**1 Thessalonians 1:4-6**

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**The Paradox of Suffering & Joy**

***4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 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.***

* Last week we examined Paul’s statement in v. 4 concerning God’s divine election of the Thessalonian believers and the significance of the doctrine of election.
	+ This morning we continue to examine Paul’s expression of thanks to God for the work that God was accomplishing within the Thessalonian church.

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**How did Paul know the Thessalonians were truly Christians?**

* Paul’s assertion that he **knew** the Thessalonians were the subjects of divine election does not mean that Paul had some special revelation from God that allowed him to see or know who was saved.
	+ There are two Greek words that are translated ***to know*** or ***knowing***. Those words are *ginōskō* and *oida.*
	+ The first word, *ginōskō*, means “a knowledge that is gained by learning or personal experience.”
	+ The second word, *oida*, means “a knowledge that is intuitively realized, based on known and observed facts.”
	+ **It is the second type of knowledge, *oida*, that Paul refers to here in v. 4** . . . the knowledge that comes from observed behavior and facts.
		- In other words, Paul’s ***knowing*** of their salvation was based purely on his observation of the behavior and attitudes of the Thessalonians, not some special insight or revelation. Paul was merely looking at the evidence of their lives.
* Then, having expressed his confidence in ***knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you***, in v. 5-7 he proceeds to lay out the evidence for **why he believed that he “knew” the Thessalonians were believers.**

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**Two reasons for Paul’s certainty of their faith**

* Paul’s confidence and knowledge in the faith of the Thessalonians is based upon **2 reasons**.
	+ The first, stated in v. 5, is his knowledge based upon his observation and interaction with them as an evangelist and preacher.
	+ The second, stated in v. 6-7, is the transformation that occurred in them, in response to receiving the gospel message.
* The first reason Paul believes that the salvation of the Thessalonians has occurred is based upon his observation and interaction with them, stated in v. 5 . . . ***for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction***.
	+ This statement presents the evidence from his side, as an evangelist and minister of God’s word.

**v. 5— How the gospel worked—negatively and positively**

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* How the gospel works through the preaching of God’s word is explicitly stated in v. 5, both negatively and positively.
* **Negatively stated**, Paul says that ***our gospel did not come to you in word only***.
	+ With this statement Paul teaches us that the transformation of true, saving faith cannot come through mere forms or rituals.
		- **In other words**, merely hearing the word of God . . . or merely attending a church service . . . or merely by being baptized . . . is a person transformed into a Christian.
	+ Until only a few decades ago the Roman Catholic Church performed its services in Latin. So unless a parishioner knew Latin, he or she had no idea what was being said. And if you did not understand Latin, how could you possibly receive and believe?
		- But for Roman Catholics, it didn’t matter that they couldn’t understand the words. They had been taught, and they believed, that their salvation was based upon their membership in the church and their attendance of mass. No personal faith was required. Therefore, an understanding of the word spoken by the priest was unnecessary.
	+ But we have learned that God has ordained that the message of the gospel . . . the message that leads to salvation . . . is transmitted through the instrumentality of human words. And if salvation is to occur, it occurs through the hearing and believing of the word of God.

**3 positive reactions to believing God’s word**

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* **And when men and women hear and believe God’s word, three positive reactions occur . . . the word of the gospel comes *in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.***
* The **first** positive aspect of the gospel message was that **it came to the Thessalonians *in power***.
	+ When Paul speaks of the gospel coming ***in power***, he is speaking of the **spiritual power that demonstrates that the power of God is operative as the gospel is being preached**. The words of natural man are accompanied by the supernatural power of God.
* The ***power*** of God that Paul speaks of here is **God’s power, which is exercised for a specific purpose**. And that purpose is to display God’s power in saving those who are unable to save themselves.
	+ Paul explicitly states the nature of this specific purpose and power of the gospel in Romans 1:16 when he states . . .

