

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

- Thanksgiving (part 1) -

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Form and structure

The nature of the thanksgiving

- ❖ From the letter opening, Paul proceeds to a section in which he gives thanks to God for the Thessalonians. A comparison with Paul's other letters shows that all of them except Galatians, 1 Timothy and Titus also include a thanksgiving section. (In some of the letters there is also a prayer for the recipients.) Some — though not a great many — ancient letters from the Graeco-Roman world also included a thanksgiving and/or a prayer wish. Here are two examples:

- Dromon to Zenon greeting. I offer up thanks to all the gods if you yourself are well and if all your other affairs have been as you want.¹
- Antonius Maximus to his sister, Sabina, very many greetings. Before all else I pray that you are well, for I myself am well. Making mention of you before the gods here . . .²

It is quite possible, therefore, that Paul took the idea of including a thanksgiving section in his letters from the way some ancient letters were written; but a study of ancient letters, including the two examples above, show that Paul's thanksgivings were very different from those of other ancient letters: (a) Paul's thanksgivings are much longer; (b) his thanksgivings focus on spiritual rather than material benefits; (c) he thanks the one true God, rather than "the gods".³

- ❖ In Paul's letters the introductory thanksgiving often introduces themes that will be developed later in the letter. Thus we see this thanksgiving addressing such issues as brotherly love (v.3 cf. 4:9-10); the Thessalonians' conversion (vv.5-10 cf. 2:13); the character of Paul and his associates (vv.5-6 cf. 2:1-12); endurance in the midst of persecution (v.6 cf. 2:14-16; 3:1-5); the return of the Lord Jesus (v.10 cf. 4:13-5:10).⁴

¹ White (1986:52).

² White (1986:160).

³ Cf. Weima (2014:74).

⁴ Green (2002:86-87); Weima (2014:77-79).

The extent of the thanksgiving section

- ❖ It is easy to identify the beginning of Paul's thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians — no one doubts that it starts in 1:2 — but there has been quite some difference of opinion over where it ends. Some scholars would end the thanksgiving section after 1:3,⁵ some would end it after 1:10,⁶ and some see it extending all the way to 3:13.⁷
- ❖ It is difficult to exclude 1:4-10 from the thanksgiving in light of the fact that (a) verses 4-5 are part of the same Greek sentence as verses 2-3; and (b) there is a clear flow of thought throughout the whole section: verses 2-3 give thanks for the fruit in the Thessalonian believers' lives, verses 4-5 thank God for their election, and verses 6-10 recall their remarkable conversion. There is a spirit of joy and thankfulness which pervades the whole section.
- ❖ The main reason for including 2:1-3:13 in the thanksgiving is that 2:13 and 3:9-11 also contain expressions of thanks. However, there is too much material in chapters 2 and 3 which really cannot be considered part of a thanksgiving to allow that the thanksgiving section occupies the entire first three chapters of the letter. Notice how the narrative in 2:1-12 focuses not merely on thanksgiving but on self-defence, and the condemnation of the Jews in 2:14-16 focuses more on strengthening the believers in the face of persecution than simply on thanking God.⁸
- ❖ These notes will therefore accept that the thanksgiving section occupies 1:2-10.

The structure of the thanksgiving

- ❖ The thanksgiving itself can also be divided into sections. Grammatically, verses 2-5 form one sentence in Greek, verses 6-7 form another, verse 8 another, and verses 9-10 the final sentence.
- ❖ Considering, first, verses 2-5, verse 2 provides the main clause of the sentence ("We always thank God for all of you"). Verse 3 begins with the participle "remembering" (*μνημονεύοντες/ mnēmoneuontes* in Greek), and indicates Paul's first reason for giving thanks to God. Verses 4-5 are also grammatically dependent on verse 2, and specify the ultimate cause of Paul's thanksgiving: "For we know . . . that [God] has chosen you."
- ❖ Although verses 6-10 consist of three sentences, they all deal with the same subject matter: the Thessalonian Christians' conversion, resulting in their persecution, yet making them an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.⁹ This provides an additional reason for Paul to give thanks to God.
- ❖ **We can therefore outline 1:2-10 as follows:**¹⁰
 - A. Statement of thanksgiving (1:2)
 - B. First reason for thanksgiving: fruit in the believers' lives (1:3)
 - C. Second reason for thanksgiving: God's election (1:4-5)

⁵ Fee (2009:19-20).

