

A Model of Faith

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[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. Our main text is going to be verses 7 through 10. Why don't we read this whole paragraph? I think it will be helpful for us to kind of bring it all together.

We have squeezed four sermons out of the first 10 verses of this letter, which may be good, it may be bad, I don't know, but it is what it is, right? So there is a cohesive thought that's happening here, so maybe it would be helpful for us to read the whole paragraph, maybe starting at verse 2 down to 10, and then we'll spend our time focused on 7 through 10, okay?

Verse 2. 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, 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 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 the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

[1 : 24] 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.

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.

Amen. Well, the World Series started this weekend, and it is not going well for the team that I have set my affection on since I was a child.

It's between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers. The first two games have taken place, both taking place in California. Well, in 1989, all of the World Series games were played in California.

The two teams who were battling for the championship that year, some of you will remember, both came from the Bay Area, the Oakland A's and the San Francisco Giants, with young stars like Mark McGuire before the steroids.

[2 : 49] And a great series, right? There's all kinds of documentaries about that particular series, and here's why. Because just before the third game began, an earthquake took place.

Just near Candlestick Park in San Francisco, it shook the stadium. Magnitude 6.9 earthquake shakes the stadium, delays the series for 10 games, but of course, the devastation was much worse than any baseball game.

It really had devastating effects on the area. And you will know most notably that we remember in those documentaries and shows that have reminded us of this incident, a double-decker freeway in San Francisco collapsed.

Some people were trapped beneath all the rubble. Many people were killed in those moments. It was really a devastating time. It was the largest earthquake in the area since 1906.

That's the largest one on record. This was the second largest on record, at least up to this point, 1989. Its effects were so widespread that it could be felt as far away as San Diego, which is 500 miles south of San Francisco.

[4 : 03] Now, to give you a range there, that would be like an earthquake happening in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and we feel it, the effects of it here in Cornelius.

San Francisco is often what we think of in relation to this particular event. That's what we remember most in relation to the loss, of course, that was experienced. But that's not actually where the earthquake originated from.

The epicenter of the quake was in a state park some 80 miles south of San Francisco. Nearly 2,000 years ago now, as we are studying this letter, something else of seismic significance happened in Greece.

But it wasn't an earthquake or any other natural disaster. Shockwaves of gospel impact were being felt all over Macedonia and Achaia.

But the epicenter of all of it that was happening was the embattled congregation in Thessalonica. That's what we learned from our text here this morning.

[5 : 13] Despite facing severe affliction on account of their faith in Christ, the Thessalonian Christians endured the suffering with a kind of joy that Peter said was inexpressible, full of glory.

Word of their faith began to spread like wildfire, apparently, so that Christians all over Greece were influenced and strengthened by it.

So that by God's grace, the Thessalonian church became a model of faith that the Lord used greatly in Macedonia and Achaia and even the regions beyond it.

Now, we read the entire paragraph. There's two contextual elements here that we should address before we jump directly into our main text for the morning. First is this.

These verses here at the end, they are flowing out of Paul's thanksgiving to God for the work of grace that he was doing in the church in Thessalonica.

[6 : 23] This is in the context of thanksgiving. The entire paragraph actually supports the opening statement. If you just set your eyes on it in verse number two, the very opening statement here, we give thanks to God always for you.

Everything down through verse 10 is in support of that statement. Paul is making an argument, so to speak. The argument is we thank God for you, and here's why.

So when we get to verses 7 through 10, he hasn't left that context, right? So what he's saying here, he's explaining to the Thessalonian church in these closing verses of the paragraph that he is thankful to God for them, specifically in these verses because of the gospel influence that they were having on other congregations.

So that's the first thing. Contextually, this is the context of thanksgiving. Second, Paul's goal in writing, why is he writing all of this? Well, it was to encourage a church who is enduring at this moment significant opposition and persecution for their faith.

So he's offering thanksgiving, but the purpose that he is recording this for them to read is because he wants to encourage them. It's a discouraged church. Faithful church? Yes.

[7 : 42] Discouraged church? Certainly. How could they not be? And here's the thing about it. But it's unlikely that they actually understood the kind of impact their faith was having on others.

So Paul writes to them right here wanting to encourage them with the fact that their suffering was not in vain. God was using it. He was using it for his glory, which would have been their primary desire, the glory of God and the good of his people.

Isn't that what, as Christians, becomes our primary hope and desire? That all of our lives would be to the glory of God and the good of his people? Even if it means our hardship, if it means that God is glorified in us and that his people are edified in the process and encouraged, that we're content with that, we're pleased with that.

