

09/20/26

Living for Christ in Light of His Return

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–3

Introduction

Letters used to be a much more common part of everyday life. Some of you probably remember passing handwritten notes in class. As children, many wrote letters to Santa at Christmas. People had pen pals and exchanged letters across the country or around the world.

We sent postcards while we were on vacation. We wrote thank-you notes after receiving a gift. Friends kept in touch through letters. And some of us may have even written a love letter at one point or another.

Today, of course, personal letters have become a thing of the past. But throughout history, letters have carried meaning, and some have preserved remarkably significant moments.

“Washington, July 13, 1863.

My Dear General,

I do not remember that you and I ever met personally. I write this now as a grateful acknowledgement for the almost inestimable service you have done the country. I wish to say a word further. When you first reached the vicinity of Vicksburg, I thought you should do what you finally did — march the troops across the neck, run the batteries with the transports and thus go below; and I never had any faith, except a general hope that you knew better than I... When you got below... I thought you should go down the river and join Gen. Banks; and when you turned Northward... I feared it was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgement that you were right and I was wrong.

Yours very truly

(Signed) A. Lincoln”¹

Now, 1 Thessalonians is obviously a very different kind of letter. It is the inspired Word of God. But it reminds us that a letter does not have to be long to carry significance. Over the coming weeks, Lord willing, we are going to study this short letter and not just study it but be transformed by it.

Main Point: This morning, we will reflect on three considerations from this letter and our passage that encourage us in the gospel and motivate us to live for Christ in light of His return.

Outline:

¹ <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/mss/mal/247/2477000/2477000.pdf> (Accessed: 9/19/2026)

I. Consider the Foundational Features of the Letter

II. Treasure the Redemptive Realities of the Church (1)

III. Imitate the Commendable Character of the Church (2–3)

It is always my prayer that we would not just be hearers of God's word, but doers.

I. Consider the Foundational Features of the Letter

Before we begin working verse by verse through this letter, we want to first understand the context in which this church was established, we want to become familiar with the contents of the letter, and we want to know the repeated themes we are going to see.

A. The Founding of the Thessalonian Church

We want to go back and consider how this church came to be and what circumstances surrounded Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians.

The Thessalonian church was established during Paul's second missionary journey. Acts 16 records that Paul and Silas had just been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16:16–40). Then Acts 17:1 tells us that they traveled to Thessalonica.

Verses 2–3 records that Paul entered the synagogue and for three Sabbaths **“reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and [saying,] ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’”**

God blessed that preaching, and Acts 17:4 tells us that some of the Jews believed, along with **“a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.”**

As these believers were being discipled, Paul and his companions were ministering among them with love, sacrifice, hard work, and integrity. But as the gospel advanced in Thessalonica eventually it brought persecution.

According to verse 5, the unbelieving Jews became jealous, gathered wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob, and set the city into an uproar.

Then verses 6–7 explain that they dragged Jason and other believers before the city authorities and claimed they had **“upset the world”** and acted contrary to Caesar's decrees because they said **“that there is another king, [named] Jesus.”**

Finally, in verses 9–10 records that in light of the persecution, the believers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. Persecution marked this church from its beginning. Paul had suffered in the events leading up to him bringing the gospel to Thessalonica, and those who believed continued to face opposition after he was forced to leave (1 Thess. 2:14; 3:3–4).

Although Paul's time in Thessalonica was brief and ended abruptly, his relationship with these believers continued. And as we turn from the history behind the church to the letter itself, it is helpful to see how Paul addresses their needs and concerns from beginning to end.

B. The Overview of the Letter

Broadly speaking, 1 Thessalonians has two major divisions. Chapters 1–3 largely cover the personal and historical details of Paul's relationship and ministry to the Thessalonians. Chapters 4–5 then shift more directly to Paul's instruction and exhortation, calling the church to continue living faithfully in light of Christ's return.