⁶ Wanamaker (1990:72); Green (2002:86); Weima (2014:76-79).

⁷ O'Brien (1977:141-144); Bruce (1982:11); Malherbe (2008:103-105).

⁸ See further Weima (2014:76-79).

⁹ Macedonia and Achaia constitute more or less what we would call Greece today.

¹⁰ Weima (2014:79-80) has a helpful discussion of the structure of the introductory thanksgiving.

D. Third reason for thanksgiving: the Thessalonians' remarkable and exemplary conversion (1:6-10)

- ❖ These sermon outlines will treat sections A and B together (this outline), followed by sections C and D, each in its own outline. This method of dividing the passage could also form a convenient basis for three sermons on the introductory thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians.

Exposition

Verse 2: "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers."

- ❖ Paul's thanksgivings are much more than just a set formula with which he starts his letters. Their length, depth, and variation from letter to letter indicate that he thought carefully about what he included in each thanksgiving. The statement, "We always thank God . . ." also draws attention to Paul's actual practice of praying for the churches he had founded.¹¹
- ❖ Paul's frequent references to his own prayer life (e.g. Eph 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Col 2:1-3; 1 Th 3:10-13), and his urgent commands to his converts to persevere in prayer (e.g. 2 Cor 1:11; Eph 6:18; Col 4:2; 1 Th 5:17-18) show that prayer was a frequent and regular activity for him. The reference to "our prayers" alludes to the fact that it was in the context of his regular prayers that he gave thanks for the Thessalonians. A number of commentators also suggest that this phrase could indicate that Paul, Silas and Timothy met daily for prayer, and that they brought the Thessalonians before the throne of grace at these times. In the light of Paul's view of prayer that is so abundantly demonstrated throughout his letters it must be considered highly unlikely that he and his coworkers did not pray together regularly in this way.¹²

"We always thank God for all of you"

- ❖ Paul considered thanksgiving to be an important part of his prayers. As he exhorted the Philippians to present their prayers and petitions to God *with thanksgiving* (Phlp 4:6), so he also made thanksgiving the first order of business in his own prayers: "we *always* thank God for you". There is surely good reason for this. By thanking God one is reminded that he has been and is at work. In this way one both honours God and gains confidence that he will continue to work by hearing one's petitions.
- ❖ In the case of the Thessalonians, Paul was greatly encouraged by their initial conversion — they had turned from idols to serve the living and true God (1:9) — and by their perseverance in the face of persecution, even after Paul and his coworkers had been forced to leave Thessalonica (3:6-8). But the apostle is careful to thank God and thus to acknowledge that this wonderful devotion was due to God's working in their lives, and not simply to his and Silas's powerful preaching, or to the marvellous character of the Thessalonians. Ultimately the change came about because God had chosen them (1:4-5).¹³ As Paul reminded the Romans: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rm 11:33).

¹¹ Cf. Wanamaker (1990:74).

¹² O'Brien (1977:146); Wanamaker (1990:74); Green (2002:87); Weima (2014:83).

¹³ Green (2002:87).

- ❖ The phrase **for all of you** is found in only one other of Paul's introductory thanksgivings (Rm 1:8). This suggests that it has been added here for some definite reason. Perhaps Paul wanted to give the letter a warmer tone by emphasizing his thankfulness for *each one* of the believers; or maybe he wanted to assure all the believers — even those who would need to be exhorted or gently rebuked later in the letter (e.g. 5:14-15) — that he was thankful for each and every one, and was confident that God was at work in each one of them.¹⁴

“mentioning you in our prayers”

