

# THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

## 1 THESSALONIANS 1-3

Baltimore football fans still grieve when they recall March 28, 1984. On a snowy night, the unthinkable happened. One of the NFL's most storied franchises, the Colts, snuck out of town in the middle of the night.

The Colts were the team of football greats: John Unitas, and Raymond Berry, and Lenny Moore... as well as their legendary coach, Don Shula.

Yet under the cover of darkness, Colts owner, Robert Irsay, hired the Mayflower moving company to clean out the team's offices and drive their equipment to Indianapolis. **An NFL powerhouse skipped town.**

Irsay's clandestine operation to relocate his Colts was an attempt to avoid the negative firestorm that was coming from the Baltimore media. Irsay said, "People of the press were hounding my family for two years, and I wasn't about to take any more hounding."

The *Colts* were *dogged* out of Baltimore.

And in a sense, this is why Paul and his pals left Thessalonica. Paul spent just 3 weeks in the city, and his time there had been extremely successful. Yet like the Colts, Paul left town to avoid a firestorm of hostility.

Acts 17 tells the story... When Paul got to town, he went straight to the synagogue, and a few of the Jews believed. But his biggest inroads were made among Gentiles. Acts 17:4 specifies, "not a few of the leading women" were converted.

Amazingly, the Real Housewives of Thessalonica came to faith in Jesus!

But this made the Jews jealous. They feared Paul's influence. They complained to authorities, "these who have turned the world upside down have come here, too." The Jews stirred up a mob and had Paul arrested.

Paul's time in Thessalonica was over before it had really begun. Secretly, he and Silas snuck out of town and moved down the road to Berea.

In the days following, though Paul was *run out of town*, his heart kept *running back to the Thessalonians*.

He'd left behind a strong church. In a paltry three weeks, the powerful Gospel birthed a healthy church.

Yet because of the brevity of his visit, there was much Paul didn't get an opportunity to explain. He realized he'd left the believers ill-equipped. So, to shore up what was lacking, Paul sent his sidekicks, Timothy and Silas back to Thessalonica, while he sailed to Athens. Six months later Timothy and Silas rejoin Paul - *now in Corinth...* After they report on the welfare of the Thessalonians, Paul writes this letter. From Corinth, around 52 AD - Paul sits down and pens a letter to the church he *knew only briefly but loved ever so deeply*.

Chapter 1 begins, "Paul, Silvanus..." (which is the Roman spelling for "Silas") "and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ..." Thessaloniki, as it is known today, is the second largest city on the island of Greece. It has a population of a million

people, and it's one of the few biblical cities that has survived until modern times.

In the first century, it was also an important Greek city. It always had an excellent harbor and was originally named "*Therma*" for the area's hot springs.

Perhaps its best advantage was its location. It was on the great Egnatian Way - the Roman road that linked Rome with the treasures of the east. It was said, that Thessalonica "*lay in the lap of the Roman empire.*"

It's amazing, this city was steeped in paganism for 400 years, but after just three weeks of exposure to the Gospel, Paul wrote, "*to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

And he greets them, "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Once, a conversation occurred on a public bus. A woman was reading a religious book when the man next to her asked, "*What are you reading?*" "*It's a book a friend gave me. She said it changed her life.*" "*What's it about?*" It was obvious she had just started the book.

She flipped to the table of contents and read off a few chapter titles, "*Discipleship, Love, Grace...*" The stranger stopped her and asked, "*What's grace?*" The lady replied, "*I don't know. I haven't got to grace yet.*"

This is the problem with many Christians. They've yet to grasp grace - *that all God's blessings result from His unmerited favor - from a love we don't deserve.*

**And grace is the fountainhead!** All the Christian life flows from God's grace. This is why you'll never know the peace of God until you first receive His grace.

Paul writes, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers..." Paul had just met the Thessalonians, but he was thankful for God's work in them, and he prayed for them zealously.

"Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father..."

Thessalonica was a model church that had brought Paul great joy... In contrast, there were churches that troubled him. The **Corinthians** were "*Christians Gone Wild.*" They were carnal and immoral... Paul referred to the **Galatians** as "*My Dear Idiots*" - they were prone to legalism... The **Colossians** were gullible to false doctrine - like a fish they swallowed the lies hook, line, and sinker... But the **Thessalonians** were a joy!

