

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10: Will It Last?

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[0 : 0 0] This comes from 1 Thessalonians 1, verses 2-10. It's on page 846 in your pew Bibles.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake, and you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

[1 : 1 3] For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you and 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 delivers us from the wrath to come.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning, everybody.

Thank you very much for your welcome. It's a great joy for us to be here today and to share with you here on the West Side, and we thank God for all that's happening here in your fellowship, which is still comparatively young, and we're reading from a letter to a young church that had just recently been planted.

One of the most important questions in all sorts of circumstances of life is the question, will it last? Will it last? Your team makes a great start to the season.

They win some wonderful victories, but will it last? They may even hit great form to reach the playoffs, but then what? Will it last?

[2 : 2 3] Or going back to our country, we're in the midst of an election campaign for a national government, and I saw on television yesterday that the third party, the Liberal Democrats, who have not been in office since 1916, are now leading the polls.

Will it last? Or perhaps you've just begun a new job or a new relationship, and it's going really well, and the initial signs all look good, but will it last?

Now, it seems that question was the one that haunted Paul's thoughts and dreams about the young church that God had used him to plant in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey.

In just a few weeks, some Jews and a very large number of Greeks, including some leading women in the city, we're told, had turned to the Lord Jesus, had trusted him, had become Christians.

But Paul had realized that very quickly, there was going to be violent opposition in that city from the jealous leaders of the Jewish synagogue.

[3 : 30] They hired a crowd, rent-a-mob, you could call them, and they came in, and they began to disrupt the young church. There was a riot. Paul and Silas had to be hurried away at night, and as he went to Berea and then on to Corinth via Athens, this question was always in his mind.

Will it last? Such a brief visit, such a tenuous foothold for the gospel, such active and powerful opponents, only too ready to rubbish Paul and his ministry.

Is it really going to last? Now, he was so concerned that he sent Timothy, he tells us in chapter 3 of the letter, to follow up on it all. If you turn the page, and I hope you've got your Bible open, because we're going to look at chapter 1 in a moment.

Chapter 3, verse 2 says, we sent Timothy, our brother, and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith that no one be moved by these afflictions, that is, the opposition that they faced.

For you yourselves know that we're destined for this. And now in chapter 3, he says, have a look at verse 6, Timothy has come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you.

[4 : 50] So for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction, we've been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live if you are standing fast in the Lord.

What a relief. But what thanksgiving and praise to God? Yes, it's lasting. Because it's God's work and not a work of men. Now this letter is the result of that.

And it's a letter of thanksgiving and encouragement and praise. And today we have just the first main sentence of the letter to look at. Verses 2 to 10 are one long sentence in the original.

Dependent on that verb that comes in verse 2, we give thanks. You see it there? We give thanks to God always for all of you. Now here's the agenda of what we're going to look at in the next few minutes.

The work at Thessalonica is lasting, which proves it, Paul says, to be a work of God and not just a work of human persuaders. If this work grows and develops, it will be because it is a work of God here in the West Side.

[6 : 02] It will not be because of clever human leadership or because of powerful human persuasion. It will be because it is a work of God's Holy Spirit. And Paul sees all the signs that the church in Thessalonica is in fact a church which is God's planting.

So the thanksgiving explores the marks of what our authentic Christian discipleship, what it looks like, what it is to be a church that really is growing in Christ.

And the teaching content of that is to show us what we should look for in our own lives and in our own church in order to have a proper confidence that God is at work in us too, that we have the real thing in terms of gospel faith and that it will last throughout our lives here and on into eternity.

Now verse 3 stands at the entrance of the letter and in many ways it's the contents page of everything that follows. I want to spend just a few moments on that and then we'll explore how it opens up this first chapter for us.

Faith and love and hope are the three things that Paul is giving great thanks to God for. Have a look at verse 2 again. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

[7 : 30] So this is not just something that takes five minutes in the morning. This is at the heart of Paul's whole life. Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faith, love and hope are the great Christian distinctives which for the New Testament writers are the absolute marks of reality in terms of Christian life and experience.

The essential ingredients of real Christianity are faith and love and hope. And the structure is very simple. It's very uncluttered.

He says we are sure that this is a work of God because you have a faith that works, you have a love that labors and you have a hope that is steadfast.

In fact, Paul puts that word your in the emphatic position and it governs all those six words. Faith, work, love, labor, hope, steadfastness.

