

# THE GOSPEL COMES WITH POWER

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Key Verse: 1:5a

**“...because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.”**

We always hope that the world will get better, and that we will live a more comfortable life. But instead, it gets worse and worse, and life gets tougher and tougher. A board of renowned scientists and political leaders have established a Doomsday Clock that warns of the likelihood of catastrophic nuclear war.<sup>1</sup> The closer the minute hand gets to midnight, the more likely the disaster. In 1991, the clock was set to 17 minutes before midnight. But just a couple weeks ago, it was set to 2 ½ minutes. These experts sense impending doom. Another threat is from super-volcanos, which exist in various places under the earth’s surface, including Yellowstone Park. According to NASA scientists, if this super-volcano erupted, volcanic ash would spread throughout the United States, with a thick layer covering the Chicago area. But they don’t expect it soon. Apostle Peter predicted that the earth will be destroyed by fire (2Pe 3:10). We can see that creation is groaning as in the pains of childbirth until Jesus comes. There is no hope in the world. The Bible tells us that the only sure and lasting hope is in Jesus.

The theme of 1 Thessalonians is the hope we have in Jesus’ coming again, and how we should live as we wait for him. Paul refers to Jesus’ coming again in every chapter of this short letter. In chapter 1 we can find two very important key words, **“church,”** and **“gospel.”** Through these two words we can see what God is doing in these desperate times. God is working through people who spread the gospel to establish churches, and through churches to preach the gospel. Those who accept the gospel turn from idols to the true and living God. In this way, God saves people from the coming wrath. Let’s learn how God is working in these desperate times.

**First, the church (1-4).** In these verses, we can find several characteristics of the church. First of all, the church is a community in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 1 says, **“Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** Though

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thebulletin.org/timeline>

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Paul was the primary writer of this letter, he included Silas and Timothy as coauthors. It is because they were his team members whom God had used to preach the gospel to the Thessalonians. Sometimes people think Paul was a “one man show.” But in fact, he respected his team members and worked closely with them. They preached together, suffered together, and shared life together. Their bond of love in Christ became very deep. Though Timothy was a spiritual son to Paul, Paul saw him as a coworker and a leader in the church. This kind of teamwork in God is one secret of a powerful gospel ministry.

Paul addresses the recipients as **“the church of the Thessalonians.”** This refers to the local church. The word **“church”** means **“called out by God from the world to him.”** The church is not a human organization, but a divine institution. It is not a building, but people whom God has brought together for his purpose. Here in our Chicago UBF church there are more than 20 ethnic groups. We have come from various places and backgrounds. Probably none of us ever imagined that we would come here. But God brought us here and put us together for his purpose. Paul described the church as **“in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** There are many organizations in the world, but only the church is **“in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** God is the origin and sustainer of the church and the one to whom it belongs. God is also our Father, and we are his children. Jesus is our Lord. Jesus is the head of the church and we are all members of his body. Jesus’ words are the source of our nourishment, as well as our standard and guide. The Holy Spirit is the power source of the church (5-6; 4:8). Our God is Almighty God, Jesus is the Sovereign Ruler and the Holy Spirit dwells in and among us. The Triune God, who is forever faithful, protects and provides for his church. Nothing can resist him. So, we don’t need to be afraid of anything. And we can be sure that God will finish the work he started because he never fails. What great comfort, encouragement and joy is ours as members of God’s church. Paul greets the church by saying, **“Grace and peace to you.”** These wonderful blessings are given to us freely through Christ Jesus our Lord.

After his greeting, Paul said, **“We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers”** (2). The Thessalonian church was being severely persecuted from the beginning (2:14). As their shepherd, it would be easy for Paul to worry about the young believers. Instead, he always

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thanked God and prayed for them continually. Verse 3 tells us why he was so thankful: **“We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Here we can find another characteristic of the church: **“faith, love and hope.”** According to John Calvin, faith, love and hope are a brief definition of Christianity. Faith is directed toward God, love toward others and hope toward the future. Christians are those who have faith in God, love for others, and hope in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith works, love labors and hope endures. Genuine faith leads to good works. Faith without works is dead (Ja 2:17). Faith is more than intellectual assent; it has power to produce good works.

