

WHEN YOU STARTED OUT

This study of the First and Second Letters of Paul to the Christians at Thessalonica has a theme of “Good Words for Growing Christians.” There are three sub-themes

- Remember Where You Were
- Consider Where You are Going
- Be Aware God Is in Charge

The first session in the initial sub-theme is titled *Remember Where You Were When You Started Out*.

Objective: To recall your experience of salvation and find ways to express gratitude to God for His work in your life.

This lesson presumes that each of us has had an experience of salvation. That experience should be memorable. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17 (*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new*) there should have been a change from the old to the new. We sometimes forget that “being born again” of the Spirit of God is an actual happening. It is NOT just a metaphorical description of a decision process. It happens at a point in time. You acquired something that you did not have prior to that time. You have new life in you that is the “uncreated life of God” that can never die. Prior to being born of the Spirit you did not have that life. In other words, there is a starting point for the Christian walk.

We will use the first chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Christians at Thessalonica to identify benefits of salvation for which we are thankful.

¹ Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 1 Thessalonians 1:1 (NASB95)

Since we are looking for things for which we can be thankful as a result of our salvation, we can find several things in this opening salutation of the letter. We can list these and see what we can learn from the various things we identify.

Associations:

Notice that Paul had people who worked with him in the work of the Kingdom. These were Silas and Timothy. They had the same objectives as Paul; that is, they were like minded in their outlook on life. They could have been simply business associates who were working to start a business to make money. Since we are considering the benefits of salvation, what difference did it make that Paul, Silas and Timothy were saved? The benefits of salvation lies in the **value of the objective** of what they were attempting to accomplish. We are looking at eternal versus temporal values in what they were attempting to accomplish.

What about our associations? Do **we** have like-minded friends? (That question could be answered with “Duh!”) Usually, we do gravitate toward people who are like-minded with us. *The more important question is related to what are the objectives that we and our friends have for our lives? Are these objectives a result of our salvation or would we have the same objectives if we were not saved? How does peer pressure impact the importance of associations?*

Church:

A great benefit of our salvation is being in (a part of) the church. The word church literally means “called out group.” So, is there a benefit associated with being “chosen?” Well, it depends on who does the choosing and what is the purpose of being chosen. For the “church” we are chosen by God and we were chosen for salvation. Being a part of the church finds benefits in that we are in a special relationship with God and other believers. Some of the descriptions of the church give us an idea of what being in the church is all about. We are considered to be children of God, the bride

of Christ, members of the household of God, the army of God, body of Christ, God's handiwork, and the temple of God. When you consider the benefits of being part of all these, then you can be extremely thankful. *What can we do in the church today to show our appreciation for being included and counted among those who are "called out?"*

In God and in Christ:

What does it mean to be "in God" or "in Christ?" There are so many verses in the writings of Paul that use the term "in Christ" as a description of our spiritual position or location. We are physically located in the world (name the city, country, etc.), but spiritually we are either in Christ or not in Christ. I think the meaning of the phrase "in Christ" goes beyond just being associated with Christ but goes to being a part of all that Christ is. Being "in Christ" means that we benefit from and have responsibility for the ongoing work and ministry of Christ. We share in His holiness, His love, His power, His concerns. We reign with Him, we suffer with Him, we are grieved when He is grieved when He is grieved, we rejoice with Him. The benefits of salvation are available to those who are in Christ. Paul described the church of Thessalonica as being in God and in Christ. Would others use that same terminology to describe our church? We need to be diligent to ensure that our own local body of believers are walking in such a way that we are described as being "in Christ." When we are part of such a body, then we benefit from the blessings that come to those who are in such a spiritual position and we will be thankful. (See also comments in material related to 2 Thess 1:1-12)

Grace and Peace:

It is by grace that we were "called out" to be in Christ that we might benefit from being in him. As you know, grace is simply God's unmerited favor. We are where we are because of God's character and not by reason of any goodness on our part. If there were any reason at all for us to be thankful, receiving something beneficial that is not deserved would be an obvious reason. When we realize what God's grace is all about, it should give us a tremendous sense of well-being, tranquility, security, serenity, safety, and stability. Peace is a direct result of experiencing God's grace. Knowing the omniscience of God and that He is favorably disposed toward us produces peace in our lives. *What can we do to show grace to others both in the church and those who are outside the church?*