Here, Paul tells us that their devotion included faith, love, and hope. He writes of their "*work of faith*" - and their "*labor of love*" - and their "*patience of hope.*"

Real **faith works.** *It acts on what it believes...*

And **Love labors.** *All our service to God should be motivated by love...* "The love of Christ constrains us."

And **hope perseveres.** *It endures the present stress.*

Verse 4, "*knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.*" The OT reserved the term "*beloved of God*" for special saints.

Nehemiah 13:26 refers to the wise King Solomon as “beloved of his God.”

But in the NT, the rank-n-file believer achieves the same special status. All who are in Christ are special to God. Paul refers to us all as “*beloved brethren.*”

And notice what makes this possible... “*your election by God.*” God chose! He selected the Thessalonians.

Think of what this meant for Paul. He spent three weeks with these folks. Not a long time by any one’s standards. *It takes more time to grow tomatoes...*

Paul was hoping to grow mature Christians. Yet his confidence was not in his own efforts. He knew God had a stake in the Thessalonians - *He chose them before the foundation of the world - had plans for them before they were born - God would complete His work!*

And this is what makes me so hopeful about you...

You may be new to our church or even Christianity. *It takes far more than a month to get a faith grounded and anchored,* but like the Thessalonians of old, God is at work in you now. He chose you. You’re His project.

And **God always finishes what He starts!**

In verse 5, Paul recalls his time in Thessalonica, “*For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit...*” Miracles, boldness, the work of the Holy Spirit accompanied Paul’s preaching.

But notice what it was that produced great confidence in the Gospel. Paul says the gospel came “*in much assurance, as*

you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.” It was the *character of the messengers that brought credibility to the message.* And this is what’s needed in today’s church.

Sure we’d love to see more miracles. But far more important are more men and pastors with integrity.

There’s a troubling disconnect in today’s church.

We’ve separated *the message* from *the messenger*. We’ve got lots of *characters*, but not much *character*. We’ve got pastors with bling... *Integrity is not as sexy.*

Here’s a major problem: *Today’s churchgoers are more attracted to ability than they are to righteousness.*

The *entertaining personality* - the *clever presenter* - the *celebrity spokesman* - draws a larger crowd than the *faithful servant*. Just because you attract a crowd and put buns in the seats doesn’t qualify you to lead.

Paul hadn’t been in Thessalonica for long, but for the time he was there, he’d lived among the people. They witnessed his life firsthand... *how he treated people, and handled money, and carried himself around town.*

Always remember, the Gospel of God’s grace is the truth, regardless of who presents it - but *it’s easier to believe when the messenger is believable!*

Verse 6, “*And you became followers of us and of the Lord...*” At first glance, this sounds a bit arrogant... Paul says, “*You became followers of US and of the Lord...*”

But think it through. When a new believer comes to Christ, how much Bible does he know? *Not much.*

A new believer's immediate influences come from the Christians around him. Whether we like it or not, people do follow **"US and the Lord."** This is why we need to live godly lives. *New Christians are watching!*

And **"having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe."**

The Church in Thessalonica was a wartime baby. It was birthed spiritually in the midst of persecution.

When angry Jews stormed the house where Paul was staying to arrest him, he wasn't there, so they arrested the only Christians they could find. They charged Jason with **"aiding and abetting a criminal."**

Jason and the other Thessalonian believers were like the babies in London in WW2, who were born in the midst of the Nazi bombings... Yet **"much affliction"** couldn't overshadow the **"joy of the Holy Spirit."**

Once, the chef for a high government official resigned his post - gave up a lucrative and prestigious position. When asked why, he explained, **"Well, when dinner is good, no one ever praises me, and when it's bad, no one ever blames me. It's just not worthwhile."**

What he was saying is that whether praise or blame, at least he wanted to know that what he did mattered...

This is what the Thessalonians found in Christ. Yes, their faith created some enemies, but at least their lives counted!

They no longer felt insignificant. The joy of the Lord filled their hearts. Now they mattered to God!

The Thessalonians had even become an example to churches in other regions - to the Macedonians in Philippi and the Achaians in Corinth... Paul knew this firsthand since he was writing from Corinth in Achaia.

Verse 8, “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth...” literally, blown like a trumpet blast...

“Not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place.” Their witness had gone viral. “Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.” Their lives spoke that their faith was legit.

