

1 Thessalonians 1

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[0 : 00] So, this morning and tonight and next week, we'll be going through 1 Thessalonians, the first letter to the Thessalonians.

We won't cover every single chapter and verse, but I'll try to get through the scope of all of it and touch on at least a little bit of everything.

And so, this morning we're obviously in the first chapter, the whole first chapter, which isn't too long, but this is an incredible little letter to the Thessalonian church.

I recently caught up with some friends from years ago. Paul and Kathy are their names. I think I chatted with them this summer. And they're a couple with several children, and they were back in the UK for the first time in three years, actually.

They moved to Ethiopia as a family to work at a seminary there. I think they are really enjoying it. They told me that's what seemed to be the case.

[1 : 07] But their work there doesn't come without its challenges. And this is what Kathy had said at the time. She said, in the past five weeks, they spent three of those with no power in their house.

Paul then told me about once a month, someone in the family gets seriously ill. And teaching, though, seemed to be going all right. He was doing most of the teaching and said that, yeah, that's going okay.

But until I heard him explain this. Apparently, in Ethiopia, many Christians are completely opposed to alcohol and secular music. So music may be not written by Christian artists and so on.

Which, that's fair enough. But this resulted in a little bit of confusion. So one of Paul's students came to him. And she was really excited about a recent Bible study that she had had with a friend. And she says, you know, I think this friend has converted to Christianity. And he says, yeah, why do you think that? What's happened? And she says, well, she's thrown away all of her secular CDs.

[2 : 21] She's not listening to non-Christian music anymore. And he thought, maybe this is a good sign. But I'm not sure that's entirely the fullness of Christian conversion.

And so, as a family, there were challenges in kind of practical ways. There were challenges in theological ways. And they're still facing these things, I think.

And these kinds of things that come their way and our way can look very different. But kind of all over the place. But what it can really result in is losing a bit of confidence in God's mission.

Losing confidence in God's mission. That he's really fulfilling or working in the way that he has promised. Or the way that he sets out in Scripture. Right, I lack my self-confidence in that mission sometimes.

That God will grow his church. That he uses the gospel to convert people. That he's going to bring about joy and the faith that he promises to us. Right, I have no doubt that many of us question these very things.

[3 : 27] What's God doing? Is he doing anything? Is it God's mission in the world and for the world? Is it that mission the whole story of Scripture?

Thessalonians is a book all about God's mission. It was written by missionaries to a people they had evangelized.

That's the background for the book. Acts 17 actually tells the story. I don't know if you've gotten here, some of you in your small group. Paul goes to the Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica for three Sabbaths.

And explains that Jesus is the Christ. This is verse 4 of chapter 17 of Acts. He says, And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas.

As did a great many of the devout Greeks. And not a few of the leading women. Now because of this, many of the Jews get upset. And then they abuse and accuse some of the local Christians.

[4 : 29] So Paul and Silas escape by night. And they continue their mission elsewhere. But nonetheless, they had planted the seeds. They were not in Thessalonica very long. And they really didn't have much to go on in terms of what God was doing.

How the Christians got along. Whether these conversions were really going to follow through. And the church would grow or be rooted or just be kind of swept away. But they did receive news. While many of those things were possible. They received news that Timothy, one of the missionaries, visits the Thessalonians. He comes back and he reports to Paul and to Silas. This is what happens. This is what I've seen. This is what you need to know. And it's largely good news. The letter in chapter 2 and 3, Thessalonians itself says, Since we were torn away from you, brothers, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face. When I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. Thessalonians is a book about these very things that we struggle with.

[5 : 48] Confidence, worry, and doubt regarding the mission of God. So as I've said, months after the initial mission, as this passage describes Paul's longing to be with them, sending Timothy.

Timothy comes back with his report of the church. And that's our occasion for the letter. And so if you look in verse 1, you shouldn't be surprised now to see Paul, Silvanus, or Silas, and Timothy are addressing them collectively.

These men had a mission to the Thessalonians and had received news about how the church was doing. And ultimately, it gave reason for confidence. Confidence. So let us begin in verses 1 and 2. To the church of the Thessalonians, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in all our prayers. The writers give thanks because God's mission and its work is evident. God's provided assurance of his ability, one, to bring salvation to people, and two, to work wonders in their lives.

[7 : 07] We give thanks, they say, because of your faith, hope, and love in Christ, and because of our knowledge of your election. It's these two things that Paul and the missionaries are grateful for, and it's these two things that give us the very same confidence in God's mission.

Two sources of confidence, two pieces of evidence that God is succeeding and carrying on with his mission. First of all, God makes the success of his mission evident in his people.