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 1 Thessalonians 1:2 (NASB95)

Prayer:

Prayer is a benefit and not a burden. It seems that a lot of emphasis on prayer and devotion time comes across as a guilt trip because we do not do enough of it. It is beyond my comprehension that we can communicate with the Creator of the Universe and they that He hears what we say. Even beyond that, He knows what we think and beyond that He knows the intent of our heart even when we are confused about what motivates us. Being able to pray for ourselves is awesome enough, but being able to pray for others and have positive influence in their lives is such a tremendous benefit that we should all have an active prayer ministry. Do you want to have influence, then prayer is the way to do so.

Not only should we be thankful that we can pray for others, but we should also be thankful (and even amazed) that others are praying for us. *What can we do to put this benefit into more effective practice?*

³constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; ⁵for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (assurance); just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 1 Thess 1:3-5

When Paul was praying for the Christian in Thessalonica, he had several specific things in mind that helped shape his prayers for them. These are additional benefits we have as a result of our salvation.

Work of Faith:

We might use the NIV translation of “work produced by faith” to get a better picture of what Paul is writing about. If we recall the writings of James, we recognize the connection of “faith and works” in that true faith is validated by works of faith. As James wrote, unless our faith produces results (works), then it is dead. (We need to be careful and not confuse “results” with “activities.”) In our present-day churches we may see many things being accomplished. The question then becomes “by what means did we produce the accomplished results?” Was it based on strength and resources provided by God or was it based on our own efforts? Abraham was characterized as doing a work of faith when he followed God’s direction and offered up his son Isaac. If the “work” we accomplish in our churches is not based on God’s enablement, then it is simply work of the flesh since it is done in the strength of the members. Many churches think they can do anything because they have plenty of money and know sound business principles. That is nothing more than faith in ourselves and in the world system. True faith thinks thus: “we can do all things through Christ Who strengthens us.” When we can see the results of our faith in things accomplished for the Kingdom of God, then we should really be thankful. *Can you think of things that we have done in our church that could be categorized as works of faith? What kind of things could we do?*

Labor of Love:

A church should also be known by its “labor of love.” We tend to use the words “work” and “labor” interchangeably. In the context of this passage, we should think of “work” as the result of “labor.” Our efforts or actions are the “labor” and the outcome or result is the “work.” The idea of “labor prompted by love” has to be concerned with the motive or driving force behind our actions. We sing the chorus “God is Love” and we recognize the inseparability of unconditional love and the character or nature of God. We learn from Scripture that this love has been poured into our hearts (our being) so that we too have the nature of God within us. Consequently, the natural (meaning by nature) response we have as Christians should be actions that flow from no other motive than unconditional love. It is not something that we “decide” to do because it will please God (or a less noble purpose), it is spontaneous action based on our new nature. If we have to analyze the situation and determine what is “the right thing to do,” then we are functioning on the basis of the “knowledge of good and evil.” We are deciding in our intellect (a soul function) what should be done rather than simply bearing the fruit that comes from a transformed nature that is a result of having a born-again spirit within us.

Steadfastness Produced by Hope in Christ:

Another characteristic is a benefit called “patience” in the KJV and “endurance” in the NIV. The Greek word is *hupomeno* which has also been translated as abide, stay, stand, and dwell. In our vernacular, we might call this “stick-to-it-tive-ness.” Such endurance that characterized the early church was inspired by “hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Hope, as used in the Bible, is not just “wishful thinking.” Hope is *firm confidence in a future reality*. In this case, the reality is the fact that Jesus is Lord and the knowledge of His sure return to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. Such hope inspires us to “keep on keeping on.”

Presence or Sight of God:

Many times the work of faith and the labor of love in which we are involved is known only by God. We do things in the church and sense no appreciation since few if any know that we have done anything. God knows and He is the only one that really matters. That should be the ultimate

cure for the pity party in which we may find ourselves at times.

