

The Heart of a Godly Spiritual Father

A Message of Encouragement and Challenge from 1 Thessalonians Chapter 1

THE INTRODUCTION

Today is Father's Day. In celebration of Fatherhood, and we are going to consider the heart of a spiritual father toward his children. Specifically, we'll be spending most of our time in the first chapter of the first letter to the Thessalonians. After considering the background and history of this letter, then we'll look a little closer at the what caused this man such joy as he considered his spiritual children. Then I will end our time together this morning with some questions about our hearts.

We're going to journey back to the birth and establishment of the Thessalonian church, as Paul planted the seed of the gospel, and beheld the miraculous regeneration of sinners. We'll see that this church had an amazing start, but what brought Paul the greatest joy and gratitude was when he heard that they were persevering in the faith and bearing fruit.

I'm not a gardener by any stretch of the imagination, but in my early teenage years I had an interesting gardening experience.

There was a little strip of land behind our backyard, and in that particular summer, I decided to plant some pumpkin seeds just to see what would happen. I dug up a small patch of ground, and planted several seeds with little expectation.

To my initial delight and surprise, within a few weeks, there were signs of life with the green plant pushing through the soil. The vine continued to grow and spread, and then the flowers began to form and then transform into small pumpkins that grew and matured. My real delight and amazement came in the fall as I harvested several pumpkins.

Similar to the joy that I had as I watched a few seeds produce life and the resulting bright orange fruit, the Apostle Paul was thrilled as he planted the seeds of the gospel in Thessalonica, saw initial evidence of life, and to his greatest delight received a later report that this church was persevering in the faith and bearing fruit.

I Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

To begin our journey, we'll consider the setting, specifically the City of Thessalonica, the Authors of this letter to the Thessalonian church, and the history that led to the writing of the letter.

I. THE SETTING: *The City, The Authors, The History*

A. The City

The Macedonian King Cassander, named it after his wife, a half-sister of Alexander the Great, founding Thessalonica in 315 BC. When Rome organized Macedonia into a province in 146 BC, Thessalonica was made its capital, and it soon became the second largest city of that area (Philippi being the largest) with a population of around 200,000 people. As a 'free' city it had its own government. It was situated at the head of the Thermaic Gulf of the Aegean Sea, a commercially strategic position, and with its fine harbor it served as a seaport for the rich agricultural plains of Macedonia.

B. The Authors

Paul

Paul's Hebrew name was Saul, born in Tarsus about the same time as Christ. He spent his early years as a student of the celebrated rabbi Gamaliel and was a member of the strictest legalistic sect of Judaism, the Pharisees. He was a lead persecutor of the early church. Around 33 AD, he was on his way to Damascus to arrest and kill Christians when the risen glorified Lord Jesus appeared to him and converted him. After his conversion, Paul immediately began to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus as the promised Messiah. Paul then spent 3 years in the Arabian desert where he received much of his doctrine and detailed teaching directly from the Lord Jesus Christ. More than any other individual, Paul was responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. The book of Acts documents 3 missionary journeys of his preaching the gospel that he once hated and despised throughout the Roman world.

Silvanus (Silas)

A companion of Paul on the second missionary journey, was chosen by Paul as a replacement for Barnabas. He was a converted Jew, considered a prophet, and a Roman citizen which made him ideal for this mission.

Timothy

Paul's most notable disciple who traveled on the second and third missionary journeys and stayed near Paul during his first Roman imprisonment. Paul considered Timothy to be his son in the faith. Later he served in Ephesus and spent some time in prison. Timothy eventually took over Paul's ministry upon his death.

C. The History

This was a letter of encouragement written by Paul to the Thessalonian church commending their faith, labor of love, and perseverance through persecution.

The story of the founding of this church is documented in the book of Acts. Paul is with Silas on his second missionary journey. They have just been released from prison in Philippi and decided to go on this 100-mile trip to Thessalonica. We pick up the story in chapter 17:

17 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three

Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also,⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things.⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Based on the persecution and danger to the church, Paul and Silas then decided leave at night and move on to Berea. Think about how must have been feeling as he left these new believers behind. Here they were, just a few months old, and he was leaving. He loved them and was leaving them in a time of persecution. There were Jewish adversaries that would likely try to persuade them that Paul was just someone using them for their money and his ego. As he diligently prayed for these new believers daily, he finally decided out of his great concern, to send Timothy from Athens back to Thessalonica to check on their condition and to encourage them. Timothy returned to Thessalonica, and to his delight, he discovered that they were doing well. After spending some time with them, he later rejoined Paul in Corinth and gave him the positive report about their progress in the faith. Paul rejoiced in the news of their perseverance and spiritual wellbeing and wrote this letter to them that we have before us. Now that we have this background, let’s read the first chapter of this letter together, and then I will quickly summarize chapters 2 through 5, and then return to chapter 1 to better understand this father’s heart for these believers.

