

People of the Light: 1. Faithful Despite Opposition
1 Thessalonians 1:1-7
July 24, 2022
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Today, we begin a new series based on the first letter of the Apostle Paul to the people living in the city of Thessalonica in the year 51 AD. Although they lived way before television, the internet and cell phones, the core problems they faced and the challenges they experienced are remarkably familiar to us today. We all know we are living in uncertain times, both as individuals and as a society. So much seems to be spinning out of control and in the wrong direction. From our shaky economy to the shifting morality, navigating ongoing COVID, and the slow, arduous work towards a peaceful existence, it can seem like our world is collapsing around us. But rather than throw up our hands in discouragement and quit, this brief letter from Paul challenges us to live out our faith in an authentic and consistent manner. So, for the next three weeks we're going to draw encouragement from this letter to see what a healthy, young church looked like in the first century and some of the attributes of this early church that we should still model today as we seek to live as people of the light.

In order for us to really relate to the Thessalonian church and draw from their experience, we need to spend some time getting to know them and understand the historical context of what is written. Thessalonica was the largest city in all of Macedonia, with an estimated population of 200,000. It was a crucial city for sharing the news of Jesus because it straddled the Via Egnatia a road constructed by the Roman government that stretched over 700 miles. The main street on this city was part of that road which linked Rome to the East. If Christianity could be settled there, it was bound to spread east along the road to Asia and beyond. So Thessalonica was crucial in making Christianity a world religion.

Most of the population of Thessalonica was Greek but there were also a significant number of Romans, Asians, and a host of other nationalities calling this large metropolis home. Many of the wealthier Roman citizens chose Thessalonica as their home. But as in any big city, then and now, it had its share of poor people. Interestingly, many of the people in the city were involved in the typical forms of big city idolatry, but they were dissatisfied with their pagan practices and were searching for a more meaningful life.

When Paul first came to Thessalonica, about a year earlier, he was traveling with Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy, on his second missionary journey. He had this tradition that whenever he entered a new town, and if there was a synagogue in it, he would go directly there and on the sabbath day, he would reason with the Jews about Jesus being the promised Messiah and his ministry in Thessalonica was having an impact.

Luke tells us in the book of Acts, (17:5-9) that there were a few Jews but also many God-fearing gentiles in Thessalonica. These were people who had embraced the Jewish understanding of God and were starting to understand the saving work of Jesus on the cross. There was powerful evangelism happening in there. Yet, the success Paul was having was making some of the Jewish leaders nervous and jealous, so they actually hired a mob (Luke calls them "bad characters") to stir up trouble for Paul and his traveling companions. After just 3 weeks of being in the city, they were chased out of town.

So, Paul continued his travels through Berea and then on to Corinth. It was here that Paul began wondering about the new Christians in Thessalonica because he had such a short time with them. He was concerned for them. So, he sent his associate Timothy back to Thessalonica

on a fact-finding mission, of sorts, just to see how the church was doing. Fortunately, when Timothy returned to Paul, he had good news to report. The new Christians were doing well. In fact, they were flourishing in their faith. When Paul heard this, he was overjoyed and so he sat down and wrote this letter. By the way, this is the first letter of our New Testament, being written in about 51 AD, even before the gospel of Mark, which was the first gospel to have been written, which was written about four years later.

This letter begins, as they did back in those days, by first identifying the author of the letter. Now a days we sign our letters at the end, but they started their letters with this. So, this identifies the author as Paul. He also mentions Silvanus (Silas for short) and Timothy. Then he mentions by name to whom this letter is being written, the church in Thessalonica. And he begins with his usual greeting, "Grace and peace to you all."

The word "grace" in Greek is **charis**. This was a common greeting among the Greeks. They would say it to each other when they met. "Grace to you." But the common greeting among the Jews was "shalom" which means peace. So, Paul, being a scholar of both Hebrew and Greek, put both traditional greetings together saying, "grace and peace to you." He never inverted the two. And there was more to it than just trying to blend the two cultures together. It was always grace and then peace because he believed you can't have real peace without knowing the grace of God. Grace, which is God's favor in your life, completely independent from your actions or thoughts, is what produces peace. Through God's grace, you know God loves you and hears your prayers, regardless of what you've done/not done in your life. But if you believe life with God is subject to your doing good and not sinning, or if you think for one moment, "I can't even pray to God about this. God won't hear me because of the way I've acted", that's not how God's grace works. Knowing I am loved, even in the midst of my mess-ups (and I mess up often), or when I feel like I have to be perfect or "good enough", I still have peace in my heart because I know the grace of God, the unmerited, unearned, grace of God. God chose to love you from the beginning, before you were even born and there is nothing you can do to lose that love. God's grace establishes peace of mind. That is why Paul always said grace and then peace.

