

1 Thessalonians Chapter 1

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. A brief prayer.

Heavenly Father, we do indeed thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, and which is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Open our hearts and our understanding to hear and to receive and to welcome your word this morning. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, how can you tell if someone has become a Christian? How can you tell if you're a Christian? Paul seems pretty confident in this opening chapter of his letter to the Thessalonians that he's addressing people who have recently become real, genuine Christians.

In fact, he even says in verse 4, We know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you. We know that he has chosen you.

[1 : 23] How could Paul have known that? Did Paul have some kind of insight into the mysterious counsels of God? How can we know that God has chosen somebody?

How can we know that God has chosen us? I think you'll find the answers to these important questions in this wonderful short opening chapter of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Paul had recently visited the city of Thessalonica. He was only able to stay there for a short time, just three Sabbaths, according to Luke, in Acts.

And on those three Sabbaths, he'd argued and reasoned and debated in the synagogue with the Jewish people. He'd got a largely negative reception from the Jewish people.

But in those days, around the synagogues, there were what we call God-fearers, and they were Gentiles who were fed up of paganism. And they'd come to believe that there was only one God.

[2 : 28] And they'd come to have a great respect for Jewish moral standards, the Ten Commandments, and so on. They didn't want to become full Jews. They didn't want to be circumcised and give up their bacon and so on.

But they were interested in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And many of those Gentiles responded to the gospel message.

And many of them left the synagogue and joined the church. And that meant, of course, that the Jews were extremely jealous.

And they stirred up a riot. And Paul had to leave the city after only three Sabbaths. And he had to move on to the next city, Berea, and then Athens. And he left a church, a new church, surrounded by paganism, liable to persecution.

And he had to leave him. So he was concerned about it. He was anxious about it, he tells us in chapters 2 and 3. And he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to report back to him how they were doing.

[3 : 37] And Timothy had just arrived with good news. They were thriving. The church was thriving. And Paul writes this letter to express his joy. And in the second half of the letter to clear up a few problems and misunderstandings that he hadn't been able to deal with when he was there.

And he says, When I got Timothy's report, I just knew that God had chosen me. I knew that this work at Thessalonica had been the work of God's Spirit. Not just my work, not just the work of man, but the work of God's Spirit.

Look at verse 5. Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. That's why he thanks God for them in verse 2.

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. He doesn't congratulate himself on what he'd achieved at Thessalonica. He doesn't congratulate them for believing in Jesus and turning to God.

He thanks God for the work in the city of Thessalonica. Why is he so confident that this is the work of God? How does he know that these people have been chosen by God?

[4 : 44] How can you know that you've been chosen by God? How can you know that you're a real Christian? How can you know that somebody else is a real Christian? Well, I think there are two reasons, two answers to that question in this chapter.

And the first, their initial response to the gospel, their initial response to the gospel. Paul remembers how they had responded when he first explained the gospel to them.

Look at verse 6. 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.

You welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. They heard the gospel message. They heard what Paul was preaching in that synagogue.

And they said, isn't this just wonderful? Isn't this just the message we've always wanted to hear? They joyfully received the good news that Paul brought to them.

[5 : 49] Not everyone welcomed the message as we could have read if we'd read on in Acts chapter 17. A lot of people resented the message. Many people opposed the message.

Paul had to be hounded out of town by this riot that the Jews stirred up. Most people probably, as today, were just uninterested.

They couldn't care there. But there were those who welcomed the message with joy. They welcomed the message with joy. And that's the work of the Spirit, says Paul.

That joy is given by the Holy Spirit. How can you tell a real Christian? They welcomed the message with joy. I want to go into a little brackets at the moment.

And I want to ask the question, what was this message that they received so joyfully? That's why I read Acts chapter 17 as well as 1 Thessalonians 1 because in Acts chapter 17 Luke tells us what Paul was preaching in this synagogue.

[7 : 01] And there were three parts to what he said. He said, this Jesus is the Christ. This Jesus is the Christ. That was part one.