True love is expressed through labor. Love without labor seems empty, and labor without love is burdensome. Here “love” is “agape,” God’s love. This love is unselfish, sacrificial, unconditional and unchanging. This love always builds up others. Whenever we practice this love, we can experience true joy and the meaning of life. It leads to eternal bonds with our fellow believers. In Chicago UBF we chose John 13:34-35 as our 2017 key verse. Jesus said, **“As I have loved you...love one another.”** Love involves sacrifice. Some examples are: spending one’s lunch hour to have a Bible study with a thirsty soul, helping people prepare to establish godly families and continuing to care for them, inviting weary students to hear the good news and share a meal, visiting the sick, helping the unemployed find a proper job, and many other things. In reality, it is not easy to love like this. How can we do so? We must remember how Jesus loved us. Then we can practice Jesus’ love, sacrificing our time, energy and money.

Hope inspires endurance. This endurance is not passive. It is the inner strength to go through sufferings. When we live in this world, we face many kinds of hardships. Some of them are manageable, but some of them are bone-crushing, such as intense peer pressure or persecution. When we put our hope in Jesus, we find the resources to go through these difficulties; our faith is purified and we become stronger. When we think about the Thessalonians’ faith, love and hope, we may think that it took a long time for them to mature to be like this. But it happened as soon as they received the gospel. They became dynamic and fruitful. This is normal Christian life.

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In verse 4, we find another characteristic of the church: **“For we know brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you....”** The church is a community which is loved and chosen by God. Sometimes we feel, “no one cares about me. I am unloved, even by my spouse or parents or church members.” This makes us lonely and sorrowful. But God loves us, every one of his children, personally and deeply. How do we know this? Apostle John wrote: **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters”** (1Jn 3:16). We can each live with this conviction: “I am loved by God as his dear child; I am chosen by God as a special person.” This precious love of God is the foundation of his church.

**Second, the gospel (5-10).** In verses 5-10, Paul tells us what empowered the Thessalonians to live such a wonderful life. In verse 5a, he says, **“...because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.”** Here we see that it was the gospel that produced the Thessalonian church, as it was proclaimed among them. The phrase, “not simply with words,” implies that it was through words; it is a message. Someone must proclaim this message. It comes through people. It does not fall from the sky like rain. The Thessalonian church was born when Paul, Silas and Timothy preached the gospel to them. Acts 17 records this in detail. Paul went into the synagogue and reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. Then he said, **“This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah.”** Paul did this for three Sabbaths. When the Thessalonians heard this message, a large number of God-fearing Greeks and many prominent women believed. There was a great work of God. How could this happen?

Though the gospel comes through people who preach the good news, it is more than just words. The gospel comes with power, the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. This power comes from the gospel itself. The gospel is not a doctrine, but the good news about Jesus who suffered, died and rose again and is sitting at the right hand of God. Hebrews 7:24-25 says, **“...Jesus lives forever...he is able to save completely those who come to God through him....”** When the gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit works: The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins, helps us understand the gospel message, and leads us to accept Jesus as our Savior. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit dwells in us to

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sanctify us and to guide us into all truth. The Holy Spirit empowers the preacher to deliver the gospel message, and the hearer to receive it with deep conviction.

Verse 5b says, **“You know how we lived among you for your sake.”** After delivering the gospel message, Paul, Silas and Timothy did not say “goodbye” and go off to a missionary compound. They lived together with the Thessalonians and showed them what a gospel-centered life is like. They demonstrated faith, love and hope in action through their lives. Seeing this example had a great effect on the Thessalonians. They could take deep root in the gospel as a way of life and grow.

