

A Lesson in Hope

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[0 : 0 0] So let's turn now to the Word of God, and this evening we'll be looking together at 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. If you're using the church Bibles, it's on page 986.

So Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians chapter 1, and we're just going to read through the whole chapter together this evening. It's also on the screens in front of you, if you prefer to follow along that way.

So 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 from verse 1. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

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 labour 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 with full conviction.

[1 : 2 6] 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 affection with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

So that you became an example to all of the 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.

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. And we ask God to bestow his great blessing upon the reading of his holy inspired word to us this evening. So before we look at this passage together, let's spend some more time in prayer before our Lord.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we once again thank you for the wonderful privilege we have of worshipping you today. We also cannot help but marvel and give thanks for the wonderful creation in which you've given to us also, especially on such a beautiful day like today.

[3 : 0 2] How blessed we are to live in such a wonderful and beautiful part of that creation in Scotland. How wonderful it is to even see the smallest things, the insignificant things that would otherwise be ignored.

How wonderful it is, Lord, to see your creation working. To see anything from the smallest insect to the largest creature, from each blade of grass to each tallest tree, from the mountains and the hills to the fields and the rivers and the seas and all of it working together in harmony because you made it so and you uphold it through your power.

So help us, Lord, as we seek to best look after the wonderful creation that you've given us, to steward it well, to care for it as best we can in our own way.

And help us to show others in its beauty that it is not just an accident, that it's not just a freak of nature, but everything has a beauty and a purpose that was made by a wonderful, loving creator.

Lord, we thank you for the technology we have, once again, that allows others to join us from home and from afar to worship with us. Lord, we thank you for the opportunity that we have had such great provision over the last couple of years that has allowed us to continue meeting and continue worshipping and sharing in fellowship during these difficult times we've all faced.

[4 : 46] And we pray as we seek to return to some normality in the coming months that you would restore broken relationships in churches, that you would restore people's joy, that you would bring unity to your church, that you would show patience and love to your people as we seek to see how we might serve you best in the days and weeks and months to come.

We pray for this church recently vacant, Lord, for all they've been through and for all they have to coming forward. We pray for their search in finding a minister, that it would be a short process, and that the right man who you have called will come and minister to these people, that they would know your blessings, that they would know encouragement and growth through that ministry, whomever it may be.

We thank you for those who have filled in in the meantime, for those gifted preachers among the congregation here and those coming from afar to worship and minister to your people here.

It's a wonderful privilege we have to have so many who are willing to come, and yet we know there's still so much that needs to be done. There's still so much work that must be done.

So we pray, Lord, that you would send workers into your harvest field in Scotland, a land which is becoming increasingly dark and spiritually dead. We pray that there would be wonderful, great, powerful revival once again in our time, that we would see conviction of sin, that we would see the joy of salvation, that we would see evangelistic zeal in the people that we haven't seen in generations.

[6 : 33] What a wonderful thing that would be. How blessed would this land be, as then we can go and seek to bless other nations as we have in the past. We know you can do this, Lord, and you've done it in the past.

And we know you've often waited until things seem to be at their worst before you've done so. But we thank you, Lord, that we are here today. We thank you for those who are still faithful, who are still gathered to you today to worship.

We're thankful for one another. So bless this congregation that they seek to serve you in Livingston. Bless the people and their situations that you know of.

Maybe some of them are secret, but you know, Lord. Minister to them through your Spirit. And help people to be encouragements to them too.

Be with the sick and the housebound and those who are struggling, whatever situation they may face, to be uplifted and to be strengthened. The strength that is not their own, but comes from you.

[7 : 38] Be with those who have uncertain futures, who do not know what the next few months will bring. Help us to trust in you, knowing that you have a great, wonderful plan marked for each of us.

And you will not see it fail. Bless us, Lord, as we hear your Word. Help us to grow from it, to love it, to be challenged by it, to turn to it at all times.

Help us to immerse ourselves in your Word, not just in church, but at home, so we may be filled with your goodness and your grace and your love.

From the wonderful Scriptures, we pray for those who are working to translate these wonderful Scriptures into languages who do not currently have it. We pray for these people who long for your Scriptures, who long to be able to read it in a language they can understand for themselves.

So we pray for the work of translators and those doing such a difficult task. And yet we know it can be done because we have been so fortunate in our own language to have it so readily available to us.

