

1 Thessalonians

I. Introduction

- A. **1 Thessalonians 1:6-10** . . . You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. [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. [9] 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, [10] 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.
- B. Today, we are going to focus on **vs 6-7**, but before doing that I want to give you a little bit of background. The church in Thessalonica was a new church plant. To our knowledge, there were no Christians there before Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy came to town and began preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. But unlike new church plants today in our country and other parts of the world, the Thessalonian converts came to faith and a new church was birthed in an atmosphere of persecution.
1. Possibly this is one of the reasons Paul could commend these new believers for the strength of their spirituality – as evidenced by their works of faith, labors of love, steadfastness of hope.
 2. You see, they weren't zealous new believers whose flame would burn white hot for awhile and then die down one day. They were serious minded converts from the start – as is anyone who comes to faith in times of persecution. In other words, they had **counted the cost** and decided that being redeemed, forgiven, and reconciled to God, and that knowing God, learning the ways and the truths of God, living a godly life, and being with God for eternity far exceeded the value of their safety, their possessions, and their lives.
 3. And why would they be persecuted by their own people for converting to Christianity? Because they lived in a region where the religious beliefs and practices were part of the fabric of their culture – and the culture did not take kindly to anyone joining a religion that discredited or excluded theirs.

- C. However, it wasn't just the situation in Macedonia that would have made unbelievers think twice about repenting and coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Those that brought them the gospel, that is Paul and his co-workers, were being hounded and persecuted by their own Jewish religious leaders for abandoning Judaism and promoting a religion that the Jews deemed an enemy of the religion given to them by Moses.
 - 1. We know this from the book of Acts which tells of leading Jews in various towns and cities stirring up the local populace and the authorities against Paul and his co-workers.
 - 2. In fact, one well-known incident took place in Philippi where Paul and Silas (Silvanus) were beaten and imprisoned for preaching the gospel and healing a slave-girl who, having been demon possessed before being healed, had made a lot of money for her masters.
- D. A possible modern day example of what the Thessalonians were facing would be a Chinese communist, who upon being converted to Christianity, felt called by God to go to the Uyghurs – a Muslim people group under the control of China – and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to them while being hounded by the Chinese authorities for turning his back on communism and promoting Christianity.
 - 1. My point is that the Thessalonians had two good reasons to fear converting to Christianity – **first**, probable persecution from their own people, and **second**, possible trouble or even persecution for becoming part of a movement where the leader was being hounded and persecuted by his own religious leaders as well as the governing authorities.
 - 2. And yet, some believed and a church was formed – and the quality of their faith in God and godly living was praiseworthy. Why? Most probably because persecution has a way of purifying existing churches so that the believers who remain in those churches become more nearly what God intends them to be. And persecution has a way of limiting the number of new converts to those who are serious minded about trusting God and living a godly life.

E. Pray

II. 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7 – what kind of Christians should we be

A. [6a] You also became **imitators of us and of the Lord . . .**

- 1. The implication here is that these Thessalonians bought into the Christian way of life so thoroughly that they intentionally and thoughtfully observed the way Paul and his co-workers **lived out**

their Christianity and used the way they lived as a model for how they should live the Christian life.

2. But their imitation didn't stop with Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. They used the truths they were taught about the way Jesus lived and what He taught to create a practical picture of how they should live. In other words, they took what they were taught about Jesus and imitated what Jesus would do in the situations they faced and with the people they dealt with in every day life.
3. Who do you intentionally and thoughtfully imitate?
 - a. I ask this because the reality is, you have been and probably still are being influenced to think and live certain ways by people – such as your parents, siblings, friends, teachers, co-workers, people on social media, the news media, special interest groups, and advertising.
 - b. Now you may not be aware of how influential these people are, but God knows, for in both the OT and NT, He warns us against ungodly influences that turn us away from trusting and obeying Him, and living a godly life.
 - c. For example, God warned against idol worship and marrying outsiders because of the evil influence such worship and relationships would have on the way the Israelites lived. Paul wrote a warning and an exhortation when he said in **Romans 12:2**, “Do not be conformed to this world (*warning*), but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (*exhortation*).” And he gave a warning in **1 Corinthians 15:33**, “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’”
 - d. The point being that there is power in influence, and the **wrong kind of influence** will move us away from God and godly living and toward thinking and living like the unbelieving world around us. However, the **right kind of influence** has the power to move us toward God and godly living and away from thinking and living like the world.
4. Which brings me back to the question, who do you intentionally and thoughtfully imitate? I have tried to be thoughtful and intentional in finding people I could imitate in living a godly life.
 - a. For example, I find the Bible full of people whose lives, or at least who have areas of life that are worth imitating. And of course, Jesus is at the top of that list. I will give you just two examples from God's word that have been influential in my own life as to how I should live. The first example comes from Jesus.

- (1) **Philippians 2:5**, “Have this (*humble*) attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”
- (2) **2 Corinthians 9:7**, “...not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”
- b. In addition to God’s word, I have carefully selected biographies and autobiographies of Christians who lived a godly life and served God in personally costly ways in building God’s kingdom. Their stories have not only inspired me to trust God and live godly, they modeled the kind of godly thinking, decision making, and living that I wanted in my life.
- 5. Are you aware of the persons you currently imitate? Have you made these choices carefully and thoughtfully – with a view to pursuing God, knowing God, and living a godly life? If not, I urge you to seek Godly wisdom and give careful consideration to who influenced you in the past, who is currently influencing you, and who would be a better choice to imitate going forward.

