy as the authors, obviously Paul is the leader of this group of men. Paul was the one who was freed up in Acts 18 to devote himself completely to the word, when Timothy and Silas returned together after Timothy's fact-finding mission to the church in Thessalonica (Acts 18:5). Additionally, the letter frequently turns to be a first person account. 1 Thess. 2:18 says, "I, Paul, more than once wanted to come to you." 1 Thess. 3:5 says, "When I could endure it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith." 1 Thess. 5:27 says, "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren." We know that Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, because it was then the Timothy and Silas returned to him (Acts 18:5).

Recipients

The recipients are clearly identified as the church of the Thessalonians. I find it interesting how quickly a church actually formed in Thessalonica. Paul didn't have much time in Thessalonica to formally set everything in place -- to set the church in order, to appoint elders. And yet, surely, it was the desire of the Thessalonians to begin meeting together, which they surely did. The form and structure must have been quite loose at first. Perhaps, Timothy helped to do some structuring during his visit to them (like Titus was commanded to do in Crete - i.e. "to set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city." (Titus 1:5).

Additionally, these recipients are described as being "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." As one commentator said, "This is an expanded for the characteristic Pauline formula, 'in Christ Jesus'." ^[1] The first phrase, "in God the Father" distinguishes them from the heathen. The second phrase, "in the Lord Jesus Christ" distinguishes them from the Jews.

Greeting

Paul gives his standard greeting. "Grace to you and peace." Without exception, this phrase (or something very close to it) is used by Paul in every one of his epistles. A close equivalent is used by Peter, James, and John in their epistles. It was thus, a common Christian greeting.

As I said earlier, chapter 1 is Paul's response to hearing of the Authenticity of the Faith of the Thessalonians. And the main thought of Paul's response is found in the first three words in verse 2: "We give thanks." This is the predominant thought of Paul throughout chapter 1. Paul is thankful to God that these Thessalonians were walking in the truth. We have seen this earlier ...

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we [really] live, if you stand firm in the Lord. 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, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

Paul was eminently thankful to God for what God had worked in the life of the Thessalonians.

This also, was characteristic of Paul's letters. He often followed his greeting with an expression of thanks to God. In fact, in every letter he wrote to a church or churches (with the exception of the epistle to the Galatians), this element of thanksgiving follows quickly after his greeting to the church (or individual). I believe that this fact must not be overlooked. I believe that as often as we read or study through an epistle, we need to stop and reflect upon Paul's attitude with respect to the churches to whom he ministered.

Let me ask you a question, when I mention a church to you, what is your response? Kishwaukee Bible Church. Grace Church of DuPage. Grace Church of the Valley. Is it one of thankfulness to God, for His working among them? How about Grace Reformed Baptist Church? Sovereign Grace Baptist Church? Memorial Baptist Church? Heartland Community Church? How easy is it to give thanks to the churches that we deem and "worthy of giving thanks"? And yet, what about these churches? Can you genuinely give thanks to God for His working among them? Paul did and we must!

I think especially of the problem laden church at Corinth. If God so inspired His scriptures to be saturated with the thankfulness of an apostle to the work of God in that church, ought we not to have the same attitude? Ought we not be those who remember and recall what God has done for us and for others?

In our day and age, is it not amazing how few attend church. And yet for us, who have had our eyes opened to the truth, and have seen and understood the grace of Christ on the cross, how can we not be thankful for all that God has done? I will admit, that it is easier to thank God for those churches where the gospel is being proclaimed and the saints are being equipped and the kingdom continues on. And such was the church at Thessalonica. Sure, they had problems -- sexual immorality was among them (4:1-8), they had sluggards in their church, who professed a belief that Christ was returning so, so there would be no need to work. (4:9-12; 2 Thess. 3:6-15), they didn't think rightly about the Christian hope, for they had serious questions about those who have died (4:13-18-5:11), they probably were unthankful for their leaders (5:12-13), they didn't know how to deal with people in their congregation (5:14), there were those in the congregation who were vindictive against one another. On and on the list goes. And yet, for the most part, they were a church with whom Paul could rejoice gratefully with.

In the next few verses, Paul describes his thankfulness to God. He does so using 3 participles. I know that some of you are English challenged, and yet, this is important, because it is how Paul described his thankfulness. These participles all end with "ing." If you look in this passage, there are 3 words that end in this way. And each of them describe some way in which Paul described his thanksgiving. These words are ...

1. Making mention
2. Bearing in mind
3. Knowing

1 Thessalonians 1:2-4

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;

And we must (am I too strong here?) outline our passage according to these participles. As a part of expository teaching, it is my goal to unfold to you the true meaning of the passage that comes before us. We must do so by allowing the passage to be as clear as possible. A good way to do this is to outline according to the grammar of the passage. That is why those of you who are English challenged, might consider what can be done to understand the parts of speech better. Perhaps this isn't so original, but my goal isn't to be original. My goal is to "exposing, explaining, and expounding the meaning of the text." I would like my outline to serve the text, rather than the text serving the outline. So, here is my outline of chapter 1. Paul tells us How, When and Why He Expresses His Thankfulness for the Authentic Faith of the Thessalonians.

