奥林匹克 καλοποιοῦσα
She does not grow weary in doing good
2 Thessalonians 3:13
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1 Thessalonians 1:1 – 10

Literary Context

Letters have always followed conventional forms; such predictability allows the reader to grasp the message with less need for conscious interpretation. In this letter, Paul's opening address to the readers (1:1) resembles the standard Greco-Roman form. Nevertheless, one can also speak of a Pauline style — he amplifies the standard form with theological meaning, thus “Christianizing” it. The church exists “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1c). As in many letters of the day, the apostle gives them a greeting, but again, he expresses himself in familiar gospel terms, “grace” and “peace” (1:1d).

In the trove of ancient letters we now possess, the author might then give brief thanks to the gods before moving on. Here in 1:2 – 10, Paul shows gratitude to heaven precisely because of the Thessalonians’ relationship to God and because of God’s working in them through Christ. The thanksgiving ceases to be a formality and reveals itself at the very heart of the message.

This extended giving of thanks also functions as an exordium. In ancient rhetoric, the exordium was a section of short to moderate length in which an author called to mind the positive aspects of their mutual relationship. In an age when time and distance might have a chilling effect on a friendship, an author did well to reestablish the reality and the value of their attachment before going on to deal with new issues. In Paul's hands, this exordium not only sets the tone of the letter (in the case of 1 Thessalonians, gratitude and appreciativeness), it also foreshadows how the new disciples have abandoned their previous Gentile conduct and how they now hope in the Lord’s return. Some debate exists over the extent of the exordium in this letter, whether it is 1:2 – 5 or 1:2 – 10. Nevertheless, what matters for today’s reader is the content of this exordium, not its precise boundaries.

More so than in the typical Pauline letter, 1 Thessalonians should be read “from the inside out.” That is, the modern reader may begin with 2:17 – 3:13 in order to discover the ground of the apostles’ overwhelming gratitude: “But just now Timothy

2. Consult Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 72 – 73. Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 52, chooses 1:2 – 3.
has come to us from you and has announced the good news of your faith and your love” (3:6). The original readers, of course, knew of Timothy’s mission before they first broke the seal of this letter. First Thessalonians is all the more effective because Paul omits a detailed retelling of the events that had led to this deep joy until several paragraphs into the body of the letter. That is, in the written version, result (our joy) precedes cause (you have survived).

Paul’s thanksgiving here is effusive: “all the time,” “when,” “without fail.” He is repetitive, with the artlessness of true emotion, as he describes their eagerness to hurry into God’s presence in order to give thanks. Why this passion? And why does their gratitude seem less breathless in the second letter (2 Thess 1:3–4)? It is because at the precise point of writing the first letter, communication with Thessalonica had just been reopened after weeks or months of silence. Their thankfulness is sharpened by the fear that things might have turned out “in vain” (1 Thess 3:5) — but thank God, they did not!

In other letters (e.g., 2 Thessalonians, Romans, Ephesians) Paul moves directly from thanksgiving to the main theme. And so in 1 Thessalonians, the *exordium* is a bridge to teaching about the apostolic team (2:1–12). But thanksgiving does not end after 1 Thess 1 — a distinctive trait of this letter is that three times more Paul has recourse to grateful words (2:13; 2:19–20; 3:9–10; see also 5:16, 18).

### Main Idea

Paul, Silas, and Timothy greet the Thessalonians and then declare that they regularly and fervently give thanks to God for them. The team’s gratitude is based on their confidence that the new disciples are among the elect, a judgment that is based first on their own eyewitness testimony and second on the talk about their changed behavior that has spread to Macedonia, Achaia, and “everywhere.”

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3. In a Greco-Roman letter, an author might have chosen to use the rhetorical device known as *narratio*: the recounting of the events that led the author to write the letter. Paul uses that form in Gal 1:11–2:14.

4. Similar to Rom 1:8; Eph 1:15; Col 1:4; Phlm 4–7.
**Translation**

(See next two pages.)

**Structure**

The letter begins with a normal Greco-Roman introduction: name of the sender; name of the recipient; greeting (see also 2 Thess 1:1 – 2). Paul’s style is at its most sparse in this letter; in other letters his introductions give more detail.

