

Bangalore Conference, 1 Thess Exposition

Study 1 – 1 Thess 1:1-10

Introduction

There are many parts of the NT that would have been helpful for us to look at together over this week. We thought about Paul's letters to Timothy or to Titus. They are letters from a senior pastor to his younger assistants and are full of helpful teaching for a godly ministry. But we settled on 1 Thess. It is a letter from Paul written to a church (not just pastors) and it is written from a loving pastoral heart to a church that was dearly loved (repeated "brothers"). Someone said this letter is like an x-ray into the heart of Paul and of how every Christian should be, even to the heart of God himself. It has much to teach us of the church, of our ministry and of what will encourage us and our churches to keep going.

As we study this little letter, it will help you immensely to know who Paul is writing to and what his relationship is to them.

Illust – If you looked through the emails on my computer and just read the inbox, a lot of what you read wouldn't make much sense unless you knew the other side of the conversation, the person I was writing to etc.

Who is Paul writing to? A church, a local gathering of God's people in this place Thessalonica. What do we know about this place? You might find out some interesting facts in books about ancient history (outside the bible). If you looked, you would find out that this was an important city in its area. It was the largest city in the Roman province of Macedonia, now part of Greece. It was a thriving sea port of the Aegean Sea and was also an important city because it straddled the main east-west highway leading from Rome to Byzantium, AKA Istanbul or Constantinople.

But even if you didn't know that, you can find out something about this place from elsewhere in the bible (important principle we will come back to during the week). In the book of Acts, you have a record that Luke made of those early years after Jesus' return to heaven. At the end of Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas have a disagreement so strong that they part company, each taking another friend with them. Barnabas went one way, Paul another. Paul begins this second missionary tour to revisit some of the churches they had first planted. But as they travelled, they were clearly guided as to where they should go. If it had been left to them, they wouldn't have gone to Thess at all. Acts 16:9 tells us that God guided them by a vision to Macedonia, first to Philippi and then onto Thess. You can read yourself what happened in Acts 17.

It had a Jewish synagogue, where they started their work. Paul spent at least three weeks there preaching and teaching in the synagogue. What was his message? Acts 17:2 He reasoned, explained and proved from the bible that Jesus Christ had to suffer and rise. Many people responded to the message a church was begun. Only three Sabbath's are mentioned but Paul may have stayed longer than this. Why did he write to them?

Acts 17 tells us how Paul and his friends had to leave in a hurry because of persecution. They only had a limited time to lay the foundations of this church. If you sneak a look into ch 2, you will see that Paul was so concerned for them (and he couldn't visit himself) that he sent Tim to check on them and bring back a report. This letter is Paul's response to the news Tim brought about the church.

We are going to take a part of this letter in each session, but it is good to remember it is a letter. You don't normally read through your letters a paragraph at a time. You read the whole thing. It would be good this week for you to read through 1 Thess several times.

Illust – everything has a label on it these days. The maker wants to mark his products with the brand. Don't know about here but many in the UK are obsessed with having the right designer label. Calvin Klein, Donna Karen, Giorgio Armani etc. Maker puts his mark on what he has made to take the credit for his work.

Whose mark is on this Thess church? Where does the credit go? It could be claimed by Paul, Silas and Timothy who planted it. It could be claimed by the Christians who made up that church. But what Paul shows in first chapter is that ALL the credit goes to God. The theme of ch 1 is of thanks to God for his work in the lives of the church. So I have four points all pointed to that theme.

Thank God for a working church

After his greeting, even the address at the top of Paul's letter has God at the centre. The church is "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". There were human instruments (Paul, Silas and Tim) but the church is not theirs, it is God's. There are a number of reasons to thank God for this church, but the first that Paul brings us to is that they are a **working church**.

He thanks God for ALL of them, assures them of his prayers and in those prayers remembers how God made them a working church. They worked, laboured and endured. People work for different reasons. Some work for fear of punishment, others work for financial reward, still others work out of a grim sense of duty. Christians are different.

Faith makes a humble worker – it wasn't that they were working to get right with God, to win his favour. Notice it is not faith paid for by works but the other way round, work produced by faith. This is why the thanks goes to God. It is he who has chosen (more on that in a moment), he who has made us new, he who has enabled us to know that saving faith in Christ. Faith makes us humble workers, not proud.

Love makes an industrious worker – our motivation to be a working church is the highest there is, love. In English we say of someone, "it is a labour of love" when they work hard at something but it doesn't feel like work. They give their time to it and they really enjoy it.

