

EVIDENCES GOD HAS CHOSEN YOU **(1 Thessalonians 1:1-5)**

We live in a world in which choices are being made all the time. When you sit down to watch television, you have a remote control in your hand. With it, you can choose what to watch, but you mostly choose what not to watch.

If you have a streaming provider, you have a host of choices to make. First, do I want to watch a series, a movie, or a documentary? After you make that choice, then you must choose, do I want to watch action, drama, romance, western, sci-fi, mystery? The list goes on. Finally, once you choose the genre, your choices multiply—all these choices.

If you want to experience decision fatigue, go to your average supermarket. It carries 47,000 different products. Or, better yet, go to your local Walmart Supercenter. It carries 142,000 products. Walk the cereal aisle, the chip aisle, and the soda pop aisle. Take in all your choices.

Never send me to buy a greeting card. Because of my perfectionistic tendencies, I might be there 30 minutes I have this inner pressure to choose the right one.

The Tuesday after next is Super Tuesday. Fifteen states and one territory will be holding their own primary. The State of Oklahoma is one of them. You will have an opportunity and a responsibility to make some choices. In November, there will be a general election. I may find myself looking for a box that says, “None of these.”

Sometimes the choice isn’t entirely up to us. If you want to go to college, you can select the college you want to attend, but then you must submit your entrance exam, usually the ACT, and then fill out an application. Some universities are really picky. They might look at your stuff and say, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

An athlete can’t just play for any team he wants. Colleges recruit the athletes they want. Pro teams draft who they want. Very few walk-ons make the team.

You may want to borrow from the bank, but they may not be inclined to lend you any. It is their choice.

You may want to work for a certain company, but it is up to them as to whether they hire you.

A boy may ask a girl to out on a date, but she doesn’t have to say yes.

A young man may be love struck and ask a young lady to marry him, but she might laugh and say, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

We don’t always get what we want because sometimes the choice isn’t up to us.

Did you choose who your parents would be?

Did you choose when and where you would be born?

Did you choose the color of your hair—its original color?

How about the color of your eyes, your height, whether you are left-handed or right-handed?

Some things aren’t ours to decide.

Let me ask a more controversial question: Did you decide to become a child of God? You might answer, “Well, I decided to become a Christian; I decided to follow Christ.” Well, that’s wonderful. I hope there will be people here today who, for the first time, will

choose to follow Christ.

Let me dig a little deeper. Why did you choose to follow Jesus? Why did you choose to trust Him? Did it just sound like a good idea? Did you really weigh the pros and cons and make a rational decision?

Jesus told His disciples, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). A chapter earlier Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Earlier in John’s gospel, Jesus claimed, “No man can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). He said much the same thing in John 6:65, “This is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless it is granted Him by the Father.”

Salvation is a divine work, not a human accomplishment. No one can pat himself or herself on the back for having trusted Jesus. God draws you to His Son. He enables you to trust Christ. The decision to trust Christ began with Him not you. Paul would agree with that. He wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may be boast.” Even the faith you had to trust Christ was a gift given to you by God.

With that in mind, let’s turn to 1 Thessalonians 1. We are going to embark on a new study. Paul wrote 13 letters in our New Testament. 1 Thessalonians is widely believed to be the first letter Paul wrote that made its way into the NT. Let’s look at vv. 1-5. I believe the key verse of those initial verses is v. 4. Paul maintains, “God has chosen you.”

How do you know God has chosen you?

- You know a university has chosen you because they will send you an acceptance letter.
- An athlete knows the team has chosen him because they issue him a uniform.
- You know a company has chosen you because they will have you fill out some paperwork.
- Fellas, you will know the girl has chosen you because she will laugh at your dumb jokes and let you kiss her goodnight.

How do we know God has chosen us? Our passage shows for us certain evidences. As we examine our text, we will note two evidences God has indeed chosen us to be His.

Evidence #1: Others Thank God for You.

To fully appreciate this letter, we need to rehearse Paul’s relationship with this church. One author noted that whenever we read a NT letter, we must keep in mind that we are listening in to an on-going conversation. Paul did not write this letter to complete strangers. This was not his first contact with the Church at Thessalonica. To get a sense of their history with one another, let’s look at Acts 17.

At the end of Acts 15 we learn that Paul and Silas have joined up and begun a missionary tour. The last verse of that chapter tells us that they “went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches” (Acts 15:41).