“We give thanks to God” (1:2) sets the emotional tone for the rest of chapter 1. Paul develops in 1:2 – 3a *how they give thanks and pray*. First is the adverb “all the time” (πάντοτε); then “for every one of you”; then in 1:2d an adverbial participle “with gratitude we speak concerning you.” Following the punctuation of NA, we attach the adverb (ἀδιαλείπτως) at the end of 1:2 to the participle in 1:3: “without fail remembering before God.” The syntax is not tightly structured, with the result that the thoughts seem to come all in a rush. It is this very flood of words that reflects the high emotion of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

Paul then moves on to the content of their prayers (1:3 – 5), doing so with participles that unpack the initial “we give thanks,” as in Eph 1:16; Phlm 4. The first, “remembering” (1:3), leads to a description of the Thessalonians’ three Christian activities in the now: work, hard labor, and endurance, which are inspired by the three divine graces of faith, love, and hope.

With the other participle Paul turns his attention to *God and his work in the Thessalonian Christians*: “we acknowledge” God’s choice of them (1:4). They are able to perceive God’s election for a reason, “because” (causal use of διὰ) of what they have seen in Thessalonica. Paul uses, as he does in 1 Cor 4:20 and elsewhere, the rhetorical device known as antithesis: the gospel came not (οὐκ) in word only but (ἀλλά) with miracles and (καὶ) in the Holy Spirit and (καὶ) in a great sense of certainty. The final clause of this set uses reminder language (“and you know”) to point to the behavior of the missionaries in Thessalonica. He thus foreshadows the truth that God will not work through people of whom he does not approve (1 Thess 2:4).

In 1:6 we highlight Paul’s change of focus to the Thessalonians, “in your turn, you” (καὶ ὑμεῖς). Verse 6 outlines the initial effects of the gospel in Thessalonica: they became “imitators” of Paul and of the Lord Jesus and received the message in tribulation and with the Spirit’s joy. Then in 1:7 – 10 Paul shows how, having received the message, they have quickly become the caliber of Christian that others could imitate; they “became the pattern” for other believers in the region. It was natural for the Thessalonians to be examples of gospel life, once they had truly received it, and the clause is marked with “as a result” (ὡς τε). But Paul is not finished there, for the Thessalonians have also sent forth the gospel as evangelists. With the marker of clarification “for” (γὰρ) he expands on what
1 Thessalonians 1:1 – 10

1a Sender Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
1b Recipient to the church of the Thessalonians,
1c Identification which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
1d Greeting grace to you and peace.

2a Prayer We give thanks to God
2b Time for every one of you;
2c Reference when we pray,
2d Restatement [with gratitude] we speak concerning [you]
2e Simultaneous [faith, love, and hope] in our Lord Jesus Christ,

3a Content #1 (of 2a, c) [1] without fail remembering [before God]
3b List [1] your work that arises from your believing, and
3c List [2] your hard labor that comes from your love [for others], and
3d List [3] your endurance that comes from the hope you have,
3e Source [1] [faith, love, and hope] in our Lord Jesus Christ,


4a Content #2 (of 2a, c) We acknowledge [before God], brothers and sisters whom God loves,
4b Content that you were chosen,
5a Cause (of 4c) because the gospel that we brought came to you [not simply
5b Manner/List [1] as words [that we spoke], but also
5c List [2] with miracles and
5d List [3] in [the operation of] the Holy Spirit, and
5e List [4] in the great sense of certainty [we had in the gospel].
5f Reminder language [5] And you know how we were among you for your sake.
In your turn, you became imitators of the pattern given by us and by the Lord (Jesus).

You received the message in highly distressing circumstances, yet with the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit.

As a result you [in your turn] became the pattern for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For you see, from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and in Achaia, but everywhere, news of your faith in God has gone out, so that we have no need to say anything [about you].

That's because they themselves are talking about us, what kind of welcome we had from you, and how you turned away from idols to God to serve the God who is living and true and to await his Son from heaven, he whom [God] raised from the dead, Jesus our Savior from [God’s] coming wrath.
he said in 1:7. I will argue that the apostles expected their disciples to be evangelistic, and that that is precisely what the Thessalonians were doing. Paul begins to conclude the section with a result clause, “so that ὥστε we have no need to say anything.”

Paul goes on to develop further why the apostles don’t have to say anything, reinforced by a marker “for, because” (γὰρ): they are saying what kind of an entrance the apostles had and how the Thessalonians reacted. They turned to God — their conversion represented by two infinitives, “serve” God and “await” his Son from heaven. The apostle goes beyond the mere description of their conversion: he recounts the apostolic kerygma, emphasizing its christological and eschatological elements in a way that anticipates the teaching of the rest of the letters.

