

The gospel in action

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Preacher: Colin Strudwick

[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, and I'm going to read that.

Okay. I'm going to read from 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. Once again, if you've got the church Bible, please call out the page number. 1186.

Two of you agreed, which is always good. So 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, beginning of Paul's first letter to that church.

Sometime after his visit there. And Paul writes, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you mentioning you in our prayers. We continually 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.

[1 : 30] Brothers loved by God, we know that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of his severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia. Your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turn to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

So reads God's words to us this morning. Well, it's great to see things happen in practice.

[2 : 42] If you read about something or read something, maybe read a story, it can be interesting to see when it's made into a film and see how someone imagines it. If you're a fan of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, which I have to say I'm not, but perhaps when you read those, walked your way or through those books, you had to imagine in your mind what these worlds were that Tolkien made up.

And perhaps you're fascinated to see the films and to see how the director portrayed that world. Perhaps if you've never read the book, you're fascinated to find out what it was that you've never read or never understood when you had a go.

We like to see things in action, real-life examples. And we have the gospel in action in Thessalonians. We see the beginning of the church in Acts chapter 17.

We read that earlier on. And now a bit more about the church in 1 Thessalonians and then 2 Thessalonians. The gospel, not just written in the page as theology like it is in Romans, but in reality in a local church.

So the context for us is Acts 17. A new church planted from nothing by Paul and Silas.

[3 : 57] And Paul was there for about three weeks. He preached on three Sabbaths in the synagogue, so that's at least two weeks and perhaps almost four. But then you remember we read that he was hounded out of Thessalonica because there was opposition from Jews in the city who were jealous of the success of the gospel.

And they got some heavies together and they stirred up a riot and the brothers had to rescue them. And this man Jason was put in prison because he had dared to associate with Paul and Silas.

And around the same time that that was going on and around the beginning of the church in Thessalonica, there was some controversy in other churches where some people were saying that Christianity wasn't really different from Judaism at all.

It wasn't a fulfillment. It wasn't a new thing in Jesus. It was really much the same. And Paul wrote the letter to the church in Galatia, the Galatians as we have it in the New Testament, to counteract that.

So that was going on at the same time. So Paul must have wondered for quite a while how the Thessalonian church was getting on. It had started in great difficulty with persecution and opposition.

[5 : 09] And then there was this controversy going on around the new churches at the same time. How would they do? And it was a real concern for Paul. And we read in 1 Thessalonians that he was overjoyed, really overjoyed.

He had sent Timothy to find out how things were going. And Timothy came back with news that they were doing well. That not only have they believed in Jesus, but as we read at the beginning, verse 1 of our passage, they were in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Still trusting in God. Still part of his kingdom. Still going on in the way that Paul had taught them.

And so Paul was full of joy and he wrote what is a very practical letter.

in which he sets out his joy and his excitement for their faith. And he sets out a model of pastoral care for Christians, I think.

And teaching them and encouraging them in a way that teaches us how to encourage others. It's not obviously a theological letter. It's not got lots of really deep teaching. But rather Paul is encouraging them to continue in their faith.

[6 : 16] And showing them and showing us how to encourage one another. So in our passage he begins... I'm pressing the wrong one.

I'm going backwards. What's going on? We've got stuck.

Don't worry about it. You fiddle while I talk. Yes. There are only the headings. So just so... You're not missing an awful lot if the PowerPoint doesn't work. Anyway, in the first...

In verses 2 and 3, Paul gives thanksgiving for gospel fruit. Look at verses 2 and 3 if you have your Bible open. He says, We always thank God for all of you mentioning you in our prayers.

We continually 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.

[7 : 21] Well, everybody in our world these days seems to want things to be different. We've had a long period of change, of over a number of decades, of some people and governments looking perhaps for minorities to benefit.

And there's been a recent upsurge against that, hasn't there? People wanting their country back, wanting the country to be great again. We've had that with the vote here to leave the European Union.

That was some of the rhetoric around that. And in America, the election of Donald Trump wanting to make America great again. Lots of people looking for a new yesterday, looking back and imagining that the past was great and wanting to get back to that past as the future.

Maybe it wasn't as great as all that. And that provoking fierce protests from other people. Not happy with how the way things are. We want it to be different. We want change.

But the only way anything can really change for the better is through the gospel of Jesus, through God changing people's hearts and lives.

[8 : 34] And that was Paul's ministry. And so when he saw that evidence in the Thessalonians and heard about it, he is overjoyed and thankful, and thankful in prayer for them.

Thankful for their faith, their hope, and their love. He says he always gives thanks for them in prayer. Thankful that in their lives there is this visible outcome, an outworking of their commitment to Christ.

