

# Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:1–10)

## *Prescript (1:1)*

1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Messiah Jesus—grace and peace to you.

Ancient letters of Paul's time began much like what we see in 1 Thessalonians: sender—recipient—greeting. In this case, while Paul uses “I” several times throughout the letter (2:18; 3:5; 5:27), he lists his co-workers Silvanus and Timothy. It is probably not the case that they served as co-writers in a formal sense, but rather Paul wanted to express that he functioned as part of a larger group (and Timothy and Silvanus were people whom they already knew; 3:2). While we think of Paul as *the* apostle to the Gentiles, we must remember that, even in the account of Paul's acceptance by the “pillar apostles” in Galatians, it is Paul and *Barnabas* who receive the right hand of fellowship (Gal 2:9). He often demonstrated a hearty spirit of community and collaboration—as 2 Cor 1:19 reminds us, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy proclaimed the gospel *as a team*.

In most of his letters, Paul identifies himself as apostle or slave, but here he is simply “Paul.” The most likely reason for this unadorned appellation is that he was not determined to reinforce his authority, and he wished to write a simple letter of encouragement and teaching for a church that he loved and cared about deeply.<sup>1</sup>

Paul writes to the church of the Thessalonians *in* God the Father and the Lord Messiah Jesus. Perhaps, in our familiarity with this kind of language in Paul's letters we might miss its potency. Paul was marking the identity of this community as primarily determined by their relationship with God and Jesus the Messiah, and in particular that they now have life and security and wholeness of their being within the ambit of that realm.

1. See Best 1986: 60.

Paul explains in Colossians that the Father “rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13 AT). This is precisely the sentiment carried by the statement in 1 Thess 1:1—*this is who you are, this is where you are, you belong with God and Jesus and they have made a home for you.*<sup>2</sup> It becomes clear very early on in the letter that the Thessalonians are facing many burdens, worries, and afflictions, and Paul’s reminder to them that they have been relocated, as it were, into the realm or domain of God and Jesus supplies a kind of identity-anchor on the stormy sea of life.

Here he adds too his wish for God’s “grace and peace” to them. This is a typical kind of well-wish for a letter of his time, but these are two very important words for Paul theologically. It is not simply a nice sentiment from Paul, but a mark of the ongoing, out-flowing work of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah where he ever has more favor<sup>3</sup> to bestow. Keep in mind that in chapter five he warns them not to be naïve, embracing cheap offers of “peace and security” from the world (5:3). When Paul conveys words of peace, it is a deeper kind than the world can offer, just as Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). As Jesus comforted his disciples, so Paul his converts—Jesus “released” his peace and left it for his followers; Paul offers it to the Thessalonians.

### *Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ Praise-Worthy Trust (1:2–10)*

<sup>2</sup>We always thank God for all of you whenever we remember you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup>In particular we continually remember in prayer before our God and Father your loyalty that works, your love that labors, and your endurance driven by hope in our Lord Messiah Jesus. <sup>4</sup>And we know, my dear brothers and sisters, who are loved by God, that God chose you, <sup>5</sup>because our good news did not come to you as a message only, but it also came in a powerful way through the Holy Spirit and deep conviction, just as you know what kind of people we became when we were with you for your

2. The collocation of “God the Father” and “the Lord Messiah Jesus” is critical for Paul’s Christology. As F. F. Bruce explains, this demonstrates “the exalted place which the risen Christ occupies in the thoughts of Paul and his colleagues”; see Bruce 1982: 7.

3. “Favor,” or generosity, is another way to translate the Greek word *charis*; see Barclay 2015.

sake. <sup>6</sup>And, as for you, you became people who imitated us and the Lord when, in the midst of great affliction, you accepted the message with the joy of the Holy Spirit. <sup>7</sup>So then you became a model for all those who believe in Macedonia and Achaia. <sup>8</sup>The message of the Lord trumpeted forth from you, echoing not only throughout Macedonia and Achaia, but your loyalty towards God went out into every place, even to the extent that we didn't need to tell anyone. <sup>9</sup>For they themselves report about us the kind of welcome we had with you, and how you turned towards God, rejecting idols in order to serve a new master, the living and true God. <sup>10</sup>And you wait eagerly for his Son to come from heaven, the one whom God raised from the realm of the dead, Jesus who will rescue us from God's coming anger for justice.