Exegetical Outline

I. Introduction (1:1)

II. Thanksgiving for God’s Saving Intervention (1:2 – 10)
   A. The apostolic team regularly gives thanks for them (1:2).
   B. The apostles gratefully affirm their salvation before God (1:3 – 5).
      1. Their faith, love and hope are manifested in their behavior (1:3).
      2. The gospel was not simply words but the medium for God’s power (1:4a).
      3. God’s love and election are witnessed by the Spirit’s miracles and the apostles’ confidence in the gospel (1:5c-e).
   4. The believers have the apostolic team as an example (1:5f).
   C. The apostles recognize growth in the believers (1:6 – 10).
      1. They have become imitators of the apostolic team (1:6).
      2. They have become a model for the gospel (1:7 – 10).
         a. In every place people are talking about them (1:7 – 9a).
         b. Their conversion is exemplary (1:9b – 10).
            i. They welcomed the apostolic team (1:9b).
            ii. They turned away from paganism (1:9c).
            iii. They turned to the true God and now await the eschatological salvation (1:10).
Explanation of the Text

1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians, which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; grace to you and peace (Παῦλος καὶ Σιλουανὸς καὶ Τιμόθεος τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ Θεσσαλονικέων ἐν θεῷ πατρί καὶ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ ἔχοντες ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνην). Paul follows the common formula of naming the sender (in the nominative case), naming the recipient (dative case), and then offering a blessing or greeting. Paul and Silvanus were Roman citizens (Acts 16:37 – 38) and bore Latin names that served as the equivalents of their Hebrew names, Saul and Silas. Silvanus was a prophet and a leading member of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:27, 30, 32, 40). Timothy was a member of the church at Lystra and probably came to faith in Christ during Paul’s first missionary journey. From the moment he joined Paul and Silas (Acts 16:1 – 3), Timothy became a regular fixture in Acts and the Pauline letters (though not in Galatians or Ephesians), not to mention in Heb 13:23: “I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released.”

It is not unusual for Paul to mention others as senders of a letter, without meaning to imply that they were coauthors. Nevertheless, the first person plural “we,” “us,” and “our” will be found in an unusually high frequency throughout this first letter (though note 2:18; 3:5; 5:27; in the first two, Paul is referring to his individual reaction to events). Paul oscillates between “we” and “I” in 2:17 – 3:6, “we” being he and Silas (not Timothy; see comments).

According to Malherbe, Paul is using an “editorial we,” and Paul alone must be considered the author.5 But this theory does not satisfactorily explain how “I” can also mean Paul. He uses the “we” as he does in Colossians (1:3, 4, 9; 4:8), to speak concretely of himself and other associates. Silvanus and Timothy are present with him in Corinth and are true cosenders of the message. We cannot now determine to what extent Silas (or Timothy) has a hand in the letter’s composition.6 The facts that Paul speaks of “I” and gives his signature in the second letter show that his voice is the dominant one in their composition.

Usually Paul refers to “the church/saints in such-and-such a city.” Only here and in 2 Thess 1:1 does he speak of the people (“the church of the Thessalonians”) rather than the city (those in Rome, those in Colossae). Paul remarks that they are “in [ἐν] God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” which denotes the relationship in which the church dwells.

“Grace to you and peace” is the stereotypical Pauline greeting, the pair found in all his epistles except 1 – 2 Timothy (which have “grace, mercy and peace,” as does 2 John 3). Divine “grace” (χάρις) is a Hellenistic concept, and Paul may have adopted the term from his pagan environment. For that reason many have suggested that he has combined a Greek term with the Hebrew šālôm. But this explanation does not do justice to the evidence. The closer parallel to Paul’s greeting is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew ḫesed (“kindness, loving-kindness”; see Exod 34:6, Yahweh abounds in “love and faithfulness”). That is, “grace” too has its roots in the OT. For Paul and the other Christian authors, a prayer for God’s grace is typically found at the end of letters as well (all Pauline letters; Heb 13:25; 1 Clem. 65.2; also Rev 22:21).

The greeting “peace” comes from the Hebrew

5. Malherbe, Letters to the Thessalonians, 86 – 89. On the other hand, Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 11, believes that the “we” refers to the three senders.

