

1 Thessalonians 1

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Date: 31 August 2025

Preacher: Phil Hair

[0:00] Well, we're beginning a new series this morning in 1 Thessalonians, but before turning there, if you turn in your Bible to the Acts of the Apostles, Acts chapter 17, we're going to read verses 1 to 9, and then we'll turn over to 1 Thessalonians.

So, Acts chapter 17, and at verse 1. And when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.

Now, maybe just to pause there for a moment and ask the question, why did Paul and his companions pass through Amphipolis and Apollonia?

Why did they not stop there to preach the gospel? That's an important question to ask, and we'll answer that later on. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.

This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ, he said. In other words, Paul's message was that the Christ of prophecy was the Jesus of history.

[1:40] Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

But the Jews were jealous, so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city.

They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting, These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here. It's the authorized version who says that these men turned the world upside down. I much prefer that, I have to say.

Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king. One called Jesus.

[2:51] Well, that's really incendiary, isn't it? Because in these days, there was one king and one lord, and that was Caesar. But these Christians are saying, actually, there's another king, and his name is Jesus.

And when they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they put Jason and the others on bail and let them go.

Okay, over to 1 Thessalonians. And we're reading the whole of the first chapter. Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

And just to pause there again.

What is there in this phrase, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, that makes it unique in the New Testament?

[3:52] There's something for you to think on for a moment. Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you mentioning you in our prayers.

We continually 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.

For we know, brothers 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 with deep conviction.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Macedonia today would be northern Greece, and Achaia, southern Greece.

[5:16] The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia. Your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us.

They tell how you turn to God from idols, to serve the living and the true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. Well, may God bless his word, and we pray that the Holy Spirit himself would be our teacher today. If you haven't met me before, my name is Phil Hare.

I'm one of the elders here in Cornerstone, and with Callum, our pastor, having been on holiday this past week, I'm ministering God's word this morning.

[6:30] And so I would invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to where we read together just a little while ago here in 1 Thessalonians as we begin this new series of studies in this letter.

1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and verses 1 to 10. And as you do this, you could also have your finger at the ready to turn to the other passage which we read in the Acts of the Apostles, Acts chapter 17 and verses 1 to 9.

Born in 1863 in Greenfield, Michigan, USA, Henry Ford became one of the greatest industrialists of his time.

At the age of 15, he became an apprentice machinist. And having a keen interest in the newly invented automobile, he had by the age of 30 produced his first ever petrol-driven motor car.

Just 10 years later, he founded his own company, the Ford Motor Company. And of all the cars he designed and produced, his most famous was undoubtedly the car which was named the Model T.

[8:07] The Model T. It was introduced in 1908 when fewer than 200,000 people in the USA owned cars.

15 million Model T's were to be sold in the space of the next 20 years. Now, I mention Henry Ford's Model T motor car because in its day, it was in every sense of the word, the model motor car.

If you wanted to know what a car should really be like, how it should look, how it should run, how it should feel, how it should handle, then the Model T was in every sense of the word, the model motor car.

It was the car that you just had to have. And indeed, it was the car which all the other motor manufacturers of the day looked at and sought to copy.

Now, let me ask this morning, is there such a thing as a model church? Not a perfect church.

[9:27] A model church. That is a church which is everything that a church should be, both in terms of its belief and its behavior.

Well, there was 2,000 years ago, and that church was the church here in Thessalonica. You'll notice how Paul describes it in verse 7.

And so, you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. And what this letter does, giving to us this model, is it sets before us what God wants the church to be like, both in terms of belief, that is with respect to the truth which it professes, and in terms of behavior, that is with respect to the lifestyle which it displays.

And all this is so very, very practical in that this word model, you became a model, is the Greek word, *tupos*, from which we get our English words, type, and typewriter.

Wonder if there's anyone here who still uses a typewriter. Very much doubt it. At university, and that wasn't yesterday, I used a typewriter to type up my final year dissertation.

