

A LETTER TO YOUNG CONVERTS (Part I)

Study 1

HOW THE WORD CAME

Read

Acts 17: 1-9;
1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5

The letter written by Paul to the Christians at Thessalonica is considered to be the first of his New Testament letters. It is obvious from its date - about 52 A.D. - that he was writing to young believers. It was a product of Paul's earlier Christian experience, and contains a spirit of enthusiasm characteristic of one who was very involved in winning people for Christ. We can catch this enthusiasm in the words of the letter. As you begin your study, try to read it through at one sitting just as you would a letter from a friend. For even though we have come to look upon it as a book in our New Testament, remember it was first read as a letter from a much-loved Apostle. Here is an outline of 1 Thessalonians with which to begin.

- Chapters 1: 1-10. Introduction**
Chapters 2: 1-12. The Reception of the Gospel - Faith. The Past.
Chapters 2: 13 - 4: 12. The Fruit of the Gospel - Love. The Present.
Chapters 4: 13 - 5:11. The Anticipation of the Gospel - Hope. The Future.
Chapters 5: 12-28. Conclusion.

We are going to study 1 Thessalonians in eight lessons, but this outline may help you to understand the book as a whole.

Thessalonica was the second city visited by Paul as he began to spread abroad the Good News in Macedonia. His visit to Philippi had ended well with the jailor and his family finding Christ. Then Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica. Notice where they began, **Acts 17: 1**, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. If you look through Acts you will find that this was often where the Apostles began their witness in the various cities. In all these Gentile cities there were synagogues where dispersed Jews met for worship. It was so in Thessalonica, and there Paul witnessed to Christ on the Sabbath day. In **Acts 17: 3** you will see what Paul taught the people. This was the gospel of which Paul speaks in his letter, and it was a clear witness to the truth concerning the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Jews and Gentiles seeking God, believed and became the nucleus of the Church to which Paul addresses his two letters. Because of the effect of the preaching of the Apostles, envious Jews stirred up persecution and Paul and Silas were forced to leave the town. But not before a small band of true believers was established, as Paul put it: "**In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**", **1 Thessalonians 1: 1**, the Church of the Thessalonians had its beginning.

We are now going to study **verses 1-5** of Paul's letter.

Verse 1. Salutation. Three great Christians salute these young believers at Thessalonica. Paul the great

Apostle, Silas his companion in labour, and Timothy, his "**true son in the faith**". (**1 Timothy 1: 2**) It is good to see that two experienced warriors are associated with a young man who was to carry on the work when they had gone. Perhaps Paul did this to encourage these young Christians to whom he was writing. It is worth thinking about. As the greeting is given we notice that these believers are "**in God the Father**" and "**and the Lord Jesus Christ**." If you look through the letters of Paul you will notice that he addresses the Christians in this way many times. In Ephesus, Colosse, Philippi, or Thessalonica, would speak of their natural surroundings. But "**in God and the Lord Jesus**" was in their spiritual sphere. Every Christian occupies two realms. An earthly place on a natural level, but wonderful to know, also a higher realm, on a spiritual level "**the Lord Jesus Christ**". Thus Paul is able to wish these believers the very best of blessings. "**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**." Think over this for yourself and compare other places where such greetings are expressed, e.g. **Colossians 1: 1-2**.

Verse 2: Thanksgiving and Prayer. Paul is able to give thanks for these young Christians. They meant much to him. From his letter we shall see that they were progressing well in their Christian lives. He was able to express his thankfulness and also speak of his prayers for them. The mark of a good soul-winner is that he always prays much for his converts.

Verse 3: Faith, Love, Hope. Here is a wonderful trio of good qualities which Paul could remember about these Christians. Notice all three were accomplished in the sight of "**our God and Father**". It tells us that these believers were occupied with the true values of spiritual life, for the correct reasons, and that whatever they did, was done in the right spirit. Faith, love and hope are great values with which to be occupied. When these govern our work, labour and patience in God's service there is bound to be blessing. Think this over carefully as you study.