Hope makes a persevering worker – hope and persevering are a theme that keeps coming up in this letter. This was one of Paul's big concerns for them. But so far they had proved worthy of his thanks to God. What was their hope? It was hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, it was hope based on the salvation he has bought through his death and resurrection. It was hope that because he has saved us, he will return for us. It is a living hope and it is that hope that helps you to persevere.

Faith, love and hope are like three legs of a stool – they need to be kept balanced and strong. **Thank God for a working church.** Not all churches are the same. But all churches must be working churches. No room for a retired church or a lazy church. As we thank God for working churches, we also hear the challenge that OUR churches are like this. Christianity is not a work to be endured for duty's sake, it is a person to be served for love's sake. What is your motivation in Christian service?

Heb 6:10-11 *"God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure."*

Thank God for an assured church

Illust – I have two daughters. My youngest daughter, Jemimah is quite small for her age. Sometimes she will ask me "do you think I have grown?" All I have to do is show her the clothes she used to wear, or remind her of the time when she could fit on my lap lying down. She doesn't notice it, but looking back at where she has come from assures her.

Remember that Paul wants to encourage these young Christians. He does the same thing, he asks them to look back. Second point, **thank God for an assured church.** Paul is deeply concerned for these "brothers loved by God" and he wants them to have assurance, to know that they are God's people.

He tells them it is possible to know that they are really God's chosen people by what happened to them when the gospel was preached to them. The gospel came not merely with words but also with power, with the HS and with deep conviction. This is God's doing! He chose them (more on this in a later session) and the evidence is there in the effect the preaching of the gospel had. The hearts of men and women are naturally blind and dead because of their sinful nature. This is true, without exception. The human words used by Paul and co, would have been useless if not accompanied by the power of the HS (Eph 2:1-10).

The church is of God's making because he chose them to be his people (v4). Might be hard subject to get our heads round, but it is God's way of speaking about his people. Many times in OT and NT, God's people are spoken of as chosen ones. Jesus said to his disciples:

Jn 15:16 *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."*

Doesn't mean we do nothing. In v6 Paul says that when these people heard the preaching, they **welcomed the message.** V9 tells us that they did something about it (turned TO God and AWAY from idols). But behind everything is our God who is King, who rules supreme, who made this world and still reigns. Thank God for an assured church.

But it wasn't just the way they received the gospel. It was also the effect on their lives. There is a saying "talk is cheap". Means that you can say anything whether you believe it or not. Another saying "Actions speak louder than words". Example – do you believe that the chair will support your weight? You might say "yes". But if you sit down, you really prove the truth of what you are saying.

Not only did these Christians receive the gospel as the word of God, with the HS and with deep conviction, they lived as if they meant it. They started to live like Paul and his friends, they started to live like the Lord Jesus. Nothing could put them off, even persecution. They welcomed the message with joy that was not from themselves. It was a work of the HS. That was strong assurance that God was at work!

APP: Thank God for an assured church. Thank God that he loves us so much that he gives to us assurance to help us, to encourage us. Sometimes our own lives disappoint us when we see how we have failed God, how little we have achieved, how unlike Jesus we have lived. But if God is really at work, there will be plenty to assure you and your people. Conversion, changed lives, willingness to suffer, holiness, recognising the word of God as just that, God's word.

Do you want to encourage your church? Then make them look back sometimes. Help them to see that God has chosen them (humbling and encouraging), help them to see that if God HADN'T, they would never have begun to follow him. Thank God for an assured church.

Thank God for a witnessing church

You have an impact on others whether you like it or not, whether you realise it or not. You live in communities, maybe several different ones (family, church) and you have an impact on them. It can either be positive or negative, it can either encourage or discourage. When people hear about you or your churches, what effect does it have?

This church became known not just in their town, but in the whole region. How? It was positive, praise the Lord! They became a model to others, an example to follow and copy for other believers. That's the kind of impact you must pray for and long for and work towards. But their impact as a church went beyond just the other believers hearing of them. This brings me to my third point – **thank God for a witnessing church.** Thank God that they were not known for their battles in the church or the way they were treating each other, or even their new building or their community programmes. It was "the Lord's message" that rang out from them.

Illust – I live about 1 mile from the village where my church is. In the village there is our chapel and also a big church with a tower and a clock in the tower. From where I live, I can't hear anything from our village, no cars, no people, no noises of any kind, EXCEPT the bell on the clock. If I go outside at exactly the hour, I can hear the bell ringing.

