

Giving Thanks for Faith, Hope and Love

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Date: 08 October 2006

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- [0 : 0 0] You may like to have open the Bibles at page 959. This is the second of our readings today from the beginning of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Today we begin a sermon series and over the next four Sunday mornings from 1 Thessalonians and then following that in November in the evenings we'll have a series on two Thessalonians.
- So we begin this book today and page 959 is where the reading is. So let's pray firstly that God would teach us from his word.
- Heavenly Father, you've caused all Holy Scripture to be written to make us wise for salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ and to equip us for every good work for your glory. And so we pray that your spirit will empower, write your word on our hearts that we may believe it and obey it as we await the return of Jesus Christ.
- Amen. Amen. Well, just about a month ago, I guess, some of us who were part of the group that I led in Greece and Turkey were in Thessaloniki, as it's called today, the second largest city in Greece of one or two million people, a fairly bustling and thriving city in the northern part of Greece.
- While we were there, we visited the small old archaeological site that goes back to the days of the Apostle Paul. We visited the museum there and we also went to the city's cathedral in effect, the Basilica San Dimitrios, a very large and relatively ornate, fairly beautiful building in some respects.
- [1 : 4 2] It's been rebuilt a bit over the years after a fire, if I remember rightly. But a place, in my opinion at least, of some superstition, really. Lots of idols and, not idols, icons, and people bowing before them or kissing them or lighting candles in front of them and so on.
- In a sense, in many respects, in every respect almost, it's a city far removed from the city that Paul visited in about 50 AD. Now it's a large city, then it was, well, large by ancient standards, but much, much smaller than today.
- Then it was thoroughly pagan without any Christian impact at all until Paul arrived with Silas or Silvanus, as he's sometimes called, and Timothy in maybe 49 or no later than 50 AD.
- That's within 20 years of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. So within a generation's span of the events of Jesus, Paul arrived in Thessaloniki, having already had one missionary journey in Turkey, as it's called today, and then a second one in Turkey or Asia Minor, as it was then called, and then crossing into Europe to Philippi.
- He'd come down through a couple of places and now to Thessaloniki as a strategic and important city in the ancient world. His visit there was short-lived.
- [3 : 0 9] Some say he was only there three weeks. It may have been a little bit longer than that, certainly no more than two or three months that Paul was there. And during the time he was there, he preached in the synagogues and to others and a fledgling church of Christians, converts, began.

Very small indeed. But under quite a deal of opposition and persecution, Paul and his friends, followers or entourage, was forced to leave Thessaloniki and went on to Berea and then further south to Athens and then after some time in Athens on to Corinth on the Peloponnese in southern Greece.

The question, I guess, that they had was, what will happen to our brand new converts back in Thessaloniki, this tiny church of people, brand new in the Christian faith?

Are they going to be able to keep going in faith? After all, Paul and his friends had had to leave the city under opposition. How would that opposition be now focused on those who were resident in Thessaloniki?

A few weeks later from Athens, Paul sends Timothy back to Thessaloniki to see how they were going, to encourage them in the faith. And now Timothy has come back to Paul, possibly in the interim Paul's moved on to Corinth.

[4 : 31] And in response to hearing what Timothy's report is, Paul now writes this letter, 1 Thessalonians, back to the church in Thessaloniki.

So this letter is written in 50 AD probably, probably just a couple of months or so after Paul was in Thessaloniki. Maybe his earliest or second earliest letter that we have in the New Testament, maybe a bit later than Galatians.

And Paul has heard good things from Timothy and maybe indeed from other reports as well. And so he responds with joy and with encouragement at what he's heard about this fledgling Thessalonian church.

Three things in particular stand out in this opening chapter, a sort of expression of Paul's prayer of thanks for what God has still been doing in and through the Thessalonian Christians.

He highlights what are often regarded as the three key Christian virtues or graces that characterize the Thessalonian church. The three key things about their church is not its building.

[5 : 40] They had none. You couldn't build a church building in those days. It wasn't to do with comfortable pews or the quality of the coffee or the music. It wasn't about how many people were there or the style of worship or how many young people or anything like that.

The three key things that stand out were faith, love and hope. The three great Christian virtues or graces.

They're not airy-fairy ideas, these faith, love and hope either. They are found rooted in practical concrete expression in the daily behaviour, relationships and practice of the Thessalonian church and its members.

That is, faith, love and hope evidenced in practical ways in their lives show the evidence of the Christian life in the hearts and minds of these Christians and the church.

