

1 Thessalonians 1 • Work of Faith, Labor of Love, Steadfastness of Hope

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Chapter one, beginning at verse one, it goes like this,

¹ "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. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." (ESV)

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we need Your Word today. We need the Word. Speak it to our hearts. Fill us with grace and understanding. Teach us today, Lord God. You are the Teacher. Teach us. Direct us. We ask it in Jesus' precious name, amen.

When the Apostle Paul first came to Thessalonica, along with Silas, on his second missionary outing, he wasn't able to stay there for very long. His stay was cut short there because the Thessalonians lived in a large, very large bustling city, probably a couple of hundred thousand people. I mean, this was no small town.

And because it was a big town, and because there were enough Jews living in Thessalonica, there were enough people to constitute a synagogue, a Jewish synagogue, and so, Paul had a tradition. Whenever he would go into a new city and there was a synagogue, he would go to the synagogue and on the Sabbath day he would reason with the Jews as to Jesus being the promised Messiah.

And his ministry was having an impact there. Luke tells us in the book of Acts that there were a few Jews, not a great number, but there was a number of Jews. But there was mostly a large number of Gentiles, God fearing Gentiles. That means Gentiles who, for the most part, had embraced the Jewish understanding of God, and they were coming to a saving knowledge of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And it was great. There was you know, action going on, evangelism happening there in Thessalonica and yet the success that Paul was having began to arouse the jealousy of some of the Jews who actually hired a mob to stir up trouble for Paul and his companions and after just three short weeks of being there in that city, they were forced to leave town. Had to get up and leave.

Now, so Paul made his way, eventually, first he went to Berea, and then he went on to Athens, and while he was in Athens, he was thinking about these people in Thessalonica who had such a short time with him as he shared the ministry of the Word, and he was concerned about them. And so, he decided to send Timothy back to Thessalonica to check out the work that had started there, and to see how it was going.

And fortunately, when Timothy returned to Paul in Athens, he brought back word that not only were the Thessalonian believers doing well, but they were flourishing in their faith. They were doing really well. And so, Paul was elated when he heard that this was, you know, things were going so well in Thessalonica. So, he sat down and wrote this letter. And by the way, this is one of Paul's one of Paul's first letters written to the churches and certainly the first letter that he wrote to the European churches.

But his letter begins as letters began back in those days by giving the writer he says, Paul, he mentions also Sylvanus, which is the Greek expanded version of the name Silas. I like Silas a lot better, but you know, and also he mentions Timothy and then he writes, *“who are the recipients to the church of the Thessalonians in God, the Father”* and so forth.

And then as it was common with his greetings, he said, grace to you and peace. And you probably know that grace, the Greek is “charis” and it and it was a

common greeting among the Greeks, and they would say that to one another when they met one another, grace to you, but you see the Jews had a different greeting. They would say Shalom, and of course Shalom means peace. And so, Paul kind of put the two together and he spoke these greetings in both the Greek and Jewish tradition saying grace and peace.

But there was more to it than just trying to amalgamate Grecian or Gentile and Jewish greetings. There was a message in that because this was a common thing Paul said, and he never inverted the two. He never said peace and grace. He always said grace and peace. And we've talked about this in the past. And we've talked about the fact that you can't have peace with God until you have laid hold of the grace of God, right?

And I don't ever get tired of talking about that, because you see, grace, which is God's love and favor in your life apart from what you do, right? God's grace in your life produces peace because you know He loves you. You know that He favors you. You know that He hears your prayer, regardless of what you've done or the kind of a life you've necessarily lived in the last 24 hours.

But you know what? If like a lot of other people that I talk to, if your relationship with God is predicated on doing good and not sinning, and you're and when you do sin, and when you do mess up, you blow up at your loved ones, or you blow up at work, or you fall into some area of sin, if you think in your mind for even a moment, I can't pray because God won't hear me.

Or I think God's love for me has been taken away because of the way I've acted. You don't understand grace. And if you don't have grace, I know that you don't have peace. It is God's grace that gives us peace. When I know I am loved, even when I'm a mess up, there's peace in my heart. Because I know that I don't have to attain to some level of perfection or goodness or whatever in order to earn God's Love.