In fact, Paul thinks back to their conversion, verse 9, “For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...”

Understand, the early Gentile Christians were saved from polytheism. The Romans and the Greeks before them had a pantheon of various gods and goddesses.

The great danger in the early church was for people to think they could simply add Jesus to their already long list of gods. This is why Paul makes it clear - to come to Christ you must “turn to God from idols.”

Jesus demands top shelf!

And idolatry is still a problem in modern times! We can turn anything - *an item, or ideal, or identity, or ideology* - into an idol. Anything you treat as “*all important*” is essentially an idol. Even good Christian parents indoctrinate their kids into



idolatry when they elevate travel ball or school work over regular worship.

The same is as true for us as for the Thessalonians.

Coming to Christ is free, but you can't bring along a bag of other loves and competing loyalties. Salvation costs only what you have to drop from your hand in order to grasp Jesus. Jesus refuses to be an add-on.

**Either He's Lord of all, or He's not Lord at all!**

I like the statement, **"Jesus didn't come to take sides. He came to take over!"** It's true! Even today, we need to turn from our idols to serve the living and true God!

Verse 10, **"And to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus..."**

When figure skater Nancy Kerrigan performed in the 1994 Olympics, her mother had to press her nose against a television screen to see her daughter skate.

Nancy's mom was nearly blind and could barely make out the elegant and beautiful lines of her daughter's magnificent skating. A news reporter asked her what she could see, **"Well, I can see some shapes, some color, and some movement when she jumps."**

**That's when Nancy's mom burst into tears, "But I can't see her face. I can't see my daughter's face."**

And this is how I feel about Jesus. I can see His hand at work - the silhouette of His presence and power. I see His movements, but I can't see His face.

This is why I'm waiting for God's Son from heaven.

*I really want to see Him face to face!*

And we're told Jesus is He "who delivers us from the wrath to come." We'll get into this more next time, but this is one reason why I believe the rapture of the church precedes the Great Tribulation. The Bible says it plainly, Jesus will "deliver us from the wrath to come."

Chapter 2, "For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict."

Paul's trip through Macedonia had been a wild ride. In Philippi, he was arrested, beaten, and thrown in jail.

Then he traveled 100 miles to Thessalonica figuring the locals would be a little friendlier. The Greeks were, but not the Jews. They were fiercely opposed to the truth that Jesus is the Messiah. Together these Jews and some local businessmen, concerned about how Christianity cutting into the local idol-making trade, stirred up a riot that caused Paul to leave town.

The United Idol Makers Union, Local 405, realized Christianity was going to put them out of work. Indeed, the Gospel was being spread, amid "much conflict."

"For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit." It reminds me of the conversation between the motorist and the mechanic...

Motorist: "What will it cost to repair my car?"

Mechanic: "What's wrong with it?"

Motorist: “I don’t know.” Mechanic: “\$289.95” When a mechanic knows the price before the problem, *beware!*

But unlike a crooked mechanic, Paul never scammed anybody. His ministry was sincere and without deceit.

Verse 4, “But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.”

A wise man said, “I don’t know the secret of success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.” Try to please everybody and you’ll actually please *nobody*.

It’s like radio stations. Imagine a station that played all genres of music... *A polka song... followed by some Metallica heavy metal... next up a rap by Jay-Z... then a Cary Underwood country... then Frank Sinatra... then Free Bird... then Beethoven’s fifth symphony... whaat?*

*Who would listen to that? Cater to everybody and you’ll please nobody.* God entrusted the Gospel to Paul because his only desire was to please his Lord.

“For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know...” When Mark Twain wrote his famous story, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” he dedicated it to “John Smith.” On the credits page, Twain wrote, “John Smith, who I have known in diverse and sundry places and whose many and manifold virtues did always command my esteem.”

Actually, Twain didn’t have one John Smith in mind. He knew “John Smith” are the two most popular names in English, and if only the *John Smiths* bought his story, it would

be a best seller. So he appealed to the human ego and wrote the flattering dedication.

Flattery might sell a short story, but it has no place in communicating the Gospel. In fact, the Gospel isn't very flattering at all - it starts out: "We've all sinned."

It slaps down our pride and interests us in mercy.

Try to make the Gospel palatable and tasteful, and you dilute its power and cripple what it does. Sharing the Gospel calls for *straight-shooting*, not *buttering up*.