Verses 4-5: Knowing. In these verses you will find three things that are known:

1. "**Your election by God**", **verse 4**. These Thessalonians, as with all other believers, were precious to God because they were chosen by Him to be His Own people. Notice what **Ephesians 1: 3-4** says in this connection.
2. **How the Gospel came to them.** They could recall how the Word came, not merely as spoken words, but with energy in the Holy Spirit and without any doubt. Try to grasp the positive values mentioned here of the Gospel. Conviction in the spoken message produced conversion in the lives of those who heard it. They were compelled to hear and eventually came to know Christ for themselves. There is the same great power in the message of the Gospel today as there was then when the power of the Holy Spirit is in it.
3. **The kind of men the Apostles were when they brought the message to the people?** They were a good advertisement for the message they preached. Their

preaching and their practice went together. So as Paul wrote, he could do so without fear concerning their **beliefs**, or his **behaviour**. This teaches us an important lesson.

Study 2

A GOOD ADVERTISEMENT

Read

1 Thessalonians 1: 6-10

We were thinking at the end of our first lesson about the link between belief and behaviour in those who came with the Gospel to Thessalonica. We shall return to study more of the meaning of this in our next lesson. Now we are going to look at some of the evidences of the effect of the Gospel in these people to whom Paul wrote. Good advertisement is essential to the well-being of any cause. Today business concerns spend tremendous sums of money to ensure that their goods are well recommended to the public. Many are wondering what the best form of advertising may be. Undoubtedly personal recommendation is very effective. If a carpenter wants to prove the quality of his craftsmanship to the people among whom he lives, one appreciative and satisfied customer would say more than all the publicity displayed in magazines and newspapers. For someone to be able to stand up and say: *'this is what he did for me'*, is recommendation indeed.

This is essentially true of the Gospel of Christ. Many people today are enquiring as to whether the values of the Christian faith are effective in everyday life. *'Does it work?'*, is the great question asked. As we read these few verses, we can almost hear Paul saying to the Thessalonians: *'You are living proof that the Gospel works'*. If we consider the passage from this point of view it will prove quite thrilling. We can feel the thrill in the words of Paul as he recalls the wonderful work that had been done in the lives of people who were once pagans. We shall notice four distinct features which are displayed in the Thessalonian Christians.

1. They became **IMITATORS** or **FOLLOWERS** of the Apostles and of the Lord, **verse 6**. To hear the Gospel for the first time must have been a strange experience for people in Gentile Cities of Paul's day. They heard things that were strangely different to the religion that they knew. Yet as they listened to the Word, we read that they received it *"in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit."* Then once they had heard and accepted the message they began to look more closely at those who preached it. Did the values they offered in the Lord Jesus show in the way they lived? Were their lives worth looking at? They must have been, for Paul says: *"you became followers of us"*. We can almost hear these pagans saying: *'If that is what Christ can do for them, that is the kind of life we want!'* They became imitators of them. Yet this would have been dangerous had Paul not said: *"and of the Lord"*. These men who preached, aimed to lead people, not to themselves but to the Lord and they succeeded. It is important to realise that however much we seek to imitate the good we see in other Christians, it is always safer to allow them to lead us to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. They were **EXAMPLES** to all who believed, **(1: 7)**. Very often a salesman carries around with him samples of the goods he has to offer. Or perhaps an Exhibition is arranged so that the goods offered for sale can be displayed. People make their purchases because of the samples they see. How glad Paul must have been to be able to say that

the Christians at Thessalonica were examples to all who believe. They were a good advertisement of what Christ could do in the lives of those who belonged to Him. It is good when people can look at our lives and see values which attract them to Christ. To every Christian, Christ is the true example of what his or her life really should be like. Peter tells us that the Lord left us *"an example that you should follow His steps"*. **(1 Peter 2: 21)** By following Him we shall set a high standard for others to see, and thus our influence will be felt in their lives.