If you're earning God's love, you need to come face to face with grace and until you do, you will not have peace. And that's why Paul always said, grace and peace to you, right? Oh, I tell you, I get so many letters, emails in a given week, and I feel like I have to be so repetitious in how I talk about this to people. You, you might be shocked to learn how many people really, truly believe in their heart that they are saved by the death of Jesus on the cross, they believe that, they accept that, but they believe they have to keep themselves saved by being good.

And in order to continue to have God's favor in their life, in order to continue to have God's love, in order to continue to get Him to hear their prayers, they've got to meet certain standards. You know? Even if it's a positive kind of a meeting of standards. if you go through a 24-hour period and you say to yourself, you know, I think I've done pretty good the last 24 hours, I don't think I've sinned once, you still don't know grace.

Even if you think it's a positive thing, grace is understanding the depth of our sinful capabilities And knowing that God chose to love you from the get go, from the very beginning, when you came to Him, when you surrendered your life to Him, He knew what kind of a person that you were and always would be and He loved you still. He chose to love you and He will never take His love from you ever.

And it is not based upon your goodness or your good deeds. So, grace establishes peace in our hearts, and I can sit back and say, God loves me. Oh, thank you, Jesus. Right? Paul goes on, look with me in your Bible at verse 2. He says,

²*"We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God, (and then he names three things)*

³*...your work of faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope in our Lord. Jesus Christ."*

Three things. First thing that Paul said, *"I thank God for you,"* was their work of faith. Actually, this is one of those times when the NIV does a better job of rendering this phrase. It's rendered in the NIV, *"your work produced by faith"* and that actually says it better because the Greek word here, you guys, for work means good deeds. It means your daily actions. It's not talking about when you go to work and do your job.

It's talking about the way you live your life and being a good neighbor. It's talking about how you care for the poor, how you help people who are homeless. It's talking about, you know, just living that life of moral uprightness, right? But Paul is telling them here that you do these things, and I thank my God that you do these things, not out of some legalistic demand, but you do it out of your faith.

Isn't that beautiful? The incentive for them to go and do good works was their faith in Jesus Christ, a faith that is grounded in the sacrifice of Jesus, that produces in us a desire to live for Him and a desire to serve Him in everything we do. And so Paul praises them for that kind of Faith that produces good

works. And this is really cool because see there's so many people trying to do good works instead of having faith. They're trying to do good works to please God to get into God's good grace. It doesn't work as we've already mentioned.

It is faith that produces good works. Oh, that's so important. Paul also praises them, also there in that verse for their labor of love, which is to say their labor prompted by love. And this word for labor is a different Greek word now, and instead of referring to good deeds, this one just means plain old hard work. He says, I thank my God that your hard work is done out of a prompting and a motivation of love.

You notice that Paul doesn't specify what their hard work was, he doesn't say, he doesn't tell us what they were doing. All he's telling us is because it's, and this is what he's focusing on, it's the most important thing. It was prompted by love. That's all I care about. I don't really, it's like Paul saying, I don't really care what you do. I just care that it's prompted by love.

And when it's prompted by love, it's always going to be good. So, I'm not going to get into details about how you've been working hard. Because all I care about is that you did it because of love. Love for what? Love for people? You know, if I said that, if I said, do you think Paul means love for people? Do you know, I bet most of you would probably say, yeah, probably love for people. And that might be in there somewhere.

But predominantly this is a love for Jesus. It is a love for Jesus that motivates and prompts us. Listen, take it from somebody who's been in pastoral ministry for a long time. If you are serving for people, for people, you will ultimately be disappointed. If you are serving for people, you've got to know something. People are capable of doing some pretty stinky stuff. I've always said kind of jokingly, the ministry would be great if it wasn't for people.

You know, if we just didn't have people, it'd be fun to come to church. It's, you know, it's stupid to say that, but you know what I'm saying. People will let you down. People will mess you over. And if you're doing it for people, guess what's going to happen? You're going to get discouraged. You're going to start thinking, nobody here appreciates what I do. I haven't had one person say thank you in weeks for what I do. Zero appreciation.

You know what that statement says? I'm doing it for them. But when you, instead, toil and labor for the love of Jesus, now you've tied into the right motive for doing what you're doing. You know, Paul said to the Corinthians

Second Corinthians 5:14, *“for the love of Christ controls us.”* The love of Christ motivates us. It moves us onward.