That's the heart of the Thessalonians. So Paul writes to them, and he is encouraging them. The Thessalonian example is, of course, it's as useful for us today as it was for the Grecian Christians then.

It is a mold of faithfulness into which we would do well to pour our own Christianity. And as we look at this church as a model this morning, we are going to learn, once again, what is at the heart of saving faith.

[9 : 07] It's reiterated again and again here in this passage. But then we're also going to look at the extent to which God will use a church that perseveres in faithfulness.

That's what we're seeing in this model. We're seeing what is the basis of saving faith and a faith that God will use. And we are looking at the extent to which God will use a church that is faithful to his gospel.

Let's look at the second one first. The boundaries of faithful influence are limitless. The boundaries of faithful influence are limitless.

In other words, there is no limit to how God will use a faithful church. Now look with me again at verse seven. Paul says, this is the conclusion really of the previous section, so that you became an

example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Now in the flow of thought in the passage that we just read, verse seven technically belongs to the previous passage.

[10:12] That's what we studied last week, looking especially at verses four through seven. It identifies the result of the Thessalonians' spirit-empowered perseverance and conversion that is described for us in verses four through six.

You know that because of the opening words. There's just the transitional words that help us in our study, isn't there? Verse seven, so that. This is a resulting statement. All of this that Paul has said about them in verses four through six, all of this has happened so that the result being you became an example to all the other believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

Well, then when we get to verse eight, there's another interpretive tool for us, interpretive conjunction. It's the conjunction four. And four, at the beginning of verse eight, forces us to look back at verse seven to see what this is expounding on, what it's explaining.

And what we find is that Paul is elaborating on the fact that the Thessalonian church had become an example, that they had become a model, a mold for all the other believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

They were the original OG influencers in Greece. And Paul wanted them to know just how far reaching their gospel influence was, which brings us to verse eight.

[11:39] Set your eyes on that again. Four, this is in reference again to example. Four, 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.

That's interesting, isn't it? Far reaching influence and impact of this church. Now, it would be tempting for us to look at verse eight and conclude that the Thessalonian church had become a major sending agency for missions in Greece.

I don't actually think that's what Paul intends to mean here. I don't think that's actually what was happening. Now, there's no doubt that the church was faithfully evangelizing.

It would be difficult to explain the affliction that they were enduring from their unbelieving neighbors if that were not true. A hidden faith is not a persecuted faith.

We understand that, right? So, clearly, they are living out their faith in Thessalonica. They are preaching and proclaiming the gospel to others. There's no question about that. That is impacting their city in such a way that the city is turning against them.

[12:50] And we see that again and again in the narrative of the book of Acts, how that tended to happen in these churches that were started in the first century. However, when Paul says that the word of the Lord has sounded forth from them, what he means by that is that Thessalonica was the place of origin.

Back to that earthquake illustration. It was the epicenter for the work that God was doing throughout all of Greece. They were the origination. It was sounding forth from them and it was expanding all over the place.

And this is not at all surprising, is it when you consider that not only was Thessalonica situated as a primary seaport for Macedonia, but it also was situated on the Ignatian Way.

This is the main and probably in many instances the only roadway and highway that connected Rome to all of those countries east of Macedonia and all of those nations east of them.

So constantly, every day in Thessalonica, it's a metropolitan area of its time. A melting pot of people that are traveling in and out of the area either by sea or by land.

[14:06] It's not surprising then that people are coming into Thessalonica. They are being converted through the witness of the Thessalonians and then they are continuing on their way and they're spreading the word of this church as they go down the Ignatian Way and to wherever else they may have been going.

Now this is where we should step back for just a moment and consider the fact again the Thessalonians probably weren't very aware of this. There's no social media. They're not going to get on Facebook and say oh man there's this person that came through.

Look they're telling all about us in this other place. There's nothing like that happening. They're just being faithful and the Lord is using them and if we step back and consider that what we find is that God is working out a plan in and through us that we don't often see or understand.

Perhaps they never even considered at this point in the young life of this church that just their geographical location was a mighty weapon in the hand of God.

They're just being faithful and the Lord is using it. Now how much of that could be true of us? We don't know exactly how the Lord is using our church. We're trying to be faithful.

[15:19] We don't know what God's plan is and how He's using us. He could be using your influence in people all over the place and you don't even know and it's because there is an orchestration of your life that is in the providential and sovereign hand of God.

He is doing His work in you. He's doing His work through you and we don't often get to see what that's like and I think this passage teaches us, reminds us of it again. This is amazing.

This is what the Lord is doing. Now the emphasis of verse 8 then is not on the Thessalonians as like a mission sending agency. That's not it. The emphasis of verse 8 is on the reach of the Thessalonians' influence.