***Romans 1:16— For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.***

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* + So, here in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 and Romans 1:16 we learn that God exerts His divine power for the specific purpose of sovereignly saving those whom He has chosen to save.
* With this statement Paul indicates that he was keenly aware of the presence of the supernatural power of God behind his words. And not only was Paul aware of the power operative in his preaching to the Thessalonians, he was always conscious of the fact that God was working through his preaching.
	+ Remember, before coming to Thessalonica Paul had experienced **the power of God in preventing him** from preaching any further in Asia. And as a result of being called into Macedonia, Paul knew that God was preparing the hearts of many who would hear and receive the gospel.
	+ So, knowing that many would hear and believe, Paul had the confidence that the gospel message he was preaching would have a profound and **powerful** impact on many people.
* We also learn in Scripture that Paul was always quick to acknowledge that he was not the source of the **saving *power* of the gospel.**Paul was always emphatic to ensure that the people knew that he was merely the messenger . . . that ***power*** of the gospel message was solely the **power of God**. We see this clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 . . .

***1 Corinthians 2:1-5— 1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, 4 and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.***

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* + We can see from these passages . . . Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 2 and here in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 . . . that the word ***power*** does not refer to the strength or eloquence of Paul’s speech, but **the power of God that is operative in every believer.**
* The **second** positive aspect of the gospel message that Paul speaks of is **the work of the Holy Spirit.**

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* + While it can well be argued that the ***power*** Paul speaks of is **the *power* of *the Holy Spirit***, the Greek text has the word ***and***, indicating that **the gospel came to the Thessalonians *in power and in the Holy Spirit***.
	+ And while we know that the Holy Spirit is the primary member of the Godhead who is operative in the process of salvation, it appears that Paul wishes to distinguish between the divine ***power*** operative in salvation, in general and, specifically, the work of ***the Holy Spirit*** . . . whatever mysterious work that might be.
* The **third** positive aspect of the gospel message that Paul speaks of in v. 5 is **the full or deep *conviction*** that the Thessalonians possessed as a result of their conversion.
	+ Personally, I don’t like the word the New American Standard translators chose to use here. The English word ***conviction***, used here in v. 5, is the Greek work *plērophoria*. In other passages this same Greek word is translated ***assurance***, which seems to more properly convey the meaning and intent of Paul’s statement.
	+ Paul’s point is that by the ***power* of the gospel message and *the Holy Spirit*, the Thessalonians possessed the “full confidence and assurance” of their salvation, which comes from the Holy Spirit.**
* Remember, Paul is expressing his gratitude for the work that God was doing in the Thessalonian church. So, from Paul’s perspective, **he was seeing the obvious change in the Thessalonian believers as they turned away from their former beliefs to embrace Christ**.

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**Their mutual “knowledge” of Paul’s motives**

* Then, having first expressed his own “knowledge” of the salvation of the Thessalonians, in the second half of v. 5 **Paul then calls upon the “knowledge” of Thessalonian believers** in regard to the motives and actions of Paul while he was with them . . . ***just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.***
* Here in this phrase Paul briefly introduces the subject he will take up in greater detail in chapters 2 and 3 . . . his defense against the accusation of his enemies that he was preying upon the gullible Thessalonians for his own gain.
* In defense of himself Paul . . . in the same way he does at the beginning of v. 4 . . . calls upon the Thessalonians to ***know*** through the facts that they have observed . . . that his motives were pure and his character while among them was unselfish and self-sacrificing.

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**Evidence of the Spirit-wrought change**

* Indeed, the Thessalonians did ***know*** **what kind of men Paul, Silvanus and Timothy *proved to be*** because, as Paul states in v. 6, the Thessalonians ***became imitators*** of them.
	+ If you put the second part of v. 5 and first part of v. 6 together, you see the picture . . . ***just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake, you also became imitators of us and of the Lord***.
		- In other words, **by your actions in becoming like us, you know that our actions while among you were honorable and godly, otherwise you would not be imitating the things we did and taught you.**
* Here in this opening phrase of v. 6 Paul makes a significant statement regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Paul says ***you also became imitators of us and of the Lord****.*
	+ We’ve probably all heard the expression, **“imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”** Here in v. 6 Paul is lending validity to that saying as he commends the Thessalonians for **becoming *imitators of us and of the Lord***.
* But in telling the Thessalonians that they had ***become imitators of us and of the Lord***, Paul is teaching them . . . and us . . . an important piece of doctrinal truth.
	+ The Greek verb ***became*** . . . *ginomai* . . . means “to become” or **“to be made into.”**