[8 : 36] They are all yours, he says. And so we know that you belong to God, that you really are genuine Christians because real faith works, real love labors and real hope is steadfast, it perseveres.

Now, the hugely important factor for us is that if these qualities are present in reality in our lives, it is because God is at work in us. It's the fruit of the gospel and that fruit's reality is demonstrated in activity.

Faith, love and hope all have objective content as the letter's going to spell out with greater clarity as we go on through it. Going to see what that faith and love and hope are all about.

And without that content, Christianity wouldn't be Christianity. But the objective content of who Christ is and what he's done for us and what he's yet going to do in the future, that is not simply reduced to statements of doctrinal truth or intellectual belief positions.

No, it has to be lived out. The reality of faith is not that I say I believe in God, the Father Almighty and the creed, though that is important that I say it and believe it.

[9 : 57] But if that faith is real, it will work in practice in my life. The reality of love is not just I occasionally feel warm feelings towards my fellow Christians, but that I am driven by a love for God and a love for one another and a love for a lost world to labor for Christ.

And the mark of real hope is not just that I have an understanding that there will be a glorious future ahead, a proposition about heaven and all its wonders and it's an amazing fulfillment of everything that Christ has begun to do, but that hope will enable me to be steadfast, to endure in the midst of suffering in this world.

You see, it shapes and controls the whole of life. What we believe has to be lived out and the reason is that the Christian revelation is not only propositional, but it is relational.

And the two things must exist together. Our faith is in who Christ is and in what Christ has done for us. Yes, there's the propositional.

He is the Son of God. He died on the cross that our sins might be forgiven. He rose again to empower us with his risen life. But our faith is not just in that.

[11 : 15] Our faith is in Jesus. It is a relational faith. It connects us to him in personal relationship. And that's true of the Christian love that we have for God and for our neighbors and for our lost world.

It's true of our hope that it's not a generalized concept of some vague idea about the future that we call heaven. heaven is where Jesus is. And our future hope is all about the fulfillment of our personal relationship that we have with him by his grace.

Because when we see him, we shall be like him. Now, you cannot therefore learn theology in the way you learn algebra. It isn't just, you see, stuff that you get into your head and know.

The reality of it is that it works out in your life. In England, we have debates about many things, including education and the role of religious education in our schools.

And we still have a statutory requirement for religious education for every school pupil. It's a very wide concept, religious education. It's the idea of comparing different religions.

[12 : 25] Christianity has no particular strong point in it. But children in all the British schools still have religious education lessons. And in a recent debate in Parliament about this, there was an interesting report in the journal called Hansard, which writes up the account of everything that's said in Parliament, where one of the ministers for education was talking about how the danger is that, because it's such a wide spectrum, nobody really understands in depth anything about anything religious.

And he quoted a letter which a boy had written to the Department of Education, which said, quote, Dear Sir, this term we are doing God. Please send details and pamphlets. Lots of people think like that, don't they?

I might do God for half an hour and half a year and see whether there's anything in it. Now, you can't learn God as you would learn any other intellectual subject.

See, what Paul is doing here is appealing to the evidence of life, which is only explicable in terms of the reality of what his readers actually believe.

Those qualities are unique to the Christian gospel. They're always a sign of God at work and they're always working out in practice. Our problem in evangelical Christianity has been one of polarization.

[13 : 51] So we have Christians who say, well, I'm a head Christian and I'm really interested in doctrine and I like to formulate my doctrine as clearly as I can because I want to believe the truth and that means that I spend lots of time in the word studying what God has said.

Great. But if that's all, you haven't yet got this balance right. So on the other hand, I meet Christians who say, well, I'm a heart Christian and I really just want to love God and love other people and my experience of God is so precious and real to me and that's why I emphasize in my life the work of the Holy Spirit.

So we've got the head, truth, doctrine, word Christians and the heart, love, experience, spirit Christians and sometimes in our country at least they're fighting one another.

Why? Because we've polarized. Because we haven't realized what the very first sentence of this letter says that is that doctrine and experience are and must be integrated.

You cannot be a word Christian without being a spirit Christian. You cannot be a spirit Christian without being a word Christian. God doesn't just want your head to teach you doctrine. He wants your heart to change it into the love of God.

[15 : 05] And as he takes the truth and the love, the doctrine and the experience, the word and the spirit and welds them together in our Christian life, then you see the reality of the gospel working out.