- ❖ The phrase **in our prayers** refers to Paul's regular prayer life, as indicated above.
- ❖ The word **mentioning** is a translation of the Greek phrase *μνείαν ποιούμενοι/mneian poioumenoi*, in which the verb *ποιούμενοι/poioiomenoi* is a very common word meaning “doing” or “making”. The word *μνείαν/mneian* is often translated “mention”, so that the phrase has come to be translated as “making mention of”, or simply “mentioning”. The impression created by this translation is that Paul merely “mentions” or refers briefly to his converts in his prayers; in other words, his prayers for them are not focussed or sustained.¹⁵ However, Paul exhorted the Ephesians to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph 6:18) — a form of prayer which goes beyond a brief reference to the people being prayed for.¹⁶ We can expect that Paul followed his own advice when praying for the Thessalonians! Furthermore, the word *μνεία/mneia* often means remembrance, so that the phrase *μνείαν ποιούμενοι/mneian poioumenoi* could be translated as “remembering you” (as it is in Eph 1:16 in both NIV and ESV), or, when combined with “in our prayers” simply as “praying for you” (cf. 1 Th 1:2 in New Living Translation [NLT]). Either way, the point is that Paul truly *remembered* his converts in prayer and prayed for them according to their needs.
- ❖ The last word of verse 2 in Greek is the word *ἀδιαλείπτως/adialeiptōs*, which means “ceaselessly” or “continually”. The word can be taken with the first verb of verse 3, as the NIV translators have done (so that v.3 begins “We continually remember before our God and Father . . .), or it can be taken to qualify the last verb of verse 2 (in which case we would translate the last part of v.2 as “*constantly* remembering you in our prayers”). The second option seems better (a) because the word *ἀδιαλείπτως/adialeiptōs*, in its three other occurrences in Paul always qualifies a verb of praying or thanking;¹⁷ and (b) because the verb “remembering” in verse 3 is qualified by the phrase “before our God and Father”.¹⁸
- ❖ Thus we can translate verses 2-3 as:

We always thank God for all of you as we remember you continually in our prayers, calling to mind before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ Cf. Fee (2009:20); Weima (2014:81-82).

¹⁵ The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (s.v. 'mention') gives the meaning of “mention” as “refer to briefly”.

¹⁶ 1 Thessalonians 3:10-13 makes a similar point with specific reference to the Thessalonians.

¹⁷ The three occurrences are Romans 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 5:17. Romans 1:9 is particularly significant because it is part of an introductory thanksgiving in which *ἀδιαλείπτως/adialeiptōs* undoubtedly qualifies *μνείαν ποιούμαι/mneian poioumai*, making it an exact parallel to 1 Thessalonians 1:2.

¹⁸ Wanamaker (1990:74); Green (2002:87); Fee (2009:20-21).

Verse 3: “We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

“We continually remember before our God and Father”

- ❖ If the above explanation of **continually** is correct, we should omit it from this verse.
- ❖ The verb **we . . . remember** picks up from verse 2 and proceeds to give the content of and reason for the thanksgiving.
- ❖ The phrase **before our God and Father** comes at the end of the verse in Greek, but is correctly interpreted to qualify Paul’s “remembering” rather than any (or all) of “work produced by faith”, “labour prompted by love”, and “endurance inspired by hope”. Paul (together with his coworkers) remembers *before God* the Thessalonians’ work, labour and endurance.¹⁹ 1 Thessalonians 3:9 gives the sense: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”
- ❖ It is noteworthy that Paul refers to God as **our Father** in such an easy and natural way, and this suggests that it had become common for believers in the Lord Jesus to refer to the almighty, creator God like this.²⁰ To refer to God so freely as Father was a departure from Old Testament usage, and draws attention to the profound privilege which belongs to New Testament believers. As J.I. Packer notes:

For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. ‘Father’ is the Christian name for God. . . .

The revelation to the believer that God is his Father is in a sense the climax of the Bible.²¹

This gives some insight into the sense of freedom that Paul experienced in his relationship with God (cf. Rm 8:15-16).

“your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ”

- ❖ With these words Paul states the first reason for his thanksgiving: there are certain qualities present in the Thessalonian believers’ lives; Paul recognizes that they come from God and he thanks God for them.
- ❖ Notice the three virtues that are mentioned here: **faith, love, and hope**. These virtues frequently occur together,²² especially in Paul, and represent some of the most essential qualities of Christian character.
- ❖ The Greek original of this verse is not as explicit as the NIV translation quoted above; it reads more like the ESV, which has “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope”.

