

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Thankful for You 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

Introduction

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

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

In our letters today we sign at the end. In the
first century you would put your name at the
beginning. Paul begins his letter in keeping
with the customs of the times, but with
clearly Christian content.

After his usual greeting of grace and peace,
the main statement he makes in these
opening verses is in 1 Thessalonians 1:2a
We give thanks to God always for all of you.

In our everyday lives it is common courtesy
for us to say thank you when they give you
something or do something for you.

But when we say “I am thankful to God for you,” we are expressing something more. Think about the last time someone said that to you or you said that to someone else.

“I am thankful for you” conveys that you value the person, that you consider him or her a gift from God to you because you see God at work in that someone in some way.

Paul was good at expressing this kind of Christian affection for those with whom he was connected through the gospel. Like when he told the Philippians, “I hold you in my heart.” He is the apostle to the Gentiles, the writer of half the NT, but he’s not in it for himself. He highly values others, and he regularly tells them so.

If we see the hand of God in the relationships we have, “I am thankful for you” should be one of the ways we communicate our heart for one another.

In these opening verses of 1 Thessalonians Paul reveals gospel reasons to be thankful for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thankful because—

1. We are connected to you—as fellow members of God’s forever family (1).

Thankful so—

2. We are praying for you (2).
3. We are thinking about you (3).

1. We are connected to you—as fellow members of God’s forever family (1).

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

The missionary team—Paul, the apostle Silvanus—Roman version of the Greek name Silas. Paul’s companion on the second missionary journey after Paul and Barnabas split ways in their disagreement whether John Mark should go with them.

Timothy—Paul’s son in the faith, about 18 when Paul first knew him—about the time of Paul’s being stoned and dragged outside the city as dead at Lystra.

Silas and Timothy had stayed at Berea when Paul was conducted by the brothers to Athens. But now they have joined Paul in southern Greece.

The church of the Thessalonians—the church is a people; born again persons who’ve put their faith in Christ Jesus

Ekklesia was a term used for Greek assemblies of citizens called out to vote on political and community decisions

Now their citizenship and identity are of a higher order than just city-state or nation.

In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ
They are now not just citizens but beloved children in the family of God. The One who has brought them into the family is the Savior King. His given human name is Jesus—Yahweh saves. The God-man Savior. Christ—the Messiah, the Anointed One, promised Redeemer and King who would crush the serpent's head and would redeem His people from sin and death, ruling over a kingdom that would never pass away. Lord—Yahweh Himself, Master of the Universe

How could anyone enter such a privileged family and kingdom?

Grace and peace to you
Grace—unmerited favor, goodness, beauty; a benediction. We have already received grace through the Lord Jesus Christ. That grace granted us forgiveness, cleansing, life in the family of God. But we still need grace, and Paul prays that for the Thessalonian believers as they continue their journey of faith.

They were keenly aware of the ongoing divine help they needed to survive and thrive despite the hostility they face in their community that drove the missionaries from their city. That hostility reflects the spiritual

antagonism of Satan against God and His people.

They needed grace to keep living for God not just because of the enemies without, but the enemies within—like their own appetites and resistance to God that flow from being part of a race of sinners by birth and by choice. The battle against their own sin would continue all their days on earth, as does ours.

Peace—shalom; not just absence of conflict, but also presence of well-being. Fullness of life as it should be. Possible only because of grace. The grace of God is the means to experiencing the peace of God. We need this peace of God to flow like a never-ending river into our lives as we live for God in a world that naturally disrupts our sense of peace. *The human heart longs for peace and seeks to find a path to it. But it comes only as a gift—the gift of God's grace through Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Paul, Silas, and Timothy are thankful to God for the Thessalonian believers because their very identity, along with the grace and peace they enjoy, comes from God alone. Apart from God these things are out of reach for us. That's why it only makes sense that the missionaries would thank God for the members of the church of the Thessalonians.

Look around you at the faces of those gathered here. Whom do you know well enough to be assured they are born-again brothers and sisters in Christ. Think of all the blessings of God evident on them and in them and flowing through them to you. These things did not just happen by chance. Your connection with these persons is purely by the grace of God at work in their lives and in yours. Thank God for them. And tell them you are thankful to God for them, just as Paul does the believers in Thessalonica.

Are you living your life in the reality of what God has done to connect you to His children? Are you treating them that way? Who needs to hear you say this week, "I am thankful to God for you"?

2. We are praying for you (2).

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

If you are continuing to thank God for your brothers and sisters in Christ, you're already talking to God about them. It only makes sense that you would pray for them regularly.

When you pray, thank God for them. When you pray, bring before Him what you know they are facing. In the case of the Thessalonians, there were open enemies to the gospel making life difficult for them. This

reality had Paul deeply concerned that they might not be faring well. When Silas and Timothy arrive with news of their healthy survival and growth in Christ, Paul is deeply relieved and overjoyed.

What trials are your brothers and sisters in Christ facing? Pray for them specifically. Pray that their faith will not fail. Pray that they will grow. Pray that they will experience joy in Christ. Pray that God will use them to display and advance the gospel among the people that know them. If you are aware of their flaws and failures, pray for God to help them in their battle for purity and holiness, for integrity and maturity. Pray that God will keep their heart and yours connected through closeness to Jesus.

Members Prayer Directory
Your own prayer list
A dedicated time

To pray this way means that you're going to have to find time to keep doing it. It means that even as you move through the day their wellbeing will be on your mind. That explains what comes next.

