



02. 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

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Silvanus and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth , and it is their news from Thessalonica that is the occasion for the letter we are about to study, a letter written from Corinth probably towards the end of 50. In Galatians Paul was stirred to give expression to the essence of his gospel. His letter to the Thessalonians has none of that kind of urgency. Nor is it a document in which Paul carefully expresses the essential convictions of his life. He is responding quite briefly (the Greek has only forty-eight sentences) to the concerns which the community in Thessalonica has expressed through Timothy and to the situation in Thessalonica as observed by him.



The two primary concerns are **persecution** and the fate of the members of the community who have **died**.

A superficial reading could lead one to think that everything was fine in Thessalonica. There are many expressions of affection, and the whole first half of the letter is given over to thanksgiving. This is all, of course, genuine, but there is evidence that Timothy's report reinforced a concern which Paul already had about the faith of the young community (3:5). The worry about the dead was but one symptom of the problem.

The key problem

They had become Christians with a good deal of enthusiasm. However, the young community had to face what seems to have been constant persecution. They had been promised a salvation that went beyond anything they had formerly heard of or experienced. They seem to have expected that the full establishment of the kingdom of God as inaugurated by Jesus would come in their lifetime, but when some of their members died without this happening, not surprisingly they began to question the kind of salvation given by Jesus who was slow in coming and who was unable to prevent death.

Were they tempted to go back to the more exciting and more socially acceptable cults that they had left? (Dionysos, Cabiros). Did they miss the sexual indulgence?

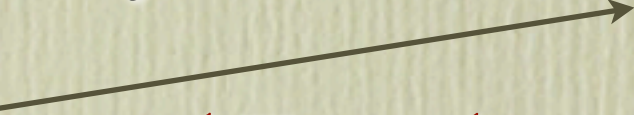
- Note Paul's extraordinary gift for friendship, shown in the way he writes his letter, in the images he uses and the sentiments he expresses.

Note also Paul's constant appeal to their personal and communal experience of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus.

- He exhorts them to keep modelling their lives on that of Jesus, and on the example which Paul and the other two missionaries, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, gave them while among them.
- Note the obvious centrality of Jesus in Paul's life. If the Thessalonians live now with Jesus, they can be confident that they will always live with him.

1 Thessalonians 1:1

{Luke uses his Jewish name, 'Silas'}


1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
to the church of the Thessalonians {‘to all the brothers and sisters’, 5:27}
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah:
grace to you and peace.

The Christians in Thessalonica are ‘**in God the Father**’. When Jesus addressed God as Father (‘Abba’), people must have been startled by his use of such a familiar and affectionate term. He was, after all, addressing the Almighty and Transcendent Deity, and yet he was speaking to God as a child speaks to a father. Jesus said that we have to become like little children if we are to share in his familiarity with God (Matthew 18:3). He asked people to trust this God who cares for us (Matthew 6:25-34), and to address God in prayer with that simplest and most trusting of words (Matthew 6:9). Jesus was attempting to bring home the amazing truth of God’s close and constant love.

Paul wants the Thessalonians to remember that God is the source of life – for his Son and for all who share with Jesus the life of the Spirit. Paul wants them to recall what happened to them when they listened to Silvanus, Timothy and himself and believed in the love of the God who sent the missionaries to them.

Paul speaks of Jesus as ‘**Lord and Messiah**’. The title ‘Lord’ has a range of meanings. When Paul calls Jesus ‘Lord’, he is referring to him as the Messiah raised to glory, who has demonstrated among the Thessalonians the power of God’s Spirit, primarily by forming the community itself, but also by the wonders of grace that were done there through Paul and his fellow apostles. The Risen Jesus is filled with the power of God – the power of redeeming Love (see Exodus 3:13-15).

1 Thessalonians 1:1

‘Grace to you and peace’.

The customary Greek greeting was χαίρειν (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). Paul uses a similar sounding word, χάρις (‘**grace**’) – a greeting that reminds the Christian assembly of God’s action in their lives in drawing them to share the life of the risen Jesus – a life of communion in love with his Father through the shared bond of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s prayer for the community in Thessalonica is that they will continue to experience the graciousness of God pouring out his love upon them.

The customary Jewish greeting was shalom (‘**peace**’ εἰρήνη). Paul repeats this greeting here, for his prayer is that they will experience the peace that is the fruit of grace: the fullness of life that happens when each member of a community contributes his or her gifts to the others in harmonious communion.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, ³constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

It was customary in formal letters to follow the greeting with an expression of thanks. Paul follows this custom, though in this case thanksgiving takes up the whole first half of his letter (1:2 - 3:13). Thanksgiving flows from a sense of wonder and appreciation. The more we are able to see things and especially people with a pure heart, the more we are aware of their goodness. The measure of our ability to see like this is the measure of our humility, for the more childlike we are in our relationship with God and the more we are free from being caught up in self-focus, the more we are open to the surprise and the wonder of other people. It is humility that enables us to see clearly; seeing leads to wonder, and wonder finds expression in gratitude.