Part two, the Christ must suffer. And part three, the Christ must rise again from the dead. And if you read 1 Corinthians chapter 15 you'll find that's exactly what he says there as well.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 15 he says, let me remind you of the gospel I preached to you. the gospel that saves you. Christ, the Christ died for our sins.

He was buried. And on the third day he was raised. So there are three parts to this message that Paul preached. Everywhere he went this was what he preached.

Christ. Jesus is the Christ number one. The word Christ isn't Jesus' surname. Jesus Christ.

[8 : 04] It's his title. That's who he is. That's what he is. Jesus is the Christ. The word Christ means somebody who's been anointed with oil.

Who gets to be anointed with oil? Royalty. Kings. Still happen. It's a long time since we've had a coronation. Don't know whether I'm going to see another one in my lifetime.

But when it happens whoever it is probably Charles will have oil poured onto his head. That's when he'll become king.

When he has oil poured onto his head. So the word Christ means king. Jesus is king. And he's not just any king.

He is the king. He is the king. He is God's king. That's what the word Christ means. The Hebrew version of the Greek word Christ is Messiah.

[9 : 04] He is the Messiah. God promised God's promised king. If you read the Old Testament and I'm going to be saying a little bit more about this tonight. God promises a king who will come and save his people.

He will come and rule in righteousness and in peace. He will rule universally. He will rule irresistibly. God promises to send this king.

And the kings of Israel and Judah were useless by and large. The one or two decent ones but by and large they were useless and this king didn't come. But they held on to this hope of this coming king.

And some of the passages about this king are quite familiar because they tend to get read in carol services. His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government there will be no end. And so on. Passages like that. You're familiar with them. God's going to send a king. This was the great hope of Israel.
[10:12] The king's going to come. There they were oppressed by the Babylonians in exile then by the Persians, then by the Greeks, then by the Romans.

But they said never mind. The king's coming. God's king is coming. Paul's message was this Jesus. He's the king. He's God's king. He's the Christ. And sure enough, you know, when you read Mark's gospel, what's the first thing that Jesus said? His first recorded word. The time is at hand. The kingdom of God has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. The time is fulfilled.

Let's get it right. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news. He's the king. Jesus is God's king.

[11:09] That is the gospel. That is the good news. The king has come. And after making that tremendous claim at the beginning of Mark, you can go on into Mark's gospel and see Jesus' royal authority over demons, over disease, over death.

And you can see him calling people into his kingdom. not just respectable Jews, but sinners and even Gentiles into his kingdom. The king has come. Jesus is the king. That's part one of the message. Part two of the message is really quite surprising. At least it won't be to you because you heard it before. But it was incredibly surprising to those who heard it at Thessalonica in that synagogue. It was the most shocking thing. the Christ, the king, must suffer.

The king must suffer. Well, he is the king, God's promised king.

[12:19] And Paul is saying that he must suffer, the king. not only did he suffer, he died. Not only did he die, he was put to death by crucifixion, which was the method of execution reserved for the lowest criminals who the Romans regarded as beneath contempt.

The disciples couldn't understand it at all. They tried to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem where he said, I'm going to be put to death. Peter said, this will never happen to you. You're the king. Jesus said, get behind me, Satan. You're thinking like men. You're not thinking like God. The king must suffer.

It was a contradiction in turn. A crucified Christ, a crucified Messiah, a crucified king. God's servant. But actually it's there in the Old Testament scriptures, the same scriptures that tell us about the coming king, tell us about somebody who is called God's servant. And this servant is going to suffer with Israel and for Israel and for mankind.

[13:42] He's going to suffer. You're familiar with passages like Isaiah chapter 53. And the amazing thing about Jesus is that he taught that the king and the servant were not two different people.

They were the same person. The king and the servant were the same person. You see, good kings love their subject.

good kings protect their subject. Good kings take responsibility for their subject. They identify with their subject.

They're there with them. And Jesus' subjects were rebels, sinners.