Not only had they significantly impacted Christians throughout Macedonia and Achaia, that is, those were the two major regions of Greece at the time, but as Paul ministered in Corinth for nearly two years later, he was interacting with Christians as he's writing this letter to the Thessalonian church. Christians coming from everywhere through Corinth, another metropolitan place and as they're coming to Paul, they're saying, hey, we heard about the Christians in Thessalonica and they're talking about them.

[16:34] The impact that they had, the encouragement of their own faith that they had through knowing and hearing about the Thessalonian believers. News of the Thessalonians' spirit-empowered conversion and spirit-enabled perseverance outpaced the apostle himself.

He didn't need to tell other people about the Thessalonians because they already knew. God was using their example as an instrument of grace to strengthen Christians from all over the place. But what exactly is it about the Thessalonians that God was using? Look at verse 5 again. We studied this last week. Notice what Paul says. Our gospel came to you not only in word but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

Now in verse 5 there, Paul said it wasn't merely the words of the gospel. It was the transformative power of the Holy Spirit at work through the gospel message that resulted in the Thessalonians' conversion.

He's making the same argument again just from a different perspective in verse 8. Notice the language. Not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.

[17:54] Do you see? It's not just that they are declaring the word of the gospel. It's that the power of the Holy Spirit at work in their own lives that is being demonstrated and displayed to these people.

The power of their own proclamation even is what the Lord is using. What sounded forth from them was not just words. It was the display of the Spirit's power at work in them.

It was one thing for the Thessalonian Christians to declare the gospel message. It's quite another thing that they continued to believe and proclaim that message through such difficult circumstances.

People saw that. They saw the Spirit's power at work in their life and that's exactly what God was using to do His work in the lives of others. The power of their influence was in the authenticity of their faith and the authenticity of their faith was revealed through faithful perseverance in affliction. So Paul says you became an example to everyone. Now again, here's the thing. there is no indication in this text or in any other text in these two letters that the church was very aware of the fact that God was using their faith to accomplish His work the way that He was.

[19:19] I just don't think they knew. I think that's part of why Paul is writing about it here. It's not to tell them something they already knew. I think it is to inform them in order that they might be encouraged about it at least mostly.

It's not like they set out to do this. There's probably no meeting of church leaders in Thessalonica to determine how they would make the strongest impact on their neighboring cities.

They weren't sitting in their living room one day saying, you know, it would be great if we could be the influencers of our generation. How can we best do that? Now maybe that kind of strategic initiative is helpful in some cases, but in the context of the local church, most often that quickly descends into a gospel-less pragmatism.

That's not what the Thessalonians were doing. The influence of the Thessalonians wasn't the result of strategic planning. It was the result of extraordinary faithfulness through spirit-empowered preaching and spirit-enabled perseverance.

That's it. The limitless reach of their influence was God's doing, and it was simply their faithfulness that He used.

[20 : 38] The picture we have of the Thessalonian church is just a group of Christians who've got their heads down, plowing forward, being faithful, trying to stay away from sin, trying to proclaim the gospel, trying to glorify the Lord and their Savior and their Lord.

And as they're doing that, God is doing a work through them that they were completely unaware of, I think. And it'll be the same for us. We don't need to develop elaborate strategies to influence our neighbors.

We just need to be faithful in every season and trust that the Lord will be pleased to use us for His glory and for His purposes so that when things are good and it's convenient, we're faithful.

When things are hard and it's really inconvenient, we're still faithful. And I think that's what the Lord will use. When we are faithful as the Thessalonians were, honestly, there is no limit to what God might do with our little fledgling church in Cornelius.

And we may not see the results of that. Lord willing, one day in heaven that will be revealed to us for the glory of God. But for now, we just stay faithful. We keep our heads down.

[22 : 00] We plow forward. We do what God has called us to do and we trust that He's going to do something with it. Secondly, I want you to see the basis of faithful influence is the gospel.

The basis of faithful influence is the gospel. In other words, there is only one kind of faith that God uses like this. Only one.

Now, the text indicates that Paul regularly met Grecian Christians who had been personally impacted by the faith of the Thessalonians. The last two verses record the report then that these other Christians were giving about the church when they interacted with Paul at some point down the road.

And what you'll notice is it had everything to do with Jesus. Shocker, right? Not at all. It has everything to do with Jesus.

Look at verses 9 and 10. 4, again, that's another one of those grounding statements, isn't it? What's he doing? He's explaining the report. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you.

[23 : 13] Now, reception, that's a weird translation to be honest with you. It's the same word if you just set your eyes on chapter 2 and verse 1. Paul will say, we'll get to this next week, but Paul says, for you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.

