

Working with the end in sight

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[0 : 00] Well, as I foreshadowed in the notices and Devin did with your discussion, the Olympics is nearly upon us. I'm not sure whether any of you are fans, but I can't wait.

I actually have to be a bit disciplined, otherwise you wouldn't get anything done over the next two weeks, just sitting in front of the television. Now, for all those athletes who have made it to Rio, after years of preparation, you know, for them the end is finally in sight.

Now, whether their goal is simply to make the finals or to get the gold medal, this is the end to which they've all been working towards.

All their training plans, their eating habits, their sleep patterns, everything has been geared towards this end. They need to peak at this one moment in time.

Now, for the rest of us, our goals may be less lofty, but we also take the same approach, don't we? Whether it's the VC exams or we're launching a product for our company or we're delivering an important report to a client, we too plan and work with the end in sight.

[1 : 10] Now, what should we concentrate on? What do we need to do in order to... In what order do we need to do them in order to get to the end? What can we leave off because it's not important?

We can only answer these questions when we can see clearly what we're aiming for at the end.

And so tonight, as we continue in 1 Thessalonians, we see how Paul and Silas, too, are able to see clearly what is needed by the Thessalonians, for the Thessalonians, for them to get to the end.

And Paul names three things in this passage, that of faith, hope, and love, or faith, love, and hope.

Now, together they are like three strands in a cord which gives strength to a Christian's life.

It enables him or her to finish the race or the life well. And if you've been paying attention to this letter, you may have noticed that these three strands are already in the earlier part of the letter.

So remember, at the start, Paul gives thanks for them in verse 3 of chapter 1. He remembers their work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, and then their endurance inspired by hope.

[2 : 25] Faith, love, and hope. And then later in verse 10, although he doesn't use these exact three words, he again comments on these things. For many have heard, he says, how the Thessalonians turned to God from idols, which they did by faith.

They served the living and true God, this they do in love. And then finally, how with hope they're waiting for the coming of Jesus from heaven. And so if you read the rest of the letter, you read through the rest, you'll find that these three qualities keep cropping up again and again.

And that's because Paul sees these as the three essential traits that's required to get to the end.

Now, let me just say at the outset that I'm going to approach the passage a little differently tonight to how we normally do it.

But I'm actually going to deal with these three things thematically rather than go through the passage sequentially. And that's because Paul is sort of not writing with a logic or an arguing of a logic in mind, but he's writing with the order of the events that he's recounting in mind.

So they don't appear, the ideas don't appear sequentially. But before I do that, let me just give you a brief run through of the events so far. So recall last week that Paul, Silas, and perhaps even Timothy, they were forced to leave Thessalonica in a hurry.

[3 : 42] They had converted a number there, but then they were persecuted by the other citizens. And then being forced out of the city, we read in Acts that they then went to Berea next.

So it's on the map on this next slide. From there, they go south to Athens, all right, all still in Greece. But what happens then is that having left, Paul was anxious with the Thessalonians.

Paul reveals in chapter 3 and verse 5 that when he could no longer stand it anymore, he sends Timothy back to find out about their faith. Timothy returns with good news.

In verse 8, we discover that not only do they have pleasant memories of Paul, the Thessalonians long to see him and the others as well. Now, after this, Paul still wants to return himself. But being unable to do so, he writes this letter instead, this first letter to the Thessalonians. And what he does is that he hopes to encourage the Thessalonians in his absence.

[4 : 45] And so the first thing we see Paul being concerned with is that of the faith of the Thessalonians. Because he and Silas had to leave the city in a hurry, he fears that their work isn't complete.

That because the Thessalonians had not been taught fully, that somehow they would abandon their faith under persecution. So Katie re-read the last few verses from last week's passage for us.

And so we're reminded of the persecution they face. In chapter 2 and verse 14, we see how they became imitators of the churches in Judea. How did they imitate?

Not in terms of doing things, but rather they were imitators because they suffered the same way that the Judeans did from their own countrymen. And these human persecutors had one thing in mind.

They wanted to stop the preaching of the gospel so that people could not be saved. Now, Paul knew though that behind these persecutors who had a human face, there was actually a real mastermind behind it.

[5 : 51] And this mastermind is none other than Satan. So twice his mention, in verse 18, Paul says that Satan is the one who blocks Paul's return again and again.

And then in verse 5 of chapter 3, Paul fears that Satan, a.k.a. the tempter, had tempted them. And so their labor or their work among the Thessalonians had been in vain.