As far as we can tell from the Pauline letters in the New Testament collection, his opening greeting was typically followed by a word of thanksgiving (Galatians being the obvious exception). He was moved to prayer and thanks to God because of something special about God's work in and through his people (here the Thessalonians' exemplary reception of, and reaction to, the good news of Messiah Jesus). Of special note, in 1 Thess 1:2, is the constancy and passion of Paul's prayer-life (see also 5:17). The catalyst for his thanksgiving-prayer here was his *memories*. For Paul, remembering was a kind of spiritual discipline (Rom 1:9). Looking to God's work among his people (and both God's faithfulness and theirs) was critical for survival in a world full of uncertainties and pressures. The same word that Paul uses for memory in 1:2 is found in the Septuagint in Deut 7:18. There Moses enjoined the Israelites, at a time when they were afraid to step out in covenantal trust into an unknown future, to *remember* God's power over and against Egypt when he led them out. Israel was regularly called to establish a memorial whenever they saw God's faithful work (see, e.g., Joshua 4:7).

The Thessalonians are enjoined to remember their own record of trust. Paul introduces here his familiar triad of trust, hope, and love (see 1 Thess 5:8; cf. 1 Cor 13:13). Traditionally, *pistis* is translated "faith" in the New Testament, but here it takes on the more common Hellenistic meaning of "loyalty" or "trust."<sup>4</sup> Paul is not really commending them for what they believe *per se*, but rather for their firm commitment to God from the start.<sup>5</sup>

4. See Best 1986: 68, 81. See also extended discussion in the Introduction to this commentary, 10–13.

5. So deSilva 1996: 73: "faith" in that context clearly refers to the believers' perseverance in their commitment to the new social reality called the [church of God] in the face

*Pistis* here is a word marking the orientation of the will—it is an active word for Paul in the same way love (*agapē*) is an active word. In ancient Greek literature, *pistis* was regularly used with the meaning of “pledge” or “bond.” This reflects aptly Paul’s concern: the Thessalonians were known for their bold and active *loyalty and obedience* that are seen in real-life action or work. Similarly, he commends them for their love that is marked by labor. With these two statements about faith/love and work/labor, Paul is not trying to make a strong and clear differentiation between the two (“work” and “labor”), but rather desires to look at their lives from several angles (loyalty, hope, love). In 1:3, the “love” for which Paul gives thanks is possibly their love for God, laboring and working out of affection for him. However, it is probably a more comprehensive kind of love that is directed towards God (vertically) *and* others (horizontally). In 3:6, after Timothy is sent by Paul to check on the Thessalonians, he brings back report of their “trust and love” and that they wanted to see Paul as he did them.

The last element in 1:3 that Paul mentions is their track record of “endurance driven by hope in our Lord Messiah Jesus.” Sometimes *hypomonē* (“endurance”) is translated as “patience,” but this word should be understood here as more of an active term (moving forward in spite of resistance), rather than a passive one (holding your ground).<sup>6</sup> We have a perfect image of this word in Hebrews 12:1 where the author presses the readers to “run with *endurance* the race set out for us.” We know that the Thessalonians were struggling with persecution as well (see introduction, 10–13).

