

Greet Classic, Main, and Online

Introduction:

Imagine driving through a neighborhood you've never visited. You pass a few houses that look perfectly ordinary from the street. But as you drive by one of them, you notice something different.

There are kid's bikes scattered across the driveway, a basketball hoop with a worn-out net, a couple of soccer balls in the yard, and a minivan parked out front with a car seat visible through the window.

You don't know the people who live there. You've never met them. You've never been inside the house. But you can make a pretty good guess about whose living inside that house. The evidence outside tells you something about the life inside. You don't see the family itself, but you see the evidence of the family.

This is essentially what Paul experiences when he looks at the church in Thessalonica. He doesn't simply say, "I know you're Christians because you say you're Christians." He says the evidence of your faith, hope, and love are plain for all to see.

Paul basically says: "Their faith wasn't merely something they professed. There was a ton of evidence scattered all around the front yards of their lives.

[Transition] - That's the kind of church Paul is describing when he writes to the Christians in Thessalonica. This was a relatively young church. They hadn't been Christians for decades. They didn't have generations of Christian heritage behind them. They were new Christians. And they were experiencing opposition and pressure because of their faith. And yet in

that context, Paul writes to them and essentially says: The gospel has changed you—and people can see it.

Their faith wasn't merely something they believed. It had become something they lived. Their Christianity wasn't merely something they claimed. It was something people noticed. And that's where I want us to begin our journey through 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Over the next seven weeks, we're going to discover that these two relatively short letters written in the middle of the 1st century have a remarkably relevant message for the church today.

- Paul writes about suffering.
- He writes about holiness.
- He writes about relationships within the church.
- He writes about perseverance.
- He writes about work and about grief.
- And he writes about the return of Christ.

And again and again, Paul brings us back to one central reality: **Because Jesus is coming again, we can live faithfully today.** That's really the heartbeat of these two letters. And it is the big idea of our series. And as we look at the opening verses of 1 Thess. 1, Paul's first words to the Thessalonians remind us that the gospel is not simply information we believe. The gospel is good news that is to transform the way we live.

Let's get our bearings for Thessalonians

The Thessalonian letters were written by Paul to encourage and instruct the young church gathering in Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was the largest and most important city in Macedonia and boasted a connection to Rome, a natural harbor and as a result became a very wealthy commerce center.

Though written 2 millennia ago, there are some amazing parallels between the setting and times then and the setting and times we find ourselves in today.

- Among believers in Thessalonica there was a tremendous amount of apprehension, misunderstanding and speculation about the Second Coming of Jesus. They knew he was returning at some point, but they were very unclear about how it all would happen. It's similar to today. The crazier world events become, the more of a heightened interest and speculation there is about the coming of the end of the age and Jesus' return.

[Transition] – In addition to this parallel there is a broader and more pervasive similarity between the believers in Thessalonica and those of us who are believers today.

- For example, believers in Thessalonica found themselves constantly fighting to swim upstream in a Godless and self-absorbed culture. Like many Pastors and religious leaders today, Paul was concerned about the growth of the church's faith in the midst of a society that was self-centered and hedonistic. And, like each of us, the Men, Women and Children who had placed their faith in Jesus were now fully immersed in the battle to break free and stay free from destructive patterns of living that were being pushed on them from every direction in their culture. In short, they were learning to swim against the tide.

[Transition] – With that bit of background, let's step into 1 Thessalonians 1.

Paul begins: *"Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace."*

–1 Thessalonians 1:1

Paul reminds them of their identity

It's worth noting how Paul describes them. He doesn't primarily identify them by their location. He doesn't say, "To the people who live in Thessalonica."

He says: "To the church of the Thessalonians...in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

For Paul, their deepest identity wasn't geographic.

- It wasn't cultural.
- It wasn't economic.
- It wasn't political.
- It wasn't even personal.

Their deepest identity was that they belonged to God through Jesus Christ.

And that's important because we will never understand Christian faithfulness until we understand Christian identity. Because what we do flows from who we are!

[Transition] - Paul continues in verses 2-3, *"We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Their faith had become visible in three primary ways.

Paul list three things together: Faith. Hope. Love. And these aren't abstract theological concepts. He sees them as very practical and visible.

- Faith produces work. (zealous task orientation, eager productive activity)¹
- Love produces labor. (Weariness, toilsome, exertion)²
- Hope produces endurance.

¹ Georg Bertram, "Ἔργον, Ἐργάζομαι, Ἐργάτης, Ἐργασία, Ἐνεργής, Ἐνέργεια, Ἐνεργέω, Ἐνέργημα, Εὐεργεσία, Εὐεργετέω, Εὐεργέτης," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 635.

² Friedrich Hauck, "Κόπος, Κοπιάω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 827.

These three tell us what they believed...was becoming visible in how they lived. That's huge friends. Because it's possible to know a great deal about Christianity without allowing Christianity to change you.