It takes us from our place of apathy and propels us to a place of service. It's the love of Jesus. Yes, we see people. Yes, we see their problems. Yes, we see their difficulties. But if we are primarily motivated by that, listen, when they turn around and bite you, and believe me, they will. Have you ever done that? Have you ever gone to help a dog and gotten bit? You know?

And you're kind of like, all right, then fine, you know, stay tangled up in that rope or whatever, you know, listen, it happens with people. The right motive is love and it ought to be our motive. Cause you know, that's the one that's going to keep you going even when people bite your hand. You get bit on the hand, you go, well, you know what I wasn't doing it for you anyway. I was doing this for Jesus because I love him so much.

And Jesus never told me that people were going to, that I should look to people and all the pats on the back and all of the, hey, good job, buddy. He never told me to do that. He told me to do it for Him and to look to Him in all things. Right? Finally, Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians for their steadfastness of hope. And that word steadfast obviously means perseverance, endurance. And that refers to something that is lasting, even when times get very hard.

And what was lasting was their hope. It was persevering. Their hope was persevering. So, I decided I'm going to look up the word hope. I mean, I know what it means, but I always like to look at these definitions because it kind of helps. I looked it up and it said, listen to this, I know this is worldly, this is not a biblical definition of hope but it's just on the internet, I found this one, “an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large.”

Yeah. How's your hope in the world doing? Yeah, me too. Not very well. But the Thessalonians were persevering in hope because they felt optimistic because their hope was centered on the person of Jesus Christ. Did you hear in Paul's letter how he talked about the fact that they came to the Lord even despite suffering? They were suffering! And he doesn't go into specifics as to what it was.

It might have been the same kind of junk that he got that actually motivated him and, or, you know, forced him to leave town. We don't really know for sure, but we know there were difficulties going on with the Thessalonian believers. Maybe they had to meet outside. Well, we know they met house to house. There

was no church building. There was all kinds, and you know, probably some of them were losing business.

There were probably people who would no longer, you know, do things with them from a business standpoint, because you're one of those people, or whatever the case might be. And yet their hope was not shaken. Because their hope was in Jesus. Their hope was founded on a person. And that hope, you guys, that hope is never going to be shaken.

Because nothing's going to shake Jesus. Nothing is going to overrule Him, or threaten Him, or cause Him to back away from your life in any way. Paul goes on in verse 4 to say, ⁴ “*Now we know, (he says) we know brothers loved by God. That he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not only in Word, but also in power in the Holy Spirit, (And then I want you to note these words) and with full conviction.*”

So, Paul is saying here in this these couple of verses, that he was assured of the genuineness of their salvation because the ministry of the Word came with power. And the word power here in the Greek means the ability to do. All right? He says the Word of God, the message of the Gospel came to you, not just inward, but in the power to do, the ability to do. They were enabled to do things by the Spirit that they would otherwise not be able to do.

And by the way, guys, Paul's not talking here about spiritual gifts. I mean, they might be in there somewhere, but that's not his focus here. When he, there are other places in the Scripture where the ability to do, is talking about spiritual gifts, but not here. What is he talking about? What power did he see in their lives?

Well, did you notice again, he talked about the fact that the Word came to them with full conviction? Did you catch those words? Well, that's a hint about what He witnessed in their lives. And He actually mentions it if you skip down to verse 8 and 9. Actually, you know what? Just 9. Look at verse 9 with me in your Bible. It says,

⁹ “*For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,*”

And that there is the power that Paul is referring to that he says came with the message of the Gospel. It was the power to turn from idolatry and to serve God. By the way, if you want a really good definition of repentance, this is it. This is a great definition. Somebody says to you, what is it? What's repentance? What

is it? Oh, let me read a verse for you. Just read them verse 9, as Paul talks about this turning. Because you see, repentance means a change of mind that motivates a change of action.

And in their lives, that change of action was to turn from their idolatry to serve the living and the true God. And by the way, in case you didn't know this, idolatry is alive and well today, and it still needs to be turned away from. You say, well, I've never seen anybody bow down in front of a little statuette. That's not the kind of idolatry I'm talking about. I'm talking about basically a love for things of this world.