They could never have a place in God's kingdom. They would be forever excluded from God's kingdom. And so the king came and he identified with them and with us.

[14:56] And instead of excluding us from his kingdom and destroying us, which he could have done, he, as the king, suffered on behalf of his subject.

The one for the many. men, he suffered for his subject. He died for his subject. He was crowned with thorns. And a placard was put on over his head saying, this is Jesus, the king of the Jew. Absolutely right. That's who he was. the king suffering with his subject, suffering for his subject. Because the king has borne God's judgment for his subjects, then they can be forgiven, they can be pardoned, they can be welcomed into God's kingdom just because the king has died for them, accepting God's judgment for them.

So that they can be welcomed into the kingdom of God. The Christ must suffer. And then the third part of what Paul said at Thessalonica was the Christ must rise from the dead.

And the book of Acts is full of this. This is what they preach in the book of Acts. They preach the resurrection of Jesus. This is what we should be preaching everywhere today. We should be telling everybody that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead on the third day and he's Lord.

[16 : 39] And by his resurrection he's been declared to be the son of God with power. The resurrection was God's yes to Jesus. The world said no to Jesus and his claim and still does.

The resurrection is God saying yes to Jesus. Yes he is who he claimed to be. He is the son of God. He is the Christ. He is the Messiah.

Yes he did die for our sins. For your sins. And therefore there is forgiveness available. The resurrection demonstrates that. Yes he has paid for sin.

Yes he has defeated death which is the wages of sin. Yes the new creation has begun in the resurrection of Christ. Jesus is alive.

He will come again in power and in glory to reign and rule universally and irresistibly as the Old Testament scriptures said but before he did that he had to suffer.

[17 : 53] You can either submit to his rule now or refuse his rule and if you refuse his rule you will be excluded finally and forever from his wonderful coming kingdom.

That's the message that Paul preached to the Thessalonians in a nutshell. Many people rejected that message. Many people were totally unmoved by it but there were some who welcomed the message.

The message of the forgiveness of sins through the death of the Messiah the King. They welcomed it. That doesn't mean to say they welcomed it the first time they heard it.

In the book of Acts you find Paul reasoning with people arguing with people persuading people he took time with some people but eventually the penny dropped and they saw that it was true.

They saw that it was the word of God look at chapter 2 verse 13 look at chapter 2 verse 13 we thank God continually because when you received 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.

[19 : 04] They came to say this was the word of God. This message was from God and they welcomed it with joy. joy. After all the word gospel means good news or great news joyful news.

In Luke it's described as good news of great joy for all people. C.S. Lewis who was an atheist wrote a book describing his conversion to Christ and he entitled the book Surprised by Joy.

Surprised by Joy. That's an interesting title because he describes himself in the book as quote the most reluctant convert in all England.

The most reluctant convert in all England. So it took some time with C.S. Lewis. But finally to quote him again he admitted that God was God.

And when he did he came into an experience of great joy. Surprised by Joy. So Paul remembers the initial response of the Thessalonians to his message.

[20 : 23] What exactly did welcoming the message with joy entail? for those who did it. Well just look at verses 9 and 10.

Second part of verse 9. They tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead Jesus who rescues us from the coming of the rock.

Welcoming the message with joy didn't mean just saying yeah well that's great I agree with that. Welcoming the message with joy meant two things.

It meant repentance towards God and it meant faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance towards God turning from idols to serve the living and true God.

Now the cities that Paul visited were full of idols. There were temples in these cities to countless gods and goddesses. You can read later on in Acts chapter 17 of Paul visiting Athens and we read that his spirit was provoked within him.

[21 : 32] The word provoked is the word from which we get paroxysm which is a kind of fit. When he saw the idols in Athens it almost gave Paul a fit. All these superstitious gods and goddesses instead of the one creator god of all mankind being given the worship he deserved nearly gave him a fit.

and he immediately began to tell them about the creator god who sent Jesus to call pagans like them into his kingdom. So repentance meant turning to god from idols and idol is a god substitute the substitute for god.