[11:11] And I can still see me in my flat in Edinburgh sitting at the kitchen table, banging away the keys with one finger. And you'll know how a typewriter works, in that when the key is pressed, a type bar, a metal lever with the chosen letter on it, strikes the paper through the ink ribbon, and it leaves an impression on the paper.

And this is the picture here, in that this was a church which when people looked on and saw its belief and its behavior, left an indelible impression on them.

An indelible impression. So much so that they would say to themselves, how can I be part of this? This is the church that I want to belong to.

The point being, isn't this the sort of church which we want to be here in Cornerstone?

A church which makes an indelible impression on people, so much so that they want to belong and come to be a part of it.

[12 : 39] And just to underline here at the very outset that all of the lessons to be learned here in this letter concerning what it means to be such a model church will have to be applied personally, have to be applied individually.

In that, and to quote the words of the old chorus which reminds us that the church is made up of people, of individuals like you and like me, and I find this so very, very convicting.

What sort of church would my church be if every member was just like me? Well, it's a challenge, isn't it?

And this letter presents us with such a challenge. Now, as we begin this study and in the time that we have this morning, let me say just two things, largely by way of introduction to this letter.

And these concern, first of all, how this church was founded. That is how it came into being in the first place. And then secondly, how this church is described.

[13 : 58] That is what it was about this church that made the huge impression on people which it did.

So let's turn first of all to how this church was founded. How it came into being. And this takes us back to Acts 17 and the account of how Paul and his three fellow evangelists Silas, Timothy, and Luke first came to Thessalonica.

And this was around the year AD 49-50. And what's of interest to note is how we're told that having left Philippi, they had brought the gospel over to Europe for the first time.

Having left Philippi, verse 1, they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia. In other words, passing them by.

They didn't stop in these towns to preach the gospel. No, they passed on until we read they came to Thessalonica.

[15 : 14] Now, why was that? What was so important about this city that, as it were, they made a beeline for it in that this was the city where a new church had to be planted?

And the answer is because of its strategic importance for the spread of the gospel throughout Europe.

Now, let me explain briefly so. Thessalonica was one of the great trading centers in the ancient Near East, standing as it did on the Via Ignatia, the Ignatian Way.

That was the main east-west motorway which began in the eastern Byzantium, what we would know today as Istanbul, and extended all the way over to the east coast of the Adriatic.

And crossing over the Adriatic, you would then join the Via Appia, the Appian Way, which went all the way through Italy to Rome itself.

[16 : 30] And so it had such a strategic position on the great trading east to west highway. And not just a city which was famous for its trade, but famous for its tourism, as people flocked to this city to holiday, as they still do today.

Thessalonica, as it's known today, is famous for its weekend city breaks. Easyjet will do you a city break deal with flights beginning at 28 pounds, but just to warn you, that doesn't include your luggage.

Luggage is added on. And not just trade and tourism, worship as well, in that Thessalonica had hundreds of temples.

Indeed, if you were in Thessalonica and you lifted up your eyes and looked over the bay of Thermikos, you could see in the far distance Mount Olympus, the home of Zeus and all the gods of Greece.

And in order to get there either by road or by boat, you had to pass through Thessalonica. Now, do you have the picture? Tens of thousands of people coming to this city, passing through this city for trade and for recreation and for worship.

[18 : 03] And Paul had the eyes to see. He had the vision that with a church planted in this great city, a mission minded church, the gospel would spread out into the rest of Greece and far beyond.

And that's exactly what had happened. Look at verse 8. The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia.

Your faith in God has become known everywhere, everywhere, in Greece and beyond. Now, I don't think that's hyperbole.

this is what had happened. And it had happened in such a relatively short space of time. Now, if this was Paul's strategy for the spread of the gospel, what can we say about his burden for the welfare of the church?

And here we come to how this letter came to be written in the first place, in that such was the impact of Paul's preaching and the inevitable opposition that it stirred up, and such was the violence of that opposition, that he had to leave the city and move on, which caused him so much pain.

[19 : 37] Such was the pastoral bond that had been formed over the time that he and his fellow evangelists had been there. In chapter 2 and verse 17, he speaks of having been torn away from them, almost ripped away from them, and so desperate to know how it was with them, desperate to know how they were getting on as a fellowship.