We can look around at his people themselves. So if we go back to verse 2, we give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith, and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith, hope, and love. These words will remind many of you of Paul's writings, and they might remind some of you of a theologian from the Middle Ages named Thomas Aquinas.

He talked about these. Now, sometimes pastors like to quote theologians, and you have no idea what's going on, or who those people are, or what the background is. Thomas Aquinas is very important.

[8 : 31] He lived in the 13th century. He lived in Paris for a little bit. He lived in Italy for a while, back and forth. He is like the John Calvin of the Roman Catholic Church.

But he's got a lot of good things for the church as a whole. So he's not going to be just left to the Roman Catholics. Aquinas called these theological virtues, faith, hope, and love.

Or he said charity sometimes instead of love. And he called them these things for this set of reasons. First, he says their object is God.

We have faith in God. They direct us towards God. Second, they're infused in us by God alone. He does the work within us to give us faith, to give us love, and to give us hope.

And third, these virtues are made known to us only by divine revelation in the Scriptures. Faith, hope, and love are not things that we would walk out the door and go and experience life and come back and realize that these are three virtues really to be prized fully.

[9 : 40] We would need to get there with Christian teaching, really. We need the help of the Bible. We fully rely on the Bible to teach us about these things. These are God-centric virtues.

They come from God. They relate directly to God. They're known through the Word of God. That's really the point to make. Faith, hope, and love. These are gifts of God, and they're evidence of God's work in God's people.

Let me pause for a moment. On work of faith, this might make some of us uncomfortable. We get labor of love, yes, working in a loving way, loving people as work and trying hard to do that.

We get the sense of being steadfast in our hope, but a work of faith. Sometimes we think of these as different things. We have kind of works which we don't want to rely on too much, and then we have faith where we trust God.

But a work of faith might be a little strange. But it's not all that strange. If we look around a little bit, Ephesians 2.10 says, For we are his workmanship, that is, the workmanship of God created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

[10:59] Works of faith. God does indeed give us faith. We have faith in God, and it works itself out through works of that faith. Charles Simeon said, Having received communications of grace, the Christians stirred up by it, by God's grace, to improve upon them, or nurture them, to the glory of his Redeemer's name.

Whatever the Christian has to do for God, he does through this principle, through that principle of grace. By which, and by which alone, he overcomes the world and purifies his heart.

There is indeed room for works of faith. These are works given to us by God and fulfilled with his help and his power. And it's one of the ways that God makes the success of his mission evident. Their faith, their hope, their love, your faith, your hope, your love. That should give all of us confidence in the mission of God.

But do I really need to remind us, the people of God do not always inspire confidence. Preachers in sneakers. I don't know if you've heard of this.

[12:22] It's spelled like rock and roll, shake and bake, guns and roses, preachers in sneakers. A Texan churchgoer slept in on a Sunday in 2019. He found himself watching church online, which was soon to become, obviously, a regular practice.

Recently interested in shoes, he noticed the brand that the pastor was wearing and posted a photo on Instagram. But it wasn't just shoes.

Pastor Gray, in one case, was wearing a Gucci sweater that cost over \$1,000. Another pastor in North Carolina was wearing boots of a similar price.

Over the coming months, he found pastors wearing Air Jordans and very pricey Air Yeezy 2s, which I wouldn't recognize those if I saw them, but I think I do know what those are.

When I went looking, I found some other pastors. I appreciated one pastor. Andy Stanley posted his own \$39 Dockers sneakers. The New York Times isn't ignorant of this.

[13:37] The title and subtitle of an article around that time was this. Let he who is without Yeezys cast the first stone. Should pastors wear \$5,000 sneakers?

There's been some soul-searching recently over materialism in houses of worship. Just a couple of weeks ago, I met with a woman who works at ACA, the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics.

And I asked her, I just met her, I said, how are you doing with everything going on? Now, that is a slightly invasive question to ask someone upon first meeting them, but I knew and she knew what I was talking about.

And it wasn't poorly received. She was grateful for the question. ACA is an organization that Rabbi Zacharias founded in 2006. He spent 40 years working in Christian apologetics.

He published over 30 books. In 2007, when my university in America suffered a mass shooting, he was one of the first people to address the students. And thousands of us went to hear him speak.

[14:51] He died in May of 2020. And just a few months later, an investigation found that Zacharias had received sexually explicit photos from over 200 women in their early 20s.

The woman that I met works at the organization that he founded. And it's now cut ties with Zacharias completely. So how should she deal with this man's reputation and with her role at that organization?

And what do I do with Ravi Zacharias' books that are on my shelf, that were incredibly influential, and had a profound impact on me and other people?

