

TUTORIAL

3.20

# A Call to Persevere

Bible presenter Scot Keen continues our study on the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in this tutorial. He encourages an exemplary church plant, the church in Thessalonica, to persevere after beginning well.

## Introduction

In this tutorial, we will begin in 1 Thessalonians chapter one with Paul's challenge to believers to persevere because of the great beginning that they had. Chapter one emphasises the good things that God did in the lives of the believers and that is supposed to motivate them to keep pressing on. We, too, would do well to remember the great things God has done in our lives when we get discouraged in our walk with God, as this encourages us to keep living by faith.

## Thanksgiving

Paul begins the letter by giving thanks for their great beginning as believers, “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. We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers.”

Pause here for a moment and notice that Paul is giving thanks to God, which gives us an indication that Paul recognises that God is ultimately responsible for anything good he sees in their lives. As you read Paul's letters you will notice that he is constantly in prayer for the believers.

You can read his prayers in the books of Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and Thessalonians. Paul is always praying for believers and, in turn, asking them to pray for him. I think it is a wonderful reminder that part of Paul's church planning ministry involved intercession for the believers.

## Response to God's word

Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:3, “Constantly 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.” What is it that Paul remembers? He first remembers their work of faith (because it says Paul remembers this, it means that he was present in person during that initial church plant), right out of the gates we find that the believers were living by faith and acting on it.

When Paul says *work of faith*, he is making mention of the works they did that were prompted by their faith in the Lord Jesus, and so from the beginning they were active in their faith. Not only that, but Paul also remembers their labor of love.

The Spirit of God was producing love in these brand-new Christians and they were acting on that love. They were labouring out of a sense of love. This is important for our walk with God. Sometimes we can labor out of a sense of obligation, hoping that maybe somehow our labor will help us please God. We know better than that after studying the book of Romans, but nevertheless, I think it serves as an important reminder that we should avoid laboring out obligation or legalism.

By implication, Paul's challenge to us (when he remembers this from the believers in Thessalonica) is that our labor should be prompted by love. It's the fruit of the Spirit that motivates us to reach out to others in love, and so we are referring to work that is produced by faith, we are talking about labor that is produced by love.

Paul then says that steadfastness, or perseverance, is produced by hope. In Greek, this is a genitive construction and can have a lot of different uses, but many people think that when Paul says *perseverance of hope*, he is alluding to perseverance that is produced by hope, and that means we need to understand what hope is because hope is an essential ingredient in producing perseverance. In Paul's letters hope is not something that may or may not happen, it refers to a certainty and an expectation of what God will do in the future, primarily our hope of the return of Christ.

Paul talks about our blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Paul is saying here that these believers are persevering and able to endure difficulties because of Christ's promised return. Hope produces perseverance.

Sometimes we can either become absorbed in eschatology or end times, or we can react in the opposite way and almost avoid it entirely because of how controversial it can be. Eschatology, or hope, is important for our perseverance and so we should not avoid it. It actually encourages us to continue walking with God.

## People of God

Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:4, “Knowing your election of God.” Paul is calling these believers in Thessalonica the elect of God. That is significant as well. It is significant firstly because Paul does not doubt their salvation, he calls them the elect of God, and yet he is concerned that they may not continue to walk by faith.

So in Paul's theology genuine believers either may or may not keep walking by faith and so need to be challenged to do so. Consider the context in which Paul states these words. Many of these people had come to faith in Jesus as Messiah from the synagogues, as we saw in our last tutorial. These Jewish believers (possibly some may have been proselytes to Judaism but primarily Jewish believers) would have been ostracised from their families and rejected from their homes, and Paul lets them know that they are actually the elect of God. What an encouragement to them.

The Jews are God's chosen people, which is something in which they took pride. Paul says actually, you believers in Thessalonica are the elect of God. This alludes to more than just Jews because there were also Gentile believers in Thessalonica. We learn about that later in verse nine when Paul says that they turned from idolatry to believe in the living God, which means that some of them came from Pagan backgrounds. Some of the believers were Gentiles and in spite of this Paul says that they are elect of God, and look at his reason why.