I think a military analogy is also fitting to portray this endurance. Imagine a soldier training and preparing for war. He goes out into the battle and, despite his extensive education, real war is simply a chaotic mess. It is frenetic and long and exhausting. *Endurance* and courage are his allies. The thought of giving up (in retreat or surrender) is natural, but that is no way to win a war! Not to mention what the commander, let alone the emperor, would say to a deserter! In the apocryphal text Sirach (written not long before the time of Paul), Ben Sira wrote this to his readers: “Woe to you who have lost your endurance! What will you do when the Lord’s reckoning comes” (2:14)? The Thessalonians are not in this kind of trouble, but they seem to be just at the place where they need some motivation to press on in trust and faithfulness (see 1 Thess 3:10). Paul’s advice is more consonant with Ben Sira’s word a bit later on: “[God] encourages those who

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of the dominant culture’s resistance and disapproval.”

6. Morris 1975: 42; Beale 2003: 47.

are running low on endurance” (17:24). Paul prays the same kind of hope continues to push them that is seen in the Ephesian church of Revelation 2:2–3: “I know your deeds, your hard work and your endurance . . . I also know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.”

The main purpose of this introductory discussion (1:2–10) is encouragement and comfort. He does this in 1:3 by appealing to *their* history of trust in God, but in 1:4 he also underscores *God’s* relationship with them. Three descriptors are used here. First, they are “my dear brothers and sisters.” This is probably Paul’s most central image used in 1 Thessalonians to help re-describe their special identity in Messiah Jesus—he refers to them as Christian siblings almost two dozen times across the five chapters. They have been adopted into a single family and household under God the Father (1:1) through Jesus the Son (1:10), so that Jesus could become “the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Rom 8:29).

What does it *mean* to be brothers and sisters in the Messiah? In the Greco-Roman world, there were few relationships more intimate and important than that of siblings—not only were they close through spending time together growing up, but there was an almost instinctual desire to protect and seek out the welfare of one’s brother or sister. When someone was in times of trouble, siblings could be counted on for aid and encouragement. While Paul himself writes to them as a brother in the Messiah, someone with deep concern, he also strongly exhorts them to take care of one another (4:9, 18; 5:11, 15) in a way that was really only true of family members in the wider world.<sup>7</sup>

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### **Fusing the Horizons: Blood-Blind in the New Covenant Community**

A letter like Galatians reminds us that Christians are “color-blind,” not privileging Jews over Gentiles as fellow-heirs of the kingdom of God. In 1 Thessalonians we are reminded that Christians are “blood-blind,” we are meant to treat fellow believers like family. In Paul’s world, as in ours, people tended to care for their family in a way not true of outsiders (the proverb “blood is thicker than water” makes good sense in just about any culture). What happens when Paul links perfect strangers by the bond of siblingship? They are not kin biologically, but the sheer frequency of use of this language from Paul

7. See further Trebilco 2012: 16–66.

demonstrates that, for him, this was more than a rhetorical device or banal label. Perhaps, even, the Thessalonians would have felt a bit of a shock when Paul started talking about “love between siblings” (*philadelphia*)—the kind of endearment and care that related to real family members (1 Thess 4:9).

In most churches that I visit, rarely have I seen this kind of “blood-blindness” of which Paul writes. But I have seen it once. In the late 1990s I did some missionary work in Eastern Europe. In Macedonia, ethnic Albanians (about 20 percent of the population) and ethnic Macedonians have a history of conflict. On the streets, everyone is conscious of the cultural dividing lines between Albanians and ethnic Macedonians and the hostility is palpable. But in our college ministry communities we saw something amazing—Albanians and Macedonians, not only sitting together and singing, but hugging and sharing and loving one another without hatred or prejudice. St. Paul would have felt proud that his siblingship theology took root in that community and blossomed.

How do we view the people around us in our own churches? Are they strangers with whom we exchange friendly greetings? When needs are raised, do we feel responsible to take care of one another? Has the gospel properly “blinded” us to blood?