Paul goes on, verse two, *"We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1 Thes. 1:2-3) This verse holds the keys as what empowered the church in Thessalonica and what can encourage us still today.

The first thing that Paul says is he gives thanks for is their **work of faith**. I think the NIV translation actually gets the closer to Paul's true intent here. It says, "your work produced by faith." The Greek word used here for work translates to "good deeds", your daily actions. It is not talking about your job. It is addressing the way you live your life by being a good neighbor, how you care for the poor and the homeless and how you stand up for those who find themselves on the outside looking in. It is talking about living a life of moral uprightness. Paul is telling them here, you do all these things, not because of a legalistic demand but because of your faith. A faith that produces good works. So often (and I'm preaching to myself here too) we try to do good, be perfect, work hard enough, to get in good with God, to earn God's grace. But that's not how it works. It is faith that produces good works and not the other way around.

Paul goes on to praise them for their **labor of love**, that's their labor prompted by love. This word for labor/work is a different Greek word. Instead of referring to "good deeds" this one means just plain, old hard work. This is the kind of work that is exhausting. I thank my God that your hard work is done out of a prompting of love. Paul doesn't list their hard work. All he cares

about is that everything they do comes from a place of love because when something is prompted by love, it's going to be good. But love of what? Love of people? While that may be part of it, predominantly, this is a love for Jesus that motivates us and prompts us. If you are serving for recognition and praise from people, you are ultimately going to be disappointed because people are capable of doing some pretty awful stuff. People will criticize you, let you down, and they'll take advantage of you. And if you're doing it for people, you're going to get discouraged. Have you ever said, "No one around here appreciates what I do. No one has even said thank you." Those statements say, I'm doing this for the approval of people. But when you labor for the love of Jesus, you've found the right motivator. Paul said in 2 Corinthians, "for the love of Christ controls us." It's the love of Christ that motivates us from a place of apathy and propels us to a place of service.

My daughter Elizabeth and I once found a stray dog darting in the middle of very busy traffic on very cold winter day. We stopped to help the dog but when I went to pick her up, she tried to bite me. I know she was just trying to protect herself, but it made me reluctant to rescue her. Have you ever tried to help a dog or other animal and gotten bit? Maybe that animal was tangled up in something but when you went to help, you got bit? That kind of thing happens with people too. The right motive is love so when people bite back you can say, (maybe to yourself) I wasn't doing this for you. I was doing it because I love Jesus.

Finally, Paul gives thanks to God for the people of Thessalonica and their **steadfastness of hope** for their perseverance and endurance. It refers to something that is lasting even when times get hard. And what was lasting, what was their hope. In my preparation for this message, I decided to look up the meaning of hope. I mean, I know what it means but I wondered how others would define it. By doing that, sometimes I find I come to a new or deeper understanding of the word. Wikipedia defines hope this way. "*An optimistic state of mind that is based on expectations with positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life of the world at large.*" So, how's your hope in the world doing these days? Yeah, me too. Not very well. Because of their endurance of hope in Jesus, the Thessalonians were able to continue.

Most of us have had times in our lives when we've been ready to quit in response to pressures and criticism. Maybe you can recall a time in your life when someone was critical of you, and you wanted to throw in the towel. Over the past couple of years, we have seen droves of teachers and health care workers quitting the work they love because of burnout. This past week I listened to a podcast called First Person. The episode was titled *The Great Pastor Resignation*. In it, they interviewed a former pastor who because of the mounting pressures of pastoring, which came to a head during the pandemic, left the ministry after 25 years. In a 2021 survey by The Barna Group, the country's foremost researcher on religion, it showed that two out of five pastors nationwide, about 38%, have quit or are seriously thinking about quitting the ministry. They are experiencing an overwhelming sense of responsibility and an overwhelming sense of loneliness and hopelessness. Thankfully, there are pastors whose endurance of hope is strong and feel resilient enough to still answer God's call on their lives. For me, I believe the church will do exactly what Jesus said the church will do when experiencing affliction and that it will thrive, even in challenging times.