Beloved and Chosen by God:

If God had not loved us He would not have chosen us for salvation and He would not have provided a way for our salvation nor would He have invited us to become a part of all that He has done on our behalf. Warren Wiersbe observed “As far as God the Father is concerned, we were saved when He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4); as far as the Spirit is concerned, we were saved when we responded to His call and received Christ; as far as the Son is concerned, we were saved when He died for us on the cross.” All of this was motivated by God’s love.

Power of the Gospel, Enabled by the Spirit, Assurance of Salvation:

The evidence that Paul had that the Christians at Thessalonica were called of God was seen in the results that came about from the Gospel message. The message that was delivered to them was not just a bunch of words but that message was used by the Holy Spirit to produce conviction and assurance in their lives which led to repentance and belief unto salvation. We should be thankful for the convincing power of the gospel since the Holy Spirit uses such assurance to lead us into a closer walk with the Lord. Paul could see the evidence of change in their lives and knew they were beneficiaries of God’s salvation.

Knowing Each Other:

Just as Paul knew the genuineness of the Christians at Thessalonica, they knew that Paul, Silas and Timothy were genuine also. These three demonstrated the truth of the gospel by their lives as they cared for the people of Thessalonica.

⁶You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8 (NASB95)

Having and Being a Good Example:

We often hear talk about “influential” people. When we hear this, we may think of business men, teachers, coaches, presidents and other leaders. The truth of the matter is that all of us are people of influence. We can influence others to be as we are and that can be either positive or negative. Though we do not usually think of influence in these terms, we can influence others to be the antithesis or the opposites of what we are. This also can be either positive or negative. To provide reasons why their children should get a good education, parents will sometimes use people who are considered “unsuccessful” as an example of what their children should *avoid* becoming. Everyone has some influence on someone.

Not only do individuals exert influence, groups and organizations have influence. In fact, organizations take on a persona and much of what we can say regarding the influence-wielding ability of an individual also applies to distinctive groups. Of course, you can recognize these characteristics as the basis for stereotyping. I can remember when I was in college, I thought that people in fraternities and sororities were those who were more interested in drinking and partying than in getting an education. They had influence on me in that I was determined to *not* be as they were. It is disconcerting that most of the examples of “influence” I can think of are related to “what to avoid.” I would call these “negative role models.” We can think of many such group role models that are negative. Unfortunately, churches are being characterized in a negatively interpreted persona by much of our society. Many churches have reacted to this by trying to “fit-in” and conform to societal pressures. In doing this, they have become reflections of the world rather than windows to the

Kingdom of God. When this happens, then churches miss the opportunity to be the proper witness as required by God.

We should be thankful in our salvation for a “changed lifestyle.” New Christians take on new behavior that is characteristic of those who have walked with Christ and even of Christ Himself. The behavior of this church was not only a witness to the people in the area where they were located, but it also witnessed to Christians in other areas. A church that acts like the world and operates according to the principles of the world is a church in name only.

Sharing the Gospel with Others:

The church at Thessalonica loved the word of God. They “welcomed it with joy.” Some churches are content to feed on pop psychology and listen to lectures based on articles or books that deny the validity of the Scriptures. True believers are hungry for the word of God and are not satisfied with anything less. The church at Thessalonica not only received the word with joy, they also proclaimed it to others. Apparently, they were not timid about it. Paul said “The Lord’s message **rang** out from them.”

⁹For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 (NASB95)

Good Reputation:

The work a church does creates its own public relations. As a church goes about sharing the gospel and the members live a life that is an imitation of Christ, then people in the community and beyond will know that something good is happening. The witness of our lives should show evidence that we are different that we used to be. Our hope and expectations should always take into account that Jesus is coming back. We should work as if it will be in the distant future and live our lives as if He is coming back today. When all the world around us is falling apart our confident witness is that God is still in control and that He loves us and will rescue us.

There are a host of benefits that are a result of our salvation and thankfulness is an appropriate response.