The letter begins in **1:1–10** introduces the church and commends the faithful qualities in them. Paul gives thanks for their faith, love, and hope, and recalls how they turned from idols to serve the living God and to wait for His Son from heaven.

As we move into **2:1–3:13**, it looks back on Paul's ministry and relationship with this church. And he gives thanks for their reception of the Word and endurance through persecution and expresses his longing to see them again.

Because he could not return, Paul sent Timothy to strengthen them, and Timothy's encouraging report brought Paul great comfort and joy. This section closes with Paul praying for their continued growth in love and holiness.

The second major division begins in **4:1–12**, Paul turns more directly to practical Christian living. He gives them this exhortation on continued growth and sanctification in everyday life.

Then in **4:13–5:11**, Paul addresses the return of Christ and the Day of the Lord. He comforts them concerning believers who had died, assures them of the resurrection and gathering of believers at Christ's coming, and calls them to remain spiritually alert and faithful as they wait for that day.

Finally, **5:12–28** gives another staccato style list of practical instructions concerning life together in the church and concludes with Paul's prayer, final greetings, and blessing.

And it is here, in **5:24**, that we find the key verse for our series, **“Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”** That verse captures that while believers are called to live faithfully, our confidence ultimately comes from the faithfulness of the God who calls us, sanctifies us, and preserves us as His people.

So that gives us the basic content of the letter. But as we work through those chapters, there are also several truths that surface again and again. These recurring themes will help us understand not only what Paul says, but what God wanted these believers, and ultimately us, to become.

C. Major Themes of the Letter

One is the transforming power of the gospel. We need to always remember that the gospel not just information to agree with, memorize, or affirm. It is the truth of God and produces genuine conversion and a transformed life.

We will also see an emphasis on faithful ministry and the authority of God's Word. Paul models courage, integrity, gentleness, sacrifice, and pastoral affection, while the Thessalonians are commended for receiving the Word of God and living under its authority.

Another major theme is sanctification. God calls His people to holiness, and that holiness is meant to affect every area of life. Our purity, love, work, relationships, conduct, prayer, gratitude, and life together in the church.

And woven throughout the entire letter is the return of Jesus Christ. His second coming gives believers hope, comfort, urgency, perseverance, and motivation to remain faithful, which is why our series is titled Faithful Until He Comes: Living for Christ in Light of His Return.

I was talking with my son recently about baseball and trying to teach him a simple principle: the more you put into something, the more you tend to get out of it. If he wants to grow as a baseball player, he cannot just show up for the games. He has to practice, work on the fundamentals, and put in the time.

And the same is true as we study God's Word. We certainly depend upon God to teach and transform us, but the more intentionally we read, study, meditate on, and discuss His Word, the more we will understand it and benefit from it.

So if we really want God to use 1 Thessalonians in our hearts and lives over these coming weeks, let me encourage you to do a few simple things as we study this letter together:

Pray. Pray for yourself, your family, and our church family. Pray that God would use this letter to grow us in holiness and Christlikeness.

Read. Lord willing, we will be in 1 Thessalonians for about 20 weeks. The entire book is only 89 verses, so you could easily read it once a week, or more. Read with a pen in hand. Mark your Bible, jot down questions, and record insights. The more familiar you become with the whole letter, the better you will understand each individual passage.

Memorize. There is a wealth of practical instruction here worth storing in our hearts for our own growth, for meditation, and for counseling and encouraging one another.

Prepare. Read the passage we will study before Sunday and begin thinking about what it teaches concerning God, Christ, the gospel, and the Christian life.

Discuss. Discuss what you are learning with your family, your Community Group, and others in the church, and encourage one another to put these truths into practice.

Remember the goal. We want God to use His Word to make us more like Christ as we eagerly await His return.

With foundational features in mind, turn now to verse 1. Which leads us to our next point...