Then I think we all continue to feel the effects of the polarization of politics that no matter what is said, it feels like it has an underlying meaning that represents one side or the other. And we feel so strongly about our own beliefs that it is sometimes hard to even talk to someone who is in a different place or to even be around people who are different than ourselves. And then of course, there is what is happening in our country on racism and xenophobia resulting in even

deeper pain and brokenness. And we find ourselves hurting and so it makes us consider giving up instead of having the strength to persevere for what we believe.

There's this quote by nineteenth century writer and philosopher, Elbert Hubbard. *"The only way to avoid criticism is to do nothing, say nothing and be nothing."* No one wants to live like that but sometimes we just can't take one more person doing or saying something that hurts our feelings. Can you imagine if Paul had done that? That would have been the end of Christianity. But instead, he spoke up for what he believed because sometimes you have to do the right thing even if it means getting bit. Or think about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Everywhere he preached there were people who harassed him. They brought rocks, rotten eggs, and rotten tomatoes to throw at him while he preached in the town square. Once while he was preaching, some people brought a whole bag of manure and they snuck up on him from behind and dumped it on his head. Then there was the time when he was taking a nap after preaching and some people set the house on fire. Every major newspaper in England mocked him but he did not give up. And I am glad that he did because his perseverance is what makes it possible for us to be together today.

Just outside of Johannesburg, South Africa, is a school called Ditshego House of Laughter. This is a non-profit organization providing multiple services for approximately 350 vulnerable children living in the informal settlement of Mooiplaas. More than 46,000 people make their home in Mooiplaas which is at the base of a landfill. They live in shacks made from corrugated tin, cardboard, plastic, and plywood found among the trash. There is no electricity, no water and a very inadequate sanitation system. There are 30 teachers and other employees hired from the settlement and living among the children they serve. The children are guaranteed one nutritious meal a day, health care and immunizations and they learn the same things that preschool children in America learn in hopes that after preschool, these kids might have a chance at an education. Education is their ticket out. This situation might seem overwhelming to some, but not to Isabelle, a trained social worker and a faith follower of Jesus. She has devoted the last 14 years to this preschool. When asked what compels her to show up every day, where the stench of the dump is ever present, she said at the age of 14, she heard God tell her to do something with her life that would change the world. When she came to Ditshego, she knew God wanted her there. It is that call that keeps her going.

Now there are going to be times in your life that are challenging or when people are critical of you because of your faith. Here's the word we take away from the Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Don't give up. Your call may not be as dramatic as the Apostle Paul's or as noble as Isabelle's but don't give up. You have been called and continue to be called by Christ. You are called to be an instrument of love and grace. You are called to live, give and serve. Don't give up. As you answer that call, you will find that your own life, and the world, will be changed forever. This week, ask yourself this question, "What won't happen if you don't do what God has called you to do?" Then set an example of what it means to be people of the light.

Let's pray: Loving God, we thank you for your grace and mercy even when we mess up. Thank you for your son, Jesus, who showed us what it means to persevere even in the most challenging of times. Lord, you know there are some folks who feel like giving up, who have lost hope. Renew our strength. Keep our eyes on you. Make us into the people you created us to be so that we can shine your light into this world and live as people of the light. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 24, 2022

Weekly Prayer

Loving God, you are the one who calls us into community with each other to love and work, to support and heal. You call us into community with all people to bring justice and hope, freedom, and truth. Fill my heart, fill my eyes, fill my ears with Your love, that I might share Your love with others. Amen.

