

1 Thessalonians 1

November 24, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

1 Thessalonians 1

Session Outline

1. Reason to Be Thankful (1 Thessalonians 1:1-4)
2. Gospel Changes (1 Thessalonians 1:5-7)
3. The Word Goes Forward (1 Thessalonians 1:8-10)

Theological Theme

Paul celebrated and encouraged the church at Thessalonica for their faithful stand and commitment to spread the gospel despite hardships or persecution they experienced.

Call to Action

Believers are to use every opportunity to demonstrate God's love, faith, and hope among the unengaged and unchurched.



Leader Guide

1 Thessalonians 1

Introduction

Think about a unique place you have heard an echo. Maybe you've called out into a canyon or been in a closed in room where every word seems to repeat back to you. In these instances, your echo sounds far beyond and lasts longer than your actual voice.

We also use the word echo in an echocardiogram to detect heart issues. Used in this manner an echo describes how sound waves form a picture that depicts what is going on inside where you can't see. It detects when changes happen and gives clarity into possible issues. Today, we are studying a letter from Paul to a church he established in which he compared their faith to a sound going forth and having an impact beyond what they could see. Their faith echoed into the world and ours should do the same.

- ❓ What comes to mind when you think about an echo?
- ❓ How does the idea of an echo connect with how Christians are to spread the gospel?

Session Summary

Paul encouraged the Thessalonian believers to continue in their faith, and we can learn from their example. This early church faced persecution and adversity, yet they stayed firm in their faith and didn't give in to the idol worship that surrounded them. In fact, they were so drastically changed by the gospel that their lives had an impact on people both far and near. Paul commended them for their faith, hope, and love and pointed out that these were strong identifiers of gospel transformation. He compared their faithful living and service to a loud trumpet blast that could not be ignored. Believers today should take advantage of every opportunity to display faith, hope, and love in their lives to spread the gospel message to the lost and unengaged.

1. Reason to be Thankful (1 Thessalonians 1:1-4)

This letter was written by Paul to the church at Thessalonica that he helped to establish during his second missionary journey. The account of this church's beginning is recorded in Acts 17 and although Paul was only in this area for a short time, he had deep concern for this young body of believers. Enemies of the gospel forced Paul to leave suddenly and after being chased away by an angry mob, Paul continued to struggle with opposition toward his missionary efforts.

Once he settled in Corinth, Paul still had various churches on his mind, including the believers in Thessalonica. Just a few months after leaving Thessalonica, Timothy and Silas met Paul in Corinth and brought news of this church to Paul, who was pleased to hear they were going strong and quickly sent a letter off to them. He eventually returned to them in person but until then, his words of encouragement and teaching kept them connected to their spiritual father.

Beginning his letter with a customary greeting, Paul shared how his heart was full of gratitude when he thought about the Christians in Thessalonica. His gratitude and thoughts toward them led to ongoing prayer for the Thessalonians and giving thanks for their faith.

- ❓ How did the report of this church confirm that it was God who sustained them and not their own efforts and strength?


In his thanksgiving for this church, Paul mentioned three main reasons that stood out to him for gratitude. Paul specifically named their faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus. These all reflect the transformation that the Thessalonians experienced as their newfound faith led to change in their lives. The word used for work speaks of faithful obedience. Because they now followed Christ, everything changed, and Paul affirmed this as part of the new identity they experienced through faith in Jesus.

- ❓ How should faith in Christ affect or change the way you work to fulfill God's calling in your life?

Paul also encouraged the church in their labor of love and steadfastness of hope. The word for labor is different than the one for work and is related to intense labor or working hard at something. Steadfastness of hope means a firm, enduring, or unwavering hope. This phrase depicts a confident belief or expectation of what is to come. Paul heard about these three things being present in the Thessalonians and called out the good in them to inspire and motivate them to continue in faithfulness.


Thanksgiving

Paul offered thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' faith. This letter started Paul's practice of beginning his letters by thanking God for his readers (all his letters except the first letter to the Galatians contain such a statement). Paul's words were not mere rhetorical flattery. He was giving credit to One who brought about their spiritual progress.

-  Application: How has your hope in Christ motivated you toward greater effort in serving Him and spreading the gospel? How is this different than working in your own strength?

2. Gospel Changes (1 Thessalonians 1:5-7)


Paul said that the gospel had come to the church not only in word but also in power. If we are not careful in the church, the focus can shift to information or entertainment to the point that our message becomes mere words. People can pride themselves on the knowledge they develop about the gospel and miss out on the power that should accompany it. The difference is found in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit at work, our message will only be words instead of the transforming power of God at work in and through us to the glory of God.