Chapter 3 and verse 2, we sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen you and encourage you in your faith.

And so here's why this letter had now come to be written. In the chapter 3 and verse 6, Timothy has just now come to us from you.

and has brought good news about your faith and love. And now Paul was writing to this church fellowship in order to further comfort them and strengthen them and encourage them in their gospel witness.

people. Now, all too briefly, that's the background to this letter, but let's quickly move on from how this church was founded, and I will say a wee bit more about this as we go on, to secondly, how this church is described.

[21 : 21] In other words, what was it about this church that made the lasting impression upon people, the lasting impression upon people which it did?

Well, here in this first chapter, I'm doing no more than sweeping through it. Let me say just three things about it.

in terms of who it was rooted in, how it was prayed for, and then what it was shaped by.

I want you to notice, first of all, who it was rooted in, and remembering that there was violence against the believers in Thessalonica. It was being terribly persecuted.

Paul speaks in verse six here of their severe suffering. Look at how Paul begins his letter with this greeting. And it's a greeting which underlines the church's security in the face of all that they were suffering.

[22 : 38] Paul, Silas, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, most of the Bible commentators make much of Paul's customary greeting here that you find in many of his letters, grace and peace to you.

But what's of real importance and real significance here is in what he has to say about where this church was.

And where this church was in that it wasn't just physically in Thessalonica, but do you notice where it was spiritually?

And spiritually, it was in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And what's so very important and significant about this is that whilst the phrase in the Lord Jesus Christ is used by Paul over 150 times in his letters, in his letters, Paul doesn't speak about people being Christians.

[24 : 04] he speaks about people being in Christ. And he uses that phrase, as I say, over 150 times in his letters.

This phrase, in God the Father, is used hardly at all. It's used hardly at all.

But he uses it here. And he uses it here to underline in the face of their severe suffering, their spiritual security.

In Paul's words in Romans 8, that there was nothing that could ever separate them from the love of God. You see, in pondering this phrase, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I want you to underline that in your Bibles. my mind went straight to John 10. And Jesus pictured of himself as the good shepherd.

[25 : 12] And his words there in that chapter in verse 27, my sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.

No one can snatch them out of my hand. But then he goes on to say, giving as it were a double security, a double assurance concerning our safety and security as the people of God.

My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. And if you wanted a picture this morning, if you're a Christian believer, this is your security.

First of all, you're in the hand of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he holds you in your hand. But then there's another hand. And it's the hand of God the Father.

And it's as if the hand of God the Father reaches over and unfolds the hand of God the Son. And that's your security.

[26 : 34] And then Jesus says this, underlining what he's just said. He says, I and the Father are one.

In other words, there is as much chance of you being torn away from the hold of the Father and the Son as the Father and the Son have of being torn apart from each other.

That's how secure your security is if you're a Christian believer. And at the very outset, this is what these Thessalonian believers needed to be reassured of, that spiritually they were safe and secure in the hands of the Father and the Son.

Now I want to say at the very outset, I want to ask at the very outset today, where are you today? Where are you? Physically? you're in Stirling, as these believers were in Thessalonica. You're in Stirling.

[27 : 58] In fact, you're here in Wallace High School. But where are you spiritually? Are you in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ?

Is this where your life is rooted? is this where your life is grounded?

But do you notice not just who it was rooted in, secondly, how it was prayed for? And this is rather marvelous.

Verse 2, we always thank God for all of you. Mentioning you in our prayers, we continually 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.

And what an enormous encouragement this must have been to the Thessalonians, strengthening them, emboldening them to go on in their faith, and to go on in their love, and to go on in their hope, not giving up, because they knew that they were continually prayed for.

[29 : 25] now, if I could illustrate this personally so, I'll always remember when we lived up north in Ullapool, in the northwest highlands, holidaying as a family in Aberdeen.

A friend had given us their house, and on the Sunday we went to church. This was a church on Union Street in the very heart of the city, called Gilcompton South Church.