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The second descriptor Paul uses for the Thessalonians is that they are “loved by God,” or “God’s beloved” (1 Thess 1:4). No doubt, Paul was applying to the Thessalonians a description that characterized the Lord’s intimate love for Israel: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11:1; cf. Isa 5:1; 57:8; Jer 12:7; Mal 1:2). Often, in the Old Testament, the Lord’s affirmations of his love came at a time when Israel felt abandoned. Perhaps this too applies to Paul’s use. That is, in spite of all the Thessalonians were going through, God’s own relationship and attitude towards them was secure (cf. Rom 8:38–39). They are not part of a nameless, faceless mass down below while God sits at a far distance in heaven. The ones called “beloved” are truly *known* by God and he cares for them deeply.

The third descriptor follows quite closely from the second: God *chose* them (1 Thess 1:4). The focus here (*eklogē*) is not a kind of one-sided election (i.e. “predestination”), but more a testimony to how *precious* they are in God’s eyes. Imagine a couple passing by an alley and noticing a poor,

homeless child lying on the ground half-dead. Their heart goes out to the child and they rush over and carefully scoop her up and find her care, later adopting her into their family. They were not forced to shelter her, but they went out of their way to rescue her and she becomes *precious, one-of-a-kind, an object selected through persistent attention and interest*. No doubt, in the midst of their trials and tribulations, the Thessalonians felt ignored by God. Perhaps they felt rejected. Paul responds tenderly: he chose you then, he loves you now.

We see a parallel in Isaiah 44 in view of Yahweh's care for Israel. In the prior chapter, Yahweh reminded Israel that her exilic state was not an accident, but the result of a heritage of rebellion against God's commands and counsel. However, rejection on God's part was not to be the last word.

But now listen, Jacob my servant; and Israel whom I have *chosen*: this is what the Lord God who made you says, the one who formed you in the womb; your rescue is yet to come, do not be afraid, my servant Jacob, my *beloved* Israel, the one I have *chosen*. (Isa 44:1–2)

How does Paul know that the Thessalonians should be confident and secure in their identity in God (especially as beloved and precious)? In 1:5 he reminds them of their reception of the message of the good news. It was not merely an exchange of words, but the presence and power of God was profoundly felt. Paul refers to the gospel coming, literally, “in power and in the Holy Spirit.” This is probably a hendiadys best translated “in a powerful way through the Holy Spirit.” Paul, here, is repeating his remembrance motif, prompting the Thessalonians to look back to the memorable happenings of their initial conversion. Probably Paul is referring to the manifestation of “signs and wonders” (miracles) at that time (see Rom 15:13, 19), but he may also have in mind their positive reaction to the good news.<sup>8</sup> Apparently that was enough to give them “deep conviction” that the gospel message was reliable and trustworthy.<sup>9</sup> They also had the example of Paul and his associates as additional testimony to the reliability of the good news.

8. See Twelftree 2013: 180–87.

9. The early Christian letter called 1 Clement uses this same language of “deep conviction” in reference to the proof supplied by the resurrection of Jesus that supported them along with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (42.3). There is some debate over whether the “deep conviction” was on the part of the Thessalonians (in their acceptance of the good-news message) or on the part of the apostles (who preached with boldness and assurance from God). My own inclination is to see it as the former, in agreement with Bruce 1982: 14.

The last clause of 1:5 mentions that the Thessalonians ought to remember “what kind of people we became when we were with you for your sake.” Even if the Thessalonians knew what this broad statement means, it is difficult for us, uninformed readers to discern. It could mean that they acted honestly and with integrity, as these matters are taken up in 2:1–12. However, the way Paul phrases this clause, it seems that he and Silas somehow went out of their way to be something or act in a way that proved better for the Thessalonians. Two possibilities are worth considering. First, he could be making reference to how he became like an infant among them (2:7), someone vulnerable and without status. He makes it clear enough that he and Silas had every right to assert their authority as “apostles,” but they chose not to. A second option is a reference here to Paul’s work-policy with them. He chose to work “night and day” so as not to burden them with his financial needs (2:9). I have a slight preference for the second option because it is a bit more tangible and, thus, would be easy to recall for the Thessalonians at Paul’s mention, but in either case the point is clear: the Thessalonians, at that time, had a crystal clear picture of God at work among them in the ministry of the apostles and the work of the Spirit. How easy it is to leave a mountaintop experience and begin to doubt the power and truth that was so present and lucid in that moment.