¹⁹ Wanamaker (1990:76); Green (2002:88-89); Fee (2009:22) *contra* Weima (2014:88-89).

²⁰ Fee (2009:22). For comparison, notice how Jesus refers to God as “your Father”, “your Father in heaven”, and “your heavenly Father” throughout Matthew 6.

²¹ Packer (1993:226-227).

²² See 1 Thessalonians 5:8; Galatians 5:5-6; Romans 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Colossians 1:4-5; Hebrews 10:22-24; 1 Peter 1:21-22.

The meaning of phrases like “work of faith, “labour of love”, and “steadfastness of hope” is a little ambiguous, and some interpreters understand them to mean something like “faithful work”, “loving labour”, and “hopeful endurance” (e.g. NLT). However, that interpretation obscures the three virtues — faith, hope and love — that seem so important to Paul, and is therefore probably not correct.²³ The most likely interpretation, and the one most commonly accepted, is the one that takes the virtues of faith, love and hope as the *source* of the work, labour and endurance: faith produces work, love produces labour, and hope gives rise to endurance;²⁴ it is a case of “Christian virtues in action”.²⁵ This interpretation is clearly expressed in the NIV’s translation.

“your work produced by faith”

- ❖ Paul thanks God, firstly, for the Thessalonians’ **work produced by faith**. Paul sometimes draws a sharp contrast between faith and works, as in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.” The contrast is that faith is the means (from our side) by which we gain acceptance with God; works can never lead to acceptance with God because “no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law” (Rm 3:20). However, that is not to say that works have no place in Paul’s theology. Rather, for Paul, the free acceptance that we gain through faith becomes the means by which we are enabled to do good works. Thus Ephesians 2:10, following on from verses 8-9, states: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Paul’s logic is this: (a) we cannot gain acceptance with God by our good works (since we are not able by ourselves to produce the good works that God requires); (b) we gain acceptance by God’s free gift of righteousness, which is received through faith (Rm 3:24; 4:5; 5:1-2); (c) now that we are reconciled to God, his power is at work in us to produce the good works that he always intended for us (though we will never be perfect in this life).²⁶ Thus it becomes clear that faith produces work, and without faith it is impossible to do the works that must characterize the Christian life. Those works, in turn, provide evidence of our faith (cf. Mt 7:15-23).
- ❖ The Greek word for **work**²⁷ is a very broad one, and it is best to understand this work as the good works which characterize the Christian life in general (cf. 2 Th 1:11; 2 Cor 9:8; Eph 2:10).²⁸ Such works include evangelism, works of mercy, and many others.
- ❖ As Paul listened to Timothy reporting on his visit to Thessalonica, he heard about the new believers’ good works and he realized that these good works were evidence of their faith — and he knew that all of it, the faith and the works, came from God. What else could he do but bow before God in thankfulness?

²³ Fee (2009:24, n.52).

²⁴ From a grammatical point of view, faith, love and hope are regarded as genitives of source or origin, or as subjective genitives.

²⁵ Fee (2009:24, n.51).

²⁶ It is important to note that, even when we produce good works by the power of the Spirit, our acceptance with God and our hope of eternal life are still based on his grace and his free gift of salvation in Christ (Rm 5:1-2, 9-11; 6:23).

²⁷ ἔργον/*ergon*.

²⁸ Wanamaker (1990:75); Green (2002:89-90); Fee (2009:25-26).

“your labour prompted by love”

- ❖ The word **labour**²⁹ in the phrase **your labour prompted by love** is very similar in meaning to the word “work”, but has a little more emphasis on the nature of the work as laborious and tiresome.³⁰ Although love could refer to love for God, love for other people in general, or love for believers — or to all three — there are at least two good reasons to think that Paul is referring here to love for fellow-believers. (a) This letter has a strong emphasis on brotherly love (3:12; 4:9-10; 5:13), which is understood to come from God (4:9). The introductory thanksgiving often foreshadows the themes of the letter (see above on the nature of the thanksgiving), and therefore it is natural to understand the love of 1:2 as a reference to brotherly love, which is addressed later on in the letter. (b) In Colossians 1:4-5, another introductory thanksgiving, Paul speaks explicitly of “faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints — the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven”. Here again we find the mention of faith, love and hope, as in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. In the Colossians passage faith is explicitly related to Christ and love to fellow-believers. It is reasonable to think that Paul’s mind was moving along similar lines in both thanksgivings, and we may therefore conclude that “labour prompted by love” refers to sacrificial works of service done by the Thessalonian Christians for one another and for believers from other places.³¹
- ❖ As Paul heard from Timothy about the Thessalonians’ love for one another and for believers from further afield, he remembered how, just a few months earlier, they had neither known nor loved Christ — let alone his people. Now they knew themselves to be the assembly of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; they had a special affection for those who were unrelated to them by blood, yet who had become their brothers and sisters in the Lord. So strong was the bond that they willingly served and sacrificed for each other. “Truly,” said Paul, “my beloved Thessalonians have been taught by God to love one another (4:9). May God be praised!”