And this was a church which we knew prayed very regularly for us. Well, just before the service began, an older couple, a husband and wife, came and sat down on the two empty chairs beside us.

The service was just about to begin, so there wasn't time to chat. We were just able to say good morning to each other. But at the end of the service, this lady turned round to me and said, well, you're visitors with us here in Aberdeen.

Yes, I said, we are visitors. It's lovely to be here. She said, where are you from? And I said, well, we're from the northwest, from the village of Ulipu.

[30 : 45] And at that she turned to her husband and put her hand on her husband's arm and said, oh, darling, isn't this wonderful?

Here's a family from Phil Hare's congregation. I'd never met them. They'd never met me.

But we were remembered. We were prayed for. And can I tell you something? Over the years following, especially when the going was hard and tough in the work, we fed off of that.

It was almost our weekly diet. Kept us going in our works of faith and love and hope. Now, let me ask you this morning, why has Cornerstone been growing in its faith and love and hope, enduring, persevering in these first ten years?

Well, I tell you, it's because you've been prayed for. And it's because you are being prayed for throughout Scotland and in many places throughout the world.

[32 : 15] Can you imagine what this must have meant to the Thessalonians? Who it was rooted in, how it was prayed for?

And then thirdly, do you notice what it was shaped by? That is, what it was that shaped, that molded this church, so that it became the model church that he speaks of here.

And do you know what the answer is? It's a very simple answer. The gospel. The gospel. Now, what do I mean? Well, I want you to notice how Paul speaks of this here by saying in verse four, for we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you.

Now, this is the doctrine of election, of how God in his electing mercy and grace chooses us to be his own.

You'll remember how Jesus spoke about this to his disciples in John 15, saying, you did not choose me, but I chose you.

[33:37] Now, I don't want to say much more about this. If you've any questions about it, speak to Callum, and he'll be glad to hear from you tomorrow morning.

Just phone up and make an appointment. But the question is, and this is a really serious question, actually, how can I know if someone is part of God's elect?

elect? How can I know if someone is part of God's elect? Indeed, can we know? Don't we often say that the elect are known only to God?

But, but, and this is what Paul is saying here, we can know. We can know. And this is how we can know, in that whoever it is we might be thinking of.

Is he, is she, a gospel person? You see, this fellowship, and this is what characterized it, was full of gospel people.

[34:51] Most of you know that the other week, the Amazing Life gospel choir performed in Sockton Prison, Edinburgh Prison.

And before we began to sing, we had the opportunity to chat to the prisoners who came to this performance, and I was sitting beside a man, I'm not even going to tell you what his name was.

It was an older man doing a 14-year stretch, 14 years in Sockton Prison, and I chatted to him, and he told me a bit about his life and circumstances, and then he said to me, where are you from?

And I said, oh, I said, most of us are from Stirling, or round about Stirling, and what church do you belong to? And I said, well, I belong to a church called Cornerstone Community Church, and he said this to me, he said, are you a gospel church?

Isn't that interesting? Are you a gospel church? Let me very briefly say three things about this

gospel church.

[36:12] Firstly, there is how the gospel was preached to this church, how it was preached to the Thessalonians, for we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you, because, you see, here's how you can know, because our gospel came to you not simply with words.

Now, of course, it came with words, this telling us that the gospel Paul preached had content. There was substance to it.

We read in Acts 17 that Paul went into the synagogue and reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining, that is, expounding the Scriptures, what Callum does here, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday.

It's what the word means, and proving that the Christ, the prophesied Messiah of Old Testament Scriptures, had to suffer and rise from the dead.

and here was the core of the message, this Jesus I am proclaiming is the Christ. That is, the promised prophet who would speak to them as God, the promised priest who would die for them on the cross bearing their sins, and the promised king who would come to rule over them, this other king called Jesus.

[37:51] But it's not simply that the message came with words. Do you notice here, it came, he said, also with power, and that power was the power of the Holy Spirit, a power which enabled Paul to preach, we are told, with deep conviction.

In other words, here was a man who was absolutely sure of his message, its truth, and its eternal relevance, the point being that those who were listening could see this, and they were gripped by it, and they were persuaded by it, and they were changed by it.