Then the world becomes hungry because the church is authentic, because it's real. And the work and the mark of reality and the work of God in us is to do both those things.

To produce in us faith and love and hope, but working faith, laboring love, persevering hope. And that's what we've got to pray for. That's what we've got to encourage one another towards.

That's what we're about as a church family, wherever we are in the world. So Paul is thanking God for the genuineness of this gospel work in Thessalonica and there are two big reasons that he gives which will take the rest of our little time together this morning.

Two reasons why he's thanking God. Here is the mark of reality, faith, love and hope. How does that look? How does it work out? What is it he's seen or Timothy has seen in the church which he's come back to report on which encourages Paul so much and causes him to thank God so much for everything that God is doing?

[16 : 21] Well the first thing is the transforming power of the gospel. Where there is Christian reality you will see the transforming power of the good news of Jesus.

See in verse 4 which is translated for us for we know brothers loved by God that he's chosen you it's actually another participle that works from mentioning and remembering in verse 2 mentioning you in our prayers verse 3 remembering before God your work of faith and so on and verse 4 literally knowing brothers loved by God that he's chosen you.

Now these marks of spiritual reality then are the signs of God's choice of his electing grace in their lives. So as Paul begins to open up the letter he says I'm sure of the reality of God's work in you because I know about the transformation in your lives which would be inexplicable if God was not at work there.

That's why I'm thanking God. Now the New Testament emphasis upon God's choice what is sometimes called election is not election to a privilege or to a status so much as equipping for service.

We are elect chosen by God to be servants. Children yes by his grace members of his family dearly loved but also his servants.

[17 : 49] Actually it was like that in the Old Testament too. If you think about the Old Testament concept of anointing you may know that the priests were anointed that the king was anointed sometimes prophets also were anointed by God but always with a view to ministry to service the priest the king the prophet they all serve the people.

So Jesus says and he is the supreme anointed one the Messiah the very Christ of God he says the son of man has come not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

So the emphasis in verse 3 on work and labor and steadfastness is very central to Christian experience. That is how you know that you've been chosen by God because he's put in your heart a desire to serve.

Now we can't predict where or when or how God will bring about the miracle of new birth in other people's lives but when it happens you can and you do see the evidences of this reality that there is a turnaround that there is the transforming power of the gospel and verse 5 explains what we can know in that situation because he says our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

Now let's just look at the process then that he gives us in verse 5. The gospel has to come in word. That is to say truth has to be proclaimed.

[19 : 25] You never get a church built unless the truth is being proclaimed. You may get a religious club started but it's not a New Testament church. The truth has to be proclaimed. And the choosing grace of God operates through the declaration of the good news of Jesus to bring men and women out of darkness into light out of death into life.

That happens when the truth is proclaimed. There are lots of people in the church who don't believe that today who talk about presence evangelism who say you don't need to talk in terms of words.

In Britain I've heard over and over again a quotation that's supposed to come from St Francis of Assisi who is supposed to have said convey the gospel by all possible means that you can and if necessary use words.

Well if he said it it was nonsense when he said it and it's still nonsense. Of course you've got to use words. There cannot be gospel ministry unless the truth is proclaimed.

But our gospel came to you not only in word. It has to come in word but it doesn't come in word alone. And that's because words can be cheap can't they?

[20 : 36] You know you go shopping you guys if you take your wife or your girlfriend shopping probably not a very wise thing to do but if you do and she tries on that new dress for the new season and the assistant says oh suits you perfectly madam.

But you know and she knows that it doesn't suit her at all. Words are absolutely cheap. Anybody can say things like that. Paul used plenty of words. Plenty of words in Thessalonica.

He reasoned and explained and proved and persuaded Luke tells us in Acts. But it wasn't his speech that was the transforming dynamic. Look at the second part of verse 5.

It was the power of the Holy Spirit and full conviction. Now is that full conviction in the preacher or full conviction in the hearers?

Probably both. Paul proclaimed the gospel with deep conviction. He really believed it. And the Thessalonian Christians received it with full conviction too.

[21 : 36] We might say total assurance. So here is what happens. Have a look at verse 5 again. The gospel comes in word but not only in word. The power of the Holy Spirit is at work bringing about a full conviction.

And as he does that, when the gospel is declared people start to say those whom God has chosen to bring to faith this makes sense to me. This is real.