And that is still very much alive. And that is a form of idolatry. And when you and I turn from those things to the true and living God, we're doing the exact same thing the Thessalonians were doing. And Paul praises them because of that power, that wonderful power of God to turn from the old life. Turn from the old life, walk to the new. Walk toward the new life that is ours in Jesus.

You know, again it's not uncommon for me to get an email from someone who is lamenting their ability to turn and walk toward Christ. I get it all the time. Pastor Paul, I just, I'm stuck. I love the Lord. I love His Word, but there's this sin in my life, and I just can't shake it. And of course, you know, Satan absolutely loves to pounce on that situation when people have that going on in their life. Because what he can do then is he can get them to doubt the very genuineness of what Jesus did on the cross and the genuineness of their own salvation and he just has a heyday with that.

And so, I find when I'm talking to people about this, the first thing I have to do is we have to settle the issue of their salvation. Do you believe Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins? Yes, I do. Is your hope in Him that the full penalty of your sinfulness has been paid for on the cross? I believe that with all my heart. The Bible says you're saved. Now stop doubting that.

Now we've got to move on to the issue of this sin that you feel like you can't get a handle on. But let's not go back and play the devil's game. Let's not go back and toy with this issue of, am I saved, am I not saved? Because that's not going to get you anywhere. You're just going to spin your wheels. And, boy, I tell you, that is just a tormenting way to live. And I know a lot of Christians live that way.

So, we come down to the simple act of faith, I believe what Jesus did for me. Once we get past the issue of, yes, I know how I'm saved. As I begin to talk to people like that, we eventually begin to discover that this individual is striving

in their own power to get rid of this sin. And the reason they are is because they're so distressed about it. And you know, by the way, they don't even realize that their distress over their sinful condition is a sign that they're saved.

I've got news for you. Before I got saved, I wasn't distressed about my sin. I wallowed in it. I loved it. And it never gave me any reason for pause. Once I got saved and God opened my eyes, to what sin does in our lives, then it began to distress me. And people don't even realize that. I'll even say to them, well you sound really distressed about this sin in your life.

I am! I hate it! Do you know that's a sign that you're saved? Do you know that's the work of the Holy Spirit? He's grieved within you, along with you about this area of sin. And they're like, I never realized that. But as, again, as we begin to talk about this, I begin to recognize and help them to recognize that they are trying their level best to defeat this sin in their lives in their own strength.

And I have to explain to them that they can't do that. That's not possible. I have to give them the bad news. You can't set yourself free from this area of sin in your life. You can't do it. You're going to have to trust in the power of the Spirit. It's the same thing Paul's talking about here to the Thessalonians. He says, I know that I know God's power came among you because I saw this work of grace that allowed you to turn from this thing.

But you see, here's the weird part about it. You can be saved, and you can still be striving in the flesh to rid yourself of sin. Did you hear what I said? You can be saved, you can be a born again Christian and still be striving to rid yourself of sin in your own strength, and you have to knock it off. And you have to come to God and say, I can't do it. I can't do it. I am helpless to overcome this area of sin in my life, and I need the power of Your Spirit, and I give you permission to work in my heart as you see fit.

And it's when you and I lay down these feeble attempts of our own flesh to try to conquer the flesh, and we begin to embrace the power of the Spirit like Paul's talking about. That's when we begin to see results. But it's not going to come from you, it's going to come from Him. It's His power. But God was giving the Thessalonians power to do something else.

And Paul mentions it in verse 10. Look with me in your Bible, verse 10. He says, God's also given you power ¹⁰“....to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead...”

I love this, and Paul is telling them that I recognize that God's given you this ability to wait because waiting is hard, isn't it? Do you struggle waiting? Do you, are you impatient like me? I hate waiting. I hate, I don't even like waiting rooms. Waiting rooms should be banned. Now we've got to have them, I get it. But you know, who likes to wait in a waiting room? You know? I mean, nobody that I know of likes to do that and waiting is hard, but these people were given the power from the Spirit to wait for Jesus.

And you might think to yourself, well, hey there, Pastor Paul, I think they were wasting their time because He didn't come back during their lifetime and so, they're spending their life waiting for Jesus, and He didn't come back. That sounds kind of stupid. Actually, it wasn't a waste of time at all. Because you see, waiting for Jesus means living in expectation of His return.