Early in chapter 16 they picked up Timothy as one who would travel with them and assist them in their work. They then faced a critical decision. They wanted to go east and

God wouldn't let them. One night Paul had a vision. He saw and heard a man from Macedonia saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:9). They concluded that was God calling them to go west instead of east. Thankfully, because of that vision, the gospel came to Europe, and the gospel took hold in the western hemisphere. Through the centuries, the Church in the West sent and continues to send missionaries across the world.

While the gospel took hold, there was and continues to be resistance. Paul and Silas were jailed in Philippi. Because of that resistance, Paul and his companions made their way to Thessalonica. Look at 17:1-4. Paul was there less than a month when controversy erupted forcing Paul to leave again, but during those initial first, few weeks, great fruit was borne and a new church was established in Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was one of the largest cities of the ancient world. It had a population of over 100,000 people. It was a coastal city along the Aegean Sea. They were economically strong and politically free. They were allowed to govern themselves. Unlike others cities, like Jerusalem, who were occupied by Roman forces and governed by those appointed by Rome, Thessalonica was left alone as long as they continued to demonstrate they didn't need Rome's help and as long as they remained loyal to Rome.

One of the things that kept the far-flung Roman Empire unified was common, religious ties. They worshiped and honored the various Roman gods or Greek gods. One of those gods was the Roman Emperor himself. He was thought to be and was worshiped as a god. In those days, church and state were not kept separated. Both were tightly knit together.

Everyone knew the Jews worshiped YHWH alone as the only god, and they were left alone since they didn't promote their faith and evangelize anyone else. But here comes Paul and his traveling companions—Silas and Timothy. They are taking terms that had been reserved for the emperor and are applying them to Jesus. Ceasar Augustus was said to be the Son of God. He had brought peace to the world, and thus Augustus brought the gospel with him, the good news.

Now, Paul preaches that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the one who bring peace. The gospel is the good news about Jesus. Being a Jewish rabbi, like he always did, Paul went to the synagogue first. He gained a hearing among both Jews and Greeks. Many trusted Jesus.

Jewish stalwarts were jealous of Paul. They wanted to stop him. They started a riot. The governing authorities got nervous. "If Rome hears we allowed things to get out of hand, they could come in, shut us down, and take over." They didn't want that to happen; so, Paul had to go. Paul went, but the message he preached stayed, and the people who had been changed by the gospel stayed.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul is looking back. He remembers the people. He reflects on how they stayed true to the gospel he preached. Paul thanks God for them.

Is there anybody who thanks God for you, particularly for your willingness to stand firm in the face of opposition? I thank God for Ruth Ann. She's taken a strong and consistent stand against our local library's practice of putting highly sexualized, inappropriate, and even pornographic books in the youth section of the library. She has

taken a hit for doing so, but I thank God for her.

I thank God for all who take a stand and go against the tide of an ungodly culture.

When others thank God for you, that is evidence that He has chosen you to belong to Him.

In v. 3, Paul identifies three things about the believers in Thessalonica for which he thanks God. These things were true of those Christians because they had been chosen. If these things characterize your life, you can know that you, too, have been chosen by God. In this verse Paul remembers and thanks God for their work of faith, their labor of love, and their steadfastness or endurance of faith.

Based on this verse, let me ask you three questions:

1. Do You Have a Working Faith?

When I say “a faith that works,” I don’t mean a faith that gets you what you want. We live in a very pragmatic age, and people want to know, “Does Christianity work?” Will it solve my problems? Will it make my successful, healthy, and wealthy? Probably not. Instead of making you popular, if you live out the Christian faith, it will make you infamous, will earn you some enemies, and bring on persecution. I can assure you, however, that it will be worth it.

By “faith that works,” I mean, do you have a faith that causes you to roll up your sleeves and get to work?

Faith is so much more than just believing that certain facts about Jesus are true. Faith produces fruit. It causes us to act. We think of the word “faith” as a noun, a thing. Properly understood, faith is a verb because it involves action. It is a force for good in this world.

Can others thank God for your working faith? When they think of your name, can they say, “He/she is a force for good in this world; I like how he does this or she does that”?

If others thank God for your working faith, you can know God has chosen you.

2. Do You Have a Laboring Love?

We use the words *work* and *labor* interchangeably. In the Greek language, the word that we translate as *labor* speaks of intense labor or hard work. When a woman gives birth to a baby, it is preceded by hard labor. When a dissident in Russia is sent to a labor camp, he is sentenced to do hard labor.

