

“Signs of Spiritual Life”
1Thessalonians 1:1-10
October 10, 21

This morning we are diving into our new series in 1Thessalonians entitled, “*Holy Anticipation: Living in Holiness, Hope, and Love Until Jesus Comes.*”

Introduction

Today in chapter 1 we are going to see that ***The transforming work of the Spirit through the word produces visible evidence of the Spirit’s presence and work in our lives.***

But before we launch into Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving and his celebration of the Spirit’s transforming work through the Thessalonians response to the gospel, I’d like to comment on just 3 words from Paul’s greeting in vs. 1.

- *“in”* – “To the church of the Thessalonians *in* God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...” The church is not just a random gathering of religious people, but those who are in relationship to God through Jesus Christ; inseparably joined to God through the covenant of Christ’s blood. We must never forget that while we are living distinct lives of separation from the world (and rejected by the world), we are living in the presence of God and His divine favor in Christ. Church, our identity is found in our relationship to God—not in our relationship to this world.
- *“Grace”* – Paul’s desire is that God will bless the Thessalonian church with grace and peace. “Grace” captures the essence of God’s great heart of mercy to save, redeem, and reconcile a people for Himself—extending mercy to sinners who deserve wrath. But God’s grace not only *saves* us from our sin, it also *sustains* and *sanctifies* us. So Paul’s longing is that the very grace of God that saved the Thessalonian believers would also sustain them in their suffering and continue the Spirit’s transforming work. And the result of grace at work in our lives is peace...

- *“peace”* – The grace of God creates a relationship of peace with God so that we are no longer estranged from God but rather reconciled to Him. And having peace with God, knowing that He is with us and for us, allows us to have peace in life’s circumstances.

We should anticipate that through this letter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, God wants to do in us what Paul was expecting God to do in the Thessalonians. To continue His work of grace by sustaining them and maturing them so that they can walk in the peace of God through their trials and afflictions as they await their final rescue when Jesus comes. *Your greatest need is not to solve the problems in your life that are robbing you of peace. Your greatest need is to walk with God in His grace, so that you have His peace in the midst of your troubling circumstances.*

Paul’s confidence is expressed in thanksgiving in vs. 2-3 as he mentions 3 key characteristics which demonstrate that God’s grace has indeed taken root and is bearing fruit among the Thessalonian believers. These characteristics are *faith, hope, and love* which leads Paul to conclude in vs. 4 that these believers are indeed genuinely saved. **[vs. 2-4]**

Three signs of spiritual rebirth:

1. **Saving grace produces works of faith** (3).

One of the ways we recognize the Spirit’s work of grace in our lives, is that our faith becomes active. Grace working through faith brings about spiritual rebirth which changes us and how we relate to people. Grace working through faith transforms our priorities, schedules, and values such that we want to serve people for the sake of Christ. The grace of God working through genuine faith will produce a life of actively contributing to the work of God’s kingdom in people’s lives.

Paul emphatically clarifies in Ephesians 2 that works do not contribute to our salvation but rather our salvation will produce good works. **[Eph 2:8-10]** So God is working in us, to work through us (10).

In fact, these works (or acts of service) are such a significant sign of genuine faith that James 2 says, “faith without works is useless...faith without works is dead” (20, 26). If leaves do not bud on the tree, the tree is dead. In the same way, the evidence of living faith is the fruit of works.

2. **Saving grace produces labors of love (3).**

What’s the difference between *works* of faith and *labors* of love? Works are *what* we do because of our faith, whereas labors of love are *how* we do it. The word *labor* carries with it the idea of intense effort, even to the point of exhaustion. But this is not just working hard for the sake of working hard. What motivates us to put our whole selves into acts of service is love. Faith-generated works are not just cold-hearted activity but are passionately motivated by love for people because of our love for God—which is a result of God’s love for us (4). **God’s love for us produces our love for God** which produces **love for people**, resulting in **works of faith** and **labors of love** so that others can experience **God’s love for them**.

Works of faith and labors of love as a result of the Spirit’s work lead us to an important, practical conclusion: *When the Holy Spirit is at work in your life, you will not remain idle. The Spirit’s active work in your life puts you into action.* You cannot claim to have the faith of a Christian if you do not have the fruit of a Spirit-generated life. What makes you a Christian is the active life of the Spirit within you. The Christian faith is not something you associate with, it is an active power of God working within you that is ongoingly changing and growing you. If the branches don’t bud and produce leaves, the tree is dead.

