YOU WELCOMED THE MESSAGE

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Key Verse: 1:6

“You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.”

Have you ever felt like what you were doing was in vain, like it had no effect at all? It makes even trying to do something so hard. But when we see results, when people respond well to what we’re trying to do, it can make us so happy. In today’s passage Paul begins writing a letter to a group of people whom he had just recently gotten to know. Though there was so much hostility that Paul had to leave prematurely, they had responded well to his message. As we think about this introduction to his letter to the Thessalonians, we especially want to learn how to respond in the right way to the good news of Jesus. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Thessalonica was one of the major cities in the Roman Empire at that time, with about 200,000 people. It was the capital of Macedonia and located on a major east/west trade route, with a busy seaport. Paul went to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. We learn about it in Acts 17. As was his custom, he went first to the Jewish synagogue. It was a group of Jewish immigrants living and working in this Gentile city, and he told them the good news about Jesus, that he died and rose again and is the promised Messiah. He spent only three weeks there, teaching on the Sabbath. Some Jews believed. So did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women (Ac17:1–4). But some Jews became jealous and started a riot. A man named Jason had welcomed Paul and Silas into his house. But when the mob searched his house they couldn’t find them. They gathered Jason and some other believers and tried to press charges against them, that they were harboring political rebels, but it didn’t work. Paul and Silas had to escape later that night by the help of believers (Ac17:5–10). They had to leave a brand new church in a shaky situation. So when Paul eventually got to Corinth, he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to see how the believers were doing, and after he came back and reported, Paul wrote this letter.

Look at verse 1a: “Paul, Silas and Timothy…” It was actually Paul writing the letter, but he includes Silas and Timothy as his peers. Paul didn’t think he was superior to them, or that the ministry was only his, but that they were real partners in the gospel. He saw the three of them as a team. It was this team approach that made Paul’s ministry effective.

Look at verse 1b: “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul respected these new believers as people who had formed a church. It wasn’t just a mutual support group. Paul said they were “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” There was a divine aspect to their gathering. They belonged to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. They had a new faith and a new identity. Also, they were not individualistic, but believers living in a community. They gathered together to pray and worship and love and encourage one another. This spiritual community gave them a new sense of belonging and a place to be strengthened in their newfound faith. If we’re going to grow in Christ, we all need to be involved in such a spiritual community.

Look at verse 1c: “Grace and peace to you.” This was a common form of greeting in ancient letters. But to Paul these words had spiritual meaning. When we are in Christ, we receive his grace and peace in our souls. We’re no longer plagued by guilt or fear or worries. With his grace and peace we become spiritually strong to live for him.

Then Paul proceeds to give thanks for these new believers. Read verses 2,3. One thing we notice here is that Paul uses the word “we.” He, Silas and Timothy met together to pray regularly, and when they did, they always gave thanks for the Thessalonian believers. It tells us another secret of Paul’s ministry, praying with his coworkers. And they didn’t just pray about problems or demand things from God; they gave thanks for the people in whom God was working. Another thing we notice here is how quickly these new believers in Thessalonica had become active. So often people can take so long to make a commitment and really live out their faith in Jesus. But these people had done so right away. They were already working in faith, laboring in love, and persevering in hope. Paul often mentions faith, love and hope as the essentials of Christian faith (1:3; 5:8; cf. 1Co13:13; Gal5:5,6; Col1:4,5). Before receiving Christ, we tend to be full of doubt, hatred or despair. But after receiving Christ, God fills us with faith, love and hope. How beautiful! And these aren’t just inner emotions; they find expression in how we actually live. When we work hard by faith, labor for people in love, and persevere in hope, our motives are right, and we have a healthy spiritual life. We should pray to see these fruits in others’ lives as well.

Look at verse 4. “For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you…” Again we see Paul’s respect for these new believers. He sees them as his own spiritual brothers and sisters. He recognizes that they are loved by God and chosen by God. Many of them were not Jews, but Gentiles, and humanly speaking they had not spent very much time with Paul. But because of God’s work in them, Paul felt so close to them and he had such respect for them.

