

Faith, Love, and Hope: Living Ready for Christ's Return

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HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF 1 THESSALONIANS

The Origin and Background of the Epistle

First Thessalonians stands as a remarkable document in the New Testament canon. Written approximately 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is widely considered by theologians to be the very first letter penned by the Apostle Paul. Although it is not arranged chronologically in our modern Bibles, its historical placement provides a window into the raw environment of the early Church.

The letter was written by Paul, with Silas and Timothy explicitly named alongside him as co-senders. The church at Thessalonica was established during Paul's second missionary journey, a sweeping apostolic effort recorded across Acts chapters 13 through 18. The specific founding of the Thessalonian church is detailed in Acts 17.

Intense Opposition and Apostolic Concern

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica was cut short by severe, violent opposition, primarily instigated by local Jewish leaders who rejected the gospel. Depending on how one interprets the original text and historical commentaries, Paul was only on the ground there for a period spanning between three weeks and three months before being forcibly driven out of town.

After fleeing to Athens, Paul found himself consumed with anxiety for this infant church. He deeply worried that the intense cultural antagonism and physical persecution they faced might fracture or completely destroy their fragile faith. Unable to return himself, he dispatched his trusted son in the faith, Timothy, to strengthen and encourage them. Timothy eventually returned to Paul with a triumphant report: despite the suffering, the Thessalonians were standing firm, though they had a few practical and theological questions that required clarification. This report directly inspired the penning of 1 Thessalonians.

The Distinct Tone of 1 Thessalonians

To appreciate this letter, one must contrast it with the rest of the Pauline corpus. Most of Paul's epistles were written to correct severe theological drift, moral compromise, or internal rebellion:

The Corinthians: Paul wrote up to four letters (two preserved in the canon) to address blatant carnality, severe sin, and deep divisiveness.

The Colossians: Written to combat dangerous legalism and syncretistic philosophies.

The Ephesians: Focused heavily on correcting pride through a call to humility and unity.

The Galatians: A sharp theological defense against legalistic reliance on the flesh.

In stark contrast, 1 Thessalonians is saturated with apostolic joy. It is perhaps the only letter where Paul writes with an unreservedly thankful heart, exalting a congregation that was structurally sound and spiritually vibrant. Commentaries routinely describe this congregation as spiritually healthy, biblically sound, faithfully loving, serving, passionately evangelistic, Christ-exalting, God-honoring, and seriously worshipping.

EXPOSITION OF 1 THESSALONIANS 1:2-6

The Dual Priority of Pastoral Ministry (Verse 2)

“We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.”

A close theological reading of this text reveals a beautiful matrix of relationships: Paul, Silas, and Timothy are the intercessors ("We"); the Thessalonian believers are the specific subjects ("you"); and God the Father is the ultimate object of devotion. Two distinct, non-negotiable spiritual disciplines are linked together in this verse:

Giving Thanks to God: Actively recognizing the hand of God at work within the community.

Praying for the Saints: Consistently lifting up the specific needs of the body.

This dual focus was illustrated locally during a recent service at Fairfield Baptist Church. Reflection on the life of the church reveals a vibrant tapestry of ministry: corporate welcomes, silent meditation, scripture readings, prayers, musical worship, the celebration of church membership, and the obedience of believer's baptism. Even after the formal dismissal, the life of the body continues—couples and individuals staying behind to pray for one another, young men working hard to drain and store the baptismal tank, and volunteers vacuuming the carpets to prepare the space for another congregation meeting later that afternoon.

Practical Application (The 31-Day Prayer Strategy): To turn corporate thanksgiving into daily prayer, believers are encouraged to utilize the church directory (whether printed or online). By taking the total number of family units listed, dividing them across the 31 days of the month, and assigning specific names to each day, the entire church family can be covered in focused prayer every single month. This converts abstract love into concrete intercession, just as Eunice recently stepped away to practically care for a family under extreme pressure, and families like the Johnsons are lifted up on their designated days.

The Triadic Framework of Christian Character (Verse 3)

“We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul highlights a powerful, recurring New Testament triad: Faith, Love, and Hope. While he famously reorders them in 1 Corinthians 13:13 to conclude with love as the greatest, here he frames them within their functional, real-world expressions. A balanced and effective Christian life requires all three operating in unison:

Your Work Produced by Faith: True saving faith is never static; faith in God naturally produces active work for God.