Coming, that's the same word that is, for some reason, in some of our translations is translated reception. Don't get the idea that what is being communicated is that the Thessalonians were just super hospitable to Paul and that impacted the other Christians.

That may be true, but that's not what Paul's saying. What he's referring to here is that when he initially came to Thessalonica and preached the gospel, that that coming to them resulted in a powerful conversion by the Spirit's work.

That's what he's referring to. So as people are coming, they're reporting concerning the kind of reception they had. That is that they were converted to the faith of Christ. And how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven.

This is the perseverance dynamic, right? So the first section is, that's the conversion element. Now, the waiting part, waiting for his Son, that's the persevering part of it. Wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead.

[24 : 30] Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. Now, because that was a really choppy way for us to work through that, let's just read through it again without me stopping us, okay? For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, 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 delivers us from the wrath to come.

Verse 8 tells us that the Thessalonians' faith in God had gone forth everywhere, making them a model of faith to Christians in Greece.

Verses 9 and 10 give us the basis or the content of their faith in God. And just using this little report that Paul passes on to the Thessalonian church here, I want you to consider what the Thessalonian

church had as its confession of faith.

That's how I want to term it here. Maybe it would have sounded something like this. Number one, we believe there is only one true and living God who alone is worthy of all our love, worship, and obedience.

Look at verse 9. How you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. This isn't just a statement of their belief.

[25 : 59] It's a polemic against the foolishness of idolatry. The idols they once worshipped were lifeless. Now they worship the living God.

Their former gods were false. Now they were turning away from them to serve the true God. And I don't want to just quickly dismiss this thought of idolatry as if this is a thing of the past.

It is not a thing of the past. You may not pray to a shrine, but we are all tempted to bow before lifeless idols.

Idols. And they take many different shapes and forms in our lives. But as Calvin said, the heart is a factory of idols. Elections coming up in just a few days.

We see this in the political culture of our nation. Every candidate presents themselves in messianic language, don't they? If I'm not elected, we're all going to lose.

[27 : 15] If I'm elected, we'll all be saved. That's essentially the rhetoric that comes from every politician, isn't it? Trump even recently said, it got a lot of attention, that if you're a Christian, if I'm elected this time, you'll never have to vote again.

That sounds a little bit like when Jesus says, come to me and you'll never thirst again. You'll never hunger again. It's amazing, isn't it? And every politician does it.

It's not just him. All of them do. They are presenting themselves to us as if they are the messiahs for us. If they are the ones, and some of us, we get sucked into it. We get all torqued out. Of course, culturally, we get all torqued out about all of this.

This can become a subtle idol of our hearts where we're resting in some person other than Christ to provide the salvation that we think we most desperately need.

And all of that is just idolatry. It's at the heart of our idolatry. That's low-hanging fruit, isn't it? There's other idols we have.

[28 : 14] I heard somebody say one time that the hardest thing about being a youth pastor is that most people think you're just tasked with babysitting the church's favorite idols.

Some of us would sooner offend Jesus than our children. Some of us would sooner disobey God than dishonor our parents.

Some of us would sooner abandon the fellowship of God's people than abandon the worldly relationships relationships that do nothing for us but point us to sin.

It's all idolatry. And it's not just something we struggle with before we come to Christ. It is something we struggle with even as Christians.

The constant tug of our hearts to abandon the true and living God in some way to serve the gods of this world even if they're just gods of our own making in our minds.

[29 : 31] And of course all of our favorite gods are the God of self. That's not the testimony of the Thessalonian church here. The reason God was using them is because they had decisively continually turned away from this world to serve the true and the living God.

If the Lord is going to use us it will be because we are constantly turning from idols to serve the living and true God as a matter of intention.

Second, perhaps their confession said something like this. We believe that all who do not love, worship, and obey the true and living God will in the end face His eternal wrath.

This comes at the end of verse 10 doesn't it? It's the last four words. The wrath to come. The wrath to come. What is that about? It is a future judgment.

The coming wrath refers to the final judgment when all people will stand before God and give an account of their lives. All who have failed to perfectly love and worship and obey the Creator which the Bible says is all of us, that judgment is characterized by divine wrath.

[30 : 53] wrath. The fact is your life is headed to an inevitable end at which time you will stand before the Holy God.

That is a reality for all of us and it is a reality that should cause us to tremble. That's a part of their confession. We believe there's one true and living God who alone is worthy of our love and worship and obedience.

We also believe that all who do not love and worship and obey Him will face His eternal judgment. Third, we believe that Jesus is God's Son from Heaven who offers us salvation from God's wrath through His death and resurrection.

