

LESSON 2

THANKSGIVING FOR THE THESSALONIANS (1 THESS. 1:1-10)

The Place of the Passage

Paul begins his first letter to the Thessalonians with gratitude to God for their conversion and their reputation for gospel witness. He commends this young church for embodying, amid affliction, the great triad of Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope (1 Thess. 1:3). The gospel that sounded forth to them (1 Thess. 1:5) is now sounding forth *from* them (1 Thess. 1:8). This passage sets the stage for the rest of the letter, using inescapable triune language: “God” is mentioned seven times, “Jesus” or “Son” or “Lord” six times, and “Spirit” twice in these 10 verses alone.

The Big Picture

First Thessalonians 1:1–10 highlights the work of the triune God in electing (1 Thess. 1:4), calling (1 Thess. 1:5), and saving (1 Thess. 10) the Thessalonian church, and also highlights the work of the church in modeling (1 Thess. 1:6–7) and presenting (1 Thess. 1:8) the gospel to a watching world.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10. Then review the following questions concerning this introductory section to 1 Thessalonians and write your own notes on them. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 2305–2306, available online at www.esvbible.org.)

Greeting (1 Thess. 1:1)

Geographically, the Thessalonian believers were located in the city of Thessalonica in northern Greece. Spiritually, however, they were “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Why do you think Paul begins by highlighting their “spiritual address”? What does it mean to be “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”? Are you spiritually located there?

“Grace to you and peace” (1 Thess. 1:1). With the exception of Galatians, Paul begins all of his letters this way. Why do you think “grace” always precedes “peace”? What happens if we reverse this order and begin to assume that peace with God leads to grace from God?

The Thessalonians’ Faith and Example (1 Thess. 1:2–10)

When you think of faith, love, and hope, what related words come to mind? In 1 Thessalonians 1:3, Paul tethers this triad of virtues to some remarkably active words: “work,” “labor,” and “steadfastness.” Why do you think he does this? What implications might this have as you examine your own faith, love, and hope?

Although the doctrine of election has often sparked controversy, Paul views it not as a weapon for fighting but as a tool for encouragement. How could the Thessalonians be confident that God had elected them (1 Thess. 1:4–5)? How should this logic embolden you for evangelism?

Just as the Thessalonians imitated Paul and his fellow workers (1 Thess. 1:6), so others are now imitating the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:7–8). Have you “become an example” (see 1 Thess. 1:7) to anyone? What about your congregation as a whole? When people watch your church’s life together, do they glimpse what it means to embrace and embody Jesus Christ?

Many Christians today in the West face increasing pressure to individualize and privatize their faith. How does 1 Thessalonians 1:7–8 challenge us along these lines?

If the Thessalonians have turned from idols to the “living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9), what does that say about the nature of idols? What false god most distracts you from serving the true God? How is that false god lifeless instead of “living”?

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10, Paul connects waiting (something we often think of as passive) with serving (something we usually think of as active). How does Christian waiting differ from worldly waiting, and why is this a crucial distinction?

Also in 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10, the camera pans from salvation past to salvation future. Having renounced God-substitutes for God himself (1 Thess. 1:9), we now await the return of God’s risen Son (1 Thess. 1:10a), who will rescue us from God’s coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:10b). How does the description of the Thessalonians’ transformation correspond to the believer’s experience of past justification, present sanctification, and future glorification?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to consider and record any Personal Implications these sections may have for you.

Definition: Grace

Unmerited favor, especially the free gift of salvation God gives to believers through reliance on Jesus Christ.

Definition: Evangelism

Declaring the gospel (the *evangel*) of Jesus the King, in the power of the Spirit, and calling for response—while leaving the results to God.

Definition: Justification

The moment God declares a Christ-trusting sinner to be in right standing before him; i.e., becoming positionally righteous.

Definition: Sanctification

The incremental, Spirit-empowered process of being conformed to Christ's image; i.e., becoming progressively righteous.

Definition: Glorification

The moment we see Christ's face and are fully and finally freed from sin to enjoy him forever; i.e., becoming perfectly righteous.

Gospel Glimpses

LOVED BY GOD. This little phrase in 1 Thessalonians 1:4 is both easy and dangerous to miss. It was God's unrevoked, unbridled love that moved him—before the beginning of the world—to choose for salvation (1 Thess. 1:4) future rebels against his throne. Contrary to popular distortion, election is a love doctrine (see Deut. 7:7–8; 10:15; Eph. 1:4–5; 2 Thess. 2:13). Scripture discusses election not to satisfy our curiosity but to humble our pride, solidify our hope, and thrill our heart.

SAVED FROM WRATH. God's wrath is his holy and settled opposition to sin and sinners. And, unlike human wrath, God's wrath is never an overreaction. Perhaps it seems to some that an eternity of hell for only a few decades of sin is not a fair sentence. But the punishment does not exceed the crime; it fits it. Hell is an infinite sentence because it punishes an infinite crime; sin is an infinite crime because it is treason against an infinite God. You have never committed a small sin, because you have never offended a small God. Yet the stunning news of Christianity is that, through repentance and reliance on Jesus, we can be rescued from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10; see also 5:9; Rom. 2:5).

Whole-Bible Connections

IDOLATRY. The Thessalonians had turned from idols to God (1 Thess. 1:9). Throughout the Old Testament, idolatry is often associated with bowing down and sacrificing to images of foreign gods. Yet this is not the whole picture. In Ezekiel 14, we learn that the Israelites "have taken their idols into their hearts" (Ezek. 14:3). Ever since the insurrection in Eden (Genesis 3), idolatry has fundamentally been a heart issue. Thus the first of the Ten Commandments simply declares, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3; see also Deut. 5:7). It is important to recognize that an idol is rarely a bad thing in and of itself; instead, it is a good thing gone bad—a good thing we have inflated into an ultimate thing. An idol, therefore, is something we will either sin to get or sin if we do not get. John Calvin famously likened the human heart to an idol factory. The New Testament makes plain that one whose life is marked by idolatry will not inherit God's kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9; Eph. 5:5). Conversion is the miracle that occurs when we forsake idols for a Savior (1 Thess. 1:9), at which point the Holy Spirit begins the lifelong process of uprooting these God-substitutes from within (Col. 3:5). Thus John closes his first letter with the charge, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21; see also 1 Cor. 10:14).

Theological Soundings

GOSPEL. Paul turns back the clock to remind the Thessalonians of when the gospel first pierced their hearts (1 Thess. 1:5). This gospel is a message, an announcement, a breaking-news headline from heaven’s pressroom. Specifically, it is the joyous news of what God has accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—his Son and Israel’s King—to reconcile rebels forever to himself.

TRINITY. In 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 alone, “God” appears seven times, “Jesus” or “Son” or “Lord” six times, and “Spirit” twice. Although it can be easy to miss, the New Testament is inescapably Trinitarian. Its pages brim with the harmonious activity of Father, Son, and Spirit working together to effect redemption. Orchestrated by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Spirit, salvation from sin is a triune achievement. Great danger lurks when we underestimate the practical implications of this doctrine—one God, eternally existing in three persons.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the significance of 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Note the personal applications for your walk with the Lord based on the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of 1 Thessalonians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study and reflect on some key lessons the Lord may be teaching you.

NOTES