II. THE LETTER: *I Thessalonians*

I Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit,⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

In chapter 2 Paul reminds them of how he had lived among them in a transparent and self-supporting way as he proclaimed the gospel. He brought to their mind how he had gently nurtured them, much like a nursing mother cares for her babies, and again expresses his deep affection for them. He recalls his hard labor among them so that he could never be accused of using them for financial gain. He told them that he was like a father to them as he encouraged and exhorted them to pursue a holy and blameless life, that they might walk worthy of God's calling. He wanted them to remember when they first met, how they had so willingly accepted the message of the gospel, even in the midst of persecution. He expressed his longing to return to see them again in person so that he could help them mature.

Chapter 3 explains how he had sent Timothy in his stead to check on them and to strengthen and encourage them. He let them know that he had been praying for them, and how thankful and encouraged he was when he heard of their perseverance and faithfulness in the gospel. Chapter 3 ends with one of his prayers for them, asking the Lord to make a way for him to return to them, and that the Lord would cause them to increase in their love for each other and everyone else.

Chapter 4 is an exhortation to holy living, specifically in sexual purity. He also commands them to work hard and lead quiet lives for the glory of God.

Finally, in chapter 5, Paul gives detailed teaching and instruction about Christ's second coming to comfort and encourage them. The letter ends with some final encouragements and exhortations.

As you read this letter, I hope that you sensed the heart of this spiritual father; his love and deep concern for these believers; his passion and commitment to their spiritual wellbeing and maturity. Now let's take an even closer look at chapter 1, and learn about the attributes of Paul's heart.

III. THE OBSERVATION: *The Attributes of the Heart of a Godly Spiritual Father*

I see six attributes of a godly spiritual father from this first chapter:

1. A godly spiritual father prays often for his children
verse 2
 - He is **thankful** to the Lord for their work of faith, labor of love, steadfastness in hope
 - In chapter 3:11-13 he prays that he might see them again, and that in the meantime the Lord would cause them to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, and that the Lord would establish their hearts without blame in holiness as they wait for the judgment seat of Christ.
 - Finally in 5:23-24, he prays for their full sanctification and preservation, spirit, soul and body to the coming of the Lord.

2. A godly spiritual father **rejoices** when his children are walking in faith, love, and hope.
verse 3

These are the three pillars of the Christianity, faith, hope, and love. We are justified by faith alone in Christ alone, which produces the fruit of love for God and others, as we anticipate the ultimate completion of our salvation when Christ returns to judge this world and establish His kingdom. A spiritual father rejoices when he sees evidence of all three in his children.

3. A godly spiritual father gives thanks to God when he sees evidence of the Father's election and the Spirit's regeneration.
verse 4

We take the gospel message as a seed, and we sow it, and we water it, but the sovereign God brings about the harvest. The Spirit of God alone can convict the human heart of sin, and bring about a new birth. Paul was thankful that he had seen initial evidence of that sovereign work of the Spirit in the Thessalonians, and that the good report from Timothy was further evidence that their calling and election was sure.

4. A godly spiritual father is committed to a single, clear message – the gospel.
verse 5a

Paul stated in Romans 1:16 that he was not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God to everyone who believes, both Jew and Greek. The good news that wicked, rebellious sinners can be forgiven, cleansed and transformed based on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's message was clear. Jesus Christ and him crucified. Jesus Christ, sent from heaven, the promised Messiah, Son of God, came to earth to fulfill the law and live a sinless righteous life, and then offered that life as a sacrifice to bear the wrath of God for the sins of those who believe and trust in Him. Jesus, born of a virgin, living a sinless life, giving His life on a Roman cross, and then raised from the dead three days later, offering the forgiveness of sins and the salvation to all who will turn from their sins and receive Him as the Lord of their life. If you are here today, I implore you to turn away from your sins, and come to Christ for forgiveness and a new life in Him.

5. A godly spiritual father demonstrates this gospel with his life as well as his words.
verse 5b

Paul points to his own life as a demonstration of this gospel. It was more than words, it was a transformational reality that could clearly be seen in Paul's life, and was also being demonstrated in the lives of the Thessalonians.

