

1 Thessalonians 1:5–10

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: so that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

How It Came About — Tracing the Stream to Its Source

Verses 5, 6, and 7 explain how the faith, love, and hope of verse 3 came to be. The work of faith, labour of love, and enduring constancy of hope are the result — these verses trace those things back to their origin. A moral stream never rises above its source. And here the source is the gospel that came to the Thessalonians — not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance. Three things beyond the word itself, marking out the character of what came. The pattern of threes runs throughout this chapter — three co-authors, three divine persons, three things remembered in verse 3, three marks of the gospel's coming here — and it is the character of the work of the triune God that has stamped itself upon this assembly.

Our Gospel — Not Word Only

The expression *our gospel* carries weight. Paul can speak of *my gospel* when he wishes to press the full scope of his distinctive message — the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, as he calls it in 1 Timothy 1. The gospel of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, as he expresses it elsewhere. This is not only the fundamental message of death and resurrection — though Paul affirms in 1 Corinthians 15 that on those fundamentals, whether they or he, all preach the same thing. Paul's gospel extends further: the present glory of the Lord Jesus as Head of His assembly, the mystery of Christ and the church, the body formed by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. All of that is gathered under *our gospel*.

That gospel came not in word only. At the time this epistle was written, there was not the flood of words that characterises our age — internet and broadcast and print without end. But the word of the gospel did come to them in word, and that was already a remarkable and precious thing. What was added to the word was threefold: power, the Holy Ghost, much assurance. Not fleshly entertainment, not an emotional manipulation of a crowd, but the sovereign work of God in souls. When the gospel comes attended by a good deal of human attraction and appeal, those who respond may carry with them a fleshly formation that they must then rise above. Here it came purely, and the result was a pure work.

Power, the Holy Ghost, and Much Assurance

Power — the gospel was effectual. It brought from God and it accomplished something real in the souls of those who heard. The Holy Ghost — not just a feeling, but the sovereign operation of the Spirit who came down on the day of Pentecost to form the body of Christ, and who joins every believer to that body as they believe the gospel. This is the sort of thing that happened to these Thessalonians. Much assurance — not a half-confidence, not a wondering

whether things might turn out well at the last, but much assurance. The work was utter and convincing.

A Calvinist position that says one cannot know one's election until judgment day stands in flat contradiction to this verse. These saints could know their election — as verse 4 has already said — precisely because the gospel came to them in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance. That is how one knows. It is not a doctrinal conclusion arrived at by syllogism; it is the seal of the Spirit's own work in the soul. There are three places in the New Testament where full assurance is mentioned: the full assurance of understanding (Colossians 2:2), the full assurance of hope (Hebrews 6:11), and the full assurance of faith (Hebrews 10:22). Even here, much assurance was the character of what was given to the Thessalonians.

Imitators, Models, Waiters

Verse 6 says they became *imitators* of the apostles and of the Lord. Not of the apostles first and the Lord second by accident — Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:16 that God had mercy on him precisely so that in him first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to those who should believe on Him to life everlasting. The Apostle Paul was set as a pattern by God's own design. But an imitator does not imitate under compulsion — imitation wells up from within, from desire. The change in the Thessalonians was not driven by a legal list of commandments; it was produced by that same power and assurance that had sealed the gospel to their souls. It was the new nature expressing itself.

They became imitators, and then — verse 7 — they became *models* to all that believed in Macedonia and Achaia. There is a progression: imitator, then model. Those who become models before they have become imitators are in danger of the flesh showing off. The safe order is imitators first. Their eyes were on the Lord Jesus, on the Son who is coming from heaven — and that kept them from

self-display. They were models in the truest sense: examples from whom others could learn, not because they were presenting themselves but because they were presenting Him.

From verse 8, the word of the Lord sounded out — not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place their faith toward God was spread abroad. Like a pebble dropped in a pond, the ripples went to the farthest edge. The apostles did not even need to speak of it — those who had heard told what had happened at Thessalonica. A great initial ingathering, and then a testimony that continued to carry.

From Idols — to the Living and True God — and to Wait

Verse 9 gives the summary in three movements. They turned to God from idols. The verb is once-for-all — they turned, and the act was done. Not a turning and turning, but the definitive act of turning. Idols are dead: stone, wood, metal, covered with paint that chips, or rusting where they stand. They are not living. And they are not true — a lie is at the bottom of them, and lies, however they may comfort for a season, have Satan for their father and darkness for their home.

They turned to serve the living and true God. Both adjectives are chosen in pointed contrast to what they left. Life versus death. Truth versus falsehood. And this living, true God had raised the dead — had raised His Son from among the dead. That resurrection is the guarantee of everything that follows.

And to wait for His Son from heaven. This is the third movement, and it is not a minor addition but the climax. They were set in a posture of expectancy — waiting for the Son. The difficulty that arises in chapter 4, where the Thessalonians grieve for brethren who have died and fear they might miss the kingdom, is intelligible only if they had been taught an any-moment expectation. If they had been taught to wait for signs and tribulation first, they would have had

no reason to grieve at a brother's death — there was still plenty of time. But they were grieved precisely because they expected the Lord at any moment and feared the departed might miss Him. That grief is the proof of the posture they had been set in. They were waiting for the Son from heaven — not for the Antichrist, not for seven years of tribulation, but for the Son Himself.

There is a difference, as one has observed, between holding premillennial doctrine and waiting for the Son from heaven. One can hold the doctrine without being in the good of the waiting posture that characterises the soul that genuinely expects Him at any moment. Both are desirable. But the waiting is the vital thing — and that is what was given to the Thessalonians in the first three weeks.

— *Study ends* —