Paul begins by telling the community how closely he holds them to his heart when he enters into intimate communion with God in prayer. He is moved to thank God for their **faith**, their **hope** and their **love**. We will find Paul linking these fundamental characteristics of the Christian life closely again in future letters.

Our primary response to God is that of faith, for grace can transform our lives only if we are open to receive it. Knowing God's faithfulness enables us to hope – that is to say, to leave the future in God's hands, trusting that God will fulfil his promises to us. Faith and hope enable us to immerse ourselves in the present moment in God's love and so enable God's love, coming to us from the heart of the risen Christ, to transform us and to radiate out from us in love for others.

The phrase ‘before God our Father’ reminds us that Paul is in God’s presence as he remembers the Thessalonians in prayer. It can also refer to the Thessalonians, for they are in God’s presence, too. God is gazing upon them in love as they live out their faith, as they labour in witnessing to God’s love, and as they sustain their hope amid persecution. Paul is expressing his gratitude that they have learned to live in God’s presence and to delight in the one who is gazing upon them in love.

The phrase ‘**in our Lord Jesus, the Messiah**’ extends to ‘faith’ and ‘love’ as well as ‘hope’. One should assume that Paul intends to include the many different ways in which these three central characteristics of the Christian life relate to Jesus. Jesus is the one in whom we believe, for it is he who reveals the true God to us. He is also the one who shares with us his own faith in God. Jesus is the one whom we love. He is also the one whose love makes it possible for us to live in loving communion with his Father. Jesus is the one we hope to be with in the future. It is also because of what Jesus did and because of what happened to Jesus that we trust that God will give us the eternal life which we have been promised. Peaceful in this trust we can leave the future in God’s hands, listening for the inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus and discovering how to give ourselves to others in love as we journey with Jesus to the Father.

The good news proclaimed to the Christians in Thessalonica by Paul is that Jesus is alive, in communion with God, and that he offers the gift of his Spirit to all who welcome him. With the Spirit comes a share in Jesus' own faith. It is this faith that enables us to be steadfast in our hope by trusting the future to God and focusing all our energies into loving one another. Paul underlines this by speaking of '**your work of faith**'. Faith is producing its fruit in their lives and Paul is grateful for the way in which they are living the gospel.

He recognises, too, that love involves 'labour'. Being in communion with God for the Thessalonians means being instruments of God's merciful and forgiving love in their world. This, as we shall see, brought them up against a lot of resistance. They are sharing in the labour of the cross and have been steadfast in their hope in spite of persecution. Paul is concerned in this letter to support them in this.

1 Thessalonians 1:3

remembering your work of faith

and labour of love

and steadfastness of hope

Faith (πίστις)

Far from being a speculative, cerebral thing, faith is essentially practical. It is fundamentally about action.

As Jesus himself says: ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 7:21).

To speak of ‘faith’ is to speak of the truth about God’s self-revelation through activity in the world, reaching its climax in God’s self-revelation in Jesus. It is to speak of the decisions we make, and the lifestyle to which we are committed as a consequence of taking this revelation seriously.

When we examine the meaning of belief in the Hebrew Scriptures, our first observation is that while belief is impossible without trust, biblical usage is against identifying belief with trust. Hebrew words which express trust are never translated by the Greek verb πίστευω or by the related noun πίστις, or adjective πιστός.

These words only ever translate words from the Hebrew root 'mn. The Hebrew noun 'mnh is often translated 'faithful'. It denotes the quality one has when one acts according to one's nature or commitments. The related adjective is descriptive of a person who is faithful, reliable, secure, sure, certain, and so trustworthy (note, trustworthy - which is not the same as trusting).

God has this quality (faithful, trustworthy) in its fullness because God always acts according to who God is. To speak of God in this way is to say that God is the real God, not a false one, and that God always acts according to the truth. Because of this, we can find our security in God, we can rely upon God, we can place our trust in God.

‘The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness’ (Psalm 33:4).

‘I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord’ (Hosea 2:20).

When we speak of human beings having this quality, we are saying that they are trustworthy because what they do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2Chronicles 31:12), then we share in the faithfulness of the Lord, and others in turn can rely upon us (Jeremiah 15:18).

Abraham is described as having a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1 Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1 Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

When we come to the Hebrew verb 'mn we find, as we would expect, that it means to act in accordance with who we are and with our obligations. It means to behave faithfully with the result that others can rely upon us. Since we are creatures who are totally dependent upon God, for us to behave in a way that is truly in accordance with our nature means to live in dependence upon God. This includes placing our trust in God's faithfulness.

The verb 'believe' then has two essential components.

- It means to place our trust in God's faithfulness
- and to give evidence of this by behaving faithfully ourselves so that others can rely upon us.

When we say that God is 'faith-full', we are saying that God always acts according to who God is.

This loving kindness of God is stressed throughout the Old Testament. It finds its most sublime expression in the New Testament in the First Letter of John where we read: 'God is love' (1 John 4:8,16).

Since God is love, God can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith. To believe in God, therefore, is to accept the salvation which God offers and to experience a summons, like Moses, to be God's instrument in liberating the oppressed. The Mosaic Law requires of God's people to be faithful to the covenant by acting with justice for the poor.