There's a subjective assurance of faith in the hearers that these things are so. That yes I am loved by God. That he has chosen me. That Jesus is the Lord from heaven who rescues his people from God's coming judgment.

And that inner persuasion is the gift of faith. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. That's what establishes the church. So when Martin Luther defined faith he said faith is saying yes this is for me.

And if that's what you've said about the gospel that is God's work in you and it is the sign that you are chosen by God to be his child. Yes this is for me. Now if there are people saying no I don't believe this and I don't want it it's not because they are unable to receive the gospel.

[22 : 48] it is because our hearts get hard and very often we resist the gospel but God is patient with us and some of us can look back over many years where he's been exceedingly patient with us.

But there comes the point if we're going to be Christians at all where there is an inner persuasion that is matched by external signs lifestyle evidences that we have received the gospel not in word only but with full conviction and that's why the second half of verse 2 verse 5 rather is so important.

You know what kind of men we prove to be among you for your sake. See Paul says you saw it in us authentic gospel lives among you that helped to convince you of the truth that what we were proclaiming was not just a salesman pitch but you saw the reality of faith and love and hope within me and Silas and you saw the transformation that the gospel produced in our lives and it began to work in your life.

You know what kind of men we prove to be among you for your sake and so verse 6 you became imitators of us and we were imitators of the Lord and so you received the word even in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

So you see what he's saying how do I know it's real because the true gospel truly received makes people truly like Jesus. That's the bottom line and the mark of that reality is that we go on gladly receiving and responding to God's truth even though it may bring suffering it brought them great opposition but they're not gritting their teeth and bearing it they are rejoicing do you see that little phrase in verse 6 with the joy of the Holy Spirit because the power of the Holy Spirit is also the joy of the Holy Spirit that transforms our lives and that is following in the footsteps of Jesus imitating the Lord who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame and is now seated at the right hand of God and it's following the apostles who were rejoicing because they'd been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus now that is the proof of God's electing love and grace that's where you see the power of the Holy Spirit at work in believers who last who go on believing go on living

[25 : 22] God's truth with great joy even sometimes at great cost and that is what we need to encourage and pray for one another because the mark of reality is the transforming power of the gospel but the second thing as we conclude is that it is also the transmitting passion of the believers the transforming power of the gospel leads to the transmitting passion of the believers you see that in verse 7 you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia for not only has the word of God sounded forth from you but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere it has been transmitted across the whole of Greece and further afield you see the explanation of verse 7 you became an example to all the believers is verse 8 your life and your testimony sounded out the word of God across Macedonia and Achaia from you it happened now again you notice that the truth is very important here but it's the lifestyle that is the confirmation there is the message that they proclaimed and the lives that they lived and the change in their lives is the thing that communicated the message with power so when he says for not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere you see he's talking about the content of the message which they obviously did proclaim as widely as they could but also about the quality of their lives which backed up the message because what you are shouts so loud they don't hear what you say and it's the quality of their lives that was the confirming factor of the truth of what they proclaimed now what was it in their lives that did that let's come to the last two verses 9 and 10 they themselves report concerning us what kind of reception we had among you literally what kind of entrance we had to you that is that you received the message really clearly not just as words but in the power of the Holy Spirit you turned and here are the things that convinced other people in Greece and other parts of the ancient world that what was going on in Thessalonica was real that it had spiritual reality verse 9 you turn to God from idols number 1 to serve the living and true God number 2 and to wait for his son from heaven number 3 whom he raised from the dead

Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come now those three things then are the mark of this reality now it's a great relief I think to see that it's so clear and it's so down to earth and it's so real to our experience how do you know you're a Christian this morning if you are maybe you're not yet maybe you're just looking in from the outside that's great it's wonderful that you're here and we want you to try and see what it's like to be on the inside thinking about Christian faith now what would it look like to be a Christian well there are three verbs there aren't there it would mean turning it would mean serving and it would mean waiting it would mean turning from idolatry that is from all the things that we live for ourselves our bottom lines the things that are most important to us the things we think our life is really all about can be career it can be family it can be money it can be lots of good things in themselves but they take over our lives and they begin to occupy the control center of our lives and they become idols we live for them idols always dethrone God they're always a subtle way of worshipping ourselves and that's why when we become Christians we have to turn which is the word for repent turn from living for the wrong things and turn to God the true God the one living God from the idols that's the first mark of being a Christian and then that God whom we have turned to is a God whom we serve do you see that in verse 9 there at the bottom of the page to serve the living and the true God so if I've really turned to God how will I know because I get warm fuzzy feelings every morning when I wake up no because my life is dedicated to serving