-  What are some ways we might rely on our words over God's Word and God's power in our lives?


These people lived in a culture that worshipped false idols, it was a city dedicated to Artemis and included many who made a living off false gods. Worshipping Jesus alone was counter cultural to say the least. To change the way they worshipped or the way they made a living was no small feat. It was hard and likely painful work, but as Paul reminded them, God loved them, and they could share that love with others even when it was painful or difficult.

Paul acknowledged that they had received the gospel with great affliction. But there was encouragement for the new believers. Paul said they had become an example for other believers. It is important that believers represent Christ well so that their own choices don't turn people away from the truth.

Further, they had received the message with joy because of the Holy Spirit. Joy in the presence of adversity was a common theme in Paul's life. Many Christ followers can testify how they have experienced joy during difficult circumstances or tragedies. Joy is a product of the Holy Spirit and not dependent on circumstances, as Paul and the Thessalonian Christians had learned. It is a testimony of faith to the lost world as believers handle adversity and difficulties.


-  When was a time you witnessed another person's joy in Jesus despite hardship? What impact did this have on you?

The way that the Thessalonian Christians received the gospel and lived differently caused them to become examples to the neighboring regions. We all need those who are farther along in the faith to show us examples of what it means to follow Christ faithfully. We need to see how others live for Christ in their everyday lives as a living example and not just words we hear. When the verbal and the visual go hand in hand, the testimony is most powerful.

 Application: How are you seeking to live as an example for other believers? Why should you?

3. The Word Goes Forth (1 Thessalonians 1:8-10)


Continuing his encouragement of the faithful in Thessalonica, Paul described their lives as sounding forth the word to far reaching places. The phrase “sounding forth” pictures a loud ringing noise like a trumpet blast. People noticed what happened in the Thessalonians’ lives and took notice. Their influence for the kingdom of God was felt near and far.

 How are our words and lives to “sound forth” for Jesus today?

These people didn’t have to travel to other areas to share about Jesus, they lived in a thriving city on the coast so as travelers came and went continuously. We also have many opportunities for our faith to travel great distances, even if we never leave home.

Paul described two important aspects of a faith that travels. First the church must have a message to spread, and that message needs to have impacted our lives. Believers who speak the truth but don’t live according to that message have not truly been impacted by it. The gospel message needs to be seen and heard. The way we live needs to align with the truth of God’s Word so others can see the impact it makes on our lives.

We also need the faith to go out. Paul recognized that the spread of the gospel did not stop when he left. It continued to reverberate in the lives of those in the church. It is always good when more people are involved in spreading the gospel and the church is not relying on a faithful few to share about Jesus.

 Where do you need to focus—the message of the gospel or the faith to share it with others? How can you do that?

When the Thessalonians heard the message, they accepted it, and their lives were drastically changed. They had turned from idol worship, which impacted their reputations and income, to serve the only living and true God. But their loss was not greater than their gain. Their changed lives were evidence of their true faith and the transforming power of the gospel.

- ❓ Application: How is God calling you to move towards greater faithfulness to Him this week? How will you respond?

Conclusion

Paul and his companions demonstrated what it meant to follow Jesus. They preached the truth of the gospel in the face of great opposition and the truth continued to spread. The new believers in Thessalonica were transformed by this message and their lives began to mimic Paul's. They were imitating what they had seen and being changed by their faith to the point that they became example to others. As Christ followers live out their faith, others are watching and impacted by our example. Paul made clear how much he was encouraged by their faithfulness. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Thessalonians continued their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in Jesus. We too are called to be examples. When we trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives can impact the world around us just as the Thessalonians did.

- ❓ How have you been challenged or encouraged by today's lesson?
- ❓ How can we as a group encourage one another toward greater faithfulness to Jesus?
- ❓ Who is God calling you to "sound forth" the gospel message to this week?

Prayer of Response

Ask the Lord to show you where you have lost hope or redirected your hope to lesser things. Invite the Holy Spirit to work in you and use you to spread the gospel message.

Memory Verse

For the word of the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith, in God has gone out. — 1 Thessalonians 1:8a

Additional Resources

- *Be Ready* by Warren Wiersbe
- *1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Charles Swindoll
- *1 & 2 Thessalonians for You* by Ligon Duncan

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of 1 Thessalonians

Purpose

Timothy reported to Paul that although the church at Thessalonica was suffering affliction, they were holding fast to the faith. And though they had some doctrinal misunderstandings, they were laboring for the Lord out of love and patiently hoping for the return of Christ. Paul wrote to encourage the church in their faith, to remind them that sanctification was God's will for them, and to correct misunderstandings about end-time events. First Thessalonians presents four major themes.