And his words, I don't know whether it does with you as well, but his words reminds me of Jesus' own parable of the sower, does it not? Remember how in the first type of soil, the seed, which is God's word, falls on along the path.

And it is Satan who snatches the seed away before the hearer can believe. Then with the second type of soil, the hearers initially rejoice when they hear the word. But again, because the word is unable to take root, when trouble and persecution come because of the word, it says, notice how it's very similar to the Thessalonians, the hearers soon fall away.

So this is exactly what Paul is afraid of, that the Thessalonians would receive the word initially with joy, believing, but then they would fall away under persecution by their fellow countrymen.

[7 : 08] Paul is afraid that they will abandon their faith. And so Timothy is sent, a fellow gospel worker, he says, by Paul, to strengthen and encourage them in their faith and to assure them not to be unsettled in the midst of trials.

But lo and behold, Timothy discovers that things are actually much better than that. For he finds them, in verse 8, standing firm in the Lord, standing by faith in spite of persecution.

And no wonder Paul then is so overjoyed in verse 9. He says, how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of God because of you, and in particular because of your faith, because you've been standing firm.

Now friends, ours may not be the same experience as that of the Thessalonians, but we can be certain of one thing, that our faith too will be tested. And I think this is particularly true of new converts, new believers like the Thessalonians.

You see, Satan knows there's a good opportunity to snatch away the word before it has fully taken root. This is when the new believer, he may be full of joy, he or she, they've just experienced the victory in their lives of having Jesus.

[8 : 29] Jesus has saved them, they believe, and so they're not expecting trials. They're not expecting that this Christian life will be difficult. But the reality, actually, is that turning to God actually means turning away from their old lives, from idols, as Paul says in chapter 1.

Things they used to take pleasure in, they must actually cast off. There may be friends around that they used to have, that they used to trust and depend on, that they must now actually relate to differently.

Their influence, their way of life, is no longer something that the new believer actually aspires to. And so the result is that this would often mean rejection by their friends.

And sometimes it's not just friends, but we may get rejection from family as well, and parents. And so while it may not be that all this will amount to persecution, to the extent of physical harm, the time for a new believer would still be challenging.

Trials will still have to be overcome, so that the word can actually take root. And so if you've actually attended the baptismal classes I've run, you would have heard me say that we should expect trials and temptations in our Christian life.

[9 : 50] I would have encouraged you in the class to persevere, because what matters most is that we finish well, not just that we start. Faith is not just believing in the head, but also changing the way we live, reorientating our entire lifestyle so that we can stand firm in the faith.

Well, Paul warned the Thessalonians of the exact same thing. So if you look at verse 3 of chapter 3, he says, For you know quite well that we are destined for these trials.

In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. Not just once.

Over and over he said that. And it turned out that way, as you well know.

Paul knew that God's people are going to be persecuted. We need to know that God's people will be persecuted. In fact, Paul knew all this because it was actually prophesied a long time ago in that first reading of us in the prophecy of Daniel, chapter 12 and verse 1.

It says there in verse 1, I wouldn't read the whole thing, but in the second sentence, There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. And then it says, But God's people, those whose name is found written in the book of life, will be delivered.

[11 : 14] And so trials and persecutions are part of the Christian life. Let me say that clearly. Trials and persecution are part of the Christian life. All of us, not just new believers, need to be prepared for it.

They can come upon us suddenly, you know, out of the blue. Or often, as I tend to find, they come upon us or we tend to fall away when there is a major change in our lives.

So for instance, when we're leaving school and entering uni, that's a key change. People will suddenly find themselves with all this freedom when they get to uni. And that can be a real test.

Lots of people use that freedom at uni to, I don't know, get drunk, get high, get laid. And as a Christian, will you be pressured to join in? What if you get ridiculed for not joining in?

Will you succumb? There's a test of your faith. Or when you start a new job, some of you are graduating, and the greed and the power and the naked ambition of working in the corporate world confronts you.

[12 : 23] Will you start working that way too? Or will you stand firm in your faith and risk being trampled on? Or, when you start a family, some of you have just done that, there's a temptation, isn't it, to make the child the all-consuming idol in your life.

And if you start there, that just keeps going on for the rest of that child's life. Or will you start pouring all your time and effort into them and only them? You know, even neglecting coming to church and start taking your family away from the faith?

You see, at first, none of these trials look like you're abandoning or giving up your faith, does it? It's just a week here, a week there, you know, one little thing after another.

But the thing is that when you begin to give in to the pressure of the world, then you are stopping, you stop living lives worthy of God. And so, whether it's through persecution or not, Satan, the tempter, has actually succeeded in drawing you away from God and away from Jesus.

