

Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians
(4) How to Know You Are One of God's Elect (part 2)

Introduction:

For several weeks we have been considering the message of God's Word in 1 Thessalonians 1. We have seen that the Apostle Paul was able to express with much assurance that the Christians in this church at Thessalonica were ones whom God had graciously chosen to be recipients of His salvation. They were among the elect, the chosen people of God, for Paul could say that He thanked God upon every remembrance of them for the grace that God had bestowed upon them. We read in verses 2ff, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God" (NKJV). Last Lord's Day we drew our attention to the teaching of Scripture that all of us are to give all diligence to confirm to ourselves that we are numbered among God's elect. Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1, "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if you do these things, you shall never fall..." (2 Pet. 1:10). This is not instruction that we are to obey in order that we might become one of God's elect, for that is not possible. The elect are those God the Father chose from eternity, ones that He determined He would save from their sins through Jesus Christ. No, to make one's calling and election sure is not in order to become one of God's elect; rather, it is to determine if God had numbered you among His elect.

This command to assure ourselves of our election by God leads to a question that each of us to ask, "How may I know that I am one of God's elect?" And although we may find an answer in Peter's words in 2 Peter 1, we may also read instruction here in 1 Thessalonians 1 on how to perform this great task. For here Paul not only stated his assurance that these Christians were among God's elect (v. 4), but he then set before them what it was about them that had convinced him of their blessed spiritual condition (vs. 5-10). Let us read once more 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴***For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,*** ⁵because 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. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For 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. ⁹For 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, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thess. 1:1-10)

And so, if we find that the work of God's saving grace that characterized the lives of these Christians is also evident in our lives, then we, too, may conclude that we are numbered among the blessed people of God, those chosen by the Father from eternity, redeemed by the shed blood of His Son, and brought into a state of salvation by the blessed Holy Spirit that he has given to us. In short, if what was true of them is true of us, then we are, just as they were and are, blessed of God. That this way of gaining assurance of salvation is biblical is confirmed in our confession of faith. In the article on Assurance of Salvation we read the following:

1. Although temporary believers, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God and state of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish; yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.

2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel; **and also upon the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit unto which promises are made**, and on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; and, as a fruit thereof, keeping the heart both humble and holy.¹

Here in 1 Thessalonians we read of the promises of God's salvation belonging to these Christians in the church at Thessalonica. If "those graces of the Spirit" that characterized them, characterize us also, then the promises of God that were theirs, are ours also.

Before we proceed, let me draw our attention to the last words of this second paragraph of our confession. It declares that assurance of one's salvation, that is, being assured that one is numbered among God's elect, produces in the heart of the Christian the fruit of humility and holiness--"**as a fruit thereof, keeping the heart both humble and holy.**" When we speak of being among the elect of God, it is common for people who do not know the Holy Scriptures to conclude that this is the epitome of self-righteousness and arrogance. "For anyone to claim that he is one of God's elect is vain, self-righteous, and hypocritical." And this conclusion would most certainly be true, if one could become one of the elect through one's own merit, through one's own effort. But the Holy Scriptures repudiate any such way of salvation. God's election of some sinners unto their salvation is wholly due to God's mercy and grace, not based upon anything performed or achieved by the believer. God bestows salvation freely upon guilty, hell-deserving sinners. There is, therefore, no ground of boasting or feeling superior to others by being numbered among the elect. Rather, a right understanding should render one very humble before the Lord and lead that believer to live for the Lord who was so gracious to bestow His gift of salvation upon him. Indeed, as the confession states of assurance of salvation, that it produces the "fruit thereof, keeping the heart both humble and holy."

Now after the apostle declared his assurance that these Christians were of the elect of God (v. 4), he gave **six reasons** for his stated conclusion. They are found in verses 5 through 10 of this first chapter to the Thessalonians. Let us take them in turn.