And so we'll see how Paul describes that in these opening verses. He begins his prayer in verse 2, or words of encouragement at least, saying to the Thessalonians that we always give thanks to God for all of you, that is we being Silas and Timothy and maybe others as well in their prayers privately or in public, and mention you in our prayers constantly remembering before our God and Father.

[6 : 58] That is, our prayers are ones of thanks for you. As we remember you, we're filled with joy at what we know about you and what we've heard about you. And those three things that I've mentioned get mentioned then in verse 3.

But notice how they're expressed. Firstly, it's not just your faith, it's your work of faith. That is, your faith, trust, belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for you, in sins forgiven, in the hope of eternal life.

That faith is expressed in work. It's demonstrated in their lives. It's not just something that sits in the head. It's not just simply a creedal belief about what they believe.

It's not something that's simply intellectual or internal, though it is those things. But it's demonstrated in a life of work. You see, faith in Christ is not something that just sits privately within us.

Faith in Christ is something that is actually expressed publicly in our daily life, in our relationships, in our behaviour, in our priorities and so on. And in particular, Paul says it's your work of faith.

[8 : 12] That is, things that you do, the labour that you do, that expresses your faith in Christ. Now, we need to be very careful here. Paul is not in any way hinting or saying that their salvation is because of their work.

Not at all. Their salvation relies upon and depends upon and comes from entirely the grace of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ, to which they've responded with faith and they are saved.

But as evidence of that salvation, they are working as Christian people. Their lives have changed in the way that they operate, relate and act and speak and behave and so on.

They are saved like we are to do work for God. We are not saved by the work that we do for God. Very important to get that right because it's easy to slip into the thinking that my good deeds are what saves me or gives me credit in God's eyes.

But not so. It is entirely by grace and mercy that we've been saved, but we're saved to do good works, to work for the glory of God. So Paul is giving thanks here to God for the Thessalonian Christians because he knows about, he's heard about their work of faith that demonstrates that in their hearts there is real faith in these recent months of their conversion.

[9 : 39] That idea is picked up again in the second expression, your labour of love. There's no big difference between work and labour, although the second word is stronger than the first.

The word labour has got the sense of working even when it's tiring, even when you come to the point of weariness. It's hard work, it's costly work. It's not your labour of love that chooses the time when you love.

It's not restrained or confined by your comfort levels or by your time and so on. It's a labour of love that is prepared to expend itself for the sake of God's glory and for the sake of others, even at some cost and some energy and some tiredness or weariness that comes from that.

Perhaps it's this labour of love. Again, it's not tightly defined by Paul. He doesn't tell us exactly what it is that is their work or their labour.

It's a fairly broad expression in many ways. It's probably got in mind your labour of love for God as well as your labour of love for other Christians, but it's stimulated by, it's caused by, the love of God to you to start with.

[10 : 57] Or as John writes in the New Testament, we love because God first loved us. Like this work of faith, the labour of love is prompted by the grace of God in the hearts and minds of the Thessalonians.

Both these ideas of work and labour suggest that in response to becoming Christians, these Thessalonians are not lazy, far from it. They are working hard in response to God.

They are working hard for the benefit of other people, both fellow Christians as well as others in their society. Now, as I say, we're not told exactly what that sort of work is, but it will be work that has reset their priorities, reset the way they do their jobs, the way they operate their families, the way they relate to people in the street and so on.

They have gone out of their way now as Christians to express the grace and love of God for other people, maybe at some cost to themselves. And it's become obvious by their lives that they're now Christians.

That is, a change has occurred in the way their whole life is oriented, is structured, is set in its priorities and so on. And so Paul can say that the report that we've heard from Timothy and indeed is known by many others, as we'll see later on, shows that your work of faith and your labour of love are well known.

[12 : 25] There is a significant and obvious change here in the way that you live your lives. The third virtue or grace is hope. But again, it's not just we give thanks to God for your hope.

Hope here is again expressed in outside or external, obvious, tangible, concrete ways. It's the steadfastness of hope that is mentioned at the end of verse 3.

Now, in particular, this idea of hope will be teased out more in this letter. But the context, remember, is that these are Christians who from the beginning are facing opposition and persecution for being Christians.

It's a big step to become a Christian from this pagan world. The sort of opposition or persecution that they might face is not here from the Roman emperor throwing them to lions or something like that.

It's not a threat of persecution to be put to death officially. Rather, it's much more likely at the informal, social, relational level. Families divided.

[13 : 33] When you become a Christian, the rest of the family will turn away from you because they reject the fact that you've rejected the pagan gods of the ancient Greek world. There'll be neighbours who might walk on the other side of the street and shun you.