II. Treasure the Redemptive Realities of the Church (1)

Although verse 1 may appear to be an insignificant greeting, as I was reminded while listening to a sermon on this passage, this greeting is no less inspired than the rest of the letter.

And even in this opening greeting, we find four redemptive realities of the church that are worth treasuring: God gives His church faithful servants, He calls sinners to become His people, He brings believers into union with Himself through Christ, and He supplies His people with grace and peace.

The **first** redemptive reality is that God gives His church faithful servants.

Verse 1 opens with the with, **“Paul and Silvanus and Timothy.”** All three men had shared in the ministry that brought the gospel to them and had a personal relationship with this young church.

The Apostle **“Paul”** was the primary author of this epistle. Although he often writes in the plural, referring to **“we”** as he includes **“Silvanus and Timothy”** in their shared ministry (1:2; 2:1, 5, 9, 13; 3:1–2, 6), he also speaks personally as **“I, Paul”** (2:18) and **“I also sent”** (3:5), and these statements confirmed he was the primary author.

Who is **“Silvanus”**? This is the Roman form of the name Silas. He was a respected leader among the Jerusalem believers and a gifted prophet (Acts 15:22, 32). He later became Paul’s companion on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:40), suffering with him at Philippi before traveling with him to Thessalonica (Acts 16:23–25; 17:1–10).

We are likely more familiar with **“Timothy.”** He was a young disciple from Lystra whom Paul chose to accompany him on the second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–3), and he eventually became one of Paul’s closest and most trusted coworkers.

Timothy also had a special connection with this church. When Paul became concerned about the Thessalonians, he sent Timothy back **“to strengthen and encourage”** them in their faith (3:1–

2). Timothy later returned with the encouraging report of their faith and love that helped prompt the writing of this letter (3:6).

So even in these three names we see something of God's grace. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy were men who knew these believers, loved them, sacrificed for them, and desired their spiritual good. God graciously provides His church with faithful servants who labor for the spiritual good of His people.

The **second** redemptive reality is that God calls sinners to become His people.

Having identified those associated with the writing of the letter, Paul next identifies its recipients: **"To the church of the Thessalonians."**

The word translated **"church"** is *ekklēsia*. Etymologically, the word is composed of *ek*, meaning "out of," and *kaleō*, meaning "to call," and originally carried the idea of those called out to assemble.

By the time of the New Testament, however, the word had come to be used more broadly for an assembly or congregation, and could even refer to a secular gathering (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). But the theological reality behind that older idea is clearly present in Scripture. The church is made up of those whom God has called out of darkness, sin, and the world unto Himself through the gospel.

And this church existed in the city of **"Thessalonica,"** which was one of the most important cities in Macedonia. Founded around 315 B.C. and named after Thessalonike, the half-sister of Alexander the Great.

Thessalonica eventually became the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was a large, prosperous port city, making it a center of business, travel, culture, and religious influence. And in the middle of this prominent and pagan city, God established a church.

That is the redemptive reality we do not want to miss. The gospel did not merely save isolated individuals; God gathered redeemed sinners together into a church family. In the middle of a pagan city, there was now a distinct community of people who worshiped the true God, lived under His Word, and belonged to one another as His people. The church itself is one of the gracious blessings God gives us through the gospel.

The **third** redemptive reality is that God brings believers into union with Himself through Christ.

Paul then moves from identifying where this church was located and gives us an even richer description of where they now stood spiritually. They were, **"in God the Father and the Lord**

Jesus Christ.” Through the gospel, those who had once been alienated from God had been brought into a new relationship with Him.

Calling God **“Father”** speaks of the love, care, security, and provision believers now enjoy from Him. And by placing **“God the Father”** and **“the Lord Jesus Christ”** together under the same preposition, Paul declares Christ’s equality and deity. Jesus is God in the flesh, the second member of the Trinity.

So consider the change that had taken place in these believers. Those who were once at enmity with God because of their sin, were now in union with God through Christ. They belonged to Him. They were loved by Him. They were secure in Him. And those same realities are true of every genuine believer today.