It was like that for this church. The message rang out from them so that those far and wide heard of their faith. What was that message? It was to do with their faith (v8) and also their conversion (v9). What is the only message that can bring faith and convert people from being idol worshippers to servants of the living God? It is the good news of Jesus Christ, his saving work on the cross, his love for this world of rebel sinners and his grace to all who will believe on him, trust him as Saviour and serve him as Lord. I hope you don't spend **all** your time worrying about what people think of you or your church, but it would be interesting to know what they heard. Have they heard the gospel ringing out, blasting out like a trumpet call, or something else?

APP: **Thank God for a witnessing church.** If each church Paul had planted had kept the gospel to themselves and never passed it on, we wouldn't be here in India speaking to you today. Our land would never have heard the gospel and neither would yours! What we receive from God, we are to give. As we give, God will give more and we can never out-give him. The Lord Jesus commanded his disciples to be a witnessing people, testifying to what they had seen and heard.

Mt 28:19-20 " *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"

Ac 1:8 " *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

Those few disciples weren't expected to personally do all of that work. Rather they passed the message on and entrusted it to others who did the same. God expects us to do the same. There are many ways you can do this. Maybe it is by preaching, bible study, church planting, writing letters, radio programmes, TV, travelling to other areas or countries. Even if you can't go yourself, you should be deeply involved in the efforts of other who HAVE gone. Are your churches witnessing churches, churches that ring out the gospel message? Christ is the one who bought the church with his blood, who formed it, who loves it, who will build it, and will one day return for it. No surprise that our message is all about him. **Thank God for a witnessing church.**

Thank God for a transformed church

Illust – we have a multitude of news channels as I am sure you do on your TV networks. There are all sorts of news. Some of it is important news but just not very interesting. I find it hard to get excited about the value of the FTSE 100 index or the Dow Jones or even the BSE 30 (sorry). Other news is interesting but just not very important. For example, it was part of the main news in the UK last week that one couple had won 45 million pounds on the lottery. But then there is some news that is both important AND interesting and it spreads fast.

Part of the reason this was a witnessing church was because of the transformation that had taken place in the lives of the people involved. My last point then is this – **thank God for a transformed church.** Thank God the church is made up of people whose lives have been changed. Wherever Paul went around Macedonia and Achaia, he didn't need to tell them about Thess to encourage others. They already knew! They had heard already.

What had they heard? They had heard about the response to the message of the gospel (v9). It had three effects on them that were so astonishing that they were hot news. First, they had turned to God from idols. They had renounced what they once served. Idolatry is our natural inclination as people born into sin. Someone once said that when people stop worshipping God, they don't worship NOTHING, they worship ANYTHING. First of 10 comm is "no other gods". Sinners are rebels against God and replace God with something they can handle, control or even avoid. But the grace of God in the gospel puts God back on the throne. So they had not just turned AWAY from idols, but also TO God, to serve the only God that is living and true.

Ps 115:4-8 " *But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.*"

Idols need not be statues of wood, stone but are anything that takes God's place. Might be money, power, ambition, a person, addiction. Anything that claims our devotion before God is an idol. The gospel transforms lives. This is why we sometimes refer to "conversion". Thank God for a transformed church.

But it doesn't stop with turning away from idols and to God. There is another part of that transforming work that is essentially Christian. They were gripped with anticipation for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every chapter in 1 Thess ends on this same note so we will come back to this again. This day would be an awesome time, when God through his Son would bring all to account and will judge the people. Why look forward to it? Because Jesus rescues us.

APP: Thank God for a transformed church. Do you see that transformation in the lives of your people? Not the same for everyone, but if God makes someone new, then they will have those new priorities, new allegiance, new master, new hope. Look forward to that day with eager expectation. Thank God for a transformed church, thank God for rescuing you, for changing you and thank God that the work he has begun, he will complete when he will take us to be with him.

Conclusion

What is Paul's purpose in the first part of this letter? It is to encourage his Christian friends, to thank God for them and to urge them to keep going. To encourage them by reminding them of the way God worked among them. To encourage them by reminding them of the assurance they have that God really was at work. To encourage them by telling of the effect they were having on those around them. To encourage them with the glorious truth of their new life and their new hope.

Be challenged by the example of this church. Thank God for working churches, for assured churches, for witnessing churches and for transformed churches. Thank God for YOUR churches and pray that God would make them more and more like this.

Amen.