To those of you who are working by faith and laboring in love, let me encourage you with this promise from **Hebrews 6:10**: “*God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints...*”

3. **Saving grace produces the endurance of hope in Christ (3).**

These new believers in Thessalonica immediately experienced significant persecution because of their faith in Jesus. Yet their faith was proven genuine by their “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father” (3). Hope in the heavenly reign and future return of Christ empowers believers to endure and persevere. A summary of the NT’s teaching on perseverance is that *those who persevere to the end will be saved, and they persevere to end by the sustaining power of God’s grace.*¹ So, **saving faith is persevering faith, and persevering faith is sustained by grace.**

Kids/teenagers: this is why you must be grounded in your faith growing in wholehearted love for God! The world will get harder for the Christian, not easier. And those who endure to the end will be saved. You need to be grounded in the rock-solid hope of Christ and His return so that your hope will not be crushed by persecution. Pray that God will give you a heart of love for the Bible, love for the truth, love for Jesus. 2 Thess 2:10 tells us that those who will fall to the great deception in the last days are those who did not “*love the truth so as to be saved.*”

- “If anyone *does not love the Lord*, he is to be accursed” (1Cor 16:22)
- “If anyone *loves God*, he is known by Him (1Cor 8:3)
- “eye has not seen and ear has not heard...all that God has prepared for those who *love Him*” (1Cor 2:9)
- “Blessed be the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to *those who love Him*” (James 1:12).

These active marks of faith, hope, and love in the Thessalonians led Paul to the convincing conclusion in vs. 4 that God had indeed set His saving grace upon them as His elect, chosen people. **[vs. 4]** Do you see your true identity here in vs. 4? *You are chosen by God as His beloved.* And **those on whom God has chosen to set His love in saving grace will bear out the fruit of faith working through love with enduring hope in Jesus.**

¹ Mark 13:13; 1Cor 1:8; 1Thess 5:24

Now Paul goes on to celebrate how God brought His saving love to bear on the Thessalonians as the Spirit worked through the Word (the gospel) to transform their lives. *4 Movements of the Word:*

A. The Word came in the Spirit's power (5).

[vs. 5] When Paul says that the gospel came in power, he may be referring to the power of accompanying signs or miracles that validated his message as truly from God. This was typical among the apostles. But it is possible that Paul is also referring to the converting power of the gospel which vs. 5-10 are giving witness to. The source of this power was not Paul but the Holy Spirit who brings about spiritual rebirth (giving life to those who are spiritually dead).

Furthermore, Paul says the gospel came with “full conviction” or with full assurance. There is a question here as to whether this “full conviction” applies to Paul as the preacher or to the Thessalonians whom he was preaching to. On the one hand, it appears as though Paul was preaching with full conviction or assurance that his message was true because he goes on to say, “you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.” In other words, our lives matched our message because we indeed are convinced of its truthfulness, and we want you to also believe in its truthfulness. On the other hand, the overall context here is the Spirit's powerful working to convert the Thessalonians to Christ. Like those who heard the gospel in Acts 2:37, they were “pierced to the heart” resulting in immediate and radical conversion.

But I'm not sure we have to choose one over the other. The idea here may be that the very assurance and confidence that Paul himself had in the truthfulness of the gospel was imparted to the Thessalonians through the Spirit's power.

Here's the question for us. Has the gospel only been words to you, or have you experienced that powerful working of the Spirit that pierces your heart with the devastating reality that your sin has severed you from God and that your only hope is that God will have mercy on you because Christ died to satisfy God's justice toward your sin?

B. The Word was received with the joy of the Holy Spirit (6)

[vs. 6] These new believers immediately began to resemble Paul's life as he followed in the footsteps of Christ, gladly suffering affliction for Jesus and the gospel. Yet even though their faith in Christ immediately brought persecution upon them, their lives were marked by the joy of the Holy Spirit's presence.

Later in **2:13**, Paul further elaborates on how they received the word: “*We constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men [not just mere words], but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.*” The Spirit and the word always go together. The Spirit works through the word to bring transformation to your life with the end result of joy! Beloved, give yourself to the Word! Give yourself to the Spirit's work so that you can endure with hope and joy!