6. See Fee, Thessalonians, 4.
greeting (1 Sam 1:17; found in Greek Jewish literature, e.g., in Jdt 8:35, “go in peace”). The prophets had also announced the coming “good news . . . [of] peace” (Isa 52:7; Nah 1:15). “Grace and peace” came to greater prominence as part of the stock vocabulary of the earliest Christian church (see, e.g., 1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 1:2; Rev 1:4; 1 Clement inscr. — “May grace and peace from almighty God through Jesus Christ be yours in abundance”).

The Textus Receptus and hence the KJV add “from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ” after “peace.” The clause has some manuscript support, but it is best explained as an addition by some early scribe who was thinking of 2 Thess 1:2.

1:2 We give thanks to God all the time for every one of you; [with gratitude] we speak concerning [you] when we pray (Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πάντοτε περὶ πάντων ὑμῶν, μνείαν ποιούμενοι ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν). Paul, Silas, and Timothy pray regularly for the Thessalonians and give God thanks for them. This prayer report is not polite religious jargon, such as Christians tend to fall into (“I’ll be praying for you!”). Rather, it is a realistic and powerful description of how they speak when they enter the presence of God. The Christian’s prayer is efficacious because there is a living God who hears prayers and responds. It is frequent because it is proper to offer him regular thanks for what he has done and to pray for his further intervention.

The language of 1:2 is similar to 2 Thess 1:3 (the latter does not have “every one,” πάντων). This is the first of several thanksgivings in 1 Thessalonians that are based on “to give thanks” (εὐχαριστεῖον), a verb common in Paul’s letters. While the verb could mean “to pray,” Paul’s orientation here is thankfulness for God’s past and present work in the Thessalonians. “All the time” (πάντοτε) is the first of many references to time in the two letters. It expresses positively the same truth that is communicated by the litotes “without fail” at the end of 1:2.

The prepositional phrase “for every one of you” (περὶ πάντων ὑμῶν) goes with “we give thanks.” Alternately it could be attached to what follows, yielding a meaning like “concerning every one of you we speak, whenever we pray.” There are two reasons why the first option — “we give thanks for every one of you” — is the better. First, many manuscripts insert “you” after “remembering” (μνείαν); while it may not have been part of the original text, nevertheless “for every one of you” was thought by koinē speakers to go more naturally with “we give thanks.” Second, the parallel in 2 Thess 1:3 suggests that the former option is correct.

The plural “you” does not indicate “you as a group” but “all of you individually.” The thanksgiving in Rom 1:8 closely parallels our section: “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.” That letter was addressed to a city where many of his Christians friends were known individually (Rom 16:3–15) and could be prayed for by name.

“We speak concerning you” (μνείαν ποιούμενοι)

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8. The verb was well-known in Hellenism and in the deutero-canonical books of the LXX; nevertheless, in the LXX of the canonical books, synonyms such as “give thanks” (ἐξομολογέομαι) predominate. See the parallel in 2 Macc 1:11: “Having been saved by God out of grave dangers we thank him greatly.…”

9. Litotes is a figure of speech whereby a positive truth is expressed by the negation of its opposite, sometimes for the sake of irony. In English: “Not bad!”; “It was no picnic!” It is a favorite device of Acts, e.g., in 20:12 (NKJV): “they brought the young man in alive, and they were not a little comforted.”

10. So Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 73–74, citing another parallel, 1 Cor 1:4. Likewise, Rigaux, Thessaloniciens, 359.
in our expanded translation is a well-attested use of the middle voice of the verb “to do, make” (ποιέω). The reader might be tempted to translate this hyperliterally, rendering it something like “to make remembrance for oneself.” Nevertheless, in this case usage determines meaning, and the phrase should be smoothed out as “to remember someone” to a third party; even better is “to mention someone” or “to speak to someone concerning another.” The NT has several examples where this construction is used as prayer language (see Rom 1:9; Eph 1:16; Phlm 4).11

We supply “with gratitude” in the second clause, since the verbal participles (e.g., “we speak,” ποιεῖμενοι) are connected with the “give thanks” (εὐχαριστοῦμεν) and further develop it. The Greek calls for stronger language than the “make mention” that is found in most translations, a rendering that might leave the reader with the idea that the apostles speak casually about them. As an example of how this phrase is appropriate for describing passionate prayer, I Clem. 56.1 says that the Corinthians are to pray fervently for the repentance of the rebellious Christian. “When” (ἐπί) in this context refers to the time(s) of their prayers.12