I. Paul was convinced of their election by God **because of the manner in which the gospel had been at work among them.** In **verse 5** Paul wrote, "because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

1. Paul could write, "our gospel came to you not only in word."

Now, it had not come to them in word only, but, indeed, it had come to them "in word." God has purposed that He will bring His chosen people to salvation through **the word of the gospel.** The gospel is a message to the lost who need salvation. It is a message with content that must be communicated to them, understood by them, and believed by them.

The gospel is referred to by a number of terms in the Scriptures. It is sometimes called "the gospel of the kingdom of God" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Matt. 24:14; Mark 1:14). It is "the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1). It is called "the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 1:16; 15:19, 29; 1 Cor. 9:12, 18; 2 Cor. 9:13; 10:14; Gal. 1:7; Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 3:2), or "the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). It is the "gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor. 11:7; 1 Thess. 2:2 8, 9; 1 Pet. 4:17). It is the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). The gospel is sometimes called "the gospel of your salvation" (Eph. 1:13) or "the gospel of peace"

¹ Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Article 18, Paragraphs 1 and 2.

(Rom. 10:15; Eph. 6:15). And so, the many various ways that depict the gospel shows forth its origin, its subject matter, and the results that it achieves in its hearers.

The essential content of the gospel is the good news announced by God that although all mankind is under His condemnation for sin, nevertheless, due to God's great love for His fallen world, He has provided a means of salvation for sinners. Although mankind has rejected God's rightful rule over them and have incurred His everlasting wrath in His punishment of their sin, He has, nevertheless, established an everlasting kingdom into which He will bring all of His redeemed to dwell with Him in eternity. God has ordained His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, to be the Prophet who would instruct them, the only Priest who would atone for their sin and the Promised King who alone could and would save them by His power. God is able to grant salvation through the merit and power of our Lord's life, death, and resurrection, and His current reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus Christ is able to save any and all sinners who come to Him and submit to Him as their Lord and Savior.

The gospel is a word, a message to be communicated, understood, and believed on in order to be saved from sin and granted everlasting life. But again, the apostle declared, "***our gospel came to you not only in word.***"

2. Paul wrote to them that the gospel had come to them also "*in power.*"

The gospel is insufficient to save sinners unless it is accompanied or made effectual by the power of God. By the word coming with power, we are referring to several things. ***First***, for the word of the gospel to come in power means that God enabled its hearers to believe it. Yes, "the word" needs to be understood by its recipients, and this also involves the power of God. But God often shows forth His power to enable understanding of His word not only by His elect, but also by many who never do become Christian.² But in addition to the need for God's power to ***understand*** the gospel, but it takes God's power for the sinner to ***believe*** the gospel. Paul described his ministry of the word among those in Corinth.

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. ²For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. ⁴And my speech and my preaching *were* not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of ***the Spirit and of power***, ⁵***that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*** (1 Cor. 2:1-3)

It was the power of God that enabled these Corinthians to believe the gospel unto their salvation.

God empowers His gospel so that it is effective in bringing sinners to saving faith in Jesus Christ. We read Paul's words to the church at Rome: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for ***it is the power of God to salvation*** for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Rom 1:16). And in 1 Corinthians 1:18 we read, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved ***it is the power of God.***"

Secondly, for the word of the gospel to come in power means that ***they regarded the word as incredibly important, critically essential to their eternal well-being.*** And so, the Lord gives "weight" to His Word when His elect hear it. It has influence upon them that hear. They understand the word and they know its truthfulness. The word is regarded as important and absolutely true by the elect. This spiritual knowledge is due to the power of God in the gospel.