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* + Here in this verse the verb *ginomai* is in the passive voice, meaning **the work of changing them into what they had become, in Christ, was not a change they had done for themselves, but a work that was done upon them by the Holy Spirit.**
	+ **Just as** **faith is a work that is done upon each of us by the Holy Spirit, so too, the transformation and sanctification that we all experience is work that is done upon each of us by the Spirit.**
	+ The Thessalonians did not make themselves into imitators of the apostle and of the Lord, **the Holy Spirit did. Everything that they were doing and becoming was the work of the Holy Spirit in them.**
* Then, having first taught that they were **“becoming”** what the Holy Spirit was doing in them, Paul then states that the Holy Spirit was causing them to ***become imitators of us and of the Lord.***

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* The Greek word for ***imitator*** is *mimētēs*, from which we get our English word **“mimic.”**
	+ The connotation of the English word, **mimic**, is slightly negative. We typically think of a **mimic** as someone who can do or say something in the same way, but there is no implication that the **mimic** is sincere. A **mimic** or **imitation** is merely a skilled **copy** of the original, **such as a person like Rich Little, who could mimic the voices of others for our entertainment**.
	+ But the Greek word *mimētēs* is a positive word. It refers to a person who **sincerely desired to imitate another in actions and attitude**. It implies a genuine desire to **be like the person being imitated**.
	+ In other passages of the New Testament we find similar instruction that encourages Christians to be ***imitators*** of Paul and of God.

***1 Corinthians 4:16— Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.***

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***1 Corinthians 11:1— Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.***

***Ephesians 5:1— Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.***

* Some biblical scholars object to the fact that Paul lists himself first, then the Lord in v. 6, that the Thessalonians ***became imitators of us and of the Lord***.
	+ But instead of wrongly implying that Paul saw himself as the primary object of imitation, we should merely see this as the natural and logical progression that occurs in the life of new converts.
	+ When the Holy Spirit causes someone to believe, it is natural for new converts to look at the messenger of the gospel as the role model for what a Christian believes and how he or she behaves.
	+ As D. Edmund Hiebert states, “*even before the message of a missionary is fully understood or personally accepted, the hearers will observe the outworking of that message in the life of the missionary. And when the Spirit leads them to a personal acceptance of the message, the new converts naturally look to the missionary to learn how to live the Christian life.”*

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* Paul knew the importance and value of his personal example to the Thessalonians. He knew that he was viewed by everyone he encountered as the representative of Jesus Christ. And as a representative of Christ, he knew that if his conduct was not honorable that he would bring dishonor upon the name of Christ.
	+ So, it is with great joy that Paul commends the Thessalonians for them having ***become imitators of us and of the Lord***.

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**The paradox of the Christian faith . . . Suffering and Joy**

* And not only does Paul commend the Thessalonians for striving to ***imitate* himself and the Lord**, but Paul goes on to further commend the Thessalonians, in v. 6, for ***having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit***.
* Here in this phrase we see one of the great paradoxes of faith and the Christian life . . . **suffering and joy**.
	+ No sooner had the Thessalonians ***received the word* of the gospel** than they were set upon by the enemies of Christ.
* And by the language that Paul uses here in v. 6 we learn that the suffering that came upon the Thessalonians was significant.
	+ When Paul states that the Thessalonians ***received the word in much tribulation***, the word ***tribulation*** is a word that means “great affliction through great pressure.”
	+ We see an example of this ***tribulation*** in the account of the events that occurred during Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica and later precipitated Paul’s departure from Thessalonica in Acts 17:4-9 .

***Acts 17:4-9— 4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. 5 But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. 6 When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; 7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." 8 They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. 9 And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.***

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* + And not only did this persecution . . . this pressing affliction and ***tribulation*** . . . result in Paul, Silas and Timothy being forced to flee from Thessalonica, but the new Thessalonian believers continued to suffer at the hands of the jealous Jews and the pagan Greeks.
	+ And through all their persecution and ***tribulation*** the Thessalonians remained steadfast in their faith, having ***received the word* of God *with the joy of the Holy Spirit***.