Did you hear me? Waiting for Jesus means living in a daily attitude of expectation of His return and that, my brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, has a powerful effect on the way we live every single day. John actually speaks of this in his first letter. Let me read this for you. It's 1st John chapter three verses two and three. He says,

²“Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (And then listen to this very important, he says) ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him (in other words hopes in His appearance) purifies himself as he is pure.”

In other words, to live your life believing that Jesus could come at any time is to live a watchful, prudent kind of a life. And that's really kind of a fancy way of saying that when you actually think about how it would have, you know, it would be if Jesus returned and found you doing something dumb, then that's going to change the way you do things.

Have you ever thought about that? You guys do know Jesus is coming back, right? Say amen if you do. Thank you. What do you want Him to find you doing? Think about that for just a minute. What do you want Him to find you doing? Playing a game on your phone? You know? Criticizing your neighbor? Having a fight with your spouse? Wouldn't that be horrible? You're right in the middle of shaking your fist at somebody and the trumpet sounds? It's like, Lord, can you give me just a minute?

Well, if you and I really live in the hope that He could come back at any time, it's going to change the way we live, it's going to change the choices that we

make and the responses that we give. But it is the Spirit who empowers us to live in that kind of a hope, make no mistake about it. It is by the Spirit that we are empowered to live even in that hope. And then I want you, then we're going to close with this.

In fact, I'm going to have my worship team come back up here and get ready. But the last statement that Paul says in verse 10, and this is very important because it's kind of a preview of coming attractions. He says, ¹⁰ “.... *Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*”

Did you guys, did you read that? And did you hear me? “*Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*” I just want you to know that I didn't say it, He did. Jesus delivers us from the wrath to come. And by the way, the wrath to come, he's talking about the great tribulation. And it's going to come upon all the earth. But I believe before that wrath is poured out on the earth, the church is going to be delivered. Jesus is going to deliver us from the wrath to come. And he's going to talk a lot more about that in this letter.

We call it the rapture. I'm going to tell you why we call it the rapture. And we're going to talk about what it is and what it isn't. And, but I want you to know that the essence of what it is given right here at the end of verse 10, where Paul says, it is Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. You know, there's a lot of people that really object to the teaching of the rapture.

Not because they don't think it's in the Word of God. I mean, it's, we're going to see this in First Thessalonians. Paul's going to very clearly talk about the fact that Jesus is going to come, and the church is going to be caught up to be with Him in the air. So, it's in the Word you guys. Do you know what people's biggest problem with the rapture is? They don't think we deserve it.

Seriously. I've had people say that. Oh, no. Yeah, the church. Oh, we're a bunch of lazy bums. We need to go through the tribulation. Well, it sounds like I'm glad you're not the one who makes up the, makes the decision for this thing, because, you know, Jesus isn't mad at you. Do you know that Jesus has clothed you in His righteousness? Do you know that? Did you know that when God looks on you, He looks at you through the righteousness of Jesus Christ?

You want to know how He looks at the bride? She's perfect! I know, here on earth, we're far from perfect. But in heaven, we have been perfected, Christians, because through the blood of Jesus Christ, and through that robe of righteousness that each of us has donned by faith, we are righteous in the sight of God.

I know we've got warts and wrinkles. And we're going to continue to have warts and wrinkles as the church here on earth until the trumpet sounds. Those aren't going to go away. But I want you to know how He sees you. He sees you today in the righteousness of His Son. And you need to know that. You need to know it when you pray, you need to know it when you, as you live out your life.

It's not about deserving to be caught up. Now, having said that, I'm not saying that we're not going to go through hard times prior to when God catches us away. We're already starting. It has begun. And I sincerely doubt things are going to go back to normal. But you know what? Hey, it's God's timetable. It's God's plan, not ours, right?

But I want to remind you of something. If you take your pulse, you'll find that you're alive. I'm not joking, what I'm saying is you're alive right now. You are alive August 9th, 2020. You know what that means? That means God knew that you were born for a time such as this. This time, what's going on in the world, you were meant to be here. And if God has brought you here, if God has allowed you to live in this time, He will give you the grace to walk it out.