And so, the only way to counter that is to stand firm in the Lord, to keep believing and living out the gospel so that we will be there at the end, which is the most important thing.

[13 : 40] Right, let's move on to the second of Paul's concern, that of love. Now, you see that when Timothy returned with the good news, he reported not just on the Thessalonians' faith, but can you see, but also on their love.

Now, what is this love which Paul is talking about? What kind of actions does he have in mind?

When you read through that passage, it's not very explicit, is it? Paul doesn't really describe what the Thessalonians have done.

But I think there's a really strong clue when we look at verse 12, because there he prays that the Lord will make their love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

And so I think the first thing we can say is that Paul is referring to their love for others. It doesn't exclude their love for God, but that too must be expressed in how they love one another.

But next, I think Paul says that they are to love others in the same way Paul, Silas, and Timothy loves them, just as ours does for you, that last phrase at the end. And so while we haven't got a lot on the Thessalonians' love, we see lots by way of Paul's love.

[14:50] And what do we see? Well, first, we can't help but feel the depth of Paul's feelings, isn't it? His great longing to see them, his great anxiety for their faith. It's very evident in the letter, isn't it?

But second, we see that this emotion and feeling actually extends beyond just those feelings. It extends into action. For he says that they've toiled night and day so as not to be a burden on them while they heard the gospel.

That was in chapter 2 last week. Remember how I said that Paul did not want to put anything between the Thessalonians and God's word. He wanted them to just hear God's word clearly, the pure word of God.

And then this week, when he's finally torn away from them, he tries again and again to return to them. Not just to see them, but really with the purpose of supplying what is lacking in their faith. In fact, so great is their desire that we read in verse 10 that they prayed night and day that they might return. Notice that same phrase again, night and day. So that God may allow them to return.

[16:00] And when he fails to do that, they send Timothy instead so that he can show love on their behalf. And how does he show it? Well, Paul says that Timothy is to go to Thessalonica so that he may strengthen and encourage their faith.

And so while love goes hand in hand with deep emotion, Paul's love together with the others is very intentional, isn't it? It's actually directed towards a single goal and that of strengthening the faith of the Thessalonians.

And so I have to say that while there's nothing wrong with us showing love with affection, you know, like gifts and hugs and all that kind of stuff, true Christian love isn't just about being nice to each other.

Rather, its goal is to help one another to persevere in their faith. You see, when you really love someone, you actually desire what's best for them.

And I guess the question is, what can be more important or valuable than someone's eternal salvation? That's actually the most important thing for them, isn't it?

[17:12] The fact that they get to the end and are saved. And so, brothers and sisters, let me urge you to channel that love for each other in that direction. So by all means, give gifts and hugs.

Remember each other's birthdays. Do all that stuff. It's really good. But don't neglect one another's faith and eternal salvation. So, if you find a brother or sister wandering from the faith, love them by encouraging them back.

If they're shipwrecking their faith with poor choices, love them by warning them. If they're struggling with questions of faith, love them by helping them to wrestle with those questions.

Sit with them and talk with them. This is the kind of love God desires of us because it keeps the end firmly in mind. And what is this end which I've been talking about vaguely and generally?

Well, let's turn to the third and last strand because it's the hope of Christ's return that's the end that we're thinking of that motivates us. When things get tough and there's opposition, it is this hope that keeps us going.

[18:25] It's just like running a marathon. I've never done it. But I've been told by many athletes and watching TV and all that that at some point in the marathon most athletes would hit the wall, right?

They're spent physically, emotionally, mentally. And yet what they do is that they are able to dig deep to keep going. And often what keeps them going is the fact that they can see the end.

If not literally, then mentally. they know what lies at the end and the glory that lies at the end when they cross that finishing line. And so it is with the Christian life.

Paul lays out this hope in our very last verse of the passage, verse 13 of chapter 3. May the Lord strengthen your heart so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

That is the end which Paul is praying for and that he wants the Thessalonians to set their sights on. Now it is true that if you ask most people today and I have to say even Christians, if you ask them what are your hopes in life, many of the answers you'll hear will center around dreams and goals in this life, isn't it?

[19:38] So it may be about finishing a degree or starting a career or maybe starting their own business. It may be getting married or buying a house or having children or already have children having these same hopes and dreams for their children.

Or it may be for those of you who are close to retirement it's the hopes of traveling, doing things you never dreamt you could do when you had a 9 to 5 job. Now there's nothing wrong with these dreams, right?