Then what did they do? Did they live as they pleased? No. Verse 6 says, **“You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.”** When the Thessalonians welcomed the message, they were full of joy. Their sins were forgiven, their wounds were healed, they found the meaning of their lives, clear purpose, and the living hope. The same Spirit who gave power to those who preached the gospel gave joy to those who received it. The circumstances they were living in did not change at all. But they had deep joy that came from their relationship with Jesus through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When they experienced this joy, they wanted to grow spiritually. But they did not know how. They realized they needed mentors. So, they became imitators of Paul, Silas and Timothy. Imitation of their mentors was the first step for them to grow. Some people look down on imitation as though it is foolish. Proud people cannot learn by imitation. Only those who are humble can do so. We cannot ignore the importance of imitation in Christian discipleship. Bible teachers should set a good example, in addition to teaching the Bible. In the same way Bible students learn more from example than from words. Still, human mentors are limited in many ways. They cannot be permanent mentors. As people mature, they need Jesus Christ as their best and eternal mentor.

When the Thessalonians humbly imitated their mentors and the Lord, they could grow until they became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (7). Those who imitate their mentors and most of all our Lord Jesus Christ become exemplary people. What impact did this have? Verse 8a says, **“The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and**

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**Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.”** The words “rang out” mean to make a big noise like a gong or thunder that reverberates and spreads widely. When the Thessalonians lived out their faith in God, they became powerful broadcasters of the gospel message. They didn’t organize an evangelistic campaign. They didn’t spend any money on mass media. They didn’t need a seminary degree. As they lived out their faith, they spontaneously echoed the gospel message. It spread through word of mouth. We can call it spreading “holy rumors.” People began to ask each other, “Have you heard about this new community in Thessalonica? They are full of faith, love and hope in these terrible times. They don’t complain but always say “Thank God.” Their lives are dynamic, meaningful and joyful. They love each other deeply. I want to be part of it.” The news spread so quickly that wherever Paul went people were already talking about it. They were telling how the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living and true God (8b-9).

The Thessalonians’ changed lives revealed the contrast between idols and the living God. Idols are dead, but God lives forever. Idols are false, but God is true. Idols are many, but God is one. Idols are visible, but God is invisible. Idols are man-made, but God is the one who made man. Idols cannot hear prayers; they never help people. But God answers our prayers and saves us. Though idols seem to be nothing, still, they have a hidden power; it is the power of the devil. This is why idols get such a strong grip on people’s lives. The devil enslaves people and plants fear that breaking away will bring forth vengeance. People are miserable in their idolatry, but they cannot break free by their own strength. Only the gospel has the power to cut the chains of idolatry and set us free. In Thessalonica, emperor worship was very strong. In addition, people worshiped Greek and Egyptian gods. The worship of these gods was associated with gross sexual immorality. The Thessalonians were slaves of idols and their carnal desires. However, when they believed the gospel, Jesus became their Lord. We need Jesus not only as Savior, but also as Lord. In the New Testament the word “Savior” appears 24 times, while the word “Lord” appears 635 times, and “Lord Jesus” appears 179 times. Jesus not only comes to save, but he comes to rule and reign as the Lord and King. When we submit to him, we can experience freedom from the power of idols. He enables us to serve the living and true God. This is the best life we can live in this world.

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Verse 10 says, “...and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” We children of God not only have the blessing of serving God in this world, but we have an even more glorious hope. The Son of God will come from heaven. God already demonstrated his Son’s identity by raising him from the dead. This mighty Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ rescues us from the coming wrath. The word “rescues” is present perfect tense. He rescues us now, and he will rescue us from the wrath to come. This wrath is being revealed generally through the troubles of this world. This causes many people to become frightened and worry. But Jesus rescues us from the coming wrath. He saves us now and forevermore. Let’s remember that the gospel forms the church and the church proclaims the gospel. This is the purpose of the church. Let’s trust in Jesus and preach the gospel boldly in this troubled world. Let’s live out the gospel by loving one another, forgiving one another, and living godly lives. Then the gospel will ring out from us and bring great changes in our campuses, our city and our nation.