“your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ”

- ❖ This phrase is easier to understand than the other two. The letter speaks frequently about the persecution which the Thessalonian believers suffered (1:6; 2:14-16; 3:3-5); Paul had been deeply concerned that they would buckle under the pressure and forsake the Lord (3:5). Yet when Timothy returned from Thessalonica he brought the good news that the new converts were standing firm in the Lord (3:6-8); they continued to believe in him, to love him, to serve him, even though it meant rejection and suffering. This is the essence of the **endurance** which Paul mentions here in the introductory thanksgiving; it is the “capacity to continue to bear up under difficult circumstances”.³² Paul’s response was “now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of God because of you?” (3:8-9), a response that is alluded to here at the beginning of the letter.
- ❖ Paul knew that the Thessalonians’ endurance was given by God (that is why he thanked God for it), but he also understood how God worked in them to enable them to endure: their

²⁹ κόπος/*kopos*.

³⁰ Louw & Nida (1996:§42.47).

³¹ Cf. Green (2002:90).

³² Louw & Nida (1996:§25.174).

endurance was **inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ**. This hope was not an uncertain wish for the future, such as when we “hope” that our national soccer team will win the Africa Cup of Nations or the World Cup. This hope “has to do with [an] absolute certainty about the future based on Christ’s resurrection”,³³ a certainty which had taken root in the Thessalonian believers’ minds. The content of the hope was the assurance that Jesus would return from heaven to deliver his people from God’s judgement (1:10; 5:2-3). Such hope inspired endurance because it convinced the new believers that all their sufferings would be rewarded. Instead of looking forward to the everlasting destruction and eternal separation from God which await those who reject the gospel (2 Th 1:8-9), those who follow Jesus will “meet the Lord in the air” and “will be with the Lord forever” (4:17).

- ❖ As love brings the triad of virtues to a climax in 1 Corinthians 13:13, so hope brings them to a climax here. The overarching framework of the whole letter is the return of Christ (cf. 1:10; 2:19-20; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:1-10, 23), and it is hope that fixes the believer’s attention on this glorious reality. Such hope was crucial for the Thessalonian believers in the midst of their suffering.³⁴

Application

Our thinking must be governed by the reality of God’s involvement in our world.

- ❖ It is easy to know a few facts about God and the gospel — and even to hold some religious beliefs — without that knowledge dominating and controlling the way we live our lives. Although we attend church on Sunday, we may pursue wealth, success, and pleasure just as much as those who do not profess to follow Jesus. If this is the case we probably do not understand the reality of God’s involvement in the world and our dependence on him.
- ❖ The Thessalonian believers, new in the faith as they were, did not suffer from this problem. Though Jason suffered financial loss for hosting Paul and Silas (see Ac 17:5-9), and though many of them had to endure vicious persecution for not participating in idol-worship, God and his coming judgement in Christ were so real to them that they would not deny him. They continued to produce the work, labour and endurance which flowed from a conviction of God’s rulership over the world and his love for his people.
- ❖ We need to cultivate this same conviction that our future and the future of the world are determined by God. While that applies in an ultimate sense to the final judgement, it also applies on a daily basis to issues like success in our work, daily provision, our health, the politics of our country, and every other issue of life. As Peter Craigie reminds us in commenting on the Book of Deuteronomy:

God is the Lord of history *and* of the world of nature. He controls other nations *and* the course of nature, whether it be health, the fruitfulness of the land, or any other part of the created order. In other words, God has total control of all the factors that might affect the future well-being of Israel. If his people were obedient, he had the power to grant blessing: he controlled the affairs of nations and could therefore give Israel peace; and he could give them health, long life, and bountiful crops as the Lord of his created world. But if Israel were disobedient, there was no sphere of life in which Israel could

³³ Fee (2009:26).