Nor did Paul wear a "cloak for covetousness - God is witness." Paul wasn't out for people's money. He wasn't out to *fleece the flock*, but *feed the flock*.

Some of today's evangelists have one hand *pressing the person's forehead* and another *picking their pocket*.

Paul continues to discuss his ministry, verse 6, "Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others..." *Have you ever done something for God so you could brag about it later?* This should never be our motive. Paul's goal was to glorify God, not himself.

Realize who Paul was. He was an apostolic champion. He could've thrown his weight around and insisted on his privileges. It was a first-century custom for a church to provide a true apostle with free room and board, but Paul refused to exercise those rights...

He says, "When we might have made demands as apostles of Christ, we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children." Like a mother, Paul

cared for his kids, rather than expect his kids to care for him. This is the heart of a true pastor.

Verse 8, “So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.” Rather than ask the church for money, Paul supported himself financially with a secular job. This was a pastor willing to *moonlight to spread the light!*

Paul continues, “You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” Paul pastored like a parent. And it’s true that pastoring and parenting are very similar.

He says, “*we exhorted, and comforted, and charged*”  
“*Exhort*” means “to correct.” And at times, for a parent, this involves spanking a child’s bottom... “*Comfort*” is “to encourage.” This is a pat on a child’s back... And “*charge*” means “to challenge.” Here’s where a dad takes his child by the hand and leads him forward...

So here’s where a dad should be... In his kid’s face when he’s wrong. By his kid’s side when he’s weak. And a step ahead when it’s time to move forward... And this also

describes what a pastor does for his church! He *“exhorts and encourages and charges”* his flock.

Then verse 13, *“For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”*

How could Paul visit a city for a mere three weeks, hold a few Bible Studies, then get run out of town on a rail, yet still leave behind a growing, vibrant church?

There’s one explanation. As Paul put it, *“The word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”* God’s Word works! *The Bible believed changes lives.*

Paul commends the Thessalonians for welcoming his testimony, *“not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God.”* It takes two ingredients to complete a touchdown pass - a pinpoint throw, and a sure-handed catch. *And so it is with our salvation...*

Paul was a great quarterback. He could pass on the Gospel, but the Thessalonians were good receivers.

By faith, they *“received the word of God...”* And this is what unleashed the transforming power of the Gospel.

Verse 14, *“For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus.”*

Times of persecution create a sense of isolation, *“O, I’m the only one to which this has ever happened.”*

Paul assures the Thessalonians that wasn't the case. He points to the churches in Judea, **For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets...** Whenever you think you've got it tough, remember there's someone somewhere who's worse off. The Thessalonians had been persecuted for three weeks. The Christians in Jerusalem and Judea had been hassled for 20 years.

Years ago, I heard about a young man named Kyle Maynard. He played 11-year-old football for Collins Hill.

Kyle was a defensive nose-guard, **but what made his participation so unique is that Kyle has no arms or legs. He would crawl across the field on his nubs.**

I remember reading a quote from one of his teammates, **"Everyone has reasons to quit that aren't as good as his reasons to quit. And he doesn't quit."**

When you think you've got it rough - your family *rejects you*, or your co-workers *ridicule you*, or a boss *rides you* - think of the believers in the world today who are behind bars and being tortured for their faith.

Paul says the Jews in Jerusalem not only crucified Jesus, they **"persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost."** It's not Anti-Semitic to say it - it's true - that much of what the Jewish people have suffered through the ages is a result of

their rejection of Jesus, and their hostility toward the Gospel of grace.

Certainly, when it comes to the cross, we're all culpable - Jews, Romans, even you and me. It was my sin and your sin that drove the nails into His body. I'm not alleviating anyone of responsibility. But the Jews who rejected Jesus bear a particular degree of guilt.

The awful cry of the Jewish hierarchy before Pilate still echoes down the halls of history, "Let Him be crucified... His blood be on us and on our children."

*The Roman sacking of Jerusalem - the Inquisitions and expulsion of the Jews in the Middle Ages - the pogroms of Eastern Europe - the Holocaust - even the terrible persecution that will come in the future Great Tribulation is part of God's answer to that infamous request, "His blood be on us and on our children."*

Paul realized that "wrath had come upon the Jews to the uttermost..." God still loves His people, Israel, but their stubbornness has come at a steep price. Here's a warning... all stubbornness comes at a steep price!

