

Saved for Sure

1 Thessalonians 1:1-4

*What makes a seed like Ananias was:
A hothouse plant that's fed and fertilized
That seems to triumph over weaknesses,
And yet its life is but defeat disguised?
Like Demas and Diotrophes, they sprout
And face no heat of day nor dark of night
And look as if they're whole and hale without.
But deep within they've never tasted Light.
No building set on sand can stand the storm,
And roots in rocky soil can't bear the heat.
But when the body and the blood transform
A heart that's right with faith is real, deceit
Cannot destroy, and we can run the race
In spite of tribulation by God's grace.*

The apostle Paul wrote two letters to new Christians in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica. And both epistles are unique.

In seven other letters, Paul identified himself as an apostle. And for good reason. Some of those churches were troubled congregations that were facing serious threats.

In his early letter to churches scattered across the Roman province of Galatia, Jewish false teachers were attempting to twist and torment the Gospel of grace into a gospel of works.

Paul needed to remind those saints of his divine authority. So he identified himself as a called and commissioned apostle.

The church at Corinth was a confused congregation. They were indulging serious sin problems. And that is only the beginning.

They were also confused concerning spiritual gifts. Added to that, the church was dividing into warring camps, each with a favorite preacher.

So they needed to be reminded that the principles Paul taught them were much more than his studied opinion. As an apostle, he had authority directly from the risen Christ to correct both their beliefs and their behavior.

Paul commanded that both of his letters to Timothy were to be read aloud in churches. But many of those believers had neither met the old missionary nor heard his preaching and teaching. So they also needed to understand his authority in the church was absolute.

Three other times, Paul identified himself as a bonds slave. He did that to underscore the importance of love and commitment to Christ.

But believers at Thessalonica were not threatened by false teachers or malignant sin. And they neither warred among themselves nor doubted Paul's apostolic authority.

So in his two letters to Christians at Thessalonica, the apostle did something he did in none of the other epistles he wrote. He gave himself no title at all. He came to them simply as another saint.

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians Verse 1

Roman engineers designed and built a highway they called the Via Egnatia. Its fitted stone pavement carried commerce along the Aegean coast. But for Paul, it was a traveling route.

With Silas at his side, the apostle walked out of Philippi's city gate. And the rough cloth of their cloaks irritated the whip wounds on their backs as they started out.

The next day when the sun was high in the blue dome of Macedonia's sky, they arrived at Amphipolis. The next evening, they arrived at Apollonia.

But they did not stop at either of those cities. For one thing, there were no Jewish synagogues there.

The evening of second day after the missionaries left Apollonia, they stood on the crest of a high ridge and looked down on the red tile roofs of Thessalonica. Its busy harbor arced around a bay, looking out on the turquoise waters of the Aegean.

Historians believe some 200,000 people lived in that city. And that included a sizable Jewish community.

So, as was his habit, Paul started his missionary work at the Jewish synagogue.

...they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." Acts 17: 1-3

Only a handful of the many Jews who heard Paul preach responded. But the synagogue was also filled with gentiles.

These were Macedonians who had become disillusioned with the pornographic paganism all around them. So they sought to slake their spiritual thirst by seeking the God of Israel.

While only a few Jews responded, a large number of gentiles eagerly accepted the Gospel of grace the missionaries proclaimed.

...some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. Acts 17:4

That both alarmed and enraged those Jews. Many of those gentiles were wealthy and filled the synagogue with glittering gold.

So unbelieving Jews went to the market place and hired a mob. They led those men in a riot, dragging some of the new Christians out of their homes. Then before the assembled city magistrates, they accused Paul and his assistant missionaries of sedition.

These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. Acts 17:6-7

While Jason was being charged, other believers spirited Paul out of the city. But the great missionary could not stop worrying about the simple, sincere saints he left behind at Thessalonica.

He knew they were enduring a firestorm of persecution. And he had only been able to teach them for two or three months.

How, he wondered, could they possibly hold out. That concern fueled and fired his prayers for them.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; Verse 2

Finally, after Paul had moved on to Corinth, Timothy arrived with good news. Believers at Thessalonica were not only surviving the persecution. They were thriving.

Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, 1 Thessalonians 3:6

That so thrilled the apostle he sat down and wrote them a letter.

The Proof of Grace

Former pagans at Thessalonica placed personal trust and firm faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. And when they did, that faith took root within their hearts and minds.

The only New Testament letter that was written at that time was Paul's letter to churches in Galatia. But it is doubtful that those new believers had read it.

But then, no one had to tell them their faith should produce positive changes in their lives. The Holy Spirit had taken up residence within them. And He always gives God's children both the ability and the desire to please the Savior who died to set them free.

...it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Philippians 2:13

Recently, a Christian writer listed people he called *heroes of the faith*. One of those *heroes* was a runaway: a teenage boy who made his living as a street prostitute. The story of that boy described how he heard and responded to the Good News that Jesus died for his sins.

