

1Thess. 1 – Memories that Lead to Thanksgiving

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers (1:2); For this cause also thank we God without ceasing (2:13); For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God (3:9); In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you (5:18).

It seems that no matter what problems the Apostle Paul faced with his converts, no matter what challenges they faced or what challenges Paul faced with them, he never lost sight of the wonder of so great salvation that had been wrought for them by Christ and was wrought in them by the Holy Spirit. And so he has cause, time and again throughout this epistle to give thanks to God and to call upon the churches to give thanks to God also. This is a consistent pattern throughout most of Paul's epistles:

- *First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all (Rom. 1:8)*
- *I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ (1Cor. 1:4)*
- *I Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers (Eph. 1:6)*
- *We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you (Col. 1:3)*

One of the charges Paul would level against the world of rebellious unbelievers would be that *even though they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful*. And in that same verse in Rom. 1:23 Paul goes on to explain that something terrible takes place in the hearts of those who fail to give thanks to God. He says that they *become vain in their imaginations, and their foolish hearts are darkened*.

Now in this 1st chapter of 1st Thessalonians – Paul remembers things about these believers that lead him to give thanks. *We give thanks to God* he says in v. 2, *remembering* (v.3). In other words – there were memories that led to thanksgiving. Giving thanks and remembering can go hand in hand. It's no different today. There are things that we do well to remember that can and should lead us to thanksgiving. And this is what I want to focus on today – memories that lead to thanksgiving. If I could put it to you simply and directly:

We Should Remember the Things that Lead to Thanksgiving

What things do we need to remember? In this 1st chapter of 1Thess. I'd like to draw your attention to 3 things that Paul remembered about the Thessalonians. These are things that we ought to be able to remember in our own Christian experiences. And

these are things that should lead us to thanksgiving, as well as challenge us to renew our dedication to Christ. Consider with me first of all:

I. You Should Remember Your Conversion – {cf. v.9}

I think it would be correct to say that most of this chapter is devoted to Paul's memory of the conversion of the Thessalonians. This 9th verse stands out as a very plain and powerful example of what happens when a man is converted to Christ. The text says that the believers in Thessalonica *turned*. They turned from something and they turned toward something. They turned away from idols. And they turned toward God.

And what you have in this verse is a perfect example of how repentance and faith work together in a sinner's conversion. Repentance speaks of a turning away from something. A sinner faces the truth of his sin. He confesses his sin to God. He pleads the blood of Christ over his sin. He's grieved and sorry for his sin and is determined by God's grace to leave his sin.

And he turns toward Christ. He has faith in Christ. He believes in the atoning work of Christ. And he is happy to commit the well-being of his soul to Christ. He takes hold of Christ by faith and his hope for eternal life and heaven is based solely upon what Christ has done.

Do you see how both work together? You have repentance and you have faith. It strikes me as strange in our day that you can find churches and preachers that try to give you the impression that you can have one or the other of these graces. You can have faith without repentance we're told in some instances. You don't, however, turn to Christ as your Savior without turning away from sin. Like the Thessalonians you turn away from idols – from the false notions of your imagination that say you're alright – sin isn't a serious matter – my goodness far outweighs by sin – those are the notions you turn away from. And you do so by turning toward Christ.

Now the Thessalonians were wonderfully and powerfully converted. And this gave Paul cause for thanksgiving. You see how he puts it in v.5 *For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance.* This is the same kind of thing that you find in Romans. You remember Paul's thesis statement to the Romans? – *the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.* Paul at that time had not been to Rome. But he knew that they had experienced the power of the gospel. And he wanted to go to them to preach the gospel to them so that they might continue to know that power.

We see the same thing in his epistle to the Thessalonians – but now he is remembering how that power was manifested toward them. He saw that power manifested in their lives. He saw them enter not merely into a new and different religion – but he saw them become alive to *the living and true God* (v.9). I love that statement in v. 9. It indicates to us that in salvation we have not merely become the adherents of a religion – but we have experienced a new relationship to God through Christ. We know Him to be the

true and living God because we've been wrought upon by the truth and we've been made alive toward Him.