The **fourth** redemptive reality is that God supplies His people with grace and peace.

Having reminded them of who they are and the relationship they now enjoy with God, Paul closes his greeting with this gracious blessing: **“Grace to you and peace.”**

Paul brings together language familiar to both Greek and Jewish readers. In place of the ordinary Greek greeting *charein* (“greetings”), he uses *charis*, **“grace,”** and joins it with **“peace,”** reflecting the Jewish greeting *shalom*.

“Grace” is God’s undeserved favor toward us in Christ. It is the grace by which we are saved and the grace upon which we continue to depend throughout the Christian life.

“Peace” speaks first of the objective peace believers possess with God because of the finished work of Christ. But that objective reality is also meant to produce a subjective experience of peace. It is a confidence and calmness of heart that comes from knowing we have been made right with God.

So, when Paul says, **“Grace to you and peace,”** he is expressing that these already belong to every believer in Christ, but that he desires that the Thessalonians would know, enjoy, and experience these blessings in an increasing measure.

Sometimes we simply need to stop and remember how richly blessed we really are. We can easily go through life with a discontented heart. We lose sight of the ordinary graces God has provided like food, water, clothing, shelter, employment, transportation, family, health, and countless other gifts. Reflecting on those blessings should cultivate gratitude and contentment.

But how much more should we stop and consider everything that is ours in Christ? We have been called out of darkness, out of spiritual death, we have been forgiven of our sins,

reconciled to God, adopted into His family, united to Christ, made part of His church, given faithful shepherds and fellow believers, and supplied by His immeasurable grace and inexpressible peace.

Remembering these redemptive realities should deepen our contentment, increase our gratitude, and motivate us to live faithfully for the One who has so richly blessed us.

And these redemptive realities are the very truths that enable and motivate us to live faithfully. The indicatives of the gospel (what God has done for us in Christ) always fuel the imperatives of the gospel (or how God now calls us to live). And that brings us naturally to the character Paul commends in these believers.

III. Imitate the Commendable Character of the Church (2–3)

As we come to verses 2–3, there are actually two examples of faithfulness worth imitating. In verse 2, Paul gives us a pattern of faithful prayer, and in verse 3, the Thessalonians give us a pattern of faithful Christian character.

Look at verse 2: **“We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers.”**

Even in this brief statement, we learn much about prayer. He prayed with others (“**we**”), this included Silvanus and Timothy. He prayed thankfully (“**we give thanks**”). He prayed consistently (“**always**”). And he prayed with concern for others (“**for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers**”).

But notice especially where Paul directs his gratitude. He is thankful *for* the Thessalonians, which expresses his genuine love and appreciation for them, but he gives thanks **“to God.”**

Paul understood that the spiritual qualities he was about to commend in them ultimately came from the gracious work of God. Every time he remembered their faithfulness, his heart was directed to the One who had produced that fruit in their lives.

That is an important reminder for us. The gospel is never intended to make much of us. It is always intended to magnify the grace of God. Whatever spiritual growth we experience, whatever faith, love, holiness, maturity, or usefulness we live out is ultimately the grace of God at work in us.

But Paul not only gives us a pattern to imitate in the way he prayed, but the Thessalonians also give us a pattern to imitate in the way they lived.

Now we find the character qualities that stood out to Paul and were the cause of his thanksgiving. Look at 3 **“constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love**

and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.”

To be “**constantly bearing in mind**” means that Paul continually remembered and reflected upon these qualities as he prayed for them. Paul highlighted this common threefold description of Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope (cf. 5:8; 1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4–5).

It has been said that faith looks back to Christ’s sufficient work in the past, love looks to Christ and serves Him in the present, and hope looks forward to the fulfillment of Christ’s promises. And each one of these qualities produced visible fruit in the lives of the Thessalonians.