Seeing a faith persuaded in their hearts and their minds that the gospel is true, that Jesus is the Savior and the Lord, and have persuaded of other gospel truths.

Thankful for their hope, this confidence Phil was talking about. Confidence for the future. Not just a confidence that things will work out well, but confident in God, that God will do what he has promised.

That God will make things well for his people. That all things work together for good for those who love God. Because God will make that happen as he has promised. And he's thankful for their love, which softens our hearts to God and one another, and counteracts our sin, and makes us want to love God's word, and love his will, and delight in his way for us.

[9 : 53] And Paul is thankful, and is overjoyed at this evidence in their lives. And so they were on Paul's prayer list, every day, regularly, always giving thanks for the Thessalonians, and presumably, always giving thanks for the other Christians he met, and the other churches.

That must have been a very long prayer list, mustn't it? But yet, that's what he says, time and again in the New Testament. I'm always giving thanks for you, in my prayers. And praying, focusing his prayers, on this commitment to Christ.

giving thanks to God that they believed in Jesus. Not focusing on their illnesses, or focusing on wanting God to make their lives better.

I'm sure he prayed for those he knew were ill, but that wasn't the most important thing. He was most concerned, and grateful that they were going on and trusting in God, and concerned that he would pray that people would continue to do that.

And he's telling us this, and telling the Thessalonians this, so that they can copy him, and so that we can copy him. He is a model for us. You know what a model is?

[11 : 06] You know, if you're going to build a building, or make a car, you first make, they make models first, of what it's going to look like, and how it might work. They do little prototypes of new cars, and then they build one full size, and eventually you go into production.

You have models that show what the real thing is going to be, or to explain to someone else. If you go to a museum, they might have a model of a building, so you can see how it all fits together.

And Paul is a model for us. He's showing us how to pray for each other. We need to copy him, and copy his priorities.

We need to pray. We need to pray regularly, and focus on this, the effect of the gospel in each other's lives. Giving thanks to God for our faith, and our hope, and our love.

And then talking about that amongst ourselves, and saying, well, I'm praying for you. And within the church life, saying what we, as Chris and Phil have already said, we're offering one prayer on behalf of everybody.

[12 : 11] And there's that sense of we're praying together. Letting everybody know that we're praying for them to do well, as they seek to follow the Lord Jesus. And praying that in public, praying for people in public, as well as privately.

So Paul prayed. He was giving thanks for the fruit of the gospel in their lives. And he always prayed for them.

And he wants us to do the same. And the Lord wants us to be prayerful like Paul about one another. The second thing that Paul talks about is the power of the gospel call.

The power of the gospel call. We've had thanksgiving for gospel fruit. Now the power of the gospel call. From verse 4, he says, Brothers loved by God, we know that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

[13 : 21] The gospel has power. It is, as Paul says elsewhere, the power of God to salvation. God is able to save despite opposition.

And we saw that in Thessalonica. There was immediate opposition to the gospel. The easiest possible thing for the people to have done, who were first getting interested in Jesus, would have been to give up.

The first, the easiest thing for Jason to do would have been to give up, because he'd already been put in prison, may have only been a Christian two weeks. But they didn't. God's power is able to save us and transform our hearts despite that, and persuade us that it's really worth it, regardless of what people say or do.

God's work in Thessalonica wasn't hindered by persecution, and it wasn't hindered by the lack of an apostolic ministry. That's both encouraging and slightly humbling for anyone who's involved in ministry, isn't it?

God uses you, and yet if you're not there, you aren't needed. You may not be. It's certainly true for Paul, wasn't it? He had to leave, and the church was left without ministry, apparently, and yet, through God's power, through God's help, they were able to keep going in a helpful and a faithful way.

[14:42] I was reminded, think about that, of the growth of the house church in China during the Cultural Revolution. The church didn't just keep going when Chairman Mao battered it for decades, and then a 40s from about the late 1940s to the early 1970s, well into the 70s.

I mean, he really went after the church, and they suffered horrible persecution, and yet the church just grew and grew, because God changed people's hearts, and there was physical power and brutality from the government and the army and whoever was involved, and yet it was overcome by spiritual power, God speaking to people's hearts and persuading them of the truth of the gospel. God is able to do it. He's done it in the lifetimes of people here. He did it in Thessalonica. God's wisdom is strong, so strong, and his power is so great.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 that God is, if you imagine the weakness of God, it's stronger than men's strength. You imagine God's foolishness. It's wiser than man's wisdom.