3. They were **HERALDS** that sounded out the Word of the Lord, **verse 8**. We can imagine the Thessalonians as a kind of radio station that beamed out the glorious sounds of the Gospel. Not only in their immediate surroundings was their testimony heard, but in every place their faith in God was spread abroad. This was truly commendable when you think that they had not been Christians for very long. It is obvious from this letter that they needed to be corrected over one or two matters that they did not fully understand. They were far from perfect and needed to learn much. BUT they were heralds of the Gospel. They spread abroad the joy they found in Christ. You and I can do that if we really love the Lord and want to win others for Him. So good was their advertisement that Paul said he and Silas did not need to speak. The Thessalonians were effectively getting on with the job.

4. Finally, they were **EVIDENCE** of the kind of work the Apostles were doing, **verses 9 & 10**. Three things were said about the Thessalonians which tell quite clearly the results of the Apostles' work: (i) - they *"turned to God"* from their idols. In other words, there was a change of **DIRECTION**. The gods of wood and stone were forsaken. (ii) - they were serving *"the living and true God"*. This meant a change of **OCCUPATION**. They had a new sense of commitment which resulted in their abilities being used in a different way. (iii) - They wanted to *"to wait"* for God's Son, Jesus, to come from Heaven. There was a new sense of **ANTICIPATION**. The Lord Jesus was coming again and they were waiting for Him. Thus the young Church at Thessalonica was an excellent advertisement for the power of God and the work of the Apostles. No wonder Paul could give thanks for them. I wonder if there is anyone who could give thanks to God for your life as a Christian? Think about it!

Study 3

TRUE CARE FOR CONVERTS

Read

1 Thessalonians 2: 1-12

In this lesson we are going to look at the bond which existed between Paul and his converts. Our reading shows how much he cared for those who had come to know the Lord Jesus through hearing the Gospel he had preached. If you look at these verses carefully you will see that the first six verses deal with negatives. Notice how often 'not', 'neither' and 'nor' occur. Then in **verse 7** there is an important 'but' which begins a positive section. The last six verses deal with the Apostles' behaviour among and towards these Christians, so that they had a good foundation for their Christian lives. Yet whether negative or positive actions, all are designed to help those who were won for Christ. If you win someone for the Lord Jesus - and I hope you will have this thrilling experience - you can learn much by studying the way in which Paul cared for his converts. He was determined that nothing in his behaviour would hinder them, and he also made sure that every help was given them to

become strong and useful Christians.

“Not in Vain”. Paul speaks in **verse 1** of a visit that was not in vain. In other words, he says that he had not wasted his time in going to Thessalonica. At Philippi they had suffered bitter persecution as they witnessed for Christ. There was enough opposition there to make them think twice about going further. Then at Thessalonica they met with more persecution. In a very courageous way they spoke the Good News. **“Bold in our God”**, is the expression used in **verse 2**. As they counted the cost, feeling the bitterness of those who were against them, they could be excused for being depressed and cast down. Was it really worth it? They looked at the small company of young Christians who had received Christ through their ministry. Then praise to God wells up inside of Paul and he says: **“was not in vain.”** They were worth it!

Not in deceit verse 3. Another characteristic of the approach that the Apostles used as they taught their converts was that of absolute sincerity. No false propaganda was used to arrest their attention. They felt that they were in a position of trust before God, **verse 4**. This attitude proved that they sought only the good of their converts. From this we can learn that if believers are to grow after conversion, they must be sure of the truth of the things which they are taught.

“Not as pleasing men, but God,” verse 4. If Paul and his companion had preached a different message, many who persecuted them would have been pleased. They could have offered the people a watered-down version of the Gospel which at least would have softened the attitude of the Jews. Their numbers, perhaps, could have grown more rapidly in this way, but Paul’s object was to please his God. He realised that God tested his heart and Paul wanted His approval, **verse 4**. He did not want the glory of man’s praise, nor did he want to make any gain out of his converts, **verses 5 & 6**. Pleasing God was Paul’s priority. If you are doing any work for God then follow Paul’s example; let God have all the praise and glory.

Now let us look at the positive things that Paul says about his care for these converts at Thessalonica.

1. He was **GENTLE** with them, **verse 7**. Paul realised he was dealing with **‘babes’** in Christ. Just as a baby needs very special care, and as a **“nursing mother”** (this is the real meaning), it will show great tenderness to a child, Paul was gentle with his converts. He did not expect too much of them. He was careful to watch over them, making sure that nothing happened to harm them. This is a lovely figure of speech and we can learn much from it.