It might have been an inspirational account but for one thing. That boy never stopped being a street prostitute. His newfound faith did not change his lifestyle at all.

And that is not possible. The apostle John wrote that if a person's profession of faith is genuine, that person will not keep on sinning.

We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, 1 John 5:18 (ESV)

The reason why is wonderfully simple. It makes no difference who a person might be. When the Savior's Spirit comes to live within a life, He always transforms that person's desires.

Suddenly, we see sin for what it is: not gold or even glitter. Just garbage! And instead of savoring sin, we find we have a hunger for integrity and godliness, for selflessness and sacrifice.

That is why James not only taught that genuine faith produces works. He also offered some examples of the kinds of works faith in God's Son grows with a new believer.

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. James 2:15-17

Our eternal God is a Lord of love. And that includes His Holy Spirit. So when He comes to live within us, He fills us with love.

...the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Romans 5:5

The same love that motivated the Master to feed hungry multitudes fills every saint. And that love makes us want to help people in need. Not because we have to, but because we want to.

Paul was overjoyed to hear Timothy's report about the new believers as Thessalonica. The apostle knew their faith was real.

Genuine faith always produces good and godly works.

The Product of Grace

The apostles consistently called the church the body of Christ. And they did so for the best of reasons.

While our Lord was here on earth, His hands reached out touch infected, untouchable lepers. He healed both the diseased and the disabled. And His eyes expressed His compassion for the lost and lonely, for the sorrowing and suffering.

But then our Redeemer rose up into the sky and returned to His Father in Heaven. And He took His physical body with Him.

However, He still has a body here on earth. People who love and live for the Lord Jesus are His body. Indeed, the only hands the Savior has to show His kindness here on earth are ours. The only faces He has to show His compassion are ours. And the only voices He has to help lost and lonely sinners find the oceans of peace and fountains of joy in Jesus are ours.

That is why we are both ordained and commanded to perform good works.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. Ephesians 2:10

But merely doing good works is never enough. When I was a small boy, members of the Lions Club in my hometown delivered Christmas gifts to poor children.

However, the night they came, I always ran and hid in the barn. No gift was worth enduring their disdain and disgust.

Yes, we who know and live for Jesus Christ are commanded to perform good works. We are to feed the hungry, visit the lonely and clothe those who shiver in the cold.

And our Redeemer promised He will richly reward believers who help others. But those deeds of kindness must be motivated by our Lord's love. If not, they are worthless.

...if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. 1 Corinthians 13:3

Paul was greatly encouraged when he sat down and listened to the stories Timothy told about the activities of Christians at Thessalonica. They were busy working as the Savior's body. And they were doing so for the right reason.

...constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love... Verse 3

A pastor friend of mine once told me a story of when he was teenager. After school each day, he delivered newspapers to houses in his hometown. But the lone resident of one ramshackle house never opened his front door. He received his paper and paid his bill through a crack in the door.

My friend tried to talk to the man. And day by day and week by week, the old man opened the door more and more.

He was confined to a wheelchair. And he told my friend about the painful problems he had with his feet. Bit by bit, that man started trusting my friend. Finally, one day he asked the young newspaper boy if he would help dress and nurse the sores on his feet.

Whenever I get confused about what sharing Christ's love is all about, I remember that story. My friend did more than tell that man the Savior of the Bible loved him.

He showed his Lord's love to that man in a practical way. That is what the Thessalonians were doing. They labored, motivated by the Master's love. And it made people all over Macedonia turn Jesus.

...you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8

The Persistence of Grace

Saints at Thessalonica were enduring painful persecution. But that did not stunt their spiritual growth or make their faith falter, faint and fail. Instead, they were standing strong, patiently enduring pain, poverty and problems that came because they trusted only in Christ.

...constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; Verses 3-4

Genuine faith in the Christ of the cross cannot and does not fail or fall flat when troubles come. It endures to the end.

...the one who endures to the end will be saved. Matthew 10:22 (ESV)

Before Timothy came, Paul was worried that saving faith in saints at Thessalonica would be swept away by the persecution they were enduring. But when Timothy delivered his report, the apostle was more than pleased. He was thrilled and overjoyed.

The Thessalonians were standing strong in their faith by keeping their attention focused on God above instead of the pain and problems all around them.

And by doing so, they learned a glorious lesson that every believer needs to know. No matter how savage and fierce the threat might be, it cannot separate us from our Savior.

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

Paul's worries all melted away. He had no more doubts that Thessalonian believers were chosen children of God. The fruit their fledgling faith was producing was all the proof he needed.

And if our faith is genuine, it cannot help but grow the same godly fruit it did so long ago at Thessalonica.

Works of faith, labors of love and steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.