

# LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for December 7: When you started out

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Most of us have lots of albums filled with family photographs. It's always fun to open up those photo albums and allow the pictures to take our minds back to other times and places. As we look, we might remember our excitement at the birth and youngest days of our children or grandchildren. Through the sequence of images we relive the first tooth, the first steps taken or the first trip to the barber shop.

Looking back is a theme of 1 Thessalonians 1. In that chapter, the Apostle Paul was reflecting upon some of his mental pictures of the days he had spent establishing the church in the city of Thessalonica, and the infancy of that church. He recalled with fondness their new birth into God's family and their first steps of faith and obedience to Christ.

Paul and Silas had established the Thessalonian church on Paul's second missionary journey. In the first century A.D., Thessalonica was a prosperous metropolis of around 200,000 people. The ideally located city was on both a major land trade route as well as on the coast of an inlet of the Aegean Sea. Its location made Thessalonica a center of trade as well as a crossroads of culture.

Acts 17:1-10 tells the story of the establishment of the Thessalonian church. According to the timeline provided in that passage, we know Paul and his companions stayed there at least three weeks before moving on to the city of Berea. The apostle's work in Thessalonica evidently lasted well beyond the three-week period mentioned in Acts 17:2, however, because on

at least two different occasions while Paul was there the Christians in Philippi sent monetary or other assistance (Philippians 4:16).

The Acts account states Paul and Silas left the city quickly and under the cover of darkness because of the fierce opposition to their work by the Jews. Having had to leave the fledgling church so quickly, Paul naturally was concerned for their welfare; and so from the city of Athens, he dispatched Timothy to go back to Thessalonica to see about and encourage them (1 Thessalonians 3:1-3).

When Timothy returned, he brought the good news to Paul that the Thessalonian church was thriving and continuing in the faith. It was at that time that Paul took pen in hand and wrote this letter. In it, the great apostle recalled their days together and encouraged those new Christians to remain faithful to their commitment to Christ. He also set out to respond to some questions that the church evidently had concerning the return of Christ, which we will see when we get to chapters 4-5.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 carefully and notice some of the things that stuck out in Paul's mind as he remembered his days with them.

First, he recalled their "work produced by faith." They served Christ in the firm belief that their work was not in vain (a familiar theme in Paul's writings—see 1 Corinthians 15:58), but that God would bless that work.

Paul also remembered their "labor prompted by love." This statement is similar to, though not identical with, the one which preceded it. The word "labor" communicates the idea of work that is faithfully carried forward over a period of time.

"Labor prompted by love" means we keep working and serving simply because our love for Christ and for his church will not permit us to stop.

The apostle then recalled the Thessalonians' "endurance inspired by (their)

hope in Jesus Christ.” We know from Acts 17 that the church in Thessalonica was birthed in an environment of hostility to the gospel. Much of that hostility was directed toward Paul and his companions, but the new Thessalonian Christians were targeted as well (Acts 17:5-9). But in the face of that fierce opposition, they had focused on Jesus Christ and remained faithful to him.

Paul’s memories of the Thessalonian Christians encourage us to keep a vital fact in mind: We all leave behind us a legacy of some kind. When we leave a place—whether it is a brief stop-over like a restaurant or a work-related meeting, or a longer investment of time such as a career or years spent in a particular church or neighborhood—what do others recall about us? What sort of memories are we etching into the minds of those around us? It might be an interesting (or perhaps embarrassing) exercise to ask others what sort of thoughts come to their minds when our name comes up in conversation.

Paul then recalled the spiritual power with which the gospel message had been preached to the Thessalonians, as well as the conviction of sin that the Holy Spirit had produced in them (vv. 4-5). Some of the Thessalonian believers had come to faith in Christ from a background of Judaism (Acts 17:4), and others out of pagan idolatry (1 Thessalonians 1:9), but all those who had come to Christ had done so with joy and in spite of the suffering of persecution which they had experienced (v. 6).

Furthermore, their salvation was demonstrated to be genuine by the transformation of their lives. In a very short time, the Thessalonians had gained a wonderful reputation among the believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia. They had become examples and role models for other believers and churches (vv. 7-8).

Some folks might set as a personal goal for their lives, that they wish to be role models for others. They want people to look up to them, admire them

and follow their examples. For Christians, the goal ought to be much more basic: We should make it our objective to be pleasing to Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9). When your life is transformed by the power of Christ people will see the difference in you, and becoming a positive example to others will be the natural byproduct of that transformation.

As I write these words, we rapidly are approaching the Thanksgiving holiday. In this season, we are encouraged to remember and express gratitude to God for the many ways in which he has blessed our lives. As we consider the blessings of salvation in Jesus Christ, let us think back to what God has done for us and be thankful to God for that gift of personal transformation which he accomplishes in us through the Holy Spirit.