Let's look at the first point tonight.

1. How Paul Expresses His Thankfulness (verse 2)

1 Thessalonians 1:2

by making mention [of you] in our prayers;

Prayer is the simple way of expressing thanksgiving to God. As J. C. Ryle once wrote, ...

I commend to you the importance of thankfulness in prayer. ... I dare not call that true prayer in which thankfulness has no part. It is not for nothing that Paul says, "By prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." Philippians 4:6. "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving." Colossians 4:2. ... Never was there an eminent saint who was not full of thankfulness. St. Paul hardly ever writes an epistle without beginning with thankfulness. Men like Whitefield in the last century, and Bickersteth in our own time, abounded in thankfulness. Oh, reader, if we would be bright and shining lights in our day, we must cherish a spirit of praise. Let our prayers be thankful prayers. [\[2\]](#)

Paul will instruct us later: "pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks." (1 Thess. 5:17,18). Paul was simply making mention of the Thessalonians in his prayers. This was the way that he was expressing his thanks to God (1:2).

Paul's phraseology here gives us insight into his prayer life. "In our prayers" - It appears as if Paul had a regular time and routine for his prayers. Perhaps he had a set time and place for his prayers. It appears as if he had some kind of list of the Thessalonian disciples from which mention before the throne of grace in his prayers.

One of the most beneficial things that we have found as a family is to take our weekly prayer sheets that we receive (either from church or from the Rockford flock) and pray through the requests as a family each night. We read partially through the list with our children and allow them to pray for whatever they can remember. We are seeking to teach our children to pray, that when they leave our home and we tell them that we will pray for them "in our prayers" that they will know what exactly it is that we mean.

2. When Paul Expresses His Thankfulness

1 Thessalonians 1:3
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,

This second participle explains when Paul expresses his thanks. He does so when he remembers the Thessalonians, which, if you look at the text seems to be constantly.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3
We give thanks to God always. Constantly bearing in mind, ...

The word used for "constantly" here literally means "without ceasing." It is translated in 5:17 - "pray without ceasing." What I love about the heart of Paul is that he calls others to do as he himself did. That is what makes a good pastor - one who can say, "follow me, as I follow Christ." Paul, himself, was praying for the Thessalonians, "without ceasing" (1:2,3), so was it not appropriate for him to tell the Thessalonians that they ought, themselves to pray "without ceasing" (5:17)? Paul, himself, was praying for the Thessalonians (1:2,3), so was it not appropriate for him to request of them, "to pray for us." (5:25)? I understand Paul's heart here. As a pastor of this flock here in Rockford, you all are constantly on my heart and are always in my prayers. Yvonne and my children are my witnesses as to how unceasingly the names of you all, here in Rockford, are mentioned in our prayers at family worship.

And as Paul brought to mind these dear saints, there were 3 things that he mentioned of what particularly he remembered. He remembered their work of faith. He remembered their labor of love. He remembered their steadfastness of hope.

Now, with each of these, we need to understand that Paul was not placing the emphasis on the faith, love, and hope. It was as if to say that they, "worked hard at their faith", "labored diligently at their love", "endured greatly to maintain their hope".

No, but rather, it should be read so as to place emphasis on the work, labor, and endurance, "... constantly bearing in mind, ..." "your work, produced by your faith", "your labor, produced by your love", "your endurance, produced by your hope." None of these phrases are particularly difficult to understand.

Work produced by faith. In his letter to the Romans, Paul described this as the "obedience of faith." (Rom. 1:5), which he desire to "bring about among all the Gentiles." In other words, that obedience which flows out of one's faith. The letter to the Romans closes with a reminder to his readers that Jesus Christ came and has been made known to all the nations, in order "to bring about the obedience of faith." (16:26).

This is what James spoke about when he said that "faith without works is dead." In other words, a profession of faith which is devoid of works is not genuine faith. And I fear that there are many across our land, who have this kind of faith. There are those who would profess to be a believer in Jesus, but have no manifestation of this faith in their lives. This kind of "faith" is a dead faith, which will not save. James 2:14 says, "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" The obvious answer to this rhetorical question is, "No."

John Piper, in one of the books I read on vacation, nailed the issue on the head, when he said, ...

The answer to the question, What is faith? Is the most basic one in this whole controversy. It is not a simple mental assent to facts. ... It is a heartfelt coming to Christ and resting in him for what he is and what he offers. It is an act of the heart that

no longer hates the light but comes to the light because a new set of spiritual taste buds have been created and Christ now tastes satisfying to the soul. [and he quotes John 6:35 - "I am the Bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME SHALL NEVER THIRST. ... This view of faith implies that faith itself will inevitably wean a person away from sin because faith is a resting in what Jesus has to offer, namely, the pathway of life. Obedience is not something artificially added to saving faith later after a second discovery in the Christian walk. It is what faith does because faith is the soul's cleaving to Jesus for the forgiveness and guidance and hope it needs to be happy. If you don't do what the doctor says, you don't trust him. [\[3\]](#)

John Armstrong says it like this: "In biblical terms true faith is not merely accompanied by good works, as if they may or may not be present, or may not somehow be part and parcel of true faith. True faith is itself the mainspring which produces obedience." [\[4\]](#)

So, when Paul saw that their faith produces works, he rejoiced in thanks to God, because it showed that their faith was authentic. But not only did Paul rejoice in their work produced by faith, but he also rejoiced in their **Labor produced by Love**.