Look again at verse 10. His Son from Heaven whom He raised from the dead. Jesus, who does what? Delivers us.

delivers us from what? His own wrath. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, came to this earth as we talked about in Matthew 5.

[32 : 04] Perfectly fulfilled God's law. Died on the cross to make an atonement for sinners. And then as Paul tells us again, God raised Him from the dead to prove that the sacrifice of Christ was sufficient.

That is, it fully propitiated, satisfied, appeased God's wrath against sinners who will turn from sin to trust in Christ.

That's key to their confession, isn't it? Now, do you see a pattern here? Do you remember back during the summer we did a series on the gospel in our Lakeside Connect series? Do you remember what the four categories of the gospel presentation was that we went through? God. There's one true and living God. Man. Man has sinned against the one true and living God. Savior.

Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead so that we might be saved from God's wrath. Just by way of passing, it would be helpful for us to recognize this is one of the earliest mentions of the resurrection of Jesus in all of Christian literature.

[33 : 21] It's not the earliest. It's one of the earliest. This coming about 25, 30 years after Christ died and rose and exalted back into heaven.

Rose back to heaven. Now, I say that so that I can point out to you at the same time that when Paul mentions the resurrection of Jesus, I want you to notice the presuppositional character of this mention of the resurrection.

He doesn't explain the resurrection. He's not instructing the resurrection as if it's not something that they didn't already know and believe. No, what we find is that it's assumed in the text as he's writing to this very early group of Christians.

And what is at the heart of it? The resurrection of Jesus. This was not a later invention by Christians. This has always been at the heart of the Christian gospel from the very beginning. That Christ rose from the dead to prove that he has power to give life. That God, the Father, received his sacrifice as a sufficient payment for our sins.

[34 : 29] That is the heart of the gospel. Without the resurrection, there is no gospel. Without the gospel, there is no Christianity and there's no point for us to be here today. Fourth, perhaps they said, we believe that Jesus is now reigning over his people from heaven as Lord and will soon return to defeat all wickedness and to deliver us finally from sin, sorrow, and death for all of eternity.

Look again at verse 10. To wait for his son. Waiting being the key word here, right? Christians are so certain of their future hope that much of Christianity might be characterized as watching and waiting.

Faithful Christians are not in love with this world. We're not trying to turn this world into heaven. No, we are longing for another world that is to come.

We know that Jesus will return soon. He's going to make all things new and we keep our minds fixed on that hope. This is at the heart of Christian endurance.

Why are they persevering in the faith in Thessalonica despite all the affliction? Because they were willing to trade the hardships of this life for the certainty of hope and peace and security in the next life.

[36 : 03] And they were spending their days enduring the affliction waiting for Jesus' return and it is the same that we do now. Now, from the time that Paul arrived in Thessalonica and through significant hardship, the Thessalonian church persevered in a faith rooted and grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ and it was this gospel endurance that the Lord used so tremendously to do His work in others.

Indeed, it is only through faith in Jesus Christ that you can be saved and it is only faithfulness to Jesus Christ and His gospel that God is pleased to use to accomplish His work through you and me in our church.

So what am I saying? There is no limit to how God will use a faithful church and a faithful Christian.

And the only faith that God uses and that ultimately matters for any of us is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, His death, burial, and resurrection and His soon return.

Now as we close, I want you to notice that the text includes four generations of examples.

[37 : 28] That's the main heading, right? They have become an example and there's four generations of examples listed here. The Grecian Christians in Macedonia and Achaia and maybe beyond there were influenced by the Thessalonians.

The Thessalonians were told in verse 6 were influenced by Paul, Silas, and Timothy who were influenced by who? Jesus.

That's right. Jesus. Now I want you to think about that word example one more time. It's the word for model or mold. If the Thessalonian church was to be poured into a mold, what would come out would not look like the church in Thessalonica.

it would look like Jesus? And that's the point of application, isn't it? If your life was to be poured into a mold for your kids, what would they look like?

Do they look like Jesus? Do they look like nominal Christians who treat their Christianity and their worship as a matter of convenience?

[38 : 46] Do they look not like Christian at all? What about our church? If our influence, our Christianity as a church, our church as a whole is poured into a mold for other churches, what do they look like?

Do they look like Jesus? That's the goal. That we would look like Jesus. Is our influence, is it actually leading people to love and serve and obey God more?

What we gain from the Thessalonians in this passage is not that they were perfect, they certainly were, but what we gain from the text is that they were faithful and that they had become an example worth imitating, which is the question for us.

Are we faithful enough that we're an example that's actually worth imitating, that will actually make any kind of eternal difference in anybody's life?