There'll be economic opposition or persecution so that you might lose your job because your pagan boss doesn't want to employ a new Christian. It may be that somebody's not prepared to do their business with your business because of your new stance as a Christian.

It may be that some shops won't serve you but they'll serve others so you're discriminated against. That's the sort of social, informal opposition and persecution that these Christians would have faced.

Indeed, there may well have been more than that as well as indeed Paul had had to leave the city with his friends because of opposition to the gospel. But through that, they have not withered and given up.

Rather, their hope has been steadfast. So their hope has been seen by the fact that they keep on under duress, under opposition, maintaining their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in the way they behave, the way they live, despite whatever cost that has come through opposition.

[14 : 48] Their hope then is not a mere optimism that things will get better the next day. Their hope is focused and grounded in the return of Jesus at the end of time.

On the day when he comes back, when he vindicates God's people and takes them to glory. On the day when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead. That's their hope. And therefore they know that the cost of opposition and persecution now is a small price to pay for the sake of being with Christ on that final day and for eternity beyond.

Therefore, their hope is unswerving. It is steadfast. It endures the opposition. It's prepared to endure the trials of life for the sake of that final day.

Well, these three Christian virtues, faith, love and hope, are the crowning graces of what is meant to be evident in every Christian life.

They lie at the essence of what being a Christian is in practice. It's true Christianity or spirituality in a sense in response to the gospel. It's not simply that they're do-gooders.

[16 : 02] It's not that they're stacking up credit for themselves in the eyes of God, but rather responding to the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection for them, their sins forgiven and so on.

They have now changed their lives markedly and that's evidenced by their work, labour and steadfastness. So no wonder Paul rejoices when he hears such a report from Timothy.

It's important that we see these three virtues as a bit like a mirror for us. Maybe not a mirror, but something into which we look and compare ourselves.

Because these words are not written simply to the Thessalonian Christians, though originally they were. They're written for our benefit as well. And they're there to make us ponder, as a church and as individual Christians, to what extent could this be said of us?

Are we people, are we a church, who is known by our work of faith, by our labour of love, by our steadfastness of hope?

[17 : 12] Could that be said of us as a church? Has God's gospel grace in our hearts and minds changed us so that we are characterised by these three great virtues?

Faith, love and hope. Or is it perhaps that that is not the case or not as it should be? Is it perhaps that our work of faith has begun to wane?

That our labour of love has begun to tire? And we're not quite full of the zeal of work and labour for God that maybe once we were.

Maybe our hope of Jesus' return has dimmed. It doesn't motivate us or strengthen us to endure as it ought to do. Maybe the hopes of our world are perhaps more captivating than the hopes of Jesus' return.

Maybe our first love has cooled. Here are new converts. Maybe we once were like that. But now perhaps our love has cooled off.

[18 : 21] Well, faith, love and hope are meant to be the key virtues, in effect, of any Christian person. And we're meant to be encouraged by the Thessalonian example as a fledgling church, no least.

But also challenged by this description to reflect to what extent do we fall short of that sort of reputation. This evidence of faith, love and hope gives Paul some reassurance about the short time of ministry that he had in Thessalonika.

In verses 4 and 5 he says, we know, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, that he's chosen you. That is, we know that because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction, just as you know what kind of persons we prove to be among you for your sake.

Notice there the sequence of things that reflects the ministry that Paul had for such a short time in Thessalonika. Our message came to you not in words only, but it came in words.

Paul preached the gospel. When we read the account in Acts 17 of Paul in Thessalonika, it's clear that words mattered. Paul went into the synagogue as was his custom and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, saying this is the Messiah Jesus whom I'm proclaiming to you.

[19 : 55] That is, the ministry of the word of the gospel is fundamental to Paul's ministry. It was important that he used words, the right words, coming out of the words of the scriptures to persuade, to convince, to argue with people that Jesus was the Messiah.

That's his ministry in the synagogue. His ministry to Gentiles would have been different, but no less using words of the gospel to them as well. Words are crucial. But Paul is saying it's not actually just the words because the evidence of the Thessalonians shows that those words were matched by the power of God.

To use an analogy that Paul uses elsewhere, in effect, he's sown the seeds or planted the seed through the word of the gospel. It is God who gives the life or the growth.

And so Paul says, my ministry was not in words only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit. Not as some would think that the power refers to miracles and great acts of signs and wonders.

Not at all. But rather, the power of God by using God's spirit to take those words spoken by Paul and written in the scriptures and write them in the hearts and minds of the Thessalonians so that they believe them and obey them.