Here's the question that each one must face then – how has the gospel come to you? Have you heard it in word only? Sadly that is the way many hear it. Or has it come to you in power? Has it come to you through the Holy Spirit? If it has then you will have gained that heart-felt perception that the gospel is true. What it says about your sin is true – that your sin is offensive to God and deserves everlasting condemnation. What it says about Christ is true – that He is the Son of God who came and who died for your sins. What it says about life is true – that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

When the gospel comes with power and the Holy Spirit bears witness to your heart to the truth of it – then it comes in assurance, as Paul says in v. 5. When it comes this way you are sure of it and it brings to your soul great joy. You see what Paul says in v. 6 *ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost*. That's really a graphic description of gospel power isn't it? They received the word in much affliction. You might say that the word stirred their hearts to an internal affliction when they came under conviction of sin and that word definitely led to external affliction when the Thessalonians were persecuted for their faith. And yet in the midst of much affliction it was not affliction that ruled their hearts, it was the joy of Holy Ghost that ruled their hearts. And so is this the case when the gospel goes forth with power.

Do you remember your conversion today? Weren't those dark days before you closed in with Christ? You had a love for the sin that defiled and damned you. You had a void in your heart that no amount of sin's pleasure could satisfy. You were weighed down by guilt. You were driven by lust. You were motivated by pride. In your darkness you didn't know how you got here, what you were doing here or where you were going from here.

But God commanded the light to shine in the darkness of your heart – that's the power of the gospel. It wasn't a lightning bolt flashing across the sky. It wasn't a clap of thunder. It wasn't a shaking of the earth. It was really very simple – the gospel made sense to you. You could see your sin and you could see that Christ died for your sin and you came to Him and you believed in Him and do believe in Him now. I want to tell you that's powerful – that's the gospel coming with the witness of the Holy Spirit in assurance to your heart. And it gives you great cause for thanksgiving this day.

Have you closed in with Him? The evidence for closing in with Him according to v. 6 is that you became a follower of Christ. You continue to follow Him and seek Him. Is that your testimony? If it is then you have cause for thanksgiving. Remember your conversion, then, and give thanks to Christ for His marvelous salvation.

So the first thing we remember and give thanks for – is our conversion. Consider with me next that:

II. You Should Remember the Impact of Discerning Your Election – {v. 4}

This truth, perhaps more than any other, is what should convince you that your salvation is a miracle. Now in this chapter Paul doesn't go to any length at all to expound election. He simply mentions it as something he knew about the Thessalonian believers and something they knew about themselves – hence the phrase *Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.*

This wasn't a matter of controversy. This wasn't something that Paul had to take the time to explain and debate and convince them about. It was rather something so basic to the gospel that Paul mentions it as something they would know. And when this doctrine is rightly understood it becomes a real bulwark of assurance to the Christian. That's the impact of the doctrine of election – it becomes a source of assurance.

You may recall that when you first discovered or were confronted with the doctrine of election it may have created doubts about your salvation. After all this is the doctrine that teaches you that salvation is entirely of the Lord. In His sovereign decree God elected a people and gave a people to Christ. In the covenant of redemption those people became Christ's upon condition that He would act as their covenant Head and fulfill the law for them that they've failed to fulfill and then pay the penalty for their many violations of that law by His atoning death.

This is the doctrine that teaches you that there is more to salvation than a mere decision for Christ. And when a believer is initially confronted with the doctrine that his salvation is entirely dependent upon the sovereign pleasure and grace of God he feels a certain amount of helplessness and humility – and that's a good thing.

But once a true believer gets beyond that initial reaction to the humbling doctrine of election then that doctrine can become a wonderful source of assurance of salvation. It becomes a matter of the believer's greatest concern as well as his duty to heed the exhortation that Peter gives in his 2nd epistle when he says in v. 10 *wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure.*

And the way we make our calling and election sure and the way it becomes a source of assurance is by simply exploring the issue raised in our text back in 1Thess. 1 as to how Paul knew that these Thessalonian believers were among the elect of God. How did Paul know that? Or more to the point – how can you know whether or not you're among the elect? Was it through some supernatural influence that Paul was able to perceive their standing with God?