Monday, July 25

Scripture: Acts 1:4-8; 17:1-10

While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me: John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Paul and Silas journeyed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, then came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was Paul's custom, he entered the synagogue and for three Sabbaths interacted with them on the basis of the scriptures. Through his interpretation of the scriptures, he demonstrated that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. He declared, "This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ." Some were convinced and joined Paul and Silas, including a larger number of Greek God-worshippers and quite a few prominent women. But the Jews became jealous and brought along some thugs who were hanging out in the marketplace. They formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They attacked Jason's house, intending to bring Paul and Silas before the people. When they didn't find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city officials. They were shouting, "These people who have been disturbing the peace throughout the empire have also come here. What is more, Jason has welcomed them into his home. Every one of them does what is contrary to Caesar's decrees by naming someone else as king: Jesus." This provoked the crowd and the city officials even more. After Jason and the others posted bail, they released them. As soon as it was dark, the brothers and sisters sent Paul and Silas on to Berea. When they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

Observation

The city of Thessalonica was crucial for sharing news of Jesus. It straddled the Via Egnatia (the Roman highway that linked Rome with the East). If Christianity was established there, it was bound to spread East along the Egnatian Road until all Asia was conquered, and West until it stormed even the city of Rome. The coming of Christianity to Thessalonica was crucial in making it into a world religion. Paul used his grasp of the Hebrew scriptures and his speaking skill to win his Thessalonian hearers to faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Application

Paul said Jesus, crucified and risen, embodied all of God's saving action. In what ways has Christ's power brought hope into your life?

Prayer

Gracious God, your great redemptive story reached its turning point in Jesus. When that story took root in Thessalonica, it was on its way to my life. Thank you for that. Help me to find ways to pass it along. Amen.

Tuesday, July 26

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to all of you.

We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God, and we know that he has chosen you. We know this because our good news didn't come to you just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know as well as we do what kind of people we were when we were with you, which was for your sake.

Observation

We often use the word church for a building or a religious organization. But the apostle Paul called his converts the church. The Greek word *ekklēsia* appears 114 times in the New Testament, sixty-two times in Paul's letters. The first use by Paul appears at 1 Thessalonians 1:1 in the greeting to the Christians at Thessalonica. What Paul has in mind is an actual gathering of the Thessalonian Christians. He requests that his letter "be read to all the brothers and sisters" and that they "greet them all with a holy kiss" (1 Thessalonians 5:26–27). For Paul, church was people.

Application

What helps you understand that you may go to the theater or a ball game, but church is who you are, not somewhere you go? What shift in thinking or acting can make that understanding of church a reality for you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as John Wesley's covenant prayer put it, "thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it." Make that a living reality in my life today. Amen.

Wednesday, July 27

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10; 2 Corinthians 4:5-9

You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don't even need to mention it. People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God, and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.

We don't preach about ourselves. Instead, we preach about Jesus Christ as Lord, and we describe ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. God said that light should shine out of the darkness. He is the same one who shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay pots so that the awesome power belongs to God and doesn't come from us. We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren't crushed. We are confused, but we aren't depressed. We are harassed, but we aren't abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren't knocked out.

Observation

In the Roman Empire, there was nothing harmless or casual about calling Jesus "Lord" (verses 6, 8). To let the message about the Lord ring out meant denying the Empire's religious as well as political claim that Caesar was Lord. People who chose to live as committed followers of Jesus the Christ, the anointed Lord, risked their social standing, and sometimes their very lives. Both Rome and Christians knew that in any kingdom, there can ultimately be only one Lord.

Application

The believers in Thessalonica accepted the good news about Jesus with joy in spite of great suffering. Reflect on the past few years of pandemic fears and limitations, whether your specific challenges were physical, mental, economic or relational, and you may have a sense of what suffering feels like. Did you learn any habits or practices to access the spiritual strength God offers you so that you can have inner joy and resilience, and not let any challenges you face crush you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, your light is so much brighter than mine. Help me learn how to get out of your way, to let you shine forth from my life to brighten the lives of others around me. Amen.

Thursday, July 28

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 5:10-12

As you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, our visit with you wasn't a waste of time. On the contrary, we had the courage through God to speak God's good news in spite of a lot of opposition, although we had already suffered and were publicly insulted in Philippi, as you know. Our appeal isn't based on false information, the wrong motives, or deception. Rather, we have been examined and approved by God to be trusted with the good news, and that's exactly how we speak. We aren't trying to please people, but we are trying to please God, who continues to examine our hearts. As you know, we never used flattery, and God is our witness that we didn't have greedy motives. We didn't ask for special treatment from people—not from you or from others— although we could have thrown our weight around as Christ's apostles. Instead, we were gentle with you like a nursing mother caring for her own children. We were glad to share not only God's good news with you but also our very lives because we cared for you so much.

"Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

Observation

Paul spoke of the courage it took to preach in Thessalonica after he had already suffered and been publicly insulted in Philippi (see Acts 16:12-40). Paul didn't yet have a copy of the gospel of Matthew, but he got to live out Jesus' principle about meeting insults and harassment with joy and trust. "The presence of the heavenly kingdom turns the tables on normal expectations

regarding what it means to flourish as human beings.” (study note for Matthew 5:10 from the CEB Study Bible)

Application

Later, Paul wrote, “If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people” (Romans 12:18). Yet like prophets before him and many godly leaders since, like the Lord Jesus himself, Paul often found himself hated and harassed. In our current age, what forms can persecution take? How did Jesus call us to respond when (not if) that happens?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, some of your most faithful servants have focused on pleasing “an audience of one.” Even as I work to live at peace with all people, keep me aware that it is you I most want my choices to please. Amen.

Friday, July 29

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12; 2 Corinthians 7:2-4

You remember, brothers and sisters, our efforts and hard work. We preached God’s good news to you, while we worked night and day so we wouldn’t be a burden on any of you. You and God are witnesses of how holy, just, and blameless we were toward you believers. Likewise, you know how we treated each of you like a father treats his own children. We appealed to you, encouraged you, and pleaded with you to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom and glory.

Make room in your hearts for us. We didn’t do anything wrong to anyone. We didn’t ruin anyone. We didn’t take advantage of anyone. I’m not saying this to make you feel guilty. I’ve already said that you are in our hearts so that we die and live together with you. I have every confidence in you. I’m terribly proud of you. I’m filled with encouragement. I’m overwhelmed with happiness while in the middle of our problems.

Observation

In 1 Thessalonians 2:7, Paul said “we could have thrown our weight around as Christ’s apostles.” In contrast, he chose gentle family images: a nursing mother (verse 7) and a loving father with children (verse 9). “We appealed to you, encouraged you, and pleaded with you to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom.” Later in 2 Corinthians, Paul chose a very different leadership style from the approach some church leaders teach and practice.

Application

Paul gently invited people to a breathtakingly serious goal: “to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom and glory.” God didn’t seek a few trivial changes. God asked for their whole life. Paul explained to them that the living God wanted living human beings to reflect his glory, and that he had summoned them to this utterly demanding, but utterly rewarding, way of life. How are you answering that call?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I know myself too well to think I’m worthy of your great kingdom. Then you say you’ve already made me worthy if I just walk life’s path with you. I humbly and gratefully accept. Amen.

Saturday, July 30

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20; 2 Corinthians 3:1-3

We also thank God constantly for this: when you accepted God's word that you heard from us, you welcomed it for what it truly is. Instead of accepting it as a human message, you accepted it as God's message, and it continues to work in you who are believers. Brothers and sisters, you became imitators of the churches of God in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus. This was because you also suffered the same things from your own people as they did from the Jews. They killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out. They don't please God, and they are hostile to the entire human race when they try to stop us from speaking to the Gentiles so they can be saved. Their sins are constantly pushing the limit. God's wrath has caught up with them in the end.

Brothers and sisters, we were separated from you for a while physically but not in our hearts. We made every effort in our desire to see you again face-to-face. We wanted to come to you—I, Paul, tried over and over again—and Satan stopped us. What is our hope, joy, or crown that we can brag about in front of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Isn't it all of you? You are our glory and joy!

Are we starting to commend ourselves again? We don't need letters of introduction to you or from you like other people, do we? You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are Christ's letter, delivered by us. You weren't written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You weren't written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Observation

The apostle Paul never saw himself as a solo act. This letter named a team: "From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy" (1 Thessalonians 1:1). Next week we'll see that when Paul couldn't return to Thessalonica, he sent Timothy to support the Christians there. He also told his Christian friends that, when he met his Lord after his life here ended, his own deeds were not his hope and crown. Rather their presence in God's kingdom was his glory and joy. The only prize in life that he really valued was to see his converts living well.

Application

Paul said Christians are a letter from Christ, "written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God." What would a careful observer learn about God by reading the letter you are writing with your life? What parts of your daily routine would show others clearly that you are a God-follower?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, fellowship is the path to your kingdom that your servant Paul modeled and called all of us, including me, to follow. Thank you for including me in your family. Amen.