Thirdly, we would say that God's power produces in the sinner ***love for His word.*** Natural man does not love God's word. It confronts him and imposes God's law upon him that would restrain him. God's

² Consider the unbelievers of Hebrews 6 whom God has illuminated regarding His truth. Also, of the false teachers of 2 Peter 2 it is said that they had understood and had even cleaned up their lives somewhat through the knowledge of the Word (2 Pet. 2:20).

word condemns fallen man who refuses to hear and submit to God's word. It brings a sense of God's condemnation upon the sinner. And so what does fallen man do? He rejects it, casts it away from him. But the Lord has promised that He will have mercy upon the one that loves His Word and has high regard for it. God said through Isaiah, "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isa. 66:2). But the natural man does not tremble at God's Word, for he hates it. He is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can he be (cf. Rom. 8:7). But when the word of the gospel comes to him with power, this former enmity against God and His Word is removed, and in its place God implants is a very real desire to know the Word of God as well as in intense delight in the Word of God. The sinner is brought by the power of God to love the Holy Word of God. And so, he comes to say to God as the psalmist:

"I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. (Psa. 119:47)

"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. (Psa. 119:97)

"Therefore I love Your commandments more than gold, yes, than fine gold! (Psa. 119:127)

"My soul keeps Your testimonies, and I love them exceedingly. (Psa. 119:167)

Love for the Word of God is a very important evidence of true salvation. It gives proof that the power of God is making the Word of God effectual to the soul.

But of those who do not love God's Word, they are damned, for they remain in their sin. They have no interest, no desire, no delight in the Word of God. They would just as soon as never hear it rather than to be confronted with its claims and demands. Paul wrote of the some who would be damned, whom the Lord Himself will condemn because they refused to love His Word. Paul wrote,

"The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders,¹⁰ and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because ***they did not receive the love of the truth***, that they might be saved. ¹¹And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, ¹²that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess. 2:9-12)

But these Christians in the church at Thessalonica had received the word in power, and therefore Paul was convinced of their election.

3. Paul wrote to them that the gospel had come to them "*in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.*"

The Holy Spirit makes the word of God effectual to the salvation of sinners. Salvation from first to last is a work of the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Third Person of the Holy Trinity. Paul wrote of the Spirit's sole authority in this matter. "Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and ***no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit***" (1 Cor. 12:3). The risen Lord Jesus declared to His disciples that they were in need of the power of the Holy Spirit in order to become effective witnesses to the world. He had commissioned them to preach the gospel to the entire world, but before they commenced their mission, they were in need of the power of the Holy Spirit. He said to them, "***But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you***; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The word goes forth with the power of the Holy Spirit, which results in the conviction of sin and the desire for salvation through repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ for salvation for all the elect of God.

The Lord Jesus had told His disciples the night that He was betrayed,

It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. ⁸And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰of righteousness, because I

go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:7-11)

If it were not for the word of God coming **“in the Holy Spirit”**, it would not have come to us **“with full conviction.”** We are in need of the Holy Spirit to empower the gospel to enable it to be effectual in transforming sinners into saints.

II. Paul knew of their election by God **because of the manifestation of the Word of God proclaimed to them--it had resulted in their changed lives.** In **verse 6** Paul wrote, “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.”

1. They became imitators of Paul (and also Timothy and Silvanus) and the Lord.

Paul had been transformed by the gospel, being made over from a Christ rejecter and a persecutor of His people to a disciple of Jesus Christ and a founder and builder of His churches. And these Christians at Thessalonica had “imitated” him. They, too, became promoters of Christ and His Word. They followed Paul as he followed Christ. They desired and sought to live before God in a manner that pleased God. Their desires had changed. Their values had changed. Their motivations had changed. Their purpose for living had changed. All things had become new unto them (Cf. 2 Cor. 5:17).

Not only did these Christians become imitators of Paul, but they were also imitators of the Lord Jesus. They had also become imitators of Christ; they had become imitators of both Paul and the Lord. The Lord Jesus modeled for us what kind of reactions and responses we should have toward circumstances to which we are subjected. We read in 1 Peter 2:

But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. ²¹For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, **leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps**: ²²“Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth”; ²³who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; ²⁴who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness-- by whose stripes you were healed. (1 Pet. 2:20-24)

2. They had received the word “in much affliction.”

Paul wrote in the next chapter of the manner in which they had received the word of God, which we will consider in detail when we arrive there. But there Paul described what it was like when he had first come among them with the gospel.