C. The Word was passed on to others (8).

[vs. 7-8] The Thessalonians did not keep the gospel to themselves. They began to preach and share their faith with everyone they could. Their joy in the Holy Spirit was contagious and motivating. And as a result, their example of faithful, joyful witness in the midst of suffering became a benefit to the churches in the whole Macedonian region. Remember, it was these Macedonian believers who had the abounding joy of the Holy Spirit in the face of poverty and persecution, that Paul pointed to as the example for the Corinthian church to follow. Beloved, the gospel is not only to be received with joy and power but also passed on (proclaimed) with joy and power. We must pray that the gospel will not terminate in our lives, but that God will embolden us to pass it on!

D. The Word transformed their lives (9-10).

[vs. 9-10] Conversion is not a mere belief system. Conversion is a radical reorientation of life! For the Thessalonians it meant abandoning the worship of every acceptable idol in their pagan religious culture to serve the living God alone.

Conversion today requires no less of a radical reorientation of life. There are many popular idols in our culture today: money, possessions, drugs, sex, alcohol, comfort, safety, health, popularity, children, particular relationships, the fear or praise of man, sports, food, music, entertainment, one's image, etc. In fact, *there is nothing in this world that the human heart cannot idolize*, which simply means we give something supreme importance in our life that only God deserves. Yet the greatest idol in all of time and history is *self*. You are your greatest idol. Sin has made us self-serving, self-centered, and self-worshipping.

Remember the very first lie in **Genesis 3:5**: "God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God..." This lie has robbed us of life and joy in the Holy Spirit. But praise God, Jesus has come to save us from ourselves and our idolatrous hearts. "Christ died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him to die and rise again on their behalf...Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2Cor 5:15, 17). This is a transformed life! Christ came to save us from ourselves.

Notice in vs. 9 that this transforming work of the Spirit through the gospel was implemented through a human response of *repentance* and *faith*. They turned to God (faith) from idols (repentance) to serve the living and true God (active faith working through love).

Not only did the Thessalonians worship God as the supreme treasure of their life, they also eagerly anticipated the return of Jesus to rescue them from the coming day of God's wrath (10). We are living in a world destined for divine wrath (like a slowly sinking Titanic). But those who indeed believe and receive Christ will not perish along with this world but will be rescued by the return of our risen Savior.

So here's what we've seen in 1Thess 1: ***The transforming work of the Spirit through the gospel produces visible evidence of the Spirit's presence and work in our lives through works of faith, labors of love, and enduring hope in Jesus' return.***

I urge you this morning to take a close look at your heart and life today. As we stand in the midst of the orchard that we call the church, it may be easy to blend in, yet we must ask ourselves if we can verify life in our branches by the budding of leaves and bearing of fruit.

1. Do you have faith that works?
2. Does love for God motivate you to labor in love for others?
3. Do you have enduring hope in Jesus and His return?
4. Have you experienced the full conviction of the Spirit through the gospel (piercing to the heart)?
5. Have you received the gospel with the joy of the Holy Spirit?
6. Do you have an active testimony to God's saving grace? (those who genuinely know Jesus talk about Him)
7. Is your life demonstrating an ongoing transformation from the worship of worldly idols and self to serve the true and living God with Christ as your treasure?

Taking God's Word to God's Throne

A Prayer from 1 Thessalonians 1

"Father, we are so thankful that we are Your beloved—that is who we are!—because You have chosen to set Your grace upon us out of Your great heart of love.

May the presence and power of Your Spirit bring Your grace to bear in our lives so that we cannot remain idle, but truly produce works of faith and labors of love while demonstrating the endurance that only comes from hoping in Jesus, our heavenly Advocate and Deliverer.

Cause the Gospel of Your Word to advance in great power by the Holy Spirit, bringing full conviction that pierces to the heart. Cause us and all who hear to receive the Word with the joy of the Holy Spirit despite tribulation from the world.

Impact our lives so thoroughly that we will be both an example and a mouthpiece of the gospel as You turn our hearts from every idle to serve the only true and living God. This we pray with thanksgiving and confidence in the name of Jesus who has risen from the dead and is returning soon to rescue us from the wrath to come."