

The Joy of Knowing the Lord Jesus Christ:
(E. P. C. Sunday 31st December 2007)
1 Thessalonians 1: 1- 10

Kenyan born-again Christians have a unique way of expressing their greetings. It is a form of confession of belief in Christ and a testimony of ones experience in walking with the Lord. The testimony by believers roughly goes like:

“I am happy because I am born again and witness to the power of Jesus in my life. I hope and rejoice in him as I know that in his second coming, Christ will make me part of his kingdom. I continually repent and present myself as a living sacrifice. Denying myself, I carry the cross daily following my master’s footsteps.”

Such a testimony is a constant reminder to both the giver and the hearer of their identity. As believers, this identity dictates their lifestyle. The testimony is always a moment of celebration despite the circumstances surrounding believers.

Today I want to share with you on the subject *The Joy of Knowing the Lord Jesus Christ* as drawn from 1 Thessalonians 1.

Joy is defined in several ways¹ i.e. as a noun

- a. the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires
- b. the expression or exhibition of such emotion - (The emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; keen pleasure; elation.)
In other words - a high degree of extreme satisfaction.

Joy also refers to - a state of happiness or felicity - complete happiness (bliss)

3. a source or cause of delight

As a *verb*, it refers - to experience great pleasure or delight

¹ <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/joy>

Paul's message to the Church in Thessalonica was a message of the Gospel (what some translations render as "our gospel.") The gospel, according to Paul, was not simply words but it came with "power" of the Holy Spirit, and with "deep conviction. When the Thessalonians heard Paul's message, they *"received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers"* (1 Thessalonians 2:13, NRSV.)

The message of the gospel that Paul preached had the following basic ingredients – death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus Christ claiming that faith in Jesus guaranteed a share in his life. Paul emphasised Jesus' resurrection and the promise that those who belonged to him would be saved from the coming wrath. Promise of salvation to believers was very important but more so its urgency because Paul believed that most people then living would be still alive when the Lord returned (1 Thess. 4:14-18) - an event which would end this age.

The expected outcome of such an appeal was first to accept the preached word as the true word from God. Secondly, following this reception was conviction that produced remorse of one's past life and acknowledgement of sin (in case of the Thessalonians who previously were idol worshippers – *"you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God"* 1 Thessalonians 1:9b.) This was to be followed by a confession of ones transgressions to the Lord who would forgive the guilt of sin (c.f. Psalm 32:1-5.) Forgiveness and assurance bring great joy and thanksgiving to believers. Such is the joy expressed by the Psalmist:

*"I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,*

*a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the Lord” (Psalm 40:1-3.)*

For the Thessalonians, this was not to be an easy thing because of the opposition in the city. Paul himself had a taste of persecution in Thessalonica. After a brief stay in the city having converted several Jews, Greeks and some influential women, he was forced to flee to Berea and later Athens (Acts 17:10-16.)

Despite persecution (severe suffering) the Thessalonians received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. *Charas pneumatou hagiou* (editor's note: my attempt at romanization because the Greek letters in Pastor Kinyua's Word document didn't transfer to the PDF) – is here used with a genitive thus denoting that the origin of joy is the Holy Spirit. Because of this joy coming from the Holy Spirit, the Thessalonians became imitators of Paul and other Christians. Consequently, their suffering became similar to one suffered by Christians in Judea, prophets, and by Christ himself (1 Thessalonians 2:15.)

The Thessalonians also became an example (model) to the new community of Christians in Macedonia and Achaia. As a result – their message rang out (sound forth; echo) = beyond the confines of their locality, as reflected in their hospitality, genuine conversion and hope of the Parousia.

What we learn from Thessalonians experience is that the work of the Spirit introduces believers into a new outlook and dispensation – a philosophy of life. The conversion thus received should be reflected in all faculties of our lives, public or private. Every believer in the lordship of Jesus Christ should be above reproach at his/her place of work and in the privacy of our homes. In this case the Thessalonians' new-found joy would bring with it newness of outlook of their service to Paul, to one another, and to other believers as reflected in;

= the development of a work ethic learnt from Paul (1 Thessalonians 2:9ff; 4:11f)
= a morality – prompted by this faith - no sexual immorality; lust; exploitation of any kind (1 Thessalonians 4)
= giving motivated by love (agape) which goes beyond call of duty (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10)

Further, the joy that was now obvious among the Thessalonians was witnessed by many as it spread far beyond the confines of Thessalonica to “every place” where their faith had become known.

In so doing they became the object of Paul’s joy. Paul is quite sentimental in reminiscing about his relationship with them. He wrote these words “*as for us brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you – in person not in heart – we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again – but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope or joy or crown or boasting before our lord Jesus at his coming? Is not you? Yes you are our glory and joy!*” (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20; 3:9) This propelled his gratitude as he wrote about

1. their work of faith (NRSV); work produced by faith (NIV study Bible) = 2 Cor. 8:2-5 “*out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity...they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability...they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will*” (NIV study Bible.) – support for ministry (collection to go the poor)
2. labor of love (NRSV); labor prompted by love (NIV study Bible) = Paul was a trained tent maker (Acts 18:4) – this was a lucrative trade because people who could afford to travel with their own tents avoided public inns which were usually not very safe (from vermin) and it is most probable that Paul served such people. As such Paul

boasted that as a missionary, he supported himself by working with his own hands (1 Cor. 4:12.) Nonetheless while he was evangelizing people for a long time like the Corinthians, he had to rely on outside support.

3. steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (NRSV); your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (NIV study Bible) = hope beyond the grave – Paul’s eschatological hope has been hotly debated and contested among theologians yet it seem to be the center of our living in Christ

Before coming to Candler School of Theology, I ministered to 13 congregations. Door to door visitation was a personal avenue of getting connected to the parishioners. I wish to share one of those memorable moments which I refer to as “my Gathanji experience.” In one of my visitations in the villages I first encountered this lady who was a widow and a believer. All of her children had relocated into the city to seek work and advancement. Her *kikoi* caught fire as she cooked and did not feel this until her whole body caught fire. Her limbs were destroyed beyond belief and her survival was a great miracle. One day I visited her in her hospital bed. It was obvious to every one that she was in intense physical pain. But when I went to comfort and pray with her – I shall never forget the experience – she was radiant and all gay. No trace of agony or sorrow was evident on her face. She shared her testimony and experience of walking with the Lord. I got a sermon. By the time I left the hospital having myself literally ministered to instead of comforting her, I was amazed by the joy and hope that radiated from her in spite of great suffering. Two weeks later we buried her but not without leaving a mark on me and other Christians who interacted with her during these last days. Such is an example of joy in abundance, joy in knowing the Lord, the joy of salvation! Amen.