

## **Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World**

### **Knowing You Belong to God 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10**

#### **Introduction**

By the time Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul, he had moved on from Athens westward to Corinth.

What his fellow missionaries shared about all the good things continuing to unfold in the lives of the believers in Thessalonica filled Paul with gratitude and joy. Only God could have created such transformation and perseverance in the lives of these brand-new believers. What was happening among them was so remarkable that news of their conversion had spread throughout the whole Mediterranean region.

Having shared with these new believers how thankful he and the other missionaries were for them, he begins to explain further why he is so grateful to God for what was happening.

1 Thessalonians 1:4

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you.

How could Paul be so sure?

What gives the missionaries confidence that these are brothers in the faith?  
What observable evidence demonstrates that God loves them and has chosen them?

Love is real but it's intangible.  
God's choice of these individuals is by definition within His mind and purposes before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1).  
Being born again into the family of God is the work of the Spirit in the soul of a person.

All of these are actions of God. He makes the first move. He accomplishes salvation for us. We cannot save ourselves by our own efforts. Yet all these divine actions become apparent because of what they produce in a person. What are the outward manifestations of the Spirit's illumination, regeneration, and indwelling?

Like Paul, when we are sharing the gospel with people, it brings us joy to see God at work. We know we cannot humanly accomplish what needs to happen in their hearts to bring them to repentance and faith. We cannot bring them to life spiritually. Only God can do that.

From the standpoint of the Thessalonians, it strengthens our faith to have those who walk with God express that they see God at work

in us. It helps us weather the trials when godly people are confident we actually belong to God.

So what were Paul and his companions seeing? What made them so confident about the spiritual state of the Thessalonian Christians?

How can we know we belong to God?

Paul answers in verses 5-10 starting with the key word "because . . . ."

<sup>4</sup> For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, <sup>5</sup> because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. <sup>6</sup> And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup> so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup> For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. <sup>9</sup> For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead,

Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

1. The gospel has turned you to God (5a, 9-10).
2. You suffer for the Word with joy (5b-6).
3. You have become a public example to all believers (7-8).

**1. The gospel has turned you to God (5a, 9-10).**

1 Thessalonians 1:5a

Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

The good news came to you

In word

In power

*By definition good news comes in the form of words, but it is not empty talk and wishful rhetoric. God's words have intrinsic power to accomplish whatever He says. He spoke everything into existence out of nothing.*

So it is with gospel words—they are vehicles of God's power. Not just truthful in line with reality, but also active in power.

That power was evident as the missionaries preached to the Thessalonians. This miraculous energy force flowed through the

missionaries and into the minds and hearts of their hearers.

John 6:63

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

In the Holy Spirit

The power was personal—in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit energizes the word to convince, convict, and draw the hearers just as the Spirit filled the apostles with boldness and clarity to communicate the gospel truth.

With full conviction

The gospel preachers spoke with full conviction, and the hearers who received the word received it with the same full assurance.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

<sup>1</sup> And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. <sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, <sup>4</sup> and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

The whole evangelistic effort was a manifestation of divine power and authority, the lead-off evidence that these persons who received the word to be chosen by God.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

At work—energizing; operating

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

<sup>9</sup> For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

They themselves report what kind of reception we had among you—not just the observations from Silas and Timothy, but of believers in Macedonia and Achaia, northern and southern Greece. To what were people everywhere in Greece bearing witness?

You turned to God from idols

- To serve the living and true God

They lived in a world drowning in idolatry.

Remember what Paul saw in Athens?

Acts 17:16

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Statues of every kind—stone, marble, wood, gold, silver—30,000 of them

Altars to every god imaginable—not only the regular pantheon of gods like Athene, the mother of the air, Demeter, the mother of the earth, Zeus, the god of force, but to Philosophy, Beneficence, Rumor, and Shame; atop the Acropolis towered the 40-foot statue of Minerva, goddess of war and civilization, observable from every sector of the city—as if to say, in this region Idolatry rules over all. Said of Athens that it was easier to find a god than a man.