And the answer is – no not at all. If you look at the previous verse – v. 3 where we have the specific items mentioned that Paul remembers without ceasing – these things

constitute the evidence of the election of the Thessalonian believers. And what does Paul specifically remember? – Look at them in v. 3:

He remembers *their work of faith*. This phrase *work of faith* is so concise and yet comprehensive. Faith and belief are the same thing. In fact they are oftentimes translated by the same word in the Greek. Paul knew that the Thessalonians believed in God and believed in Christ. Look at what they believed in the last verse of the chapter – v. 10 – They believed that Christ was the Son – the Son of God from heaven. They believed that he was risen from the dead – They believed that Jesus was that Son raised from the dead – and they believed that through Christ they were delivered from the wrath to come.

This suggests that they believed in judgment. They believed that sin calls for the righteous anger of God's wrath. But through Christ's shed blood they were delivered from that wrath. In other words – they believed the gospel. They had faith in the gospel. This was their *work of faith* – that Paul remembered. But this faith was not merely assent to these glorious gospel truths – Paul remembered their *work of faith*. Their faith led to something – it led to a conscious effort on their part to live for Christ.

This point is made stronger in the next phrase where Paul says he remembers – *their labor of love*. This is the essence of practical Christianity – labor of love. We labor because we love Christ. I hope you're here today because you love Christ. I hope that whatever you do, you do so with an aim to the glory of Christ because you love Christ. This is our glorious freedom in the gospel. We don't strive to earn something from Christ – we could never earn anything from Christ. Our best efforts fall short of the glory of Christ and we could never earn our way to heaven or into an acceptable standing with God.

But what we could never earn – God has freely given in Christ. He gives us Christ's righteousness. He gives us forgiveness full and free. He gives us eternal life. He gives us a home in heaven. And those who see their need for these things and perceive that apart from these things their best efforts will not avail to gain them acceptance with God and so they freely receive what God offers in the gospel – these folks, I say, are driven in life by an altogether different force or motivation than those who know not Christ and have not accepted the gospel. Their labors for God become labors of love – they are driven by love to Christ. They are driven by gratitude to Christ for all that Christ has freely given them.

This is another mark of one who is among the elect of God - his work of faith and his labor of love. And then – look again in v. 3 – his *patience of hope*. The word *patience* could also be translated *endurance*. His hope endures. His faith in Christ perseveres through all the circumstances of life. The believers in Thessalonica were put to the test – there was a price to be paid for identifying with Christ.

If you have the chance read Acts 17 which describes Paul's entrance into Thessalonica. The believers there faced great opposition from the unbelieving Jews. Paul was forced to leave the city prematurely. One of the things that gives a certain amount of drama to this 1st epistle to the Thessalonians is what Paul records in the beginning of chapter 3.

We read in 3:1 – *Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlaborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith: That no man should be moved by these afflictions.*

And then look at v. 5 – *For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labor be in vain.*

Paul wanted to know whether or not their faith would hold in the midst of great affliction. The suspense of the matter weighed on Paul's heart until he couldn't stand it any longer and so he sends Timothy to them to find out. And in v. 6 we discover that Timothy returned to Paul and brought news of the believers at Thessalonica – *But now when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you: therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith: For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.*

Can you feel Paul's relief and exhilaration over the fact that these believers were persevering in their faith? It's no wonder he could write back in 1:3 that he remembered their patience or endurance of hope. We sure don't expect much in our generation do we? It seems that in our day if a person makes even the slightest profession of faith we become willing to excuse the fact that the gospel really doesn't have much of an impact upon his life. Paul's ministry to these believers was cut short – but still their lives were effected by the gospel. This is the power of the gospel.

And so Paul knew they were among the elect – because they believed in Christ, because they labored for the name of Christ and because their hope endured – they never let go of Christ. This is how you can know whether or not you're among the elect – do you believe in Christ? Has your life been transformed by Christ? Is your life lived in gratitude to Christ for so great salvation? Do you continue to hold fast your profession of faith in Christ no matter what the circumstances of life bring your way?