1:2e – 3a Without fail remembering [before God] (ἀδιαλείπτως μνημονεύοντες). Paul describes how he and his company pray concerning the Thessalonians; gratitude is an overarching theme of their ministry to the church. Some interpreters attach “without fail” (the adverb ἀδιαλείπτως) to “we speak” (μνεῖμεν ποιούμενοι) in 1:2 (“we speak concerning [you] without fail when we pray”).13 It is better to follow the NA27 text, which links it with “remembering” (μνημονεύοντες) in 1:3. First, the parallel in Rom 1:9 suggests that Paul favored placing the adverb before the verb. Second, the rhythm of the Greek is smoother if the adverb is attached to ἐπί.14 This is the view we adopt in our translation.

In English, 1:3 and 5:17 are traditionally rendered “pray without ceasing.” But can this really mean perpetual intercession, given the demands of daily life? Should prayer claim the sum total of one’s waking hours? Fortunately there are some ancient Jewish and Christian parallels that help to unlock its specific meaning. In 3 Macc 6:33 there is a banquet during which there is uninterrupted thanksgiving to heaven.15 In this case, the author could be referring to long hours of prayer. This would lead to an understanding of 1:2e-3a as “we pray often and heedless of the time.”

Paul’s letters themselves hint at this meaning here. Especially noteworthy is 2 Cor 11:28, which many commentators take to be a reference to prayer: “I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” Even more clear are Col 2:1 and 4:12, where Paul’s prayer for the believers is a fight or struggle. How wonderfully this mirrors the prayers of our Lord, who was known to arise before dawn to pray (Mark 1:35) or to pray long into the night (Matt 14:23). He taught his followers to

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11. See BDAG, μνεία 2. Also BDAG, ποιέω 7.
12. BDAG, ἐπί 18. a., marker of temporal associations. It is possible, but unlikely, that Paul is referring to regular occasions of prayer; e.g., the apostles Peter and John kept the traditional Jewish daily cycle in Acts 3:1; 10:9. That alternate rendering would be “at our prayer times.”
13. So Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 74; Fee, Thessalonians, 21; Green, Thessalonians, 87.
14. So Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 11 – 12. It is perhaps a relief to see that even the koinê preacher Chrysostom was puzzled by the sentence’s syntax; see Homilies on First Thessalonians 1 (NPNF Ι 13:324).
15. It is the sense we might have gotten from a parallel usage of the adjective in a first-century BC inscription that refers to an incessant cough (MM, 9). An interesting usage is found in the pseudepigraphal T. Levi 13.2 (ed. Charlesworth): “Teach your children letters also, so that they might have understanding throughout all their lives as they ceaselessly read the law of God.” That is, the literate son will be able to read the law throughout his lifetime, regularly and often, but of course not uninterruptedly. If T. Levi provides a true parallel, then the Christian’s prayer should be regular, but not necessarily perpetual.
pray and never give up (Luke 18:1). Be sure also to study the example of Moses, who told Israel how “I lay prostrate before the LORD those forty days and forty nights because the LORD had said he would destroy you” (Deut 9:25).

Praying “night and day” also has a pedigree in the Psalms, where the phrase does not mean “evening and morning prayers” but desperate, unending intercession for God’s help: “LORD, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry” (Ps 88:1 – 2). During the Maccabean revolt the people were summoned to call on the Lord day and night (2 Macc 13:10 – 12), which added up to three straight days of prayer, weeping and fasting “without ceasing.”

Here is where the immediate postapostolic literature can also shed some light, since it purports to be faithful to the apostolic practice of the first century. In those books, “prayer without ceasing” bears a close resemblance to the uninterrupted prayer of thanksgiving in 3 Macc 6:33. Ign. Eph. 10.1 seems to quote 1 Thess 5:17 and applies it to a regular ministry of prayer. Ignatius and also Polycarp in Pol. Phil. 4.3 use the adverb “ceaselessly” (ἀδιαλείπτως); yet they do not give specifics as to prayer’s duration. Further along in the second century, however, Herm. Sim. 9.11.7, “without ceasing” (ἀδιαλείπτυτος) refers to an all-night prayer vigil. Ign. Pol. 1.3 likewise refers to losing sleep. Polycarp for his part did “nothing else night and day except praying for everyone and for the churches throughout the world, for this was his constant habit” (Mart. Pol. 5.1). Even on the verge of arrest Polycarp prayed two full hours for “everyone who had ever come into contact with him, both small and great, known and unknown, and all the universal church throughout the world” (Mart. Pol. 7.3 – 8.1). In other words, the apostolic fathers believed that Christians should pray daily and for extended periods of time, and that this practice had been learned from the apostles.