2. He **LOVED** them deeply, **verse 8**. they desired to give them the very best, longing for their welfare. Notice it was not just words they gave them. It was not just a matter of preaching at them. Remember that when you lead people to Christ, it is not only a matter of giving them God’s Word, although that is very important. But you must also give them love, time, patience and, perhaps, even material help. Love is a very practical thing. The Apostles would have given their own souls for the good of the Thessalonians because they were dear to them.

3. He **WORKED** hard among them, **verse 9**. They did not want the labour and expense of the work to be a burden on young converts. In other words, Paul was not preaching the Gospel for what he could get out of it. Many times in his life as an Apostle, he must have nearly worn himself out in his labours for others. Read through Paul’s letters and you will discover just how much the care of his converts cost him in physical effort. He laboured always for the good of others.

4. He was **BLAMELESS** in behaviour, **verse 10**. Notice how Paul could appeal to these young believers without shame as he spoke of the character of their lives before them. This is where so many of us make a mistake. We can easily forget the importance of purity of life, as well as power in preaching. It was good that the Thessalonians learnt their standards of Christian living from the blameless lives of their teachers.

5. He **ENCOURAGED** right values in their lives, **verses 11 & 12**. We noticed the illustration of nursing mothers used in **verse 7**. Here we find the charges of a father to his children. In a serious, almost stern way, the Apostles desire that their converts should walk worthy of God Who had called them. This reminds us, as we end our lesson, that to be a Christian demands serious, prayerful and careful living.

Study 4

STABILITY AND JOY

Read **1 Thessalonians 2: 13-20;**
3: 1-10

We have seen in our studies so far how very close Paul was to his friends at Thessalonica. It seems that he really lived for them and they were constantly in his thoughts. We can understand why Paul was so burdened with the needs of others when we remember that this was just one of the many companies of Christians which owed their origins to the witness of the great Apostle. You will read in one place that he speaks of carrying the care of all the Churches, **2 Corinthians 11: 28**. It must have been good to be one of those believers who enjoyed the love and interest of such a wonderful Christian. He really cared for his converts.

The passage we are studying now may seem a little disjointed and it may be difficult to follow a clear line of thought in it. But we are going to do a study in causes. We shall notice five of them as we work our way through these verses.

1. **Cause for Commendation, verses 13 & 14.** It almost seems as though Paul is giving the Thessalonians a pat on the back, but of course it is more than that. We find him thanking God again for them; this time because they received the Word of God as it came through the Apostles. But the distinct reason for his commendation was that they received it as God’s Word and not man’s. Once they had received the Word they became followers or imitators of the Judaeon Churches, those churches which had just been planted by the Apostles. There is a lesson here for us to learn. Although we hear God’s Word through those who speak it, we need to receive it as more than just human words. The Gospel is God’s message to men and we must receive it as such. Men and women who serve the Lord are just channels through which His blessings flow. Paul was relieved that he was not the centre of attraction to his converts. They saw beyond him to the Lord who had sent him.

2. **Cause for Conflict, verses 14-16.** The word that was received so readily at Thessalonica was, as we have already noted, received amid great opposition. The main source of this opposition to Paul and Silas was the Jews. Having killed the Lord Jesus, they were now out to destroy His followers. Their ‘dog in the manger’ attitude was clear. They refused the Word themselves and would not allow others to receive it either. This was very sad and Paul speaks of their judgment being more severe because of it.

Let us guard against this attitude of, when we refuse God's Word ourselves, we are annoyed at others accepting it. It seems as if the Thessalonian Christians suffered most from their own countrymen. It is never easy to take a stand for Christ among those who know us best. It may be that you are experiencing this now. Take courage, stand firm and be faithful in your witness for the Lord at all times.