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**What is joy?**

* As I said a few moments ago, one of the great paradoxes of faith and the Christian life is the ability to endure great **suffering** with abiding **joy**.
	+ But how is this possible? How can a person remain joyful in the midst of persecution and suffering?
	+ To the unbeliever who reads or hears this, this makes no sense. It’s like saying you can have pain and pleasure at the same time. The terms are mutually exclusive. You can have either pain **or** pleasure . . . you can have either **suffering or joy** . . . but you can’t have both. They are complete opposites.
	+ But for as contradictory as they seem, Scripture teaches us that Christians can, and **do**, have both **suffering and joy**.
* To better understand how a Christian can experience joy in the midst of suffering, it is helpful to understand what joy is.
* The word **joy** is a word that we are all familiar with. We hear it used often. **But, think about it. Do you really have a good definition for what “joy” is?** If I asked you to define **joy**, how would you define it?
	+ Most people would come up with a definition that sounds very much like a synonym for **“extremely happy.”**
* In fact, the Collins Dictionary states that joy is “a deep feeling or condition of happiness or contentment.” Joy is the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying.

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* Although we may not realize it, ***joy*** is one of the significant results of the relationship that we have with God when we are saved. In Paul’s list of the **fruit of the Spirit** in Galatians 5:22-23, ***joy*** is listed second, after ***love***. **But what is joy? Is it merely a degree of happiness?**
	+ If that is true, then James’ statement in James 1:2-3 doesn’t make sense.

***James 1:2-3— 2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.***

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* + Is James instructing us to be “happy” when we find ourselves in a difficult trial??? I don’t think so. **So what is “joy”?**
* In looking at various definitions of biblical joy I found plenty of examples of joy, but I had trouble finding a clear definition. It seems that joy is tough to define. It’s one of those things you will recognize when you have it.

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* Probably the best definition I could find was the statement in Hastings Bible Dictionary that **“joy is the sign that the soul has found its object.”**
	+ In that definition, brief as it is, I think we have the best definition of ***joy*** . . . **the sign that our soul has found its object.”** In other words, **joy is the recognition and response of our soul that we are children of God and that we are happily submitting to the authority and leading of the Holy Spirit, regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves.**
	+ And because joy is the response of our soul to the knowledge that we belong to God, **our joy or happiness are not dependent upon worldly events.**
	+ For the world, joy is merely a fleeting feeling or emotion. And the world’s experience of joy is dependent upon events at the time. Joy in one moment can turn to grief in the next.
	+ For the Christian, joy is not fleeting, but a continual experience of the soul to the knowledge of one’s eternal relationship to God.
* Therefore, because our joy is not dependent upon the events in our lives, but upon our knowledge of our relationship with God, we can have joy, even in the midst of great suffering.
	+ In some cases, such as the martyrs of history, they experienced great joy because of their suffering. Those who experienced the strengthening power of God in the midst of terrible persecution and whose testimonies are preserved for us in historical accounts is a great comfort to us. For us to know that God was with them, strengthening them in the midst of their great suffering serves as a great encouragement to those of us who have not yet suffered as they did. The knowledge that God will sustain us is a cause for great joy.
* Here in 1 Thessalonians 1:6, and the parallel passage of Acts 17:5-9, we have an historical account of such an experience. Even in the midst of great persecution and **tribulation**, the new Thessalonian believers were strengthened and sustained, **with great joy**, in the power of the Holy Spirit.
	+ And for Paul, who was forced to flee from the persecution, it was a great relief and encouragement for him to have finally received word from Silas and Timothy that the Thessalonians were not only surviving, but were a thriving light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
* My prayer is that if we are ever called upon to suffer as many of our brothers and sisters of the past, that our testimony will be one of **great joy in the midst of persecution and suffering.**
* Next week we examine Paul’s commendation of the Thessalonians for the result of their faithfulness and how word of their faith was becoming known throughout Greece and beyond.