³⁴ Cf. Weima (2014:87).

escape God; the strength of their army or the richness of the land would be of no avail when the living relationship with God was broken.³⁵

What was true for ancient Israel is true for us as well. It is important for us to cultivate and live by this awareness!

- ❖ Another indication that our thinking may not be governed by the reality of God's involvement in the world is a sense of hopelessness about the expansion of God's kingdom and the spread of the gospel. We look at our society and we see how marginalized Christians are; we see how popular ancestor worship and idol worship are in our culture; we fear the militant advance of Islam; we feel intimidated by the atheistic arguments of intellectuals — and we begin to lose hope that people will ever turn to Christ.
- ❖ When Paul reflected on the good news brought by Timothy (3:6-8), he had no doubt that God was the one who had been at work in the Thessalonians, and that he himself had given them their faith, their love and their hope. Though the believers were a small minority in a hostile city, Paul recognized in them the reality of God's powerful working. It was this recognition which motivated him to continue preaching the gospel in Corinth (from where he wrote 1 Thessalonians) and all the other places where he ministered.
- ❖ Once again, we need to cultivate this kind of confidence in the power of God to draw people to himself. During the time of the Reformation, when it seemed that the cause of Christ was languishing, John Calvin refused to be discouraged by what he saw. He expressed his hope like this:

But our chief consolation is that this is the cause of God and that he will take it in hand to bring it to a happy issue. Even though all the princes of the earth were to unite for the maintenance of our Gospel, still we must not make that the foundation of our hope. So, likewise, whatever resistance we see today offered by almost all the world to the progress of the truth, we must not doubt that our Lord will come at last to break through all the undertakings of men and make a passage for his word. Let us hope boldly, then, more than we can understand; he will still surpass our opinion and our hope.³⁶

Thankfulness must be a prominent part of our prayers.

- ❖ One of the ways of cultivating an awareness of God's working in the world is to make sure that we spend time thanking him in our prayers. There are so many ways in which the Bible emphasizes the importance of thanksgiving.
- ❖ When Paul explains why the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men, he identifies thanklessness as one of the root causes: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rm 1:21). May it never be that God's children should behave in a manner that provokes his wrath! We dishonour God when we do not thank him.
- ❖ When Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians to present their requests to God he writes:

³⁵ Craigie (1976:44).

³⁶ Quoted in Murray (1971:xii).

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phlp 4:6-7).

- ❖ The psalms are full of praise and thanksgiving to God, and in them God teaches us to come before him with thankfulness. Notice Psalm 50:23: “He who sacrifices thank offerings honours me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.”
- ❖ We often experience times of discouragement, whether due to our personal circumstances or due to the situation in our society. At such times it is tempting to see the world negatively and to lose hope in the power of God, or at least in his willingness to demonstrate his power in our midst. Although thankfulness may be the last thing on our mind at such times, those are precisely the times when we must discipline ourselves to thank him. Notice how Paul says, “We *always* thank God for all of you . . .” (1 Th 1:2). There is nothing like thanksgiving to restore our confidence in God’s power and his willingness to exercise that power on our behalf.
- ❖ My great-grandmother was a woman who suffered greatly. Her husband was murdered when she had a large and growing family to look after, and she lost one child in infancy and another in her early twenties. One day she was feeling particularly discouraged when she heard someone in the street singing or whistling the hymn “Count your blessings”. Though she died before I was born, my mother tells me what a difference that reminder made to her. And we can be similarly encouraged!

When upon life’s billows
 You are tempest tossed,
 When you are discouraged,
 Thinking all is lost,
 Count your many blessings,
 Name them one by one,
 And it will surprise you
 What the Lord hath done.

Refrain:

Count your blessings,
 Name them one by one,
 Count your blessings,
 See what God hath done!
 Count your blessings,
 Name them one by one,
 And it will surprise you
 What the Lord hath done.

