

Bible Study for February 9th

This letter follows the form of letters in the ancient world in listing the author(s) and the recipients first. The authors were Paul, Silas and Timothy who had first visited Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-9, traveling the approximately 90 miles from Philippi. There in Acts 17, we read that Paul preached three consecutive Sabbaths in the synagogue and saw some Jewish converts, along with some of the God-fearing Gentiles. While he was there, Paul supported himself with his tent-making occupation (see 2:9 and 2 Thess. 3:7-10). They stayed with someone called Jason. There was a riot. Paul, Silas, and Timothy left and went to Berea. From there Paul went to Athens. Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica eventually and rejoined Paul in Corinth where he gave him a positive report, but shared some concerns about the church. This occasioned Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Although Silas and Timothy are listed as co-authors, Paul is clearly the primary author and has always been recognized as such. It was written around AD 51-52 from Corinth. The recipients were the Thessalonians. Thessalonica was a city of great prominence in Macedonia with a population of 100,000. They were located on the coast and on a major road known as the Egnatian Way.

Paul wrote the letter because he had learned from Timothy that his character had been attacked, believers needed encouragement due to persecution, to urge them to live godly lives, and to comfort them about the state of believing loved ones who had died. All of these issues he addresses in this letter.

The Faith of the Thessalonians

A good summary of the testimony of the Thessalonians is found in verses 2-3.

- Work produced by faith (Eph. 2:8-9).
- Labor prompted by love (Rom. 5:5).
- Endurance inspired by hope (Rom. 15:13).

The three greatest virtues: faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13). They are inner virtues that produce outward actions. Faith produces work (no contradiction between Paul and James!). Love produces labor.

Notice that Paul thanks God for these things. We tend to thank and congratulate people, although gratitude to others seems to be an increasingly lost virtue, but Paul thanks God for their work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope. Why does Paul thank God for these things? Because he recognizes that they are all gifts of God, works of God's grace! Work, labor and perseverance come from faith, love, and hope which are gifts of God's grace! All that we do in the Christian life is grace!

Yes, we must believe and we must work, but we must always remember, as Paul told the Philippians, that is God who works in us to will and do according to His good pleasure (2:12).

There is a hint of the source of the Thessalonians faith, love, and hope in verse 4. Paul says this is why I give thanks to God for you, because you are "loved by God" and "He has chosen you." God takes the initiative in our salvation. We were loved before God before we loved God. We were chosen by God before we chose God. This doesn't eliminate human responsibility or the necessity of personal faith in Christ, but it does explain why God receives all the glory in our salvation. As John put it in 1 John 4:19, "We love, because He first loved us." Some say, well if I believed God chose us first I wouldn't preach the gospel to anyone. It wouldn't matter. That couldn't be more wrong. We preach the gospel first because we are commanded to do so! But salvation only comes to men and women and boys and girls who respond to the gospel message. Romans 10, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God."

Bible study continues on back →

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In verse 4 we see how Paul knew that the Thessalonian Christians were loved and chosen by God. It was because they responded to the gospel message that Paul preached and they became followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. How do you know if you are loved and chosen by God? Simple answer with a question. Have you responded to the message of the gospel in repentance and faith and followed the Lord Jesus Christ? If so, you can know and others can know that you belong to God!

Note their conversion in verse 9: They turned to God from idols. What a beautiful description of conversion! Conversion includes both repentance and faith. It is the turn from sin and to God. It is an 180 degree turn! This was not metaphorical for the Thessalonians. They had literally turned to God from idols. One reference work notes:

Archaeological and inscriptional evidence indicates the presence of various Greco-Roman deities, such as Dionysus, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Demeter, and Zeus. The Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis were also popular, as was the imperial cult with its worship of the Roman Empire.
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Their conversion included repentance from their idolatry and faith in the one true God. That's what repentance looks like. It may look slightly different in your life, but it will include turning from sin and turning to the one true God. What are the sins that have held you captive? Are you willing to turn from them and turn to Christ? That is not only the evidence of your salvation, it is the evidence of your election. Not only do we see the faith of the Thessalonians, we also see:

The Faithfulness of the Thessalonians.

In these verses of the Thessalonians' testimony, there are numerous examples of the faithfulness of the Thessalonians. Their work that was motivated by faith. Their labor that was motivated by love. Their endurance that was motivated by hope. They worked and followed Christ (v. 6). Their faith was known throughout the Mediterranean world (v. 8). Thessalonica was an influential city with easy access to other parts of Empire by sea and land. They endured persecution (v. 6). The Thessalonians were known for their faithfulness. But not only do we see the faith and the faithfulness of the Thessalonians, we also see:

The Future of the Thessalonians

This takes us all the way down to verse 10. The Thessalonians were waiting for something. They were waiting for the "blessed hope and glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." Remember, they had endurance inspired by hope. Hope of what? Hope of the second coming of Christ! They kept going, enduring persecution, because they knew that persecution, pain, and suffering were not the final word for the child of God! Jesus is coming again! The One who was raised from the dead is coming again! Jesus, who conquered death by His death and resurrection, is the One who is coming! Jesus, who died for our sins that we might be forgiven and accepted as righteous, is the One who is coming! This Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath! How does He rescue us? He rescued us by His first coming. He lived a sinless life and died a sacrificial death in our place. He bore the wrath that we deserve so that we could escape that wrath. But the rescue will be consummated at the return of Christ! There is a day of wrath coming on this world that has rebelled against Jesus! But for those who have received Jesus, we will escape the wrath that will be poured out on this world! Do you know Him? Are you trusting in Him? Have you responded to the gospel message in repentance and faith? You can know that your sins are forgiven through faith in Christ alone!

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