First, Paul remembers their “**work of faith.**” Their faith produced action. The word *work* refers to deeds or activity. It is the visible action of what they believed. Their works did not earn salvation; rather, their works gave evidence that their faith was genuine.

Second, Paul remembers their “**labor of love.**” *Labor* carries the idea of strenuous effort, toil, or giving oneself unsparingly. Their love moved them to sacrifice and serve. Their love for Christ produced love for His people, and that love motivated them to labor for the spiritual good of others. Genuine Christian love is willing to expend itself in service to God and His people.

Third, Paul remembers their “**steadfastness of hope.**” *Steadfastness* refers to endurance, patience, and perseverance under difficult circumstances. It’s the ability to remain faithful while carrying a heavy load.

The Thessalonians were already suffering for their faith, yet they continued to persevere because their hope was “**in our Lord Jesus Christ.**” They were waiting for God’s Son from heaven (1:10), confidently expecting His return and all the blessings that would accompany it.

Christian hope enables believers to endure present suffering because they know what Christ has promised for the future (cf. Rom. 8:24–25).

Ultimately, all three qualities center on Jesus Christ. So, let’s take a moment to fix our eyes on Him.

Our **faith** rests in Christ and in what He has accomplished for us. Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh and lived the perfectly righteous life that none of us has lived or could live. **Hebrews 4:15** says that He was “**tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.**” He perfectly obeyed the Father in thought, word, attitude, and action.

And then He willingly went to the cross, where He suffered and died as a substitute for sinners, bearing the judgment our sins deserve. He rose bodily from the grave, conquering sin and

death. **1 Peter 3:18** says, “**Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God.**”

Salvation rests entirely upon who Christ is and what He has accomplished. There is no other way for sinners to be forgiven and made right with God. You must believe in Christ. And the good news is that His work is completely sufficient, meaning that His perfect righteousness, sacrificial death, and resurrection are enough to save completely all who trust in Him.

Our capacity for **love** also comes from Christ. In **John 13:34**, after humbling Himself to wash His disciples’ feet, He said, “**even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.**” **1 Peter 2:23** says that “**while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats.**” Even from the cross, He prayed, “**Father, forgive them**”(Luke 23:34). Jesus shows us that genuine love continues to respond righteously even when others sin against us.

But you should also remember the love He has shown to you. As Paul says in **Galatians 2:20**, He is “**the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.**” Think of how often you have failed Him, strayed from Him, been unfaithful to Him, and fallen short of what He deserves, and yet His love toward you has remained. He continues to extend patience, forgiveness, care, provision, and His grace to you.

Through the gospel, He changes our hearts, and as we know Christ, commune with Him, and meditate on His love for us, His love increasingly transforms the way we love others, even those who hurt us, oppose us, sin against us, or treat us as enemies.

Our **hope** is also in Christ. The Jesus who died and rose again is coming back. He promised His disciples in **John 14:3**, “**I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.**” Christ will return for His people. He will raise those who have died in Him, complete the salvation He began in us, and bring us into His presence forever.

That means that whatever suffering, disappointment, loss, temptation, or difficulty you experience in this life is temporary. Christ is coming, every promise He has made will be fulfilled, and that produces in us a steadfast hope.

So if you do not know Christ, understand that you cannot produce this kind of faith, love, and hope in your own strength. Your greatest problem is your sin and your separation from a holy God, and your only hope is Jesus Christ.

God commands you to repent. To turn from your sin, from living for yourself, and from valuing things as more important than Him. You must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and submit to Him. In doing this you show that you trust entirely in Him.

As we continue our study of this short but rich letter, may we treasure what God has done for us in Christ and then live in a manner worthy of those realities. May our prayers increasingly reflect Paul's example, and may our lives be marked by a faith that works, a love that labors, and a hope that endures.

May God make us a more faithful people who live for Christ in light of His return, confident that **“Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”**

Let's pray.

Benediction: **Romans 15:13 “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”**