It seems best to conclude that Paul and team engaged in regular, extended, and strenuous prayer. “It would not be adequate to make an equation [of praying without ceasing] with what we call today ‘the spirit of prayer,’ a readiness to place oneself in the presence of God.”16 In no fashion does unceasing prayer transgress the Lord’s command, “when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans” (Matt 6:7). The Gentiles in Jesus’ day viewed prayer as efficacious to the extent that it repeated large quantities of “power” words, which would somehow effect change in the cosmos. Christian prayer, by contrast, is powerful in that it is directed to a powerful God. Today there are Christians who reason that repeated prayer somehow reflects a person’s lack of faith. I have heard too many times, from the pulpit or in conversation, that the Christian should learn to speak to God once and for all about some necessity, and then simply “leave it with him.” Yes, surely in some extraordinary case the Spirit might lead in that direction. Nevertheless, this practice has no basis in the doctrine of prayer as taught by the OT, Jesus, the apostles, or the earliest church fathers.

For all this, we translate “without fail” in an attempt to capture the regimen of their intercession and thanksgiving. The NLT also does well with “we … pray for you constantly” (see also 1 Thess 2:13; Rom 1:9; 2 Tim 1:3). Since Paul directs that his readers follow the same discipline in 5:17, he must have regarded it as practicable for a nonapostle to obey. In other texts, Paul, Ignatius, and Polycarp thought it a reasonable standard for bishops and widows as well as for the laity.17

16. Spicq, “ἀδιαλείπτως,” TLNT, 1:34. Were it not an uncommon word, I would have suggested that Paul prayed assiduously.

17. 1 Tim 5:5; Ign. Eph. 10.1; Pol. Phil. 4.3.
The verb “remembering” (μνημονεύοντες) refers to prayer in Ign. Magn. 14.1, “Remember me in your prayers.” As with “we speak” (μνείαν προφθέγμων) in 1:2, a participle unpacks the previous verb “we give thanks.” This verbal participle could be causal (“because we remember”) or temporal (“when[ever] we remember”). Yet, since there is nothing that demands either of these interpretations, it is best to follow the rule of leaving it an attendant circumstance, thus: “we give thanks and we remember.”

1:3b-d  Your work that arises from your believing, and your hard labor that comes from your love [for others], and your endurance that comes from the hope you have (ὑμῶν τοῦ ἔργου τῆς πίστεως καὶ τοῦ κόπου τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ τῆς ὑπομονῆς τῆς ἐλπίδος). The Thessalonian disciples are carrying out activities that confirm the inner changes they have experienced. Here is one of the “triads” (patterns of three; sometimes Paul uses dyads, patterns of two) that are sprinkled throughout the two letters. The dyads and triads have the effect of communicating Paul’s effusiveness as he reflects on Thessalonians’ response to an appalling situation. The three virtues of faith, love, and hope are given as fundamentals in 1 Thess 3:5 – 6; 5:8; and then in 1 Cor 13:13.19

Each virtue — faith, love, hope — is in the genitive case. Translators have tried to capture Paul’s meaning, given the various options for translating these genitive words. Among the solutions, the two most viable are attributive genitives: “your faithful work, your loving deeds, and the enduring hope you have” (NLT).20 Meanwhile, the NIV offers a genitive of production/producer:21 “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope.”

Is one option more credible than the others? Yes, especially if one begins by looking at all three genitives (“faith,” “love,” and “hope”) together rather than one at a time. While there is no rule of grammar that demands that all genitives in a triad must be of the same type, it is the logical place to start. “Endurance of hope” (τῆς ὑπομονῆς τῆς ἐλπίδος) makes best sense if “hope” (ἐλπίδος) is a genitive of production/producer: “your endurance that is produced by your hope.” It then yields a smooth reading to make the other two this same type of genitive, as does the NIV. This is also the interpretation given by John Chrysostom in his homily to a koinê-speaking congregation.22 It is the view reflected in our translation.