B. **[6b]** you received the word in [the midst of and while enduring] much tribulation

- 1. We know this is true from what Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 2:14**, “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews.” And in **2 Thessalonians 1:4**, Paul said, “We ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.”
- 2. There is nothing in our human nature that enjoys suffering. Even Jesus prayed the night before being crucified, “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (**Luke 22:42**). It is also true that Jesus told His disciples that “Whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes” (**Matthew 10:23**).
- a. And yet, as unwanted as suffering, tribulation, and persecution are, these Thessalonian believers repented of idol worship, came to faith in God, and chose the way of Jesus Christ in the midst of and while enduring **MUCH** tribulation.
- b. That word **MUCH** is significant, for it tells us the extent of the tribulations they had to endure when listening to and believing

in the gospel of salvation, and converting to Christianity. I believe their situation can be compared to Muslims in a strongly Muslim country, like Saudi Arabia, where just listening to the gospel or reading the Bible could result in being persecuted, and where converting to Christianity could result in death.

- c. And yet, some of the Thessalonians thoughtfully listened to the gospel message and they submitted to the influencing work of the Holy Spirit. As a result they turned from worshiping and serving idols to worshiping and serving the living, true God. And all of this in the midst of **MUCH** tribulation.
3. What about us – that is, those of us who have known God for a time, and who have seen His faithfulness and have experienced His provision and protection, and who have seen the results of answered prayer – how easily are we knocked off the narrow path of godly living and confident trust in God by even a small amount of hard times, sickness, testing, or tribulation?
 - a. The reality is, it is easy to live a good life in good times. But it is hard to live a good life when being good is unpopular or the one being good is being verbally attacked or suffering economic consequences or being unjustly punished.
 - b. In contrast, it is hard to live a genuinely godly life – even in good times, for we must die to self, take up our cross daily, and imitate Jesus Christ regardless of who we are dealing with or what is going on around us. Add trials, tribulation, sickness, pain, being unpopular, unfair criticism, verbal attacks, loss of possessions, loss of job or income, and persecution to your situation, and living a genuinely godly life becomes a whole lot harder.
4. Now consider the situation the Thessalonians were in. They were just beginners when it comes to trusting God and living the Christian in the midst of hard times – while most of us have been Christians for some time. If difficult times make it hard for us to remain faithful to God and the Christian way of life, how hard do you think it was for them? Yet they repented, trusted in Jesus, and used Paul and Jesus as their examples of how to live a godly life. Could we not use them as an example of what we can do, if we will?
5. My purpose here is not to criticize or shame us, but to exhort and encourage us to see what God’s people have done – which means we can do it too. We may not do it as well as them, but we will go further in godly living if we will do our best to follow their example.

C. I want to conclude this part of **verse 6** by reminding you that it is **NOT** God's intention that we live the Christian life alone.

1. We are part of God's family. We are members of the Body of Christ. We are united as one by the Holy Spirit – which means we can and ought to travel the path of Christian living together.
2. Therefore, I am urging each of us to **look for** – not wait for but look for ways to support each other, to encourage each other, to call back to sensibleness and godliness anyone who strays, to pray for each other, and to stand with each other so that we go through this life as a family and not as individuals alone and on our own.
3. The Christian life is not an easy life, but we can make it easier by supporting each other, and in so doing, live it together.

D. [6c] And with the joy of the Holy Spirit

1. Is it easy for you to imagine having joy in the midst of suffering? Do you tend to think that having genuine joy in the midst of trials, tribulation, suffering, sickness, and persecution is not just a paradox, it is unrealistic? Is it your opinion that having the joy of the Holy Spirit at such times – or at any time – is illusive and therefore improbable?
2. When suffering, genuine joy is a mindset based on believing something greater awaits you if you will endure the suffering. For example:
 - a. David wrote in **Psalm 30:5**, that “God's anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime; weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.”
 - b. We see the truth of this in childbirth. It was God's response to Eve's sin that greatly increased a woman's pain in childbirth. And yet, there is joy in the midst of the pain over the prospect of holding a baby in your arms after enduring the pain.
 - c. And that joy in the pain becomes joy without pain when the baby is placed in your arms and you hold what you believe is so precious that it made enduring the pain worth it.
 - d. James says something similar in **James 1:2-4**, “Consider (*James is speaking of a mindset, a way of seeing the person or situation*) it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, [3] knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. [4] And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

- e. In other words, when becoming perfect and complete is of great value to you, anything that gains this for you brings joy to you, even if it includes pain and suffering.
3. However, Paul is not talking about this kind of joy. He is talking about the joy of the Holy Spirit – which the Thessalonians experienced while suffering tribulation in coming to faith and living the Christian life.
4. Though the joy of the Holy Spirit is different, it does not diminish the need for a godly mindset that values what is truly valuable so that you have genuine joy in the midst of trials and tribulation.
5. And yet it is a different kind of reality that comes from a different source. You see, this joy doesn't come from a mindset, it comes from the indwelling Holy Spirit as a result of living a godly life – a life the Thessalonian believers intentionally, thoughtfully, and carefully entered into and pursued.
6. We enter this way of life when we put off as much of the old nature as we are aware of and put Christ-likeness in those places where we put off the old nature. In other words, when we purposefully and thoughtfully imitate godly people and Jesus Christ, it puts us in the spiritual condition whereby we experience the inward peace, the contentment, and the **joy** of the Holy Spirit.
7. There is a way in which the peace, contentment, and joy of the Holy Spirit seem spontaneous, and there is a way in which they aren't. They seem spontaneous in that they show up almost unexpectedly. They are not spontaneous in that their appearance requires living the kind of godly life that makes it possible for us to become aware that the Holy Spirit is producing these things in us.

III. Conclusion

- A. [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.
 1. Paul said in **1 Corinthians 11:1**, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.”
 2. Do you intentionally and thoughtfully set an example for those around you – wherever you may be and whoever they may be?
 3. Are you aware of the example you are setting, and if aware (*which you ought to be*) are you satisfied you are making a good effort to set an example worth imitating?