Verse 17, "But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. Therefore we wanted to come to you - even I, Paul, time and again - but Satan hindered us."

Notice, Paul's awareness of the spiritual warfare raging around him. Here a *simple visit* became a *spiritual battle*. Paul said, "Satan hindered us."



In a million ways, our enemy can engineer little distractions to keep us from visiting a friend, or bowing to pray, or getting our family to church! What we're tempted to chalk up to coincidence can be an attack.

Verse 19, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy." There're five rewards in the NT that can be won by Christians. They're called "crowns." 1 Corinthians 9:24 speaks of an "incorruptible crown." It goes to those who persevere... 2 Timothy 4:8 awards the "crown of righteousness" to those who love His appearing... 1 Peter 5:4 mentions a "crown of glory" given to the faithful pastor... And Revelation 2:10, the "crown of life" is bestowed on believers who endure persecution.

And here, a "crown of rejoicing" goes to Christians who are faithful witnesses. Paul's reward, his trophy in heaven is the presence of the Thessalonians - not just Oscar, but Bob, Bill, Bev - *the folks he won to Christ!*

Before the throne of God, every face will be cocked toward Jesus. He'll be our focal point. But at some point, Paul will peek, and out of the corner of his eye, he'll see the Thessalonians - *and he'll take great joy!*

He'll know his witness had something to do with them being there! The Thessalonians are "his hope, his joy, his crown!" Who is your "crown of rejoicing?"

In the movie, "Mr. Holland's Opus," Glen Holland gives up aspirations to compose music to teach school and feed his

family. Over the years there's a piece of music he works on. As his career closes, his students return to thank him for helping to shape their lives.

One of his former students tells him, "There is not a life in this room that isn't a better person because of you. We are your symphony, Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. We are the music of your life." And this is how Paul felt about the Thessalonians and the people he influenced for Jesus.

And this is our opus... *the folks we've touched with the Gospel of grace and influenced for Jesus' sake.*

Chapter 3, "Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith..."

It's interesting that whenever Paul heard of a church fighting false doctrine, he responded with a **letter** - but when the problem was persecution, he sent a **leader**, *a person*. Here he sends them his sidekick, Timothy.

Paul realized a sufferer needs more than info and data - they need a shoulder to lean on - real flesh and blood interaction. We get strength to endure and persevere from the faith of other faithful believers.

*And note, Paul wasn't selfish.* Timothy's visit to the Thessalonians meant he'd be alone. Paul cared more about *reaching out* than *huddling up*. Hey, we'll spend forever with our friends. Today, we need to reach out.

Timothy was sent to encourage the Thessalonians, “that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this...”

Hey, if you follow Jesus, you will be persecuted. Don't let it surprise you when it happens, “For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.”

Even Jesus warned us “in the world you will have tribulation.” I love the observation, “Jesus promised three things to His disciples... First, they would be ridiculously happy... Second, they would be completely fearless... Third, they would be in constant trouble...”

Paul left Thessalonica because he was the flashpoint for the hostility. His departure had cooled tempers, but it didn't extinguish the opposition. He knew persecution would continue to be directed toward the believers... This is why he sent Timothy to check on the church.

He writes, verse 5, “For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you - therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith.”

Paul was encouraged to know the Thessalonians were continuing in their faith. If their faith had come off the rails, his evangelistic efforts would've been in vain.

“For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.”

Remember, it's not enough just to have faith. We need to stand fast in our faith and hold tightly to Jesus.

“For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?” *What's does a persecuted person need most?*

Prayer! Paul is praying “*night and day*” that he can visit soon and “*perfect what is lacking in their faith.*”

Chapter 3 closes with a blessing, “Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you...” Paul prays for an “*increase*” - not of *pay*, or *promotion*... but of love for one another. Don't pray for a *bigger nest egg* - pray for a *bigger heart!*

And this is a frequent prayer of mine. I grew up with folks who had *a closed mind and a small heart.* This is why I pray today for *an open mind and a big heart.* Our God is big-hearted. I want to be big-hearted like Him!

Then verse 13, “so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.”

Each chapter in 1 Thessalonians closes with a verse referring to the return of Jesus... The NT speaks more of His second coming than almost any other subject.

That's what Paul will elaborate on in Chapter 4...