And you see the two go together in true gospel preaching, the word and the spirit. You see, my friends, when it comes to preaching, I can do a number of things, Callum can do a number of things, in that I can convince you intellectually, and I can move you perhaps emotionally, I might even be able to impress you personally, but what's the one thing I'll never be able to do, just this, regenerate you spiritually, raise you up from spiritual death to spiritual life, only God the Holy Spirit can do this. And it's what happened here, so much so, chapter 2 and verse 13, we also thank God continually, because when you receive the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

But notice as well that this gospel was preached not just by means of the words which Paul spoke, it was also preached by means of the life which Paul lived.

[40:15] Do you see this at the end of verse 5? You know, he says, you know how we lived among you for your sake. In other words, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, and Luke lived lives which commended

the gospel and they commended the gospel by their living in that in all that they said and in all that they did there was to be seen in them something of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Just a few weeks ago, a very famous preacher in the USA died, a very fine Bible expositor and author by the name of John MacArthur and Lynn and I last Sunday evening tuned in to his memorial service in California.

We wanted to do this because the preacher at the memorial service was Sinclair Ferguson who stood here two weeks ago. But one of the things that was said about John MacArthur was that the loudest and the longest sermon he ever preached was his life.

And such was the impact of this, the lives that these evangelists were living. Verse 6, you became imitators of us and of the Lord.

That is, the Lord who could be seen in them. And my friends, isn't this just how so many people are first drawn to the gospel? It's not that they hear it, it's that they see it.

[42 : 11] I would be interested to go around the whole of the congregation this morning and ask what it was that first attracted you to the gospel of Christ. And I wouldn't be surprised if most of you were able to say, well, it's not that we heard it, we saw it.

And we saw it in the lives of maybe someone I was working with, someone I was at university with, a neighbor, I saw something in them that was altogether different and irresistibly attractive.

And I said to myself, what is it and whatever it is, I want it. I want it. I want it. I want I want I want it. And so how this gospel was preached to the Thessalonians.

Secondly, very quickly, there is how this gospel was received by the Thessalonians. Verse 6 again, in spite of severe suffering, you welcome the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

Now, isn't that extraordinary in some ways? In spite of the most terrible, terrible suffering, the gospel Paul preached was received with joy.

[43 : 29] And with joy because of what it did for these Thessalonian believers. Now, what was it that Paul preached that produced such joy?

Well, he preached at the very end of the passage, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. And isn't this the gospel we rejoice in?

And that because of all that Jesus has done in his death upon the cross, in the words of Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied for every sin on him was laid.

Here in the death of Christ I live, that's why we rejoice in this gospel. Because it's the only gospel that does this, rescues us from the coming wrath.

How it was preached to the Thessalonians, how it was received by the Thessalonians, time has gone thirdly quickly.

[44 : 44] How this gospel resounded out, from the Thessalonians. You see, and going all the way back to where we began, in what particular way was this church a model church?

Well, not just in the way in which they received this gospel, but in the way in which they transmitted this gospel. Verse 8, and this verse ought to begin with the word for.

for, for, for the Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Now, this phrase rang out means to echo or to make a noise. It's the phrase that's used for the peal of a bell or the boom of a cannon or the blast of a trumpet.

In other words, you couldn't but help hear this message which was being proclaimed by the Thessalonians. But here's the question, the really important question.

[45 : 58] How was this message proclaimed? How was it actually sounded out by the Thessalonians? And do you notice the answer Paul gives?

Not just by means of what was preached by them, but by means of what was reported about them. Now, do you see how Paul underlines this? In that he says, therefore, therefore, we do not need to say anything about it.

You see, the picture is that of Paul preaching this gospel throughout the whole of Greece and beyond and saying to his hearers, let me give you an example of the power of the gospel.

You want to know how the gospel changes lives? Let me give you an example. Let me tell you about what happened in Thessalonica and people would immediately interrupt him.

[47 : 13] Immediately interrupt him and say, but we all know what's happened there. We've heard about it.