Are you ever burdened
 With a load of care?
 Does the cross seem heavy
 You are called to bear?
 Count your many blessings,
 Every doubt will fly,

And you will keep singing
As the days go by.³⁷

We must understand that good works are produced by faith, sacrificial service by love, and endurance by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- ❖ Good works, sacrificial service, and faithful endurance are important and necessary qualities for every Christian, and we should always be looking for ways to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb 10:24). But it is crucial to understand how these qualities are produced in us. According to 1 Thessalonians 1:3 they are produced by faith, by love, and by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ❖ Zealous Christians and Christian leaders are often tempted to force people into behaving as they should by creating rules and codes of behaviour which are then enforced through various forms of social pressure. While we recognize the need to be accountable to one another, that accountability should not take the form of a checklist where we can merely tick off the items to prove that we are living up to the required standard. Rather, we need to be encouraging one another’s faith, love and hope; and where good works, sacrificial service, and faithful endurance are absent, we should look for problems with the underlying virtues and seek to rectify these. The result will be a much more genuine and thorough transformation which is characterized by freedom in Christ rather than bondage to human rules.
- ❖ One of the most powerful examples of the Christian virtues in action comes from the life of David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary to southern and east Africa between 1841 and 1873. Livingstone was born in poverty, and from the age of ten had to work twelve-and-a-half hours a day, six days a week, in a cotton spinning factory. Very few of the children who worked in the mills ever learned to read and write properly, but Livingstone educated himself by reading late into the night. Later he studied medicine and became a doctor, in order to equip himself for the work of missions. Livingstone’s later work in Africa involved untold hardships as he sought to open up the continent for the gospel and for commerce — the purpose of the latter being to cut the nerve of the slave trade. He endured long separations from his family, was mauled by a lion, and suffered frequent illnesses.³⁸ Yet he claimed that he never made a sacrifice:

For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice that I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? . . . It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in, and for us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the

³⁷ Words by Johnson Oatman. Accessed at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/c/o/u/countyouth.htm> on 20 April 2016.

³⁸ These highlights from Livingstone’s life are taken from the biography by Rob Mackenzie (2000).

great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us.³⁹

- ❖ In Livingstone's life we recognize a living faith that had come to rest in the love of God, demonstrated through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; Livingstone's good works are legendary and are still remembered with gratitude in Zambia. His love for others was evident in his sacrificial service; at one time he delayed his reunion with his family in England by two years in order to lead his African companions back from Luanda on the Angolan coast to their home at Linyanti, just west of the Victoria Falls.⁴⁰ Few Christians in history give us a better example of endurance: until his dying day David Livingstone never stopped trusting in Christ or persevering in the work to which he was called. And this endurance was inspired by an assurance of the "glory which shall hereafter be revealed in, and for us".
- ❖ No amount of coercion or social pressure could have persuaded Livingstone to sacrifice for Christ and for other people the way he did. His life is a testimony to the power of faith, love, and hope.

Sermon suggestions

Theme

- ❖ The **exegetical** theme of this passage is:

The first basis of Paul's continual thanksgiving for the Thessalonian Christians is that the Christian virtues of faith, love and hope have become active in their lives through good works, selfless service, and patient endurance.

- ❖ A possible **homiletical** theme is:

Paul and the Thessalonians are an example to us in their thankfulness, their expression of the Christian virtues of love, hope and faith, and their God-centred and God-dominated understanding of life.

Possible sermon outline

- ❖ This is just one possibility, and should be adjusted according to the needs of the particular congregation. Depending on the time available and level of understanding and maturity of the congregation, point IV may be omitted.

- I. Introduction
- II. Thanksgiving must be a prominent part of our prayers (v.2)
 - A. Paul's example
 - B. Application
- III. Our lives should be characterized by the Christian virtues in action (v.3)
 - A. The example of the Thessalonians
 - B. Application
- IV. Our thinking must be dominated by the reality of God (vv.2-3)
 - A. The example of Paul and the Thessalonians
 - B. Application
- V. Conclusion

³⁹ Quoted in Mackenzie (2000:195-196).

⁴⁰ Mackenzie (2000:142-171).

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