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. ²But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, **we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict.** (1 Thess. 1:1f)

And then farther down we read,

¹³For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. ¹⁴For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. **For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans...** (1 Thess. 2:13-14)

When those, who profess to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, do so in the face of opposition or persecution, it is evidence that they are numbered among the elect of God. They are willing to suffer rather

than deny Christ. This is evidence that the gospel has been at work effectually in them by the power of the Holy Spirit.

3. They had received the word “with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”

Even while coming to faith in the face of difficulty and experiencing affliction, nevertheless, they were filled with “the joy of the Holy Spirit.” The joy that the Christian can experience is not contingent upon the outward circumstances to which he is being subjected, that is, if he is thinking rightly and is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Believers in Jesus Christ are to be a people known for their joy in their Lord.

Many sorrows shall be to the wicked;
But he who trusts in the LORD, mercy shall surround him.
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous;
And *shout for joy*, all you upright in heart! (Psalm 32:10)

New life in Jesus Christ is to be characterized by joy. We may voice to our God,

In Your presence is *fullness of joy*;
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psa. 16:11)

God has promised that they who come to salvation will encounter great joy. God has said:

For *you shall go out with joy*,
And be led out with peace;
The mountains and the hills
Shall break forth into singing before you,
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (Isaiah 55:12)

Our Lord Jesus told His disciples that their own salvation was to be the basis of their joy. On one occasion when their rejoicing was based upon demons being subject to them through Jesus’ name, Jesus told them not to rejoice in this, but to express their joy that they were recipients of salvation. He said to them:

Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather *rejoice because your names are written in heaven*. (Luke 10:19f)

Later, on another occasion, the night our Lord Jesus was betrayed and arrested, He spoke to His disciples of the temporary sorrow that they would experience because of His sufferings and death that He was to encounter. But He declared to them that upon His resurrection and thereafter they would be characterized by joy. Jesus said in **John 16:20ff**:

Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but *your sorrow will be turned into joy*. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow; *but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you*.

We should be a rejoicing people. When people see us and they reflect upon us, we should so live before them that they perceive us to be joy-filled people. We should always be rejoicing.

Now, when we speak of joy, we are not speaking of that which might be generally characteristic of a cheerful and optimistic personality. There are many non-Christians who may be of that nature. We are speaking of a deep-settled and abiding joy that may belong to the true Christian. His natural personality might be more melancholic than others; nevertheless, he may be filled with and characterized by joy that the sanguine personality has never known. No, we are not speaking of one who is a bubbly and happy person by nature. ***The joy of the Christian is a deep-settled sense of well-being, satisfaction, confidence and delight in knowing his God and knowing that he is in a right relationship with Him.*** This person will have a calm spirit under trial. He will have a sense of well-being and confidence when, humanly speaking, all seems to be hopeless. He will have a measure of stability and confidence when others seem to be losing control. His is not self-confidence, but he is confident in His God and His relationship with God through Jesus Christ. He delights in this, and it settles his soul. He is at peace with God and his soul is at peace because of this.

Joy should be always be characteristic of us, for we are in the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God is “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). It is a fruit of the Spirit. “The fruit of the Spirit is...joy...” (Gal. 5:22). Joy should be that which characterizes each of us.

III. Similarly, Paul knew of their election by God ***because they became examples of how believers ought to live in the world.*** In **verse 7** Paul wrote, “so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”

The Christians in the church at Macedonia had first become imitators of Paul and the Lord, but then they became an example to other Christians and churches of how Christians are to live in this fallen world.

They had become an example “to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” Macedonia was the region in the north of Greece where Thessalonica was/is located. Achaia is the southern region of Greece proper. Everyone throughout these two regions had heard about the church at Thessalonica. The other churches saw that church as containing model Christians. Every church desired that their church would be like the example of the church at Thessalonica. This church was conforming their faith and their practice to the Holy Scriptures. Paul had written to Timothy, “Let no one despise your youth, but ***be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity***” (1 Tim. 4:12). But here was an entire church of believers, which was an example “to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.”