In verses 6 - 10, Paul delineates four exhibitions of the Spirit's fruit evidenced in their lives:

- Exhibit A: Their exemplary **joy in the message** that was causing them affliction
verses 6-7

These believers were immediately threatened with imprisonment, rejection from the community, and violence. They were rejoicing in that persecution, which was a clear

exhibit of genuine faith.

- Exhibit B: Their **continued proclamation** of the word in persecution
verse 8
Even after threatened, they continued to boldly proclaim this gospel message to the point that it was going out to the whole region; another clear exhibit of genuine salvation.
- Exhibit C: Their **turning away from idols and committed service** to the true living God *verse 9*
These believers not only spoke about Christ and His work, they imitated Christ and His work through their rejection of false idols and religion and a full committed service to the one and only living God in Christ.
- Exhibit D: Their **patient hope** as they anticipate the return of Jesus
verse 10

IV. THE APPLICATION: *5 Final Questions for Reflection*

1. What do we pray for other people? What do we see in other's situations that elicits the greatest gratitude and joy in our hearts?

I am thankful for Romans 8, that says that we don't know how to pray as we ought, so the Spirit of God groans for us in perfect agreement with the God the Father's will. I am thankful that we have a perfect intercessor in Christ, day and night, before the throne God in our behalf. And I also rejoice in the Word of God that teaches us, today through the example of this godly spiritual father, how to pray for those we love. I am challenged by this message to examine my prayers for those I care about. As we come to know and trust our God and Savior deeply, we will begin to unite our hearts with the Spirit of God, praying truly in the name of Christ and for His glory and sake, in what we desire to see in the lives of those we love. As they face difficulty, and unrelenting suffering at times, and strained relationships, and difficult jobs, and the unkindness and rejection of even family members, our prayer ought to be for them to respond in a way that brings the most honor to the Lord. And when we see evidence of God's amazing grace as they respond in love, and mercy, and courage, and endurance, and thankfulness, our hearts should overflow with gratitude and thanksgiving as we behold the evidence of the true and living Savior in their lives. It seems that often our spiritual senses have been dulled by the worldly culture, not only among the heathen, but sadly in the evangelical world that is sometimes selling out to a false health and wealth gospel. If the Lord God wanted us to all have no pain, no suffering, no problems, and no temptation, then we would all drop dead at this moment and be with Him. We need to pray that we would all have the wisdom and discernment to see the bigger purposes of the Lord in our lives. He is orchestrating all things for the ultimate good of his people and the most extraordinary display of the glory, both now and also the future

2. Do we understand the power of the gospel to the point that we would joyfully suffer loss, even the loss of our life for the sake of the message going forth?

We may get the chance to answer this question soon. As this culture continues to degrade and despise the restraints of righteousness and decency, our lifestyles and message will become more and more repulsive and antagonistic. All of us have lived in the United States in an unusual time of minimal persecution (unlike most of the rest of the world, where believers are suffering the loss of property and life every day for the sake of the gospel) Believers suffering for Christ is the norm in the Bible. This was the setting for today's message. The question to consider is are you ready to face loss and persecution for your faith in Christ and an uncompromised gospel?

3. How do we evaluate the effectiveness of a ministry?

Is it the number of people that follow? Is it the level of excitement and entertainment in the gathering? Is it the number of programs and conveniences provided for the needs of those that come? Is it the size of the budget? Is it the appearance of the meeting place?

Paul evaluated the effectiveness of his ministry in the evidence of true repentance and love for Christ in the converts, as well as the love that they showed through their hard work and commitment. Paul would say that a church is effective when it knows and lives the gospel. If you want to know the true effectiveness of a church, look carefully at the lives of the members. Do they know and love the truth? Do they live out the truth they profess in their day-to-day lives? Do they love each other, and other people, not just in words, but deeds? Are they productive, hard working givers? Do they love and crave the word of God, and do they love the Lord Jesus? Are they thankful and grateful? Do they display the fruit of the Spirit? The affirmative answer to these questions is evidence of the effective ministry of the gospel.

Finally, if our pastor hired a private investigator to follow you around for about a month or so, and interview the people in your neighborhood, and at your job, and the members of your immediate and extended family, and your church friends, and all of the other people that you have had interactions with over the last year or so, would that investigator's report give cause for gratitude, joy, and confidence in the pastor's heart, or would he be deeply concerned and distressed in what he heard?

My hope is that there would be much celebration and rejoicing.