3. **Cause for Concern, 2: 17 - 3: 5.** In all these verses we cannot miss the concern Paul felt for his converts. Notice how keenly he felt the separation from them, **verses 17 & 18.** Paul would have visited them, but it was not possible. He even felt that Satan had hindered his coming. Remember Satan does often interfere with God's work and His workers. The Apostle seemed very conscious of this when he wanted to help his friends, so he did the next best thing. He sent Timothy, his **"true son in the faith"**, (**1 Timothy 1: 2**) to find out their needs and report back to him. Try to understand just how much these people meant to Paul. He was so deeply concerned **"less by some means the tempter had tempted"** them, (**3: 5**) that he prayed **"night and day... exceedingly"**. (**3: 10**) That he would see them and be able to supply them with what they needed. This teaches us a valuable lesson. Our prayers and our care can make a lot of difference to our friends who may need help. It could be that you have led someone to the Lord Jesus and you are separated from them. Prayer covers all distances and breaks all barriers. Those who are a long way from us can feel the benefit of our concern for them as we remember them in prayer. So, as Paul had told these believers that they would suffer for their faith, he was concerned that they would be able to overcome and stand firm. (**3: 4**)

4. **Cause for Comfort, 3: 6-9.** Timothy did a good job for the Apostle who sent him to Thessalonica. He not only helped to establish the believers there, but as he reported back to Paul of their steadfastness, he brought the Apostle comfort and joy. It must have been a tonic to Paul to hear the great news. **Chapter 3: 9** is a great verse. Paul is obviously overjoyed and gives great thanks to God for all he hears. Their stability is his joy. Look back to **2: 19 & 20** and you will see something of what joy really meant to Paul. He is looking on to the time when the Lord Jesus will come again. We shall look more fully at this later. But as a great soul-winner, Paul realises that when the Lord Jesus comes again and sees people whom he was able to lead to Christ, they would be his crown of rejoicing. Remember, everyone that you bring to the Lord Jesus will be a source of gladness to you, not only now, but when the Lord Jesus comes again. This will be a day of reward to all who faithfully serve Christ. Yet Paul derived comfort and joy in his converts even then as he heard from Timothy of their steadfastness.

5. **Cause for Confidence, 3: 8.** **"For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord."** We would be right in saying that the well-being of the Christians at Thessalonica was to Paul, a matter of life and death. If they stood firm, the joy and gladness would be his. If they failed, then the Apostle felt that he had failed in his trust. Nevertheless, as we read these verses, and have studied them carefully, we are bound to feel the confidence Paul had in the power of God, the effectiveness of the Gospel and in the simple faithfulness of these young believers.

Questions

Study 1 HOW THE WORD CAME

1. Where did Paul begin to witness in Thessalonica and what were the results?
2. What special description do we find of the Apostles in **Acts 17: 1-9**, as they came to Thessalonica?
3. In which 'two realms' does every Christian live?
4. Which three things are linked respectively with faith, hope and love in this passage?
5. a) What mark of a good soul-winner do we find in the verses in Thessalonians?
b) Why had the spoken message of the Gospel been so effective among the Thessalonians?

Study 2 A GOOD ADVERTISEMENT

1. Of what were the Thessalonians a 'living proof'?
2. Why is it so important that we follow the Lord Jesus and not merely those who lead us to Him?
3. Give the two things which were linked with the Thessalonians' reception of God's Word.
4. As Christians, what sort of influence should we have on the lives of other people?
5. Which three things, in the lives of the Thessalonians, are given as evidence of the Apostles' work?

Study 3 TRUE CARE FOR CONVERTS

1. What evidence did Paul have that his work at Thessalonica was not in vain?
2. Why is it essential that our service be pleasing to God - as in **2: 4**?
3. How did Paul treat the Thessalonians, according to **2: 7 & 8**?
4. How did the Apostles conduct themselves when among the Thessalonians?
5. In what way did Paul want the Thessalonians to walk as Christians? (Answer using the words of Scripture).

Study 4 STABILITY AND JOY

1. Give the two causes for Paul's commendation of his converts.
2. What marked the opposition of the Jews to the Gospel?
3. What does Paul say about Satan in this passage?
4. What would the Thessalonian believers mean to Paul when the Lord Jesus returns again?
5. Give the three things mentioned in our study which gave Paul confidence.