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### **Fusing the Horizons: Metamorphosis**

It is hard to tell in English, but Paul repeats an important keyword in 1 Thessalonians: *ginomai*. This verb can be translated “to come” or “to become” based on context. Paul uses this verb twelve times in this letter, four times in 1:5–7. The Thessalonians *became* imitators of the apostles and the Lord Jesus (1:6; 2:14). And they *became* an example for the Macedonians and Achaians (1:7). The apostles *became* holy and blameless among them (2:10). This can make it sound like believers are always transforming into something better, something more glorious. Certainly this is true in the sense that Paul discusses in 2 Cor 3:18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” As we are gravitationally pulled into the orbit of God’s grace and power, we are reshaped into the “the image of [God’s] Son” (Rom 8:29).



But that can make it seem like the Christian life is simply one of glorious transformation, like an unassuming caterpillar becoming a beautiful butterfly. However, a glorious transformation is not the *only* kind of change that believers must undergo. In a sinful, hostile world, there is another kind of “becoming”—believers sometimes must *become* something less glorious in the eyes of the world. When writing to the Corinthians, he told them that he had to suffer becoming (*ginomai*) like garbage in the world’s eyes in order to bring them the gospel (1 Cor 4:13). Sometimes the calling of a Christian is to transform into something ignoble, shameful; this is the only way Paul can say: “death is at work in us, but life is at work in you” (2 Cor 4:12). We see this clearly modeled by Jesus in Phil 2:5–11 where he took upon himself the humble station of a human who had to face the shame of death on a cross (2:8). Christ’s own “*becoming*” was to become a reject (John 1:11).

This may be what Paul means when he says that he *became* an infant (see below 54–56) with them (2:7). In this context, it means something that would not come naturally to Paul. For the sake of the Thessalonians, Paul had to undergo a change, a metamorphosis, but not always into something more attractive from a worldly perspective. Yet this *becoming* is inspired by the Messiah and empowered by the Spirit.

We would do well to remember, then, that God intends to change us. Obviously he wants to cause us to grow in holiness. But we must also consider other ways we might need to go through a metamorphosis in order to bring goodness and blessing to someone else. Perhaps that change will not seem “glorious,” but if it benefits and blesses the other, it will bespeak Christlikeness.

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In 1:6 we learn for the first time in the letter that the Thessalonians faced bitter persecution when they accepted the good news. They did not shrink from faith, nor did they retaliate against any trouble-makers, but met the occasion with joy, the same kind of godly reaction that was seen in the suffering apostles, the prophets, and even the Lord Jesus himself (1 Thess 2:14–15). The Thessalonians became the poster-children of what Paul would commend years later to the Romans: those who “Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer” (12:12 NET). So noteworthy was their surrender and commitment to Jesus and his kingdom that their

fame spread throughout Macedonia and Achaia and beyond, and they became a model and example of gracious perseverance (1:7–8).

So admirable and even unexpected was their bold loyalty to Jesus that the message about him spread quickly, moving even faster than the apostles could travel to share this news. One is reminded of the Israelite spies who encountered Rahab. The Canaanite prostitute did not need to be told about the fame of Israel and the power of Yahweh because she had already heard and she revered the God who “dried up the water of the Red Sea” (Joshua 2:9–11)!