Again, this isn't difficult to understand. When one has a deep love for another, they will not seek their own good, but they will seek the good of the other. When there is love, so will there be sacrifice and devotion. When there is love, the details will work themselves out. That is why Jesus, when asked about the greatest commandment simply replied, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:38-9). Love to God. Love to man. The details will work themselves out.

When Paul refers to their love here, he is probably referring to both kinds of love - to God and to man. But Paul saw, not only their love in words, but he also saw it in deeds. He points out here that they labored - this is a specific labor to the point of fatigue.

Yvonne and I know fatigue. We went mountain biking in CA. If ever you are going to go Mountain biking, there are two requirements: Mountains and Bikes. Well, in CA, there are both of these. At any rate, I thought that mountain biking was going to be this glamorous thing - biking on these nice trails through the mountains. But, we were rudely awakened when the trail (which was a very nice trail) went up and down, up and down, up and down. If we weren't going up, huffing and puffing (or walking our bikes), we were going down, with our hands on our brakes. After a few miles, we were fatigued. So was the love of the Thessalonians. Their love produced in them a labor which pushed themselves to their limit to the point of fatigue. Peter talks about this in 1 Per. 4:8 - "keep fervent in your love for one another."

This is nothing more than what Paul, himself did, ...

1 Thessalonians 2:8-9

we imparted not only the gospel of God, but our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you.

Do you see it? They had become very dear. The NAS footnote says, became "beloved". Their affection for the Thessalonians caused them to labor diligently. They gave all of themselves - "their own lives" - to the Thessalonians. The Thessalonians did nothing more than imitate the love of Paul. They saw how he labored to the point of fatigue in his love and service for them, so they merely responded in like fashion.

We have a lesson to learn here. Our love here for one another needs to be apparent and visible, that others coming into our midst would see it and desire it. I remember as a lad watching Major League Baseball (perhaps it was basketball), and they tried to lure people into watching and attending Major League Baseball games that they would show lots of varying shots of what baseball is about - the hot dogs, the great plays, the home-runs, the singing of "take me out to the ball-game." Then they would say, "Catch the fever!" When people come into our midst, they need to "catch the fever." One of the great benefits of planting a church as we are is that people can see our love for one another and imitate it. As a lone ranger, it is difficult to plant a church - people don't see the love, nor understand the body dynamics.

But these Thessalonians were demonstrating their fruit of love in that their love produces a labor to the point of fatigue among the Thessalonians. Not only was Paul recalling their work produced by faith, not only was Paul recalling their labor produced by love, but, Paul also recalled their **Steadfastness produced by Hope**.

This steadfastness may also be translated (and the NAS says in its footnote) "endurance." This is that quality of a person that "remains under" the pressure. Paul, no doubt, is referring here to the tribulations, which the Thessalonians faced. In 1 Thess. 1:6, "they received the word in much tribulation." 1 Thess. 2:14 says, "You endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen". And 1 Thessalonians 3:3 says, "Paul sent Timothy that "no man might be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this." They were those who were enduring in the midst of their trials. They were enduring up under them.

Some commentators have pointed out that these three results have an ever-increasing intensity about them. From work - to labor - to endurance. At any rate, these Thessalonians were an enduring church. Like the church of Philadelphia (Rev. 3:10) - "You have kept the word of my perseverance" (i.e. endurance, steadfastness). "the hour of testing is coming, which is coming upon the whole world." Rev. 3:11 warns: "I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown." They had a hope, which allowed them to endure. They were hoping for the crown.

Let me say a word or two about this hope. In the New Testament, the word denotes more than pious optimism; complete certainty is always involved with the word. It is not, "Oh, I hope so!" It is "Oh, I expect so!" Is not the hope of the college student that he will finally get through finals to get to his summer vacation? Is not the summer vacation going to come? Is it not a certainty? Yet, he hopes; he "longs for".

So is the Christian hope certain. We long for the returning of our Lord. Much of 1 Thess. is about this hope. Each chapter ends with a reference to His 2nd coming.

1 Thessalonians 1:10

and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, [that is] Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

1 Thessalonians 2:19

For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?

1 Thessalonians 3:13

so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

1 Thessalonians 4:16

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

1 Thessalonians 5:23

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This hope produced in the Thessalonians a hope that endures. So we ought to have this hope.

When we were vacationing with some friends this past week, it so reminded me and stirred me on to long for the true fellowship that we will enjoy some day when the Lord Jesus returns for His people. Paul wrote to Titus, "in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago." (Titus 1:2). Is not an uncertainty, it is a certainty.

May God grant us the grace to have such a faith that works, such a love that labors, such a hope that endures It will give us great assurance of our standing before Him in His return.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on August 13, 2000 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1]

[2] J. C. Ryle

[3] John Piper. The Pleasures of God. p. 288.

[4] John Armstrong. Viewpoint.