I have some of these myself. But if these are the only things that motivate us then that's really quite short-sighted isn't it? Because the Bible gives us the truth and the reality of what the true end is. That all of us will face that same end when Jesus comes again with His holy ones. That is, His holy angels, His heavenly army. And when He does, He will bring with Him God's wrath against all evil, sin and rebellion.

That is the coming wrath that Paul has been talking about over the last three chapters. In chapter 1 and verse 10 He talks about it there. Then at the start of our reading in chapter 2 and verse 16 He talks about how the wrath has come upon those persecutors.

[20 : 51] And then now here in chapter 3 and verse 13 even though He doesn't talk about wrath it's very clear that it's a holy and heavenly army that is coming to bring judgment.

And on that day the only hope we have actually is in Jesus Himself. When Paul prays that they will be holy and blameless he doesn't mean that they need to be without sin or perfect.

That's how they will escape God's wrath. No, what he's referring to is that they have stood firm in their faith. That they have lived a life that is pleasing to God and maintain an upright character. They've done that even through trials and persecution so that in one sense they're blameless because there is no doubt about the integrity of their faith. Now again the prophet Daniel also prophesied about this a long time ago in chapter 12 which we looked at verse 10 it says and hopefully it will be on the screen this time as well.

This is what verse 10 says many will be purified made spotless and refined that is be holy and blameless but the wicked will continue to be wicked and none of the wicked will understand this but those who are wise will understand.

[22 : 11] And so there will be actually a great separation on that day isn't it? Those who are holy and blameless and those who will face God's wrath. And God uses trials and persecution actually to purify our faith those that he is saving.

to shape our characters so that it will be ready to meet Jesus. So friends we mustn't lose sight of this end. We mustn't stray away from the hope that is in Christ alone.

On that day Jesus will be both judge and rescuer. And on that day all our earthly accolades and achievements they wouldn't matter. Whatever Olympic medals that are being won by people next week or the week after they wouldn't come for anything.

You may be the President of the United States or even the Prime Minister of Australia but that in itself wouldn't save you from God's wrath. You might even be the Dalai Lama but unless you believe in the Gospel it will not rescue you from God's wrath.

All your dreams and goals will mean nothing then. It will not save you. Only standing firm in the Lord will. Paul says this in verse 8 of chapter 3 we've looked at it already.

[23 : 25] For now we really live since we are standing or you are standing in the Lord. And so can I say to those of you if you've not believed in Jesus today or committed yourself wholeheartedly to Jesus then let me urge you please do.

If you need to find out more then come along to that course we're running on Wednesday night. don't leave it because the end is in sight. God's coming wrath.

It will come when Jesus comes again. But for those of us who have put our faith in Jesus then let me also encourage you not to just consider your own faith but also the faith of others.

To watch out for one another's faith as well. You see we skipped over a verse in chapter 2 but there Paul showed through his love that he wasn't just concerned with his own faith.

So verse 19 look with me at it if you will. This is what he says For what is our hope our joy our crown in which we glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?

[24 : 39] Is it not you? He's not thinking about himself he's thinking about the Thessalonians indeed you are our glory and joy. Now the picture he has here is this crown of glory is that laurel that the ancient Greeks used to put on winners to crown their moment of glory.

In fact I hope I have a picture of this that's what they did in the Athens game in 2004 just to revive that practice they were back in Athens so they thought let's mimic what the ancient Greeks did.

That is the picture that Paul has and the Thessalonians are that crown on Paul's head. It's the faith of the Thessalonians that is Paul's crown and glory on that day of Christ's coming.

You see Paul doesn't just want to stand there himself before God but he wants the Thessalonians to be with him as well and that is the picture of the end that he has inside not just of himself but of everyone all of God's people standing holy and blameless before God.

So friends what is your vision of the end? Is it one of fear where you have no confidence before God's wrath or is it a vision of a day of crowning glory when you will not only be rescued by Jesus but that you will be surrounded by everyone else here tonight?

[26 : 04] Well if your vision is of that letter one then stand firm in the Lord even under persecution. Increase your love for others by encouraging them in their faith so that all of us may be found holy and blameless before God on that day.

Let's pray. Father forgive us that we live life so often without the end in mind without knowing that there is a day of judgment coming a day of glory coming that actually Jesus came once but he is coming again.

We so easily get lost we so easily lose that vision and start focusing just on the now here and now. So forgive us Lord help us lift up our eyes to see that horizon and to focus on that hope and as we do that to stand firm and to love to encourage one another to persevere under persecution.

We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.