Apparently, distant Achaians and Macedonians came to know the story of the work of God amongst the Thessalonians, in particular how they “turned towards God, rejecting idols in order to serve a new master, the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9). Paul helpfully clues us into the probability that the Thessalonians are mostly Gentile believers, since Jews abhorred idols (Rom 2:22) and considered worshipping with cult statues a mark of reprobation (1 Cor 5:10–11; 6:9; Gal 5:20; cf. 1 Pet 4:3).<sup>10</sup> Idols were known to be, according to Jewish thought, dead and inefficacious (cf. Acts 14:15).<sup>11</sup> Given that the early Christians represent pagan worship as a kind of ignorance and slavery (Heb 9:14), it takes the intervening work of God to bring illumination, wisdom, and freedom to know and worship the true God.

If we look at a Jewish text like *Bel and the Dragon*, we learn that Jews (like Paul) were educated with stories that reminded them that idols are not real gods, but objects made with human hands. This is distinctly *not* true of the living God who created all things and rules over all creatures (see *Bel* 1:5). Idols reflect the imagination of their artisan (a mere human) and, thus, they are as corrupted as human sinners. Thus, Jews and Christians could associate idolatry with sexual perversion and greed (see *Col* 3:5). When the Thessalonians rejected their idols, then, they also turned away from a pagan, godless way of life. As Beverly Gaventa explains, this required a whole new way of life:

Paul’s words about turning *from* idols to serve God imply that faith in the God of Israel who is the Father of Jesus Christ is not an

10. Note, though, that in the Introduction I consider the possibility, even likelihood, that this church was comprised of many “god-fearers,” Gentile pagans at once time associated with the Jewish synagogue and later became believers in Messiah Jesus. See 6–13.

11. For a discussion of Jewish anti-idol polemic and Gentile cult statue worship in the era of the New Testament, see Gupta 2014.

optional practice to be added on to previous values and commitments. One cannot serve this God alongside idols; they must be put away. The claims of Christian faith are all-encompassing.<sup>12</sup>

When they turned towards the one God, they committed themselves to “serve a new master” (*douleuō*). To call this slave-service was not to imagine this as cruel, de-humanizing slavery, but more like the joy a trained soldier experiences under a professional, if demanding, senior officer who knows what it takes to carry out a mission successfully. Howard Marshall notes that this kind of service is life-giving because its focus is on the doing of what is good and right, rather than “being in bondage to sin.”<sup>13</sup>

To become a slave of Yahweh is to be written into the story that Scripture tells, which involves the covenant with Israel and which reaches a climax with the appearance of Messiah Jesus. While Jesus’ (first) coming launched a new phase in salvation history, he ascended into heaven and promised to return again.

We read in 1 Thess 1:10 that Paul commends these believers who turned to God as they “wait eagerly for his Son to come from heaven, the one God raised from the realm of the dead, Jesus who will rescue us from God’s coming anger for justice.” There is a kind of passive dimension of the word “wait” (*anamenō*) here (as in “to stay put”; Judith 7.12), but Paul probably uses it in a more transformative manner. They live their lives in eager anticipation of Jesus’ return; they have re-oriented their lives around this arrival.<sup>14</sup> The kingdom of God is a kind of invisible reality because Jesus is in heaven and it appears like the worldly powers are in control. To wait for, or anticipate, Jesus’ return means living according to an alternative vision of power and value that is unseen, but is surely to come. The Thessalonians have shown signs of aligning with this not-yet kingdom even under pressure and affliction. The tables will turn, so to speak, when Jesus returns because God is coming with wrath (“anger for justice”; 1:10b). God’s wrath, or anger, is not borne out of an unbridled temper, but the justice-orientation of God towards a rebellious world.<sup>15</sup> Paul preached an impending assize that would call the world to account for its hedonism, bloodlust, oppression of the weak and poor, and rejection of the authority and wisdom of God. Those who received “the good news” of Messiah Jesus in this life might not

12. Gaventa 1998: 20.

13. Marshall 1984: 58; see further Harris 1999.

14. See Marshall 1984: 58.

15. *Ibid.*, 59.

be many, and they would face opposition for their commitment, but Jesus would recognize them at his coming and rescue them as his own people.<sup>16</sup>

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16. See Wanamaker 1990: 88.