Paul remembered these things about the Thessalonians. And because he remembered he knew they were elect. And because he remembered and knew he could say in v. 2 *we give thanks to God always for you all.* If you can make your calling and election sure, this day, then you have cause to give thanks to God and to Christ. How is it that you've gained an interest in Christ? How is it that you love Him, that you've responded to Him, that you're grateful to Him for His willingness to leave heaven's glory to die on the cross for your sins?

Is it because you're wiser than the next man? Is it because you possessed some spark of spiritual life? Is it because you were just a little more godly or spiritual than someone else? Not at all. You were dead in trespasses and sins. You did not seek after God until He sought after you and worked on your heart.

Only then did you gain the grace to face your sins – up till that time you denied your sins, or blamed them on someone else, or blamed them on your circumstances, or refused to think that they were very serious. But the Holy Spirit moved on your heart with power – and then you faced your sins and turned to Christ. And you've believed on Him ever since. And you love Him and you live for Him and you wait for Him with anxious anticipation knowing that one day you'll be transformed into His glorious image – for when we see Him we shall be like Him we read in John's first epistle. These are the marks of one who is elected of God.

Your election should give you cause for thanksgiving. We remember, and because we remember, we know, and because we know – we're thankful. We have great cause for thanksgiving this day, then, don't we? We give thanks when we remember our conversion. We give thanks when we can trace the evidence of our election. Consider finally that:

III. You Should Remember Your Zeal – {vv. 7-9}

These verses are very similar to what you find in Rom. 1. In that epistle Paul is writing to Christians. He is writing to believers that he had not yet visited. He knew many of them from previous experiences where he had crossed their paths, but he had never visited them or preached to them while they were at Rome.

But they bore a similar testimony to the one we read of here in this 1st chapter of 1Thessalonians. *Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world* Paul writes to the Romans (1:8). And now in 1Thess. 1:8 he says *in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad*.

Even though the location was different, and even though the people were different, and even though the preacher was different – the impact was the same. When the Christians at Rome gained an interest in Christ their desire was to make His name known. And when the Christians at Thessalonica gained an interest in Christ their desire was to make His name known.

You cannot possibly know Him without possessing the desire to make His name known. This happened, you know, when Christ walked upon this earth. He would deliver men from their blindness, or from their deafness, or from demon possession and then He would charge the recipients of these miracles to hold their peace – but none of them could – they must tell what Christ has done for them.

I feel my own heart challenged on this point. Maybe you feel your heart challenged as well. I have to go back, it seems, so far to remember that zeal I once possessed for the

Lord Jesus. I wanted everyone to know what Christ had done for me. I was naïve enough to think that everyone I came into contact with would rejoice at my discovery of Christ and would respond to the gospel the same way I did. I was in for a rude awakening. Lost loved ones would scoff, others wouldn't want to hear it, others might endure it for a time but would not respond to it, but would rather ignore it.

Can you remember your zeal? Can you remember the freshness of your discovery of Christ and His salvation? Can you remember the intensity of your desire to make His name known? It seems that with the passing of time our zeal languishes. We become too conscious about our image and respectability. We rationalize that if we appear too fanatical we'll do more harm than good. We've learned to anticipate scoffing and mocking and the rejection of our Savior and so it has become increasingly easy to hold our peace.

Let's remember our first love this day. Let's reflect on the days that we first gained an interest in Christ and our zeal for Him knew no bounds. Let's think on the times that we prayed for everyone we knew and we endeavored to tell everyone we knew about salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

If you can remember that zeal – then you'll find cause for giving thanks. If you can remember that zeal, then you'll face a challenge to rise to this day. Oh that God might renew our zeal by giving us new and fresh discoveries of Christ and His so great salvation.

So there is much for which we can give thanks during these days. Remember your conversion. Remember your election. Remember your zeal. And as you remember these things then worship Christ and offer to Him your thanks. Of all men and women upon the earth we should be characterized as those that are grateful to our God and to our Savior Jesus Christ. Dr. Bob Jones Sr. had a saying that I hope I never forget. He said: *when gratitude dies on the altar of man's heart, that man is well nigh useless*. May God deliver us from becoming useless through a lack of gratitude. Indeed may the gospel come to your heart with such power today that your praise will be strong and your zeal will be inspired and your love will grow and your confidence will be increased.