“Faith,” “love,” and “hope” are not some invisible qualities that bear no relationship to the real world. They are vibrant realities that express themselves visibly. “Faith” (πίστεως) in this context is not a creed but the action of believing that produces

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21. Wallace, Grammar, 104 – 6. Exegetes who label the three as subjective genitives are pointing in the same direction as Wallace; nevertheless, Wallace distinguishes between the genitive of production/producer and the subjective genitive: Wallace, Grammar, 105, n. 89 — “With a subjective gen., the head noun is transformed into a verb; with a gen. of producer, the head noun is transformed into the direct object of the verb ‘who produces.’” Attributive genitives and genitives of production/producer (or, as some would prefer, subjective genitives) are not the only two options. Rigaux, Thessaloniens, 362 – 63, for example, would like to render the first phrase as an exegetical genitive, something like “the act of having faith in Christ.” His interpretation does not yield a natural understanding; for example, “labor that is love” would not suggest itself to the reader as the obvious sense of “labor of love.”

hard work (see comments on 1:8; see also 3:5). Likewise, love manifests itself in “your hard labor,” or as Green puts it, “hard, strenuous, and exhausting labor.”23 But, to whom is their love directed? Although “faith” and “hope” are Godward, “love” in this verse seems to be the love between people. For example, Paul regularly speaks of love one for another (3:12; 4:9 – 10; 5:13), and it seems to be this mutual love in which they are flourishing (3:6; also 2 Thess 1:3).

The Thessalonians passed through extraordinary testing, even while Paul was still present in the city (Acts 17:5 – 9). Jason and others had to post bail as guarantee against further disturbances. If they forfeited the bond or lost their income because of their commitment to Christ, some of the believers would be laboring simply to survive.

Love is a theme repeated throughout this letter, and for good reason: Paul bases his teaching on the Olivet Discourse (see Introduction). Although we hear little preaching today about a particular sign of the end, one is that “the love of many will grow cold” (Matt 24:12; see also the prophecy in 2 Tim 3:2 – 3, that people will become “without love”). I have translated it as “love for others,” since it may have extended beyond the Christian family and included the love that leads to evangelism.

“The endurance of hope” is a common NT motif; likewise, “the one who stands firm to the end will be saved,” as Jesus said (Mark 13:13). In 2 Thess 1:4 the traits of faith and endurance are thrown into sharper relief during tribulation (see also 2 Thess 3:5; 2 Cor 1:6). The same holds true in Revelation, where Ephesus is noted for its endurance (Rev 2:2 – 3; see also 3:10; 13:10). In 2 Thess 3:5 Paul prays that the Thessalonians might endure, since they know what the future holds. By contrast, the pagans are known as those who have no hope in the resurrection (see comments on 1 Thess 4:13) and thus grieve piteously at the death of their friends.

1:3e-f [Faith, love, and hope] in our Lord Jesus Christ, [as you live] in the presence of our God and Father (τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐμπροσθεν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἡμῶν). The Thessalonians are to define themselves with reference to the Father and the Son and (in 1:5) with reference to the Spirit. There are two ways to connect this clause with the preceding context: (1) it refers only to the third part of the triad, hope;24 (2) it refers to each of the three parts. Some versions purposely leave it vague. The second option is preferable; since Paul is speaking in triads, it is natural that he follows a triad with language that qualifies all three parts (there are two further examples of triads doing so in 2:10 and 12). For this reason we include the triad in brackets. All three have their source in “our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The phrase “in the presence of our God and Father” is not immediately clear. First Thessalonians offers some parallels: (1) perhaps the phrase is prayer language, as in 3:9. This might suggest that “the presence of God” is where the apostles are praying and giving thanks, and Paul is looking ahead to 1:4. (2) Perhaps it is eschatological language, referring to being in Christ’s or God’s presence after the parousia in 2:19 and 3:13. (3) The best interpretation is that it is relational language, as shown by what immediately precedes it, “our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul describes the sphere in which the Thessalonians experience faith, love, and hope in Christ, that is, in the presence of the gracious God.25

23. Green, Thessalonians, 90.
24. So CEV, GNB, NIV, NJB; Witherington, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 59; Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 12.
25. See the analysis in Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 76, who relates “God’s presence” to prayer.