Things haven't actually changed that much. John Calvin much a quote which is much quoted coming up here you'll have heard this quote before. The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols.

The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols. An idol a god substitute is something we trust in look to rely on for the things that only god can do for us or give to us or be for us.

Many of them are good things. Many of them are god given things. But we make them ultimate. We put them in the place of god in our lives.

[22 : 58] We rely on them for happiness and for significance and for purpose and for security and for success. We love them. We trust them. We seek them. We hope in them. We worry about them.

We can't imagine being happy without them. Those things are our god. Things that have pushed god to the circumference or the back of our line.

Those are our false gods, our idol. And repentance means turning from them to god, to serve the living and true god.

That doesn't mean to say that you become a recluse and that you never think about anything but religion. It means that you actually enjoy some of these things more than you did. but they simply become god's good gifts for you which you're grateful for.

Bad things of course you want to give up and you ask god to help you to break that power over you. This is what repentance means. Repentance towards god, turning to god from god's substitutes.

[24 : 07] and faith in jesus christ. They turned to the living god to serve him and to wait for his son from heaven.

They were waiting for his son from heaven, jesus, who god raised from the dead and who rescues us from the coming wrath. All their hope, all their faith was in jesus, the son of god.

Now, let me ask you, have you welcomed the message with joy? Joy given by the holy spirit, are you a christian? Are you one of god's chosen?

How can you tell? Have you welcomed the message with joy? many of you here will not be able to remember a time when you didn't understand the message or assent to the message because you've known it from childhood.

Maybe sometimes you wish there had been a time when you could remember first hearing the gospel and being able to either agree or disagree with it, for it or against it.

[25 : 28] sometimes some of us who've been brought up in Christian homes wish there had been a time like that when we heard the gospel for the first time and it was news.

For some of us the gospel has never really been news, we're just used to it. We've been brought up to it from our mother's knee as preachers always say. And for you, you need to ask yourself the question, what is your response to the gospel now, today?

Are you welcoming it with joy, today? Is it the source of your joy? Are you turning from your idols today to serve the living and true God?

Are you today trusting in Jesus Christ, waiting for him to come from heaven? Are you trusting in him for deliverance from the coming wrong? That's the question you need to ask yourself.

God's love. So, Paul looked back to the initial response of the Thessalonians to the gospel, and then secondly, and with much less time, he thought of the progress they had made since their initial response to the gospel.

[26 : 48] The progress they had made since their initial response to the gospel. gospel. The mark of genuine repentance and faith is that they continue. Repentance leads to a life of repentance.

True faith leads to a life of faith. The mark that you've received the message with joy is that you go on welcoming the message with joy. So, Paul refers in verse 3 to their continuing faith and hope and love.

Three Christian qualities that he often mentions together regularly. Notably in that passage about love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Faith and hope and love. He often links them together.

three qualities of Christian character. Paul is anxious that this initial response to the gospel had not just been a flash in the pan.

Timothy has reported the good news that they're progressing in faith and hope and love. And Paul is thrilled. Chapter 3 verse 6. 3-6.

[28 : 00] Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. Paul had arrived with the good news of their faith and love.

Verse 7. Therefore brothers, chapter 3 verse 7. Therefore brothers in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. Now we really live since you are standing firm.

You are standing firm in the Lord. Real faith, real repentance, a real welcoming of the gospel leads to a life of standing firm in it.

So Paul mentions these in verse 3. Your work produced by faith.

Your labour prompted by love. Their faith was producing work. James chapter 2. Faith without works is dead. The devil believes, the demons believe and tremble.

[29 : 04] They've got no works to show for their faith. They're still demon. There's been no change. Your work produced by faith.

Your labour prompted by love. The word labour there means toil to the point of exhaustion. Work to the point of exhaustion. Prompted by love.

Their love for God, for Jesus, for one another was causing them to serve and love God and Jesus and one another.