[21 : 11] Paul does everything in his power using words to persuade and convince the truth of the gospel. But it is God's power and God's powerful spirit that actually brings life into dead lives by using those words on their hearts.

And so their response of the Thessalonians was with full conviction. Paul was fully convinced in his preaching. He sought to convince and persuade them. Their response, I take it, is their full conviction.

But Paul's ministry was also then backed up at the end of verse 5 by his example. He practiced what he preached. So he says, you know what kind of persons we prove to be among you for your sake.

That is, they saw the way Paul lived. He wasn't a charlatan. He wasn't there to make money, to deceive them. He was there with a genuine intent to preach the free gospel of grace freely to the Thessalonians so that they, under the powerful words and spirit of God, would come to faith in Christ.

And that's happened as is evidenced by their work, labour and steadfastness of faith, love and hope. Persecution or opposition when it comes can bring two results, simply put.

[22 : 33] Sometimes when people suffer opposition or persecution, when they suffer difficulties or strife, they can end up bitter or angry or resentful or grumbling or complaining to God.

We see that time and again in the scriptures. Israel in the wilderness is a good example of that. And so sometimes it is of us and others where things we think don't go right or that God has let us down, we can grumble and complain.

The danger is that that path ends in an unbelieving bitterness. Psalm 95 that we had in our first reading suggests that potential outcome as well.

But the other outcome is joy. And that's how the Thessalonians responded to the opposition that they were faced with. In verse 5 at the end, sorry, in verse 6, you became imitators of us and of the Lord for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.

There again is mention of the work of the power of the Spirit inspired by the Spirit to bring you faith to receive the word. But in spite of the opposition that was evident even as you became Christian you received it with joy.

[23 : 53] That is that the opposition and persecution that you suffered in effect pales into insignificance compared to the joy of knowing with faith the gospel of Jesus Christ and the eternal promises of God that are ours in him.

Joy ought to be evident even when we face persecution and opposition because joy shows, when a joy is expressed when we face opposition and persecution shows that we've understood the priorities of God right.

That this world is fleeting and is temporary and is in some ways much less significant than the eternal realities of heaven which the gospel ensures and secures for us.

I remember reading a book that was so influential to me 25 or so years ago when I was a university student called *Forgive Me Natasha* which I've mentioned from time to time. It's a most powerful biography of a girl in Russia in the KGB Soviet days in 1970 or thereabouts who was beaten several times by the KGB in a far eastern part of Russia and the KGB operative who was leading that group of persecution was so troubled internally by the joy on her face even as she was being beaten that in the end he realised there was truth in Christianity and he converted, he left the KGB Navy, jumped ship to Canada, was eventually murdered probably by the KGB for having defected as a Christian but he came to tell this story of how he had become a Christian.

That is the joy of this Christian woman, even as she was being persecuted for her faith, was so striking that he became a Christian.

[25 : 45] Two or three weeks ago I was in Turkey and preaching in a couple of different Protestant churches in Istanbul and teaching some of the pastors there in a preaching conference and I met a number of folk in those churches who have lost significant contact with family members because they've converted from Islam to Christianity.

Twenty years ago there were virtually no converts from Islam in Turkey but these young people, all younger than I am, many of them at great cost have lost significantly economically and socially having become Christians and trusted the gospel of Christ.

But they're not bitter for that. The thing that struck me was their joy in knowing Christ even at the cost that they've had to pay for doing that out of an Islamic background.

I think earlier in the year of meeting some Burmese Christians from Yangon in India when I was there, who have suffered much under a notorious regime that is anti-Christian and thoroughly corrupt and yet no bitterness but great and abiding joy even though they have to expend a great deal of cost and effort and some personal cost in being Christian.

For the sake of being Christians and being teachers of his word there is this abiding joy. I think it's a real challenge sometimes to us because the opposition, persecution, the trials that we face are much smaller than those ones and much smaller than what the Thessalonian Christians would have endured.

[27 : 25] We live in such a comfortable and affluent society that the problems we face are really in many respects trivial by comparison and yet sometimes we are tempted to take the path to bitterness and anger rather than to express our joy.

the Thessalonian example is yet another challenge to us I think as well. Paul commented in verse 6 that the Thessalonians imitated Paul and his friends, that is they had no other Christians they ever met until Paul arrived in Thessaloniki.

They were converted through his ministry and they began to imitate him, that is his way of life, his priorities, his character and so on as he imitated the Lord. But those imitators, the Thessalonians, have themselves become an example for others to imitate.