To consistently show love in the community of faith, the church, is hard work.

I think about two porcupines out in the cold at night. They need one another, but when they try to get close and huddle up, the needle one another.

Likewise, in the church, we need one another, but we also needle one another.

To live above, with saints we love,
O, that will be glory.
To live below, with the saints we know,
Well, that’s quite a different story!

It is hard work to love people who are different, who try your patience, who are critical, and who are not appreciative of your efforts. Our young children are often that way, yet we love them. Just remember that believers who are different from you are still your brother or sister in Christ. They are family, and we are to love our family.

John declared, “Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

3. Do You Have a Patient Hope?

Paul wrote in Titus 2:13 that the return of Jesus is our blessed hope. Because of that hope, we can endure hardship. We can persevere under difficult circumstances. The believers in Thessalonica were willing to suffer persecution for the cause of Christ because they had fixed their hope on Jesus.

James Grant wrote, “In our present life we are called forward in hope, and that future, the hope we have, comes back into the present and encourages us to be patient as we run this race.”

Are you living life in that way? If you are, people will notice, and God’s people will thank God for you. If they do, that is evidence God has chosen you.

Please understand this: God did not look forward and see that you would live a life of faith, love, and hope, and because of that He chose you. No. God chose you, and because He did, He enables you to show forth faith, love, and hope. Faith, love, and hope are the result of God choosing you, not the reason He did so.

Evidence #2: The Gospel Came to You in Power.

Look at vv. 4-5. Paul tells the believers in v. 4 that he knows God had chosen them, and v. 5 begins with the word “because.” Verse 5 is the evidence for his belief God had chosen the believers in Thessalonica. The evidence is that the gospel, the good news of Jesus had come to them. Then, Paul clarifies the way in which it came. It came not only in word, but in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.

I like the way the NLT renders those two verses:

⁴ We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people. ⁵ For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true.

When Paul delivered the gospel, those who were saved were not just hearing a sermon. They heard a life-changing message from God, and the Holy Spirit enabled them to embrace it and take hold of it. It was in that way that the gospel came to them in power.

When people hear the gospel and walk away unchanged, the gospel came to them in words. When the gospel comes to them and changes their life, the gospel came to them in words and in power.

Has the good news of Jesus ever come to you both in words and in power? Did that

gospel message change your life? If that has happened to you, that is powerful and convincing evidence that God has chosen you.

In 2005 Time Magazine named him as one of the world's one hundred most influential people. He was born in 1921 and died in 2011. During the 90 years God gave him, John Stott served as an Anglican pastor who had a world-wide ministry. He wrote more than 50 books, and he donated all the proceeds of those books as well as his speaking engagements to a ministry that trained and got resources into the hands of pastors who serve in the developing countries of the world.

In 1958 John Stott traveled to Sydney, Australia to conduct a series of meetings at a leading university. The day before the final meeting, Stott received word that his father had died. He also started losing his voice. Stott told the story this way:

It was already late afternoon within a few hours of the final meeting of the mission, so I didn't feel I could back away at that time. I went to the great hall and asked a few students to gather round me. I asked one of them to read, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness," (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). A student read these verses and then I asked them to lay hands on me and pray that those verses might be true in my own experience.

When time came for me to give my address, I preached on the [broad and narrow ways from Matthew 7]. I had to get within half an inch of the microphone, and I croaked the gospel like a raven. I couldn't exert my personality. I couldn't move. I couldn't use any inflections in my voice. I croaked the gospel in monotone. Then when the time came to give the invitation, there was an immediate response, larger than any other meeting during the mission, as students came flocking forward . . .

I've been back to Australia about ten times since 1958, and on every occasion, somebody has come up to me and said, "Do you remember that final meeting in the university in the great hall?"

"I jolly well do," I reply.

"Well," they say, "I was converted that night.

Stott went on to say:

The Holy Spirit takes our human words, spoken in great weakness and frailty, and he carries them home with power to the mind, the heart, the conscience, and the will of the hearers in such a way that they see and believe.

Has God done that on your behalf? Has the simple gospel of Jesus made a profound difference in your life? If so, you know God has chosen you. Maybe God is doing that right now for you. Jesus is the Son of God. He died to pay the penalty of your sin. He arose. He is alive today. If you will turn from your sin and turn to Him in faith, He will change your life, so much so that God's people will thank God for you. Receive Him today.