How could he? Read verse 5a. It was the Holy Spirit who had changed them. It was the Holy Spirit who had enabled them to experience the good news of Jesus so powerfully. It was the Holy Spirit who had given them deep conviction of the truth that is in Jesus. This work of the Holy Spirit in them was the evidence that they, in fact, belonged to God, were loved by God and chosen by God. We can’t control how the Holy Spirit works in people. What we can do is share the good news of Jesus and pray and see how God works.

And there’s another thing we should do. Look at verse 5b: “You know how we lived among you for your sake.” Here Paul is talking about living the Christian lifestyle. Paul didn’t just go and preach at people and leave. He lived among them, sharing life together, imitating the humility and love of our Lord Jesus. The main trait of the lifestyle of the apostles was the sacrificial love of Jesus, living not for themselves, but for the sake of those to whom they ministered. When we live sacrificially for others, God himself works.

Read verse 6. We learn two things here. First, these new believers immediately started imitating the unselfish lives of their mentors. Becoming a Christian isn’t about just believing certain doctrines; it’s about changing our ways, especially learning to live for others instead of for ourselves. At our core, in our sinful nature, most of us are living for ourselves. But the gospel changes us so deeply that we actually start living for Jesus and for others. It makes us willing to make a radical change in our way of living.

Second, Paul said, “you welcomed the message.” What does it mean? It means they didn’t argue in their minds with what Paul was saying. They opened their hearts and accepted it. In a sense, they remind us of Jesus’ words, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Mt19:14). They were simple and teachable like little children. They didn’t think they knew better than Paul. They were spiritually ready to receive the good news of Jesus.

What’s even more remarkable, Paul says, is that they did so “in the midst of severe suffering.” What’s he talking about? It was the suffering of persecution. As we saw, there was a riot. People were getting arrested for their faith in Jesus. It was dangerous to take sides. But these believers didn’t chicken out. They still welcomed the message. How could they? Paul says, “with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” Joy? Wow, that’s unexpected. In their severe suffering they weren’t worried or anxious or fearful; they were joyful. People can be joyful in the midst of severe suffering only by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It’s not by human effort; it’s God’s work within us. It’s so simple, yet so powerful: hear the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, repent of our sins, believe in him and receive the Holy Spirit. When we do, our lives become so joyful, no matter what we’re suffering or what hardships we’re facing. It’s the only way to really be changed, to repent and believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit.

What happened when the Thessalonians did? Read verse 7. Their change had a powerful impact. They became a source of inspiration to other struggling Christians. It tells us another aspect of a healthy Christian life: being a good influence on others. So often in this world we hear bad news, discouraging news. People’s bad behavior can dishearten us or influence us in a bad way. But the good news of people being changed by Jesus and willing to suffer joyfully for him can really inspire us. We can’t inspire people just with our nice talk; we inspire people when our lives give evidence that the Holy Spirit is really working in us.

Look at verse 8a. “The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.” These new believers in Thessalonica had become a blessing to the whole world. We learn here how the message of Jesus spreads: not just through the preaching of apostles, but through the changed lives of new believers. So many people don’t have faith in God. So many are filled with worries and selfish concerns and all kinds of sins and weaknesses. But when we hear of people who have real faith in God, even in the midst of severe suffering, we can wake up spiritually and start exercising our faith as well. There are many kinds of noble causes and movements in the world. But inspiring people through our own lives to have faith in God may be the best kind of movement.

People were talking about the conversion of the Thessalonians (8b,9a). How does Paul describe it? Read verses 9b,10. First, they turned from their idols, which were false and dead. They tried to make those idols their security, but in fact those idols were useless. Second, they turned “to the living and true God” and began to serve him. They chose to be different in their society where everyone was serving idols. Third, they were waiting “for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” They had a real hope in the Risen Jesus and in his Second Coming. They believed that only Jesus could save them from the coming wrath. They had confidence in this gospel. Paul really respected them for their faith.

Read verse 6 again. May God help us to welcome the message of Jesus. May he help us to experience the joy of the Holy Spirit and imitate the sacrificial life of our Lord Jesus. May God make our practical lives a spiritual encouragement to one another. And may the message of Jesus ring out from us to this campus, and even to the whole world.