Their hope produced and your endurance inspired by hope. Their hope was producing endurance. The word means stickability.

A dogged refusal to give up whatever the difficulties, whatever the discouragement. So they were going on, they were going on responding to Jesus.

[30 : 03] Hope produces perseverance. You can do just about anything, get through just about anything. if there's light at the end of the tunnel, if you've got a hope at the end of it.

When I used to climb up fells in the Lake District, the thing that kept me going up the hard bits was the prospect of the view at the top, the photographs I was going to take and the marmite butties I was going to eat.

That's what kept me going up the difficult bit. The hope kept me going. The hope of a medal gets an athlete to get through all that rigorous training.

You can put up with just about anything if there's a hope at the end of it. If you know it's not going to last forever and if it's going to result in joy. Paul uses the illustration of birth actually, giving birth.

those of you who have had that experience will probably know that it's supposed to be quite painful. I hear that it's quite painful.

[31 : 16] But you accept the pain because you know that there's going to be something at the end of it. Something marvellous at the end of it.

That's what keeps you going. that's what was keeping these Thessalonians going. And that brings us perhaps to the most thrilling thing of all.

Verse 8. 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. What's Paul saying there? He's saying the message I preached to you in Thessalonica. What's happened to it? You're preaching it now to other people.

It's spreading. Not through me but through you. It's the idea of a sounding board. The sound bounces against the sounding board and is dispersed to a wider area.

[32 : 21] Or in a more recent illustration think of a telecommunication satellite that receives a signal and transmits it further afield. That's what had happened at Thessalonica.

The message had gone from Paul to them and now it was going out from them to the surrounding area. And here's one fantastic indication that someone has really responded to the gospel.

When they begin to want to tell the message to others, they might be very nervous about it. They might think they're absolutely hopeless at doing it, but they want to do it.

They want to do it. The message that came to them, they want to sound out from them to others.

Now I'm not saying you should be able to give a long list of people you've led to Christ.

But you want to lead people to Christ and you try to lead people to Christ. sadly so often these days in Britain where people just don't want to know, we feel we fail so often.

[33 : 34] But we want to lead people to Christ. And maybe some of you, if you think of a nought being absolutely no interest whatsoever and ten being a fully committed baptised church member, maybe some of you are just going to have to move somebody from three to four or from six to seven.

It doesn't matter. you move them. But you want to lead people to Christ and you try and think of ways you can do it and you pray for opportunities to talk to people.

Do you do that? Do you pray for opportunities to talk to people? Our next door neighbour has started coming to church with her.

She's been coming to cattle services for a year. And the last cattle service, she said, I really enjoyed that. She said, I'm 77, do you think I could have my funeral at this church?

So I said, well, that could be arranged. Didn't ask her for a date, but I'm sure that could be arranged, but how about coming more often? So she started coming more often.

[34 : 45] And in September we're going to start a little Christianity Explored course in our home for her. And I didn't want it just to be her, so there are two or three elderly people coming as well to watch the Christianity Explored DVDs together.

I'm hoping she'll come to Christ. Just do it. Just do it. Just do it. Okay, so this is why Paul is so confident that what has happened at Thessalonica was the work of God.

This is how he knows that God has chosen them. All the signs are there. They welcomed the message, even at a time of persecution, with joy.

They turned to God from God's substitute. They trusted Jesus Christ. And now they're living lives of faith and love and hope.

Really, really wanting to get the message out to others. When you find that happening in a person, you can be pretty sure that the Holy Spirit has worked, that God has chosen them, and you can thank God for what he's done.

[36 : 03] Can I ask you, if you're a Christian, in the light of what I've been saying, has God worked in your life? And can ask you, if you are a Christian, to pray that God will work like this in Whitby and elsewhere, wherever you come from this morning, as he is in so many places all over the world today.

There are churches like this starting all over the world. He is at work. Pray that God will be at work in Whitby, or wherever it is you come from.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.