What do we do with these sorts of things? Do you remember what Paul tells the Corinthians? They were getting all caught up in their leaders. Paul says this in the third chapter, what then is Apollos? What is Paul? Paul, servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, he says, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

[15:56] So neither he knew plants, nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. Apollos and Paul here were not bad influences on the church or a cause for no confidence, I don't think, like the people that I am referring to.

Instead, these two men are the objects of too much confidence, actually. Don't align yourselves with Apollos. Don't align yourselves with Paul.

Align yourself with Christ. That's Paul's point. And I think the principle is the same. God uses leaders to establish and grow the church. If there's anything we've learned through the leadership fallout in recent years is that it can be, it can be awful and that God can nonetheless still do something good through bad leaders.

God uses his leaders to establish and to grow the church. And yet, that true growth comes from God alone and that's why we put our hope fully and only in Christ and God.

You can tell someone the gospel but you can't make that person believe it. You can testify to the love of Christ and word and life but you can't transform someone's heart.

[17:10] This really is the area of life that is truly, truly dependent on God. God's mission is so much beyond us. He gives us the pleasure of participating, of stumbling along and seeing some of the fruits.

We exist amidst a very dignified but a very depraved church. It's a mix of both and success is really up and over to God himself. I hope when we see bad examples we should not think that God's mission has ultimately failed.

This letter takes it up an additional notch actually. We're directed not only to the faith, hope and love of this Thessalonian church in the abstract. We're actually drawn to their exemplar action among other churches.

Have a look at verse 5, partway through verse 5. You know what kind of men we prove to be among you for your sake, that is the missionaries. 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 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 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.

[18:37] You notice those words, imitators, in verse 6. Example, in verse 7. And that final phrase, your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.

actions speak louder than words. The proof is in the pudding. A good reputation should be embraced by the church and celebrated when it's seen.

The Thessalonians took it in. They took the message in and they threw it back out to carry it along. You may not know this, but there are quarterly meetings for the presbytery.

The IPC as a whole where IPC ministers and some of the elders gather and several of the churches, all the different churches around the UK come together.

And part of that meeting involves sharing updates about each of the churches. And so a minister, one of the elders from the church will come up and share a bit about what's going on at the church and some things to celebrate and things to pray for and so on.

[19:46] So we'll hear from IPC List, Trinity Church, York, IPC Hammersmith and so on. There are always things to be thankful for.

Always things to be thankful for. Just this year we heard about numerical growth among a very young church plant in Chester. We heard about encouraging evangelism and outreach in Hounslow.

the ownership of a building in Ilford and hopes to formalize a new service taking place in a new city. And I know there are things to be thankful for here too.

According to this letter God is making the success of his mission evident in the Thessalonians. He's inspiring confidence by working in his own people.

He brings about the fruit of the Spirit and he catapults his gospel greater distances thanks to his church. God's people attest to the success of his mission.

[20:50] That's the first point and here's the second. There are only two points this morning. God's people attest to the success of his mission. God also makes his mission and its success evident in the power of his gospel.

people. Let's have a look at verse 4. For we know brothers loved by God that he has chosen you. Hear the confidence that's being expressed and even more incredibly what it is that the writers are confident about. For we know brothers loved by God that he has chosen you.

What do these missionaries know that God has elected the Thessalonians? He's chosen them.

Now, why would these missionaries give thanks to know that God has chosen the Thessalonians?

When the Bible mentions election it's associated with God justifying sinners. Election's associated with becoming godly, with putting on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. [21 : 57] It's associated with having grace and peace, with becoming a child of God rather than a slave or an enemy of God. It's associated with abundant gratitude and thanksgiving.

That all sounds not only good, but worth giving thanks for. This thanksgiving, this knowledge, is really a matter of confidence.

We know you're elect. We know that God's mission is succeeding. And there are two primary reasons around this election and around this confidence.

In verse 5, for 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 and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

The confidence about the election and therefore in God's mission is seen through, one, the fact that the gospel came to you. It's that first bit, because our gospel came to you.

[23 : 01] It's easy to skip over this one and kind of jump to the power and the Holy Spirit and the full conviction. But it's an essential part of what happened to the Thessalonians. God's gospel came to them.

It was preached, it was taught, it was heard by those to whom it was delivered. Now, that alone doesn't result in a missionary knowing that God has chosen someone.

I suspect a lot of us are aware of this. But the delivery of the gospel does spark confidence and prepares the missionary, it prepares the people of God to look for initial evidence of election, of God's word taking root.

It's like prayer. When we pray for certain things, part of what that does for us is to look for answers to prayer. We're searching around in life, finding things, thanking God for that.