3. We are thinking about you (3).

Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and

steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

- Your Work of Faith
- Your Labors of Love
- Your Steadfastness of Hope

“Remember” has the idea of keeping in mind, not just that you suddenly remembered something you forgot. Just like Jesus says about the Lord’s Table, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Sometimes what we remember about people is what they’ve done to hurt you. “I’ll never forget what you did to me.” Other times, we keep in mind some kindness they did. “I’ll never forget what you did for me.”

But Paul thinks of them in a more comprehensive way.

Your Work of Faith

That is, the work that your faith produced. These new believers had weathered the onslaught of the angry mob. They had rallied to protect Paul and Silas, seeing to it that they were safely conducted out of the city.

Faith in Christ changes how you view life and what you consider important. It makes you glad to help a brother or sister in crisis. It fuels your battle against sin. It leads you to obey God’s commands because you believe in

His goodness and that following Him is the best life there is. It steers you away from what you know is wrong because you know its harmful to others and to yourself, along with being dishonoring to God. It calls you to a life of self-denial and cross-bearing in pursuit of following Jesus all the way home. It makes you generous because that's the way your heavenly Father is and because you know you have an inheritance beyond value waiting for you. It calls you to take risk for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of other people. That's what stood out to Paul (and the rest of the world) about the believers in Thessalonica. They were willing to suffer and did so with joy. The whole region was talking about the radical change in their lives. Macedonia (northern Greece), Achaia (southern Greece)—the whole country and beyond! How they had turned from serving idols to serve the living and true God.

Your Labors of Love

Labor is toil to the point of exhaustion. We might well ask whether it's worth it to spend yourself that way. Love answers yes. Love is the hallmark of born-again people with God's life in them. Love for God. Love for others. Love is not theoretical. It cannot remain passive in the face of human need. It's longsuffering and kind. It's not arrogant or rude. It does not hold grudges. It endures. It bears all things. It believes in God. It believes

in people, that as image bearers they can be and do far beyond what you might expect if Jesus has made them His own. It fuels hope.

Your Steadfastness of Hope

Steadfastness is often translated “patience” or “endurance.” It literally means “to remain under.” That is, it bears up under the load. In all the downward pressure of life, all its burdens and afflictions, disappointments and sorrows, Christian hope bears up under the load. Hope is not wishful thinking; it is certainty regarding the future. Because of our faith in the reliability of the promises of God, we are certain that the best is yet to come. That all His promises will come true. We believe that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the shining splendor yet to be revealed. We can say with the Psalmist in Psalm 23:6

Surely goodness and mercy (steadfast love) shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

All this is future oriented. Whatever days we have left on earth—God’s goodness and steadfast love will pursue us. And when it’s all said and done, it only gets better. God’s home will become my home. I will live there forever. The heavenly city, capital of the universe, which will one day descend to earth, is my hometown. My name is written in the city registry, the Lamb’s Book of Life. New

heaven, new earth, sinlessness, immorality.
This is my sure inheritance.

At the end of this first chapter Paul talks about how the Thessalonian believers are waiting expectantly for Jesus our Savior to return. That kept them going.

Knowing our certain future helps us bear up under the pressure, no matter where it's coming from. Lies and mistreatment. Being vilified. Physical harm. Confiscation of property. Imprisonment. Even execution. None of this need shake us. Nor aging, or cancer, or death of loved ones, or loss of employment, or any other trial common to human beings. None of it can strip us of our guaranteed future. None of it can drive the Spirit of God from our lives. None of it can break our relationship with Christ. Nothing can separate us from His love. Not angels or demons, not life or death. No wonder Paul calls us "super-conquerors" in Romans 8.

The believers in Thessalonica are thriving despite their faith being under fire. The hostility has not quenched their faith or their love. They are surviving and thriving. They are bearing up under the pressure. For that Paul is rejoicing and praising God.

When Paul thinks on the believers in Thessalonica, he calls to mind these divinely created qualities:

 Their Work of Faith

 Their Labors of Love

 Their Steadfastness of Hope

No wonder Paul, Silas, and Timothy are thanking God for them. These are God things.

When you think of the believers you know, think on these things in their lives as well. These qualities mark them as God's own, just as they mark you as God's own. Let the presence of these treasures bring ongoing praise to God from the depths of your soul.

If you're going to thrive in a hostile world when your faith is under fire, you need a thankful heart for what God is doing in your life and in the lives of the believers you know.

Focus your mind there. It is refreshment for your soul. Not a denial of the hard things. It just puts them in perspective.

Conclusion

Thankful to God for you

1. We are connected to you.
2. We are praying for you.
3. We are thinking about you.
 - Your Work of Faith
 - Your Labors of Love
 - Your Steadfastness of Hope

Discussion Questions

1. How could you make expressing thankfulness to God for the brothers and sisters in Christ you know a more common feature of your life and communication?
2. What are the kinds of evidences of God's work you see in the lives of believers you know well?
3. Where do you see God's grace at work in your own life?
4. What are some examples in your own experience of the peace God has given you?
5. Who are some of the individuals for whom you pray regularly?
6. What could be some ways you could make prayer for others a higher priority?
7. What work of faith and labors of love have you seen in the lives of your brothers and sisters in Christ?
8. Why do you think hope (certainty regarding the future) is so necessary to bearing up under the downward pressures of life?
9. What does the expression of future certainty in Psalm 23:6 regarding all the days of life on earth, along with where we will dwell forever, do for your own endurance?