God isn't weak or foolish, but you understand the point. God is so far beyond us, so much stronger, so much wiser. We're nothing by comparison. And we see the power of the gospel in Thessalonica, that God saved people and kept them safe in Christ, despite the opposition.

[16:14] We see in our passage an example of gospel ministry. Paul says in verse 5 that they came with words, not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction.

And then he says, you know how we lived among you for your sake. So they came with the words of the gospel, the Holy Spirit anointing the message and stirring people's hearts, and a personal conviction among the apostles, and consistent godly lives.

It's a bit like a recipe, isn't it? Take one gospel message, God's power, personal conviction, three godly lives, and continual prayer, and spiritual life as the result.

Well, if it's a recipe, then perhaps we can repeat some of that anyway, and trust God to add the power. It's interesting that he talks about their deep conviction.

It's an important thing, isn't it, that as we seek to share the gospel, talk about it amongst ourselves and amongst people who don't believe in Jesus, that we do it with conviction.

[17:26] It's important to be personally committed to the message. Paul in Thessalonica preached in the synagogue, three Sabbaths in a row, and also elsewhere and talked to people.

He was persistent in his ministry. He just kept at it. He took every opportunity. He looked for opportunities, and when he got an opportunity, he talked to people. And we need to be the same as we're trying to make a serious recommendation to our friends and family and people we meet, that they need to think about Jesus and think about him as the Lord and trust him as Savior.

Think how many Christians came to Christ because a friend spent time with them discussing what the truth is, reading the Bible together, listening, answering questions, inviting them to events at a church perhaps.

That commitment, ongoing. Not many Christians came to Christ because somebody just said a throwaway comment to them about how good Jesus was and wandered off and never mentioned it ever again.

Part of God's work is that we are personally convinced of the message and committed to it. And that doesn't guarantee that people will be saved because the recipe still needs God's power and we can't control that.

[18:47] But our bit of it is to be convinced. And that's part of God's work through us. He works through disciples, not salesmen. We're not there to just get a signature on the line and walk away and another tick, another number for the church role.

We're disciples. We need to persist and keep at it and keep struggling if it's hard and to think with hope and endurance about what God has promised for the future as things are difficult and yet persist with people so they might know what the truth is.

Also, I've alluded to it already but it's worth noting in verse 6 that they became imitators of the apostles and of the Lord in spite of severe suffering.

The suffering of the church that they witnessed didn't prevent them coming to Christ and they welcomed the message with joy. And it's a wonderful indication that God was really at work in their hearts.

As I said earlier, the easiest thing would have been to give up or to say that this is just too hard, it's not worth bothering with and yet God worked in their hearts to the extent that they were prepared to endure anything just to know God, to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

[20 : 10] And it's a regular pattern in the New Testament. The apostles in particular, they're an example of keeping going, of enduring persecution and suffering and still keeping at it, helps other Christians and helps us to see that following Jesus is really worth it.

To use a phrase that I'm not fond of but it's helpful in a way, they walked the walk and just talk the talk, they didn't just talk and say that this will be good but they really lived it out.

And it's a model to us as well in our lives, in our Christian lives, to keep persisting in gospel ministry and not to be put off by opposition or criticism.

And the greatest recommendation we can give to others, one of the greatest recommendations we can give to people is that they see that we think it's so worth following Jesus that we're prepared to endure people laughing at us.

We're prepared to endure criticism. We're prepared to endure bad publicity for the church if that might happen. I don't know what you go through. But that might happen and it might happen in the future in a place like Brighton.

[21 : 20] Somebody might decide on the local media that you are the worst people that ever lived because of what you believe and you may have to endure that. And that will be painful and yet that might be the best recommendation to people you know of the truth of the gospel if you're prepared to endure that and gently keep insisting that they follow Jesus.

Because that's where the truth is. So we saw the power of the gospel call God overpowering the opposition and changing lives and making them recognize the truth of the gospel.

And then finally we have a sort of wonderful little section where we have the echoes of the gospel message from verse 7 onwards where Paul says you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia your faith in God has become known everywhere. And so on. They tell how you learned how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Imagine you're the Thessalonian church and you've not been at it for very long and you wonder what this letter is going to say perhaps you've got some idea because you've met Timothy and so you've had some ministry from him and some reminder of what Paul was like.

[22 : 47] Imagine getting this letter and saying well I don't need to tell you how great you are because everybody's heard about you everybody's heard about you how you turn from your old ways and you're now trusting Jesus they've heard in the church and everybody around about knows about it too.