Paul would write this church in his second epistle that he ordered his own life so that he might be an example before them, demonstrating how a Christian should live. He wrote:

⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, ⁹not because we do not have authority, ***but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us.*** (2 Thess. 3:7-9)

May the Lord enable every one of us to become so committed and devout as Christians that other churches in our New England region would view our church as an example that they may follow.

IV. Paul knew of their election by God ***because they proclaimed the Word of God to others, seeking to evangelize the world in which God had placed them.*** In **verse 8** Paul wrote, “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 Christians in this church not only eagerly and readily received the Word of God, they became eager and ready to proclaim the Word of God to others. They were mission-minded. This is good evidence of ones who are numbered among God's elect. They have benefitted from the Word of God; they want others to also benefit from the Word of God. The message of the gospel became important to them. They sensed an obligation as well as opportunity to spread the Word of God widely from their church into the

region in which they were situated. They were excited to have a part in disseminating the seed of the Word of God even as they anticipated a great harvest of souls who come to salvation in Jesus Christ through their word. They would not put their light under a bushel basket, but “on a lampstand, so that it gives light to all who are in the house” (Matt. 5:15).

V. Paul knew of their election by God *because of their repentance from sin to serve the true God*. In verse 9 Paul wrote, “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.”

Faith in the Lord produced by the gospel results in true believers abandoning their former ways of life that were contrary to the Word of God, even as they begin to conform their thinking and practice to the word of God. This is what repentance is according to the Scriptures.

The initial act of faith on the part of the guilty sinner is the sinner calling out to God for free forgiveness and promise of life that is in Jesus Christ. *But that initial act of faith also contains in its very nature a faith that leads that sinner to turn from his sin*. The believing sinner repents of his sins; that is, but then he turns from his love and practice of sin and submits himself to Christ. Take **Zacchaeus** for example. We read in Luke 19:1ff of his faith and repentance.

Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. ²Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. ³And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. ⁵And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.” ⁶So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. ⁷But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, “He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.”

⁸Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.”

⁹And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; ¹⁰for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Take note of this: It is not the act of turning from sin that results in the forgiveness of sins by God and God’s declaration that he is no longer guilty but righteous in His sight. Nor is it in the sinners resolve to turn from sin. Zacchaeus was a sinner who became justified before God solely through his faith in Jesus alone, not *due* to his ceasing to be a thief. The Bible does not teach penance for sin, but repentance (turning) from sin. But repentance is not the ground of justification, faith in Christ alone is what justifies the sinner. *Justifying faith is the act of faith that comes to God in faith solely on the merit of Jesus Christ alone due to His life, death, and resurrection on the sinner’s behalf*.

And so, *the faith that pleads and clings to Christ alone is the same faith that leads that sinner to repudiate sin and turn from serving sin in his life*. Zacchaeus had faith to believe on the mercy and merit of Jesus Christ alone for his acceptance before God. He had no righteousness of his own that he could claim. All of the resolutions in the world would not have cancelled out the guilt of his crimes before God. His faith in Jesus Christ did, however, result in God cancelling the debt that Zacchaeus owed to God’s justice.

Repentance is an essential aspect of our message of salvation that we proclaim to the world. Paul related to the elders of the church at Ephesus how he had come among them:

He (Paul) said to them: “You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; ²⁰how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, ²¹testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, *repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*. (Acts 20:18-21)

God calls people to exercise repentance toward God. This implies turning from sin unto the Lord. From what are we to repent? First, we are to renounce errant views of the person of Jesus and adopt and embrace the view that God has of Jesus. We are called to turn from sin, which may be defined as living a self-directed existence, disregarding and violating the ways of God.