In the New Testament - and it is to this point that we must return - Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us. To do so we will need to trust him. We will also need to live faithfully the life he offers us, not independently, but as people who are 'born of God' (John 1:13), like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (John 15:1ff).

To believe is, as the English word so aptly expresses, to 'be' - 'lieve', to 'be' in 'love'. It is to choose to be in God's love, receiving with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the eternal mystery of God's being and which he offers to us by pouring his Spirit into our hearts.

To have faith is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God's love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion.

The faith which we are to have in God is a gift which Jesus gives us in giving us a share in his life. It is a faith which we receive from God, before it is a faith which we offer God as a response.

To believe is

- to listen to God's word as revealed in Jesus (Galatians 1:12).
- to heed what God says 'when God was pleased to reveal his Son in me' (Galatians 1:16), trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with our hearts and minds, our soul and strength.
- to live in communion with Jesus (Galatians 2:20), sharing his life of love and so sharing his faith – the faithfulness (fullness of faith) of God which Jesus incarnates and reveals.
- to act in accordance with God's will as revealed by Jesus, especially by living a life of love (Galatians 5:14).

Hope

In non-Biblical Greek ἐλπίς means ‘estimation’ or ‘expectation’. We should have a sound basis for our judgment of what the future might hold for us.

In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Psalms and prophetic writings elpis translates words expressing ‘trust’ and ‘taking refuge’. The focus is on God as the one in whom we place our trust. This sentiment continues in the Wisdom literature, but there the influence of non-Biblical Greek can also be seen with the focus shifting from present trust to future expectation.

In the New Testament ἐλπίς retains the idea of trust, but with the focus on the future. We could define it as a trusting confidence now in regard to the future – a trust based on one’s faith in God. Trusting that God is faithful we are sure that what God has promised will happen and we can leave the future peacefully to God.

When Paul speaks of ‘eagerly waiting’, and when he speaks of ‘hope’, these are not the same. There is a place for eager longing. There is also, and more importantly, a place for hope, where the focus is not on longing for something for which one is expectantly waiting, but on present assurance because of the God in whom one now places one’s confidence, on whom one now relies, to whom one now looks.

A perfect expression of hope is found in Psalm 131:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great
and too marvellous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

This is not without importance in recognising the distinction between faith and hope.

Faith is concerned with objective reality: the fact that God is real, the fact that God's will has been revealed, and that our basic response (our 'faith') is to accept this truth revealed in our history, base our life upon it and act accordingly. In Paul, as we have seen, the objective reality in which we believe is what God has revealed in Jesus (1:12,16).

Hope speaks of an attitude of trust whereby, because we believe, we can leave the present and the future in God's hands.

Love

Though it is John and not Paul who uses the expression ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8), from everything that Paul writes we can be confident that he could readily make this statement his own. Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God’s self-giving, a ‘word’ of love. When God revealed himself to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God’s instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God’s love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus’ self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God’s gift of self, to God’s love.

The love of the heart of Jesus for Paul is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes elsewhere: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

One of the central texts of the Torah reads: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). Because the verb ‘love’ is translated in the Greek version by ἀγαπάω, inevitably Paul uses this verb to speak of our basic relationship with God.

However, it may come as a surprise to discover how seldom he does so – in fact only three times:

1. In the following quotation: ‘As it is written: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who **love** him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).
2. ‘Anyone who **loves** God is known by him’ (1 Corinthians 8:3).
3. ‘We know that all things work together for good for those who **love** God’ (Romans 8:28).

Perhaps even more surprisingly, he speaks of our loving Christ only once, in the final sentence of his Letter to the Ephesians: ‘Grace be with all who have an undying **love** for our Lord Jesus the Messiah’ (Ephesians 6:24).

Furthermore, he never uses the noun ἀγάπη with either God or Jesus as its object. In the context of human behaviour, the noun always, and the verb on every occasion other than the four noted, refer to our relationship with other people. In speaking of our response to Jesus and to God Paul prefers to speak of 'faith'.

The love we are to have for one another is not any kind of love. It is God's love flowing through us to others. Paul sees love as divine. It flows from God to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and thanks to this gift from us to each other. Jesus' disciples are to have the same universal dimension to their love that Jesus had. This universal love is nurtured within the community of love where Jew and Gentile share in the same Spirit.

In this love is fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’ (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

In his love, Jesus is harnessing for his Father all the energies of love. It generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves; to love with his love. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus' own love to offer them.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in their mutual love. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship. It is not the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well. It is not a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals.

As Paul writes: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us: 'Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2).

When Paul says that ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6), he is quoting traditional Jewish wisdom. Judaism does not separate faith from obedience; it does not think of faith as an intellectual assent that leaves one’s behaviour untouched. To believe means to commit oneself to do God’s will ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Does not Jesus affirm the same truth: ‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 7:21).

James writes: 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves' (James 1:22).

'Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead' (James 2:17).

James is speaking about 'works of faith', not 'works of the law'. He is insisting, like Paul, that real faith bears fruit in love. Of course it matters what we do. Of course we must obey the will of God.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
to the church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah:
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²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, ³constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus the Messiah.