So Paul says in verse 7 you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia for the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, parts of ancient Greece, north and south, but in every place your faith in God has become known so that we have no need to speak about it.

That is the reputation of this tiny fledgling church is so striking that other Christian churches throughout ancient Greece have begun to model themselves on the Thessalonians.

[28 : 49] So what a great chain reaction that is where they model themselves on Paul who's trying to model himself on the character of Christ, they in turn are being models for other churches and other Christians through the ancient world.

That ought to be what's happening. It ought to be for us that we are modelling ourselves on God as we see others senior in the faith that become our mentors on whom we model our Christian lives to some extent and then we might find others modelling themselves on us.

It's a scary responsibility in many respects. But that's what Paul is giving thanks for here for the Thessalonians. And when he says in verse 8, the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, that's by not only their words but by their behaviour, this thoroughly clear conversion demonstrated by faith, love and hope is now clearly a reputation that is spreading through ancient Greece and it's sounded forth like a trumpet call or the call of a minaret at 4am to wake you up and call you to prayer in Arabic countries and so on.

That's the sort of notion that's behind verse 8. We'll see how this prayer of thanks in effect as it is, concludes in verses 9 and 10.

The reputation of the Thessalonians has gone out to all the regions of Greece as verse 9 begins. They've heard what sort of welcome they gave to Paul as they've been converted through his ministry there.

[30 : 22] And how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God. Remember that ancient Greece was full of gods. Thessaloniki was at 50 kilometres from Mount Olympus, the home of the gods.

On a clear day you can see Mount Olympus. We didn't particularly do that on this trip recently. So Thessaloniki lived sort of under the shadow of the home of the gods.

To turn from pagan gods to serve the living God is a significant step. It's a much easier step in our social climate in Australia to become a Christian.

the change is often less obvious although it ought to be striking in the way we live our lives. Notice that they've turned from idols, that is futile gods, nothing gods, to serve the living God.

That is it's not turning to be set free to do what you like. It's actually to a life of slavery is really behind the word serve but it's a slavery that's liberating because it's the true and the living God who is being served.

[31 : 31] But the second thing that they've turned from idols to do, one is to serve and the other is to wait as verse 10 says, to wait for his son from heaven.

I must say I'm often impatient and I don't particularly like waiting. Whether it's a queue or a doctor's surgery or in recent, in this past week in airport lounges, waiting seems to be a sort of waste of time and you sit there and you look at your watch and so on.

Waiting for the Lord Jesus to return is not to be like that. It's not a sort of looking at my watch and twiddling my thumbs and tapping my foot and getting frustrated by nothing happening. Waiting is an active thing.

We wait for the Lord Jesus to return by working out our faith, by labouring our love and by steadfast hope. That is by doing the very three things that verses 3 and 4 commend the Thessalonian church for doing, they are showing that they are waiting for the Lord Jesus to return.

I wonder whether that's a significant motivation in our own Christian lives. Are we consciously waiting for Jesus' return and demonstrating that waiting by the work of faith, the labour of love and the steadfastness of hope?

[32 : 54] Well just as there is no middle ground between serving idols and the one true living God in verse 9, there is no middle ground in the destinies either. So we are waiting for Jesus whom God raised from the dead, the one who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

That is the two destinies are simply wrath, God's wrath, God's judgement against our sin or if we have placed our faith and trust in Jesus, we are rescued from it so we are waiting for his rescue on that final day.

Wrath or rescue are the only two destinies. You serve idols or non-gods, wrath will be the destiny. If we turn to the one true living God, then rescue is the one destiny that awaits us.

There is no middle ground, no other option. In the ancient Greek world, the three graces were reputed to be goddess sisters of the goddess Venus, the goddess of love.

And those three graces represent splendour, jollity and abundance. And they have come to be quite significant in art, as some of you would know.

[34 : 12] There are paintings in Pompeii of the three graces, sculptures by Canova and others. There are Botticelli paintings of the three graces, as well as paintings by others in ancient and modern times.

Splendour, jollity and abundance, though, are not the three crowning graces for Christians. They are faith, love and hope.

Much more important, much more abiding than splendour, jollity and abundance. They are to be the marks of every Christian and every Christian church.

And so as a church, as we begin in effect a new financial year and we come to our AGM in a few weeks' time, maybe this will be a challenge for us in the year ahead. That in the year ahead we make more evident in our life faith, love and hope.

The work of faith, the labour of love and the steadfastness of hope. So that we may be more obviously characterised by those three things.

[35 : 21] And so that for God's glory, our reputation in those things may bring blessing to others as well. Amen. Amen.