The idea of “repentance” is not one readily accepted by people. There is something about the very word, repentance, which elicits a reaction. I think there are several reasons for this:

(1) It implies personal guilt that must be dealt with. And if there is anything that is avoided in these days it is any sense or admission of guilt.

(2) The word itself, I think, is linked in most people’s minds with a word which sounds somewhat similar, that being *penance*. But this is error, for repentance is nothing like penance. We are speaking of repentance, not penance. The two are decidedly different.

Penance is a man-made doctrine developed through Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition. Penance is a teaching which says that a person must confess his sins to a priest, perform some self-abasing action, confess so many “Hail-Mary’s” or do some deed for the purpose of compensating for one’s sin and performed in order receive the absolution of a priest, that is, his pronouncement of forgiveness of sins. But penance is not repentance, but because there is an association of the two together, I believe there is an aversion to speak or hear of this matter of Biblical repentance.

But even though repentance is something that is not pleasing to us, this is no reason to ignore or neglect this duty. For this matter of repentance is so important being central to the Biblical teaching about salvation and the Christian life.

What is repentance? Repentance, simply, is fully *turning oneself from serving sin to submitting to God and doing His will*. And yet having described repentance simply, further clarification is needed for there is a false repentance that does not save which can look much like the genuine item. True repentance includes the following elements.

(1) **With true repentance there is a true sense and acknowledgement of *personal sin*.** Often times when evangelism is conducted this is not a matter that is driven home to the conscience. It is not enough to get a person to acknowledge that he is a sinner among everyone else who are also sinners; rather, it is “*Me, My sin, Lord.*”

(2) **With true repentance there is a sense of one’s *guilt* because of his sin.** That is, when a man repents of his sin, he feels the just condemnation of God upon himself for his sin. He does not see his sin as a trifle, but as a terrible affront to God’s law that warrants his condemnation; his sin is an exceeding crime that is worthy of God’s wrath. He sees his sin as exceedingly sinful and he recognizes there is no basis of plea before God for forgiveness; rather, if forgiveness is to come to him, he knows that it must be by the free and voluntary exercise of God’s mercy that He is free to bestow or withhold.

(3) **With true repentance there is a sense of *shame* due to one’s sin.** This is different than guilt. Guilt is a sense of one’s condemnation. Shame is the feeling of utter disgrace due to sin. There are some who teach that you are never to experience shame or guilt, that God in His grace has provided such a perfect sacrifice in Christ that guilt and shame is never to be experienced, and that if a preacher like myself leads people to experience guilt and shame over sin, he is a false teacher. But let me say this: if you have not experienced a sense of guilt--just condemnation-- and a sense of shame concerning your sin, you have not received forgiveness of sin. If our sin caused Christ to be treated as guilty and caused Him to suffer shame, it should certainly do that in us. Adam and Eve sensed great shame in the nakedness of their sin, and we should feel no less. A shameless man is a non-Christian man.

(4) With true repentance there is a sorrow over personal sin. It is inward sorrow, a remorse for having ever committed it. This is in contrast to a sorrow or fear merely for its consequences. Parents, when your child sins and he is sorrowful before you, that is good, but that is not enough. Direct him to have sorrow before God. And be concerned and make it a matter of prayer, if that is not present.

This sorrow is not simply a sorrow for having committed the sin itself, but *it is sorrow before God*. When one becomes aware of sin and God's attitude toward sin and His work through Christ in dealing with sin, the repentant sinner feels great sorrow. Not only has his sin deeply grieved God, but his sin was a cause of Christ's terrible shame and infinite suffering as the sin-bearer. There is sorrow for having committed it, but it is a sorrow that involves remorse for the pain it placed upon the Lord Jesus Who bore it upon His cross.

(5) With true repentance there is a desire and effort toward restitution. This is the effort to undo the offense before others, making restitution if need be, to vindicate the ways of God and bring Him glory. This was evident in the repentance of Zacchaeus.