So I don't need to say how great it is that you believe in Jesus I've heard it all already. One incredible encouragement there must have been to this perhaps a small church I don't know what kind of size it was wondering about the future perhaps and yet knowing that the gospel message and the success of the gospel had echoed around the world and Paul had heard about it.

Does Brighton know you're here? It's a valid question isn't it? The church I grew up in many years ago had as part of its old history a culture of not wanting to be noticed.

They were happy to be their little group out of the way of the town we were in and they got a building a bit of land and built a building on it which is sort of hidden away behind the high street so you'd never see it and it was eventually the church changed its ideas and then it still took a long while to get the council to put up a sign to say well there's a church down that little alley and you'll go and find it.

They wanted to be hidden away and we can be a bit like that and yet that's not what happened with the Thessalonian church. They became famous because of the success of the gospel and that was a witness to the power of God and it generates more success.

[24 : 33] They had totally rejected the world's religion and the world's ideas and that must have been a shock to everybody who knew them and it continues to be a shock isn't it when people are saved and completely change their ideas about what's right and what's wrong and what's good and what matters in the world and it shocks people and they didn't just reject what they'd come from but they replaced it with a complete commitment to Christ and the gospel message and to borrow a phrase from elsewhere it turned the world upside down and this report echoed around and Paul heard it.

It got back to Paul. Of course this rejection this change made some people angry about it but they couldn't ignore it. They knew about it and their anger couldn't stop it.

And it reminds us that news of the church whether it's good or bad is noted by the world as also by other Christians. Sadly scandal in the church or associated with the church or decline in the church harms the gospel because then people start to believe or to say well the gospel isn't true.

If they can act like that they can't be Christians or it must all be rubbish. Or if there aren't many of them well there must there's only a few it's just some idea they've got. There's been a terrible scandal and sad news this week about abuse carried out by one man John Smythe in the 1970s who's associated with some Christian camps and who behaved in some appalling ways which weren't dealt with by all kinds of people.

But it's connected to the Anglican church and connected to parts of the Anglican church that we'd normally want to uphold and stand with and say there are many genuine Christians there and yet man was among them and has disgraced the name of Jesus.

[26 : 36] And that scandal harms the church. And we'll all have to live with that and we'll have people say well what do you think about that? And we'll have to find words to say well we find his behaviour appalling and that that isn't a Christian way to act.

And yet we still believe in Jesus even though individual Christians let him down and let others down because we're still sinners. And that's going to be a difficult conversation for us.

And there may be difficulty for your church and our church as people reject our message because they've heard about that story. On the other hand when there is success for the gospel it has an impact on the wider community.

the more people are saved the more people think well what is going on? Is it really true? My friend has become a Christian. Maybe there's something in it and success breeds more success.

It happened with the Thessalonians. It can happen with us as we continue to make the gospel known and continue to approach people and want to recommend Jesus to them.

[27 : 46] It's a lot of time and effort but sometimes one conversion can trigger several as God adds blessing on blessing as people become intrigued by what's going on.

Also as there's gospel success it encourages the church. The Thessalonians their success encouraged Paul and encouraged the other Christians in Macedonia and Achaia that sort of part of Greece and Macedonia as they are today and it must have been wonderful to hear this news at Thessalonica and know that this church had been formed and planted and had kept going despite the problems that there were around them.

And it's great for us it's a positive impact on us when we find out about other churches and hear of success hear of conversions hear that churches are prospering because we know that God is at work it's an encouragement to us that we can rejoice with our brothers and sisters that they're seeing God's blessing and we can have confidence in God for us in our church and our lives because if God is at work there and doing great things he can do great things here.

We have over the years probably in my lifetime been encouraged and rejoiced in mass conversions in places like South America Columbia at one point and in Africa and it's wonderful and wonderful to hear about huge churches in countries like South Korea and Japan despite the prevailing culture and it's great to hear because it reminds us that God can do that here.

He can change the hearts of cynical British people. There's something about our national mentality that seems to make us more alien and against gospel truth or listening to other people or trusting someone else than other nations and that's a problem for Christian ministry and yet God can get through that.

[29 : 59] He's got through your cynicism if you're a cynic. There's at least two of us here. One tax man, one ex-tax man, two cynics and yet here we are. And so if God can save the tax collectors, well he can save everyone.

And so it's an encouragement as we hear about other churches' progress to us. Of course in order to hear that we need to get ourselves interested in what's going on among Christian churches in the city, in the county, in the country and around the world.

We need to get in touch with organizations that report news in order to hear this news to be encouraged and to have that feeling to our thoughts and our prayers that God will work through us. There's something that we need to do there just to make sure we're plugged into that. And Paul is encouraging that here. He's once again setting himself up as a model to copy.