See in verse five, “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power.” He is talking about apostolic signs there. That begs the question, how can we know that these believers are elect based on the signs that took place there? Once again, we need to think of the big picture. If you read the book of Galatians and Act chapter fifteen, you will discover that Paul was convinced that God was reaching out to Gentiles because God was validating apostolic signs at Paul's hands. This convinced not only Paul that God wanted the Gentiles to be saved, but also the Jerusalem council.

So we have this body of believers in Thessalonica, some from Jewish backgrounds, and others from Gentile backgrounds, and Paul says they are God's chosen people. We know that God granted Paul apostolic signs to convince them of this. The Gentiles not rejected of God, as their Jewish friends would say, they are actually God's people and that is a huge thing. The Gentile believers are the people of God. Paul is thankful for their initial response to God's word, he is thankful that they are God's people and finally, Paul is thankful for their example to others.

## Example to others

Notice in verse six that Paul says, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord." Usually when we think about imitating Christ, this is not what comes to mind, but observe how he explains this imitation. They do so in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Now, when Jesus accomplished the mission God gave him, it came with much affliction. It came with suffering; however, it was also accomplished by joy. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him. Paul's obedience also cost him tribulation, but he also did so with joy. And now the believers in Thessalonica have become imitators. Walking in obedience to God's Word brought them persecution, and yet they did so with the joy from the Holy Spirit.

Paul continues talk about their example. Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:8, "For 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." When Paul says that their testimony is going forth in Macedonia and Achaia, the idea is that wherever Paul goes he does not have to tell people about the Thessalonian church plant, rather they tell him about it. We see this again in verses eight through ten. He says, "For we have no need to say anything. For 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, and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come."

Paul doesn't tell other people about the Thessalonian church plant, they tell him about it. When they tell Paul the story of what God did there, they talk about the fact that these people, now believers, turned to God from idolatry. That was their background, and they rejected it to serve the living and the true God. This imagery is wonderful. Often when a church plant takes place, especially among an unreached or least-reached people groups, it takes years for the people to leave the practises that they have had up until this point completely behind.

So it is an amazing testimony of what happened in Thessalonica because, in essence, they made a clean break with their idolatry. We do not always read about this happening, even in the New Testament. Acts chapter nineteen speaks about the fact that the people there had been believers for some time before they stopped their magical practises, but not so in Thessalonica. They were serving a living and true God, and they were waiting for God's Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead.

The believers had this posture of anticipation, an expectancy. They were expecting Jesus to come from heaven and deliver them from the wrath that was coming. We do not learn much about this wrath in the text here, but Paul will touch on it again later in the book. I believe that the wrath of God talked

about in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, as we will see later on in the book, is not the wrath that someone might go to after they die, but instead is a wrath that is coming to the earth in the Day of the Lord, as Paul mentions in 1 Thessalonians chapter five and 2 Thessalonians chapter two.

These believers were waiting for Christ to rescue them from that wrath is coming. I love the play on words here. They were waiting on Jesus (which means *Yahweh delivers*) to deliver them from the coming wrath. The Savior is going to do what the Savior does and that is rescue. Paul encourages these believers to keep going because they had a great beginning. They were an example to other believers, they were lived by faith, they laboured with love and worked with faith and they persevered because of their hope. This was an exemplary church plant, and Paul wanted to that encourage these believers to keep going in their walk with God.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *A Call to Persevere*

1. In 1st Thessalonians 1:3, Paul wrote about ‘perseverance of hope.’ What is the correlation between hope and the believer’s perseverance?
2. As Paul reflected on his time in Thessalonica (when he planted the church) in 1st Thessalonians 1, he mentions the good things that he observed in their life (e.g., work of faith, labor of love, perseverance of hope, how they turned to God from idols, and their expectation to be delivered from the coming wrath). Are these things characteristic of your life as well? How would these qualities be expressed in your context?
3. In 1st Thessalonians 1, Paul said that the believers in Thessalonica became an example to other believers in Macedonia. In what way did they serve as an example to others?