(6) With true repentance there is confession of sin. There is an owning of personal responsibility. When one truly repents he makes no excuses. He does not lessen his guilt; rather, if it were possible (but it isn't), he would magnify his guilt. Again, Zacchaeus could be cited. He stood and confessed his sins to Christ but it was in the hearing of others. When John baptized in the Jordan he did so while they were confessing their sins.

(7) With true repentance there is a confession of specific sin. Yes, there is a keen recognition of the pervasiveness of sin in one's entire being, but it is generally specific offences which makes the matter sin known to the individual. These specific offences are recognized and acknowledged, which leads one to see the all pervasiveness of sin as a principle in one's being; and seeing this, he turns from it.

(8) With true repentance there is a hatred of sin in all its forms wherever it is detected. The non-Christian may grieve over certain "sins", but these are generally outside of themselves. They hate "sins" which run counter their understanding of what is right and wrong--things they may identify as crimes against the environment, sins of intolerance, prejudice. But generally these are sins outside of themselves. With respect to themselves all behavior and attitudes are justified and they justify others who view matters in the same vein. But when one becomes a Christian, having repented of sin, he adopts the same view of sin that God has--he has a hatred of it. He hates it in *himself* and he hates it in *others*. He grieves over what he does; he grieves over what others do.

This is important. There is something defective somewhere if we do not hate sin. If we are not grieved by immorality in all its forms, if an overheard blasphemy does not cut us to the heart, if an off-color joke does not offend our sensibilities but rather appeals to our sense of humor.

(9) With true repentance there is a cessation--a turning-- from the performing of those former sins. Now this is not the time to speak of sins of which we repent of which seem to come back upon us, sins to which we frequently succumb; that is another topic for another time. What we are saying here is that when one repents of sin, he deals with sin, it is not merely a confession of it without the intention or resolve to turn from it.

(10) With true repentance there is a turning to God and His Son Jesus Christ. Repentance is not just turning from sin, but it is turning to God. In fact, the Apostle Paul emphasized this aspect in the passage we cited earlier:

"I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now before we move on from this description of *true repentance*, I think it is important to stress this: although all of the elements stated above must be present in true repentance has been experienced, the degree to which these things may be experienced varies greatly from individual to individual. Some feel these things very acutely, so as to be almost consumed by them; others, however, do not experience them as acutely; nevertheless, they are all present. The bottom line is this, not that you have felt these things acutely but that the essence of repentance has been exercised by yourself--that is, *you have turned from serving sin and are you are now submitted to God and doing His will from the heart.*

VI. Paul knew of their election by God *because they were joyfully anticipating the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.* In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 Paul wrote, “and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” True Christians look forward to the return of the Lord Jesus when they will receive the fullness of their salvation that He has secured and promised to them. They view themselves as strangers in this world, and they long for the new heavens and new earth that the Lord has prepared for them.

Conclusion.

We have seen that this chapter contains is a rather extensive list of qualities and behaviors that convinced the apostle Paul that these Christians in this church at Thessalonica were among the elect of God, ones whom God had chosen in eternity to be the objects of His saving purposes and power in Jesus Christ. All of these qualities are manifestations of the grace of God operating in the life of His people. Now you might perhaps have measured your own profession and life in the light of these things and have concluded that there is not a great deal of evidence to make your calling and election certain to yourself. What are you to do? Let us conclude by turning back to 1 Peter 1 and read what the Lord would have us do.

⁵But also for this very reason, *giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, ⁶to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, ⁷to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. ⁸For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. ¹⁰Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; ¹¹for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. ¹²For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. ¹³Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, ¹⁴knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. ¹⁵Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease. (2 Pet. 1:5-15)*

We are to purpose and to strive to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord through giving ourselves over to the Scriptures, asking and trusting the Lord to transform us by His grace and conform us by His grace to these qualities that characterize His people. As these manifestations of His grace are more fully and clearly manifest in your life, you may be more assured of your calling and election unto salvation by our God.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:13)