- It's possible to know Bible verses without becoming more Christlike.
- It's possible to attend church for years without becoming more loving.
- It's possible to understand theology and still live in self-centered ways.

But Paul looks at the Thessalonians and says: I see your faith at work. I see your love laboring. I see your hope producing endurance. Their theology had become their biography. Think about that. Their beliefs had become their behavior.

Their faith had become action.

Faith that works is not simply intellectual agreement. Biblical faith trusts God enough to act on what God has said. Faith says: "I believe God; therefore, I will obey God." "I believe God is trustworthy; therefore, I will follow Him even when I don't understand everything." "I believe Jesus is Lord; therefore, I will submit to Him as Lord of my life."

Don't misunderstand, Paul isn't teaching salvation by works. The gospel message is that we are saved by grace through faith. (period). But genuine faith never remains completely invisible. Grace, truly embraced and digested, changes people. If God has genuinely captured your heart, eventually your faith begins showing up in your choices.

- It affects how you treat people.
- It affects how you spend your time.
- It affects what you do with your resources.
- It affects how you respond when you're mistreated.
- It affects what you do when nobody is watching.
- It affects how you live at home.
- It affects how you conduct yourself at work.

[Transition] - Paul was commending their faith and how their beliefs had become observable actions. He commends their faith that worked. Next, he commends their love that labored.

Their love labored.

Biblical love is not merely an emotion. Biblical love can be defined as "Actions to meet the needs of another." In other words, love gets involved. Love serves. Love sacrifices. Love gives. Love leans in when the going gets tough. That's why Paul uses the word "labor."

He's not talking about some sort of easy love. This is costly love.

- It's the kind of love that gets up early to serve.
- The kind of love that stays late.
- The kind of love that listens to someone who needs to talk.
- The kind of love that forgives.
- The kind of love that serves someone who can't repay you.
- The kind of love that keeps showing up.
- The kind of love that keeps one's preferences in perspective.

[Transition] - Having called out their faith that works, and their love that labors, he addresses their hope that endures. Hope that produces endurance.

Their hope produced Endurance

This may be the most important idea for the entire series. Because Thessalonica wasn't an easy place to follow Jesus. These Christians were experiencing opposition. They had discovered that following Jesus doesn't mean life suddenly becomes easy.

And yet they had something that enabled them to remain faithful—Hope. Not wishful thinking. Not optimism. Not "I hope things get better." Biblical hope is much more substantive than that.

Biblical hope is confidence in what God has promised. And Christian hope ultimately rests in a person—the Lord Jesus.

Paul says they had "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus." Their hope gave them staying power/stick-to-itiveness. Their hope kept them going. And this is one of the great themes we're going to see throughout Thessalonians.

What you believe about the future affects how you live in the present. If you believe nothing lies beyond this life, then ultimately everything has to be measured by what happens here.

But if Jesus is coming again...

- If resurrection is real...
- If judgment is real...
- If eternity is real...
- If God's promises are true...

Then what happens today is important—but it isn't ultimate. This isn't all there is! Thank God. That's Christian hope. And Christian hope produces endurance.

[Transition] - Having commended them for their faith, love, and hope, Paul also commends them for how they have allowed the gospel to transform them. Look at verses 4-5.

"For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

The Gospel does more than inform, it transforms.

This is a remarkable statement. Paul says the gospel came to them "not only in word." The gospel was certainly communicated through words. But the gospel is not *merely information* that enters our minds. The gospel is truth that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, transforms our lives.

Paul says it came: *"with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction."* And then in verse 6 he says: *"You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."* –1 Thessalonians 1:6

Notice the combination: Affliction and joy. Those two things don't normally appear together. We expect: Affliction and discouragement. Affliction and fear. Affliction and anxiety. But Paul says: *"You welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."*

They had discovered something Christians throughout history have discovered: Joy doesn't require easy circumstances. Christian joy is deeper than circumstances:

- You can have trouble and still have joy.
- You can experience loss and still have hope.
- You can face uncertainty and still have peace.
- You can walk through suffering and still know that God is faithful.

Why? Because Christian joy isn't ultimately produced by what's happening around us. It's produced by the one who lives within us and what we are confident lies ahead.

[Transition] - And because of their observable transformation verse 7 says they became a role model. Paul says, *"you became a model to all the believers."* And then verse 8, *"The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere."*

Their witness was their transformed lives

Paul basically says: "We don't even have to tell people about you. They're already talking about you." Their reputation had traveled. Their faith had become known. Their lives were speaking.

Think about that. They weren't famous. They weren't powerful. They weren't influential by the standards of their world. But God had transformed their lives so dramatically that their faith became a witness far beyond their immediate congregation.

And that raises an interesting question for us: What are we as a church body known for?

If someone who doesn't attend our church were asked, "What is that church like?" What would they say? Would they say:

"They're a church that loves people."

"They're generous."

"They serve."

"They care about their community."

"They're people of integrity."

"They're always there when someone is hurting."

"They genuinely love Jesus."

"They live what they believe."