Your Labor Prompted by Love: Love is exhausting; it requires a deep, self-sacrificing labor for the benefit

of God and one's neighbor. This serves as an internal challenge: if a believer claims to love God but harbors an inability to get along with a brother or sister in the local church, the authenticity of their faith is compromised. True love heals horizontal relationships because of a vertical reality.

Your Endurance Inspired by Hope: The Greek concept of endurance (*hypomone*) is not a passive, defeated resignation, but a triumphant fortitude. This endurance is fueled entirely by a forward-looking hope in the literal, soon return of Jesus Christ.

Theological commentators have summarized this triad through various helpful lenses:

The Summary of Life: Salvation (Faith), Service (Love), and Steadfastness (Hope).

The Function of Life: Faith gets to work, love executes its labors, and hope sustains patient endurance.

This triadic theme is structurally woven throughout the entire architecture of 1 Thessalonians:

Faith: Expounded deeply in Chapter 3:7-8.

Love: Detailed thoroughly in Chapter 3:9-12.

Hope: Masterfully unveiled in Chapter 4:16-17.

The Divine Dynamics of Gospel Transmission (Verses 4-5)

“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.”

Paul routinely addresses the church using the familial term "brothers" (or "brothers and sisters" in modern translations reflecting the collective plural). He uses this intimate term 15 times in this brief letter alone, and another 7 times in 2 Thessalonians, underscoring the deep covenantal bond of the early scattered communities.

In verse 4 and 5, Paul brings together two profound doctrines that often cause intellectual tension in human minds: Divine Election ("He has chosen you") and Human Responsibility ("the decision to trust"). Scripture does not attempt to resolve this mystery for our finite intellects; it simply states both as absolute realities in the mind of God. God sovereignly chooses, yet humans are held fully accountable for their response to the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

Paul outlines the four structural pillars of how the Gospel was successfully transmitted to the Thessalonians:

Words: The baseline requirement of logical, verbal, human proclamation. The message must be spoken and heard.

Power: The inherent, explosive spiritual force embedded within the message of the cross itself. The gospel is not mere human philosophy; it carries divine weight.

The Holy Spirit: The third person of the Trinity acting as the primary agent of transmission, moving the message from the preacher's lips to the hearer's soul.

Deep Conviction: The internal, unshakable subjective response wrought by the Holy Spirit within the hearts of the listeners, moving them from intellectual assent to absolute surrender.

The Super-Rational Nature of Christian Joy (Verse 6)

"You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering and with joy given by the Holy Spirit."

The ultimate evidence of the Thessalonians' election and conversion was their radical response to crisis. They became imitators of the apostles and of Christ by welcoming the truth while simultaneously undergoing severe suffering. This introduced a supernatural paradox into their culture: suffering and joy existing in the exact same space.

The Theological Principle of Joy: A Christian's joy must never be determined by external circumstances, but solely by their immutable relationship with Jesus Christ.

Practical Illustrations of Circumstantial Pressure: Consider the common, frustrating trials of daily life. You may experience noisy neighbors playing bass-heavy music that rattles your walls until 4:00 AM, forcing you to use earplugs just to sleep. Or you may face sudden household emergencies, such as a hidden plumbing leak in the laundry room that ruins the flooring and floods an adjacent spare bedroom. These circumstances are real, frustrating, and exhausting. However, authentic Christian joy does not depend on quiet neighbors or dry floors; it remains anchor-locked in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ.

SUMMARY CONCLUSION AND BENEDICTION

The Core Elements of a Faithful Church

Reviewing the opening of this epistle provides an exhaustive summary checklist of what a healthy, localized body of believers looks like. We are called to be a church defined by:

Continuous thanksgiving and corporate prayer.

Uncompromising faith in God that manifests in tangible work.

Sacrificial love for God that mends and maintains relationships with each other.

An expectant, enduring hope centered on the imminent return of Christ.

An assurance of being chosen by God, validated by a lifestyle that imitates Jesus.

A reception of the Gospel that moves past empty words into Holy Spirit power.

A supernatural joy that remains untouched by shifting worldly circumstances.

Ultimately, the Christian life boils down to two critical, searching questions regarding readiness:

Am I fully ready if the Lord Jesus returns in glory today?

Am I fully ready if my earthly life ends and I go to meet Him before He returns?

The heart of the Gospel can be captured in a single, profound theological epigram:
The Gospel is about how Jesus came to be born once, so that we might be born again.
Apostolic Benediction (1 Thessalonians 5:28)
“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”