It's this kind of compounding sort of effort. And the same thing with missionary efforts. We look into the lives of people, to those around us, for evidence of God's work.

[24 : 07] And the second reason is a little bit more than that. Thessalonians says that the word of the gospel came to the city, but it came to them with more than that. It came to them more than word.

You may have gotten two responses from people when you're sick. If you tell someone, oh, I've been staying home for a couple of days, I've got this terrible virus, it's all cleared now, but my family and I have just had a tough COVID, it's just been a tough week with this illness going around.

Not necessarily looking for pity, just kind of sharing the facts, that's what's going on. One response you can get is, I'm sorry to hear that. So when do you think you're going to be back to work?

The second one is, oh, poor you, with three exclamation points. How are your symptoms? How are you doing? Do you need anything? Excessive concern.

Which of these people do you think receive the news of your illness with, quote, power and full conviction? In Romans, Paul says that the news itself needs to come with something more.

[25 : 22] Romans 15, he says, for I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum, I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ, and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel.

I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, but God's gospel does not always seem to have power. Paul associates words and deeds and signs and the power of the Holy Spirit through which he was ministering and expecting God to work.

These things that need to accompany the spoken words. Now, preachers can go on a lot about preaching Christ and him crucified, rightly so.

We can sing, oh, the wonders of the cross, we can sing amazing grace, we can confess here today that I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord, Lord. But amidst that very confession, people can sit here and stare stone cold at the floor.

You might be thinking, what a joke, what's all this about? This gospel doesn't really make any amount of difference. That may very well happen today.

[26 : 53] It may happen to someone who is reluctant to come to church in the first place. Very glad that you're here, by the way, visitors. And maybe someone new, it could be a lifelong believer who finds himself or herself in the valley of shadow.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. Sometimes, all we can offer each other is God himself. That's sometimes the best that we can offer. It, of course, is the best thing we can offer. But Christians are not always on their best game. As a matter of fact, sometimes we're at our best when we're not at our best because we rely on God. And we bring our prayers to him and we bring our whole selves to him. God promises his power.

He promises it through the gospel. He promises to sustain us with hope even though it doesn't feel like it all the time. Paul, Silas, and Timothy give thanks for what they've witnessed among the Thessalonians.

[28 : 09] They've seen God's mission succeed. These Christians have faith in God. They have hope in Christ. They have love for one another and love for God. They receive the missionaries preaching with conviction by the power of the Holy Spirit and their way of life has basically propelled the success further on.

This chapter ends with a report about those results. The other churches who have heard about the Thessalonians report to these writers, the missionaries, about their very own reception. What I mean is that Paul and Silas and Timothy are now hearing stories about themselves and how the Thessalonians received them.

So these final verses look backwards actually. It's a wonderful snapshot into the transformation that has occurred in the churches.

I'm speaking of verses 9 and 10. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you. So that is the story about the Thessalonians has gone so far.

It's come back to the ears of the missionaries. And they said this report about our reception and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead.

[29 : 29] Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. Let me just finish here with the shape of God's mission and this is it really. To turn, to serve, and to wait. To turn, to serve, and to wait.

That is the shape of God's mission. First thing, turning from idols. You know all too well the teaching that everyone serves something.

We all have a master. We're all by nature worshipers. Part of God's mission is to turn us away from these objects of worship and to turn them to him alone.

Jesus confronts people about their love of money, about their concern with reputation, about the prison of religiosity. turn from these things and follow me, says Jesus.

You cannot serve two masters. Of course, turning from these is to turn to God, to serve him and him alone. So the shape of God's mission is in a way God himself.

[30 : 36] And that's why we can have confidence. He molds our entire life around him. We give up things. while God gives us all of his blessings.

Turning, serving, and lastly waiting. We wait for the arrival of Christ from heaven. That's the kind of waiting that's going on for a glorious end to all of these things that we face.

Some of the difficult things I spoke about earlier. We are waiting for Christ to come back. How you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead.

Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. That's the end of the mission. And all along that mission, in your works of faith, labor, and love, good examples of following Christ, and bad examples, in all of that, Christ is our hope and our confidence.

So let's come to him now in prayer. Let us pray. Lord, give us faith and give us hope and give us love.

[31 : 52] We thank you for your promises this morning. We thank you for your work in the church in ages past. We thank you that we're recipients of this mission and that we are now people who can celebrate your work among us.

I pray that we would find evidence of these things, that you would be gracious and merciful to us to show us your work and our lives. Thank you most of all, Lord, as we turn to you.

Thank you that you are the bedrock of hope. I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.