[Transition]- That's the kind of reputation Paul is describing. Their witness was their transformed lives! But what did that transformation look like? What were people saying about them? Notice in verse 9 describes their reputation, *"They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."*

That's transformation. *"You turned to God from idols."* That's repentance. You turned from something. But even more importantly, you turned to God. Christianity is not merely turning away from bad things. It's turning toward the living God.

And that's important because you can remove something from your life without replacing it with God.

- You can stop drinking.
- You can stop using offensive language.
- You can stop certain behaviors.
- You can clean up your life.

- And still...not know Jesus.

The Christian life isn't fundamentally about behavior modification. It's about *transformation through relationship with Jesus*. They turned from idols to serve the living and true God.

It's worth noting, that word "idols" matters. Because we may be tempted to think: "Well, I don't have idols." I don't have a little statue sitting on a shelf that I bow down to.

We talked about this in our Deuteronomy and Isaiah series this past year. An idol is a counterfeit god. It is anything we treat as ultimate: the source of our identity, the basis of our security, the measure of our worth, the cause of our joy, or the means of our control. Whatever sits in that place is an idol—and it will always fail us.

For some people, it's money.

- For others, its reputation, career, or success.
- For some, it's comfort.
- For some, it's their family.
- For others, it's control.
- For some, it's pleasure.
- For some, it's approval.

How can you know where the possible idols are in your life? Ask yourself: What would devastate me to lose... because I've allowed it to become more important than God? What am I most afraid of losing—because I've let it take a place in my life where only God belongs?

The Thessalonians turned from their idols to God. And that's what the gospel does. It doesn't simply make us better versions of ourselves. It reorients our lives in right relationship to God!

[Transition] – Paul wraps up his opening comments to the Thessalonian believers with one of the clearest statements of Christian hope in the

New Testament. He says now we, *"Wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."*

There it is. There's the reminder. Right here at the beginning of Thessalonians. Jesus is coming! The resurrection happened. Jesus is alive. And he's coming again. To rescue us from his coming wrath. For now, we wait. We wait.

When we hear the word "wait," we typically think about inactivity. Waiting at the doctor's office. Waiting in the Costco gas lines. Waiting for a flight. Waiting. Bored...twiddling our thumbs.

But biblical waiting isn't passive. Biblical waiting means living with confident expectation. It's preparing for what you know is coming. My middle daughter in Colorado asked us to come one week before her baby was due. Boy had I forgotten how much there is to do in prep for a baby. That baby hadn't arrived yet, but there was a ton to do. We worked our tails off every day that week. Then she was 5 days late. So, guess what...the "to do" list kept growing. Guys, because we knew what was coming, it ordered our today. Because the future often impacts the present!

That's what Paul is saying. Jesus is coming. Therefore, live differently today. The future is not irrelevant to the present. What we believe is coming determines how we live while we're waiting.

And this becomes one of the central themes of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Paul will talk repeatedly about the return of Christ...not to simply to satisfy our curiosity about the future.

He teaches about Christ's return to transform our lives in the present. The doctrine of Christ's return is intended to produce:

- holiness.
- faithfulness.
- perseverance.
- hope.

- readiness.
- mission.

In other words: We don't wait for Jesus by standing still. We wait for Jesus by living faithfully.

The Marks of a Gospel-Transformed life

So let me bring Paul's description of this church together. If we were to walk through 1 Thessalonians 1 and ask, "What does a gospel-transformed church look like?" Paul gives us three memorable answers.

1. **Faith that works**—They trusted God enough to eagerly obey Him.
2. **Love that labors**—They loved people enough to tirelessly serve them.
3. **Hope that endures**—They trusted God's promises enough to remain faithful.

Questions for Reflection this week:

1. Is your faith producing obedience?

Maybe the question for you today is: "What is God asking me to trust Him enough to do?" You already know what the Bible says. The question is will you obey it.

- Maybe you need to forgive someone.
- Maybe you need to make something right.
- Maybe you need to stop compromising in an area of your life.
- Maybe you need to step into an opportunity to serve.
- Maybe you need to trust God with something you've been trying desperately to control.

What is God asking you to trust him enough to do?

2. Is your love producing service?

Maybe God is asking you: "Who can I love through you?"

Who needs encouragement?

Who needs help?

Who needs your attention?
Who needs a phone call?
Who needs a meal?
Who needs prayer?
Love labors.

Who needs someone to walk
alongside them?

3. Is your hope producing endurance?

Maybe you're in a difficult season right now. Maybe nobody else knows how difficult it has been. Maybe you've been wondering: "How much longer?" "Where is God?"

As he did today, Paul might remind you:

- Jesus is coming.
- Your circumstances are not the end of the story.
- Your suffering is not the end of the story.
- Your disappointment is not the end of the story.
- Your grief is not the end of the story.
- Your unanswered questions are not the end of the story.

Jesus is coming. And because Jesus is coming, you can remain faithful today! And that's a faith worth talking about.