Athens was the leading cultural city of Greece, so it epitomized the spiritual state of the Mediterranean world. This was the spirit of the age. Darkness reigned.

Turning from idols was therefore revolutionary, as was worshipping a living and true God not represented by manmade

statues and shrines as were the fictional, imaginary, manmade gods of paganism.

We think our own culture sophisticated, but we still pursue substitutes for the living and true God. We still bow at the altars of human intellect, observation, and wisdom, worshiping science and technology, along with the popular philosophy of the age. Little interest if any in the wisdom of God or His authority and infinite power. We are devoted to money and influence. We sell our souls for indulgence in pleasures God has declared evil and harmful. We believe we are better off for doing so. And we are hostile toward anyone who dares to limit our self-destructive appetites. Like the idols of ancient times our idols are ways of worshiping ourselves instead of the God who created us.

Serving the God who is the source of life and ruler of the universe Who by His power created man rather than worshiping gods created by man to serve human appetite.

You turned to God from idols

- To serve the living and true God
- To wait for his Son from heaven—raised from the dead, delivers us from the coming wrath

Here is a God who is not merely spiritual, far removed from the harsh realities of life on



earth. God the Son was born human, the God-man. He suffered alongside us and for us. He never sinned. He took in his own body the death we deserved and then rose again three days later. Forty days after His resurrection He ascended into heaven with the promise to return.

The Thessalonian believers were eagerly waiting for His return from heaven, not with the craven fear of those who know they have sinned against God and deserve His wrath, but with the joyful expectation of those who know their sins have been forgiven and cleansed, and that an eternal inheritance awaits them in the everlasting kingdom of the Messiah, the Savior-King.

*All of this was profoundly counter-cultural. It did not affirm the evil around them. It confronted it. It offered hope of rescue from it. And it was an open invitation to all ethnicities for anyone who would receive it by faith.*

Paul's words to the Athenians:

Acts 17:24-27

<sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath

and everything. <sup>26</sup> And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, <sup>27</sup> that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

This open call to all ethnicities enraged the Jews who considered the Messiah exclusively their own Savior-King.

*Ironically, what amplified the testimony of these new believers was largely the hostility they faced, pushing the gospel to new communities and displaying how deeply committed these brand-new Christians were to the gospel they had believed. Who would risk so much for a lie? And how could you explain away such a display of power in the radical redirection of their devotion?*

Pagans and Jews were both stunned.

#### Diagnostic Questions

- Have you received the word of the gospel as the word of God, not just of human beings?
- Has it caused you to turn away from the idols of your heart to the living and true God?

- Is your life about serving God while you eagerly wait for His Son Jesus Christ to return from heaven?

## **2. You suffer for the Word with joy (5b-6).**

<sup>5b</sup> You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. <sup>6</sup> And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

The credibility of the missionaries' gospel witness was their own willingness to suffer for the sake of advancing the good news. Imprisonment and beatings, mob attacks and legal pressure failed to turn the missionaries from devotion to Christ and spreading His gospel. The Thessalonians imitated that same level of commitment. Their reception of the gospel was not riding the coattails of popularity. Just the opposite. Gospel power at work provokes the powers of darkness. It threatens their dominion. It does not accommodate them. It overturns them. So they fight back.

*So willingness to suffer for Jesus has ever been an acid test of genuine conversion.* Jesus Christ Himself set the example, not just the missionaries—"imitators of us and of the Lord." In fact, Jesus declared that you cannot

be His disciples unless you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him.

The cross was an instrument of torture and death. It expressed the hostility and hatred of human beings and Satan himself for God and His truth and His Son and His people. Those who believe only because of the emotion of the moment or the surge of the crowd do not survive the pressure of affliction and persecution.

Matthew 13:20-21

<sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup> yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.

Jesus contrasts those with saving faith:

Matthew 13:23

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

It takes time to bear fruit. Truly born again people continue to show life and in time they bear fruit. They don't shrivel up as soon as affliction or persecution arises on account of

the Word of God. They persevere. They don't affirm the lies of pagan thought. They don't twist and modify the truth to make life easier on themselves in the face of a hostile world.