Author

No serious objections have been made to dispute that Paul was the author of 1 Thessalonians (1:1). The greeting also mentions Silvanus and Timothy. Sometimes Paul wrote from the team perspective, but he was the primary author (2:18; 3:2).

Setting

About AD 50 the missionary team led by Paul and Silas ("Silvanus") left Philippi and traveled westward on the Roman road known as the Via Egnatia. They proceeded toward Thessalonica—the strategic capital city of the Roman Province of Macedonia.

Thessalonica was a large port city on the Aegean Sea in modern-day Greece, with a population of about two hundred thousand. The city was filled with pagan worshipers of idols, the full pantheon of Greek and Roman gods, and was well known for its emperor worship. Thessalonica was loyal to Caesar, who had granted its citizens many privileges.

Special Features

Paul spent a very short time in the city of Thessalonica, but he was able to establish a church during his stay. He may have had little time to instruct the new converts, so it is not surprising that Paul wrote a letter to address some questions.

Extended Commentary

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1:1 Paul used the Latin version Silvanus (2Co 1:19; 2Th 1:1) for the person whom Luke referred to using the Greek name Silas (Ac 15:22). Silas was chosen by Paul to accompany him on his second missionary journey, replacing Barnabas (Ac 15:40). Silas participated in the work of planting the Thessalonian church (Ac 17:4) and was with Paul in Corinth at the time of the writing of this letter. Paul may have encountered Timothy at Lystra on his first missionary journey (Ac 14:8–18). On the second visit Timothy is described as a disciple who was ready to assist Paul in the missionary efforts (Ac 16:1–3). Timothy is not explicitly mentioned as participating in the founding of the Thessalonian church (Ac 17:1–9), but Paul sent him from Athens to assist the newly formed and persecuted church when Paul realized he could not return to the Thessalonians (1Th 3:1–2). Timothy’s encouraging report on the state of the Thessalonian church prompted Paul to write this epistle (3:6). The reference to church (Gk *ekklesia*) in NT times could refer generically to any gathering or assembly, but Paul specified it here as the local assembly at Thessalonica in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1:2 In his epistles Paul normally thanked God for those people to whom he was sending the letter and mentioned that they were in his prayers or offered a prayer for them. The only exception to this is Galatians, where he issued a strong rebuke.

1:3 Paul commended the Thessalonians for their work produced by faith, their labor motivated by love, and endurance inspired by hope. Their work and labor were evident in that the gospel had gone throughout not only their province of Macedonia but into the neighboring province of Achaia (vv. 7–8). Endurance was especially needed in the midst of persecution.

1:4 While the Thessalonians were commended for their work, Paul reminded them that God is the one who had chosen them and that they were loved by him. “Chosen” (Gk *eklogon*) carries the idea of God’s choice or selection.

1:5–6 The gospel is more than a message of words. It is a message that comes in power and in the Holy Spirit. The basic meaning of “gospel” (Gk *euangelion*) is “good news.” Paul further specified that it was not just any good news but the good news that came from God (2:2, 8, 13). Even though the church at Thessalonica was founded in the midst of severe persecution, the message was warmly received with joy that came from the Holy Spirit. That God was working there was also evident since Paul and Silas were able to stay only for a short time before they were forced to leave and yet the church started and flourished anyway (Ac 17:1–9). How we lived among you is further explained in 2:1–12.

1:7–9 The Thessalonians’ faith and gospel message spread throughout Macedonia and Achaia. These two Roman provinces—Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south—make up a large part of modern-day Greece. In NT times, these provinces included major cities such as Philippi, Athens, and Corinth. Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia. It appears that Paul’s missionary strategy worked. He evangelized the major cities with the expectation that the gospel would spread from there into the surrounding areas. The Thessalonians’ predominantly Gentile background is evident from the false worship of lifeless idols, from which they turned to serve the living and true God.

1:10 While the Thessalonians were enduring persecution, they were also waiting for the coming Son from heaven—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. The “coming wrath” was not a persecution that Paul and the Thessalonians were experiencing or would experience from the unbelieving world, but a future time of God’s wrath against the unbelieving world. Christians will be rescued from this (5:9). Paul introduced the fact of Jesus’s resurrection here and later expressed the hope of the resurrection for Christians who had died (4:16).¹

References

1. *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1860–1861.