God because when I wake up every morning I say to him effectively Lord this is a new day you've given me what do you want me to do for you today what are we going to do together today how am I going to live my life for you today now you don't do that if you're not a Christian it's a mark of being a Christian that you serve the living and the true God you've turned from serving yourself and your idols and you are now serving God now only God can make that change in our experience but that's what it is the living and true God is the one whom we seek to serve he's the one who dominates our lives in his love and mercy and grace who pours his compassion into us day by day who constantly goes with us and guides us and directs us this God we want to serve that's why it will last because he's changed our hearts we've turned in the power of the spirit we're serving the living true God and we're waiting for his son from heaven so we've got a future perspective which is that

Jesus is coming back and we can hardly wait for it to happen now waiting is not a very popular concept in our culture because we associate it with frustration waiting in the airport for the plane that's delayed five hours waiting for the day that's going to come you know which we're looking forward to and never seems to be appearing we regard waiting as a frustrating thing but here the waiting is eager anticipation it's standing on tiptoe it's like kids waiting for Christmas you know from the middle of November is it here yet is it tomorrow that's the waiting that he's talking about the waiting that says Jesus is coming back I can't wait for the kingdom to come in its fullness but I've got to wait so it's not inactive it's not frustrating it's waiting that motivates service the love that labours the faith that works and keep serving because this hope is steadfast and enables us to endure and you see in verses 9 and 10 you've got the whole gospel if you want the whole gospel in two verses this is a great little passage which says it what does it say about

Jesus says he's the rescuer the deliverer verse 10 says he's the son of the living and true God verse 10 says he's God incarnate he was raised from the dead he had a body he was dead and was raised in the power of an endless life he ascended into heaven tells us where he's reigning and from where he will come it's all there in verse 10 and when he comes again it will be to deliver those who wait for him from the coming wrath of God which in that day will bring about his judgment on the rebellious world now to have turned and to be serving and waiting is a spectacular change that could only be accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit through the authentic apostolic message of the gospel and that's why he says as you will see next week chapter 2 verse 1 our visit was not a failure our coming was not in vain so verses 9 and 10 are two three line statements

[33 : 13] Jesus who died is in heaven and will rescue us on the last day Christians are people who have turned are serving and will go on waiting for that full salvation and you see how those three ideas link up with the faith love and hope in verse 3 because it's faith that turns you to God from serving idols it's love that keeps you serving the living and true God and the world in which he's placed us through him and it is hope that enables us to keep on waiting for his son from heaven who is coming again raised from the dead the Jesus who on that last day will deliver us from God's wrath and then we'll know what a great salvation we really have so there is the power of the gospel that transforms and there is the passion of the Christians to keep on communicating that gospel and those are the marks of a church that is truly alive and a church that will last in time and ultimately for eternity because they're marks of

Christians who are truly alive and Christians who will truly last let's pray let's just take a moment of quietness to think about what we've read and heard and maybe one thing the Lord's laid on your heart this morning that you would like to turn into a prayer and a response to him so that the word doesn't just bounce off us but roots in our minds our hearts shapes our wills just a moment or two of silent prayer Lord we so often feel discouraged about our

Christian lives we wonder if it will last we wonder if we're making much progress we thank you for this wonderful passage that's a corrective to those discouraging thoughts because we can know that we are truly your children we can see that you by your spirit through the gospel have enabled us to turn and to begin to serve and to wait eagerly for the coming of the Lord Jesus we thank you for the faith you've given us and we pray that it will work this week in all sorts of practical ways as we serve you day by day pray that love may motivate that service and we pray that our hope will make us steadfast persevering Christians and we pray that for one another that you'd help each of us to support one another to love one another to care for one another to pray for one another day by day through the week so that we might grow together as a church that will last that will bring glory to your name a church that won't just last but will grow and reach out as the gospel sounds out across this part of

Chicago and indeed to the uttermost parts of the earth thank you for such a vision of how powerful this gospel is and we pray Lord that you will make us Christians who are connected to that reality through the gospel itself and through the work and ministry of your Holy Spirit and all for the glory and honour of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray through