

HOLY WAITING

Living in Holiness as We Await the Return of Christ

A Holy Prayer of Thanks

Key Idea:

Human rebellion produces hearts of ingratitude, but the Gospel forms hearts that overflow with thankfulness — expressed to God in prayer and in verbal gratitude to others — in every circumstance.

Key Text:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

Key Points:

- **1 Thessalonians Was Written to a Persecuted Church in a Hostile Culture** — Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy wrote to the church in Thessalonica — a city where believers had already faced persecution (see Acts 17:1-13). The letter's two great themes are eschatology and holiness: how to live faithfully while waiting for Christ to return and make all things right.
- **The Gospel Transforms Even Our Greetings** — Where standard Greek letters began with χαίρειν (Greetings), Paul opens with χάρις (Grace) and adds the Jewish blessing of peace. Even the letter's salutation bears witness to the Gospel's power to transform ordinary life. Believers are who they are because of grace — and that grace produces peace regardless of external circumstances.
- **Ingratitude Is at the Heart of Human Rebellion** — Romans 1:21 identifies failure to honor and thank God as central to humanity's rejection of His revelation. Ingratitude is not a minor social failing: it is a mark of hearts turned away from God. This is why our culture has grown so uncomfortable with genuine thanksgiving: unbelief and ungratefulness are inseparable.
- **The Gospel forms hearts that overflow with thankfulness** — Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy begin this letter with a prayer of thanksgiving. This is the common pattern for almost of the letters in the New Testament, for gratitude expressed in prayer and to others is the overflow of the Gospel in the life of a believer.
- **Gospel Thankfulness Is Expressed in a Symphony of Three Movements** — The prayer of thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-4 moves through three participles: (1) constantly mentioning them in prayer and giving thanks to God; (2) remembering the Gospel fruit in their lives — the work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope; and (3) knowing that they are loved and chosen by God, as evidenced by the Spirit's power in their response to the Gospel.
- **Thanksgiving That Is Not Verbally Expressed Is Illusory** — Real thankfulness finds its way into our prayers and our words to others. Paul almost always tells the churches he writes to why he is thankful for them. Gratitude that stays internal and unexpressed is not yet the overflow the Gospel is meant to produce.

Discussion Questions:

- The series is called “Holy Waiting.” What images or feelings does that phrase evoke for you? In what areas of your life are you currently waiting — and how is that waiting going?
- The Thessalonian church faced persecution in a culture hostile to the Gospel — a city that accused Paul’s team of “turning the world upside down” and claiming Jesus as King in place of Caesar. In what ways does our own culture feel hostile to genuine Christian faith? How does that hostility tempt you personally?
- Paul transforms the standard Greek greeting (χαίρειν — Greetings) into a Gospel greeting (χάρις — Grace, plus peace). What does it reveal about Paul’s whole way of seeing the world that even his letter openings are shaped by the Gospel? In what ordinary areas of your life do you see — or wish you could see — the Gospel transforming the mundane?
- Romans 1:21 identifies ingratitude — failing to honor and thank God — as central to human rebellion. Does it surprise you that Paul places ingratitude at the heart of unbelief rather than at the edges? How does this reframe the spiritual seriousness of a complaining, ungrateful spirit?
- Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians “always” and “constantly” — even though they are a persecuted, beleaguered congregation still young in the faith. What does it tell us about Paul’s theological vision that he can find so much to be genuinely thankful for in an imperfect, suffering church? What would it take for you to develop that same eye?
- Paul’s thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 focuses on the triad of faith, love, and hope — and their outward expressions in work, labor, and steadfastness. He gives thanks not primarily for material blessings or external successes, but for the fruit of the Gospel in people’s lives. How does this reorient what you notice and give thanks for in those closest to you?
- Bret noted that if we focus on the negatives in others, thanksgiving withers; but if we daily recount the evidence of God’s work in the people around us, gratitude overflows. Which of these patterns more honestly describes the way you tend to think about your spouse, your children, your close friends, or your church community?
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 calls believers to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” The phrase “in all circumstances” is striking given that the Thessalonians were being persecuted. How is this kind of circumstance-independent thanksgiving different from toxic positivity or denial? What makes it genuinely possible for a believer?
- Bret said: “Thanksgiving that is not verbally expressed is illusory.” If the people closest to you were asked whether they more easily recall your complaints or your expressions of gratitude, what do you think they would honestly say? What would it look like to change that?
- Paul and his team could not be physically present with the persecuted Thessalonians, but they could pray — and they did so constantly. Is there someone in your life right now whom you cannot help in practical ways but can consistently lift before God in prayer and thanksgiving? What would it look like to make that a regular, deliberate practice?
- The Lord’s Table is called the “Eucharist” — from the Greek word for thanksgiving. How does coming regularly to a table of thanksgiving shape the overall posture of a believer’s life? In what ways has receiving Communion formed a spirit of gratitude in you?

For Further Study:

For other teachings and resources to grow in thankfulness and prayer, take a look at the following:

- Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 slowly this week, noticing every place Paul expresses thanksgiving or describes the fruit of the Gospel in the Thessalonians' lives. Let it model the kind of prayer and gratitude the teaching calls us toward.
- Study Romans 1:18-25 to understand Paul's diagnosis of ingratitude as the heart of human rebellion — and to deepen your appreciation for the contrast the Gospel creates.
- This week, write down three specific ways you see the fruit of faith, love, or hope in someone close to you — and then tell them. Practice the verbal thanksgiving the teaching calls for.
- Meditate on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 — “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” — asking the Spirit to show you what circumstance-independent thankfulness would look like in your current season of life.
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for a deeper study of [gratitude and thanksgiving](#), [prayer](#), and [the Gospel](#).