### Application

*Nobody enjoys being mistreated. Nobody enjoys pressure and affliction. But your faith is proved genuine by these trials. False faith crumbles.*

So do not look at your trials and sorrows as enemies—even if they come from enemies of the gospel. God uses these to purify, strengthen, and vindicate you. Not only are you proving that your faith is genuine. You are heaping up eternal reward.

### 1 Peter 1:6-7

<sup>6</sup> In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup> so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

### James 1:2-4

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its

full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Matthew 5:10-13

<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup> You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

### **3. You have become a public example to all believers (7-8).**

<sup>7</sup> so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup> For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

The word of the Lord—the gospel—sounded forth like a trumpet blast reverberating through the mountain ranges. It sounded through the instrument of living human beings who had been rescued by Jesus.

The inward change that had happened to them was so outwardly obvious, that the missionaries did not have to prove that the gospel of Jesus actually turns people from darkness to light. The light of their faith in God was shining too brightly for the missionaries to have to make the case.

This is what genuine conversion does. When we visited the Nunezes' church in Cancun in 2005, the congregation was almost entirely composed of new believers. Part of their growth was due to the gospel witness of the Nunezes. But what kept happening was that when a person trusted in Jesus, his or her life radically changed. Their family would at first think it was just a passing fad. But 6 months in or more, the transformation and growth continued. And whole families would trust in Jesus. Why? They saw the power of the gospel in the exemplary lives of those who were truly born again.

*We are called to proclaim and to display the gospel. The display demonstrates that the gospel we believe is not just words, but the power of God to save to the uttermost all who believe.*

If you are a genuine believer, your mission in life is to glorify Christ and to benefit others. But it's not just your mission. It's the

characteristic way you live. You can't do otherwise if you have the life of God in your soul. God is in you. The Spirit indwells you and empowers you. And that divine life in you flows out to everyone around you like a river. Not just to the unsaved, but to believers as well, just as our text states. Your brothers and sisters in Christ need your example. It benefits them.

John 7:37-39

<sup>37</sup> On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

<sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" <sup>39</sup> Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Application:

Who is benefiting from the life of God in your soul? Who is, as it were, drinking from the springs of living water flowing from the Spirit's work in you?

*You cannot effectively glorify God by shouting the gospel over the wall to people you don't know and who don't know you. They need the opportunity to see God at work in your life close up. So move into their lives. Let them*



*get to know you.* Start with the people who are already close to you—your family, your coworkers, your neighbors. Then shine. Let the gospel reverberate through your home, your workplace, your community.

Psalm 67:1-2

<sup>1</sup> May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face to shine upon us, *Selah*  
<sup>2</sup> that your way may be known on earth,  
your saving power among all nations.

## **Conclusion**

Here's what to look for in your own life and in the lives of anyone who is truly belongs to God:

1. The gospel has turned you to God (5a, 9-10).
2. You suffer for the Word with joy (5b-6).
3. You have become a public example to all believers (7-8).

Closing Song: The Lord Is My Salvation

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the advantages of knowing you actually belong to God as a born-again member of His family, loved and chosen by Him?
2. What are some examples of when you've seen of the Word of God go forth

- with Holy Spirit power and full conviction, and what was its effect?
3. Why does the preached/taught Word have power on people the way it does?
  4. What are some of the common idols of our age—what people love, trust, and fear to lose more than God?
  5. What difference does it make in our thinking and living if we are eagerly waiting for the return of the risen Son of God from heaven who will deliver us from the wrath to come?
  6. In what ways was the gospel Paul preached counter-cultural to prevailing paganism? In what ways was it counter-cultural to prevailing Judaism?
  7. What does it say about ourselves and about the gospel when we are willing to suffer for it joyfully? How about when we are not willing to do so?
  8. In what ways is our displaying the work of the gospel in our lives so valuable to believers as well as to unbelievers?