[8 : 51] Help us not to take it for granted. So be with us, Lord, today. Encourage each one here. Encourage them in the hope of the Gospel, knowing that we are out of the darkness, that there is light, and that in Christ we may find that light and enter into it and be a part of it and share it with others.

Forgive us, O Lord, and bless us. In Jesus' holy and precious name we pray. Amen. Amen. So a few years ago now, it was 2019.

So it doesn't seem like that long ago, but when you're taking COVID and everything, it feels like a lifetime ago now. So when I was applying for the ministry, I had to write an essay as part of the application, just a short one.

I think it was about 500 words. We had to write an essay about what the Gospel was, which makes sense, considering what it is we're applying for, if you think about it. But the thing I chose to focus my essay on was the theme of hope.

Because the hope of the Christian faith, the hope that the Gospel brings into a hopeless world, is a hugely fundamental part of our faith.

[10 : 20] And I think perhaps it's something we need to be reminded of fairly regularly, the hope we have in the Gospel, especially in these difficult and strange times in which we find ourselves living in.

It's also something we need to be actively sharing whenever we get the opportunity to do so. We look at the competing philosophies that are going around in the 21st century Scotland today, thinking of secularism, atheism, humanism, all these other isms that are floating around today.

None of these things bring anyone any hope at all. They bring nothing but death and destruction.

But the Gospel, the Gospel brings us hope. It brings us the best hope we could possibly imagine.

It doesn't just give us simple hopes. You know, things like hoping that there'll be enough money in the bank account to pay the bills at the end of the month. Well, that isn't important, but it promises us wonderful, powerful hope for a life everlasting.

[11 : 36] Hope of an end to suffering. Hope to an end to pain. No more death. No more tears. A hope of an eternity in the presence of our holy God, worshipping him perfectly forever.

In 1st Thessalonians, Paul is greatly concerned with this hope. The full letter is quite short. It's only five chapters long.

But if you read it and you pay attention, you'll notice in every chapter, there is a mention of the second coming of Jesus. There's a mention of the fulfillment of God's promises that he made to his people.

The city of Thessalonica was an old city, even in Paul's day. It was named after Alexander the Great's half-sister and was founded in about 315 BC by her husband, who was King Cassander of Macedonia.

And by Roman times, the city had exploded into a provincial capital with more than 200,000 people living within its borders. And the church in Thessalonica was a fairly new church.

[12 : 48] It was also primarily a Gentile church. There may have been a few Jews who were a part of it, but primarily it was made up of former pagans.

And they probably met together in several groups in people's homes, not like one big meeting as we have done here today. There were also an evangelistic church.

They were actively reaching out into their city with this new wonderful thing they had discovered, the gospel. If you want to read more about the beginnings of this church, you can go to Acts 17, where Luke gives us a very good background into the city and the church there.

And they had it pretty rough, really. They didn't have an easy time of it. It wasn't like church planting today. It was quite a different kettle of fish. Because after a short time of hearing Paul's preaching, many people started becoming Christians.

They started being saved. And this started to cause some problems. Because although Thessalonica was originally a Greek city, it was a very pro-Roman city. It was the provincial capital.

[13 : 58] And being very pro-Roman gave them lots of benefits and lots of civil status and made them feel important and big about themselves. So when this little Jewish man came into the city preaching about another Lord who wasn't Caesar, things started to get a little bit tense.

And it caused a lot of uproar, a lot of persecution, which unfortunately led to Paul and his team having to leave the city just because of the amount of trouble that it was causing.

I'm sure this was an incredibly hard thing for Paul to have done. I'm sure he loved those people dearly and he still had an awful lot in which to teach them. And therefore, a few months later, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, who then went to catch up with Paul in Corinth.

Timothy updated him on the status of the church, reporting that generally they were doing pretty well. However, there were some issues that had cropped up. Unfortunately, some people had died and there were some issues that needed clarification.

So this letter is Paul's response to Timothy's update on the situation in that church. So we're going to look at three things really from this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians together this evening.

[15 : 14] We're going to look at hope. We're going to look at a steadfast hope. We're going to look at a powerful hope. And we're going to look at a meaningful hope. So firstly, then, we have a steadfast hope.

So after beginning his letter in his customary fashion, Paul kicks off with a prayer. He says in 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.

Paul's been told of the difficulties his brothers and sisters have been facing. So he does what we should all do when we hear about things like this. He prays. Note how he clarifies too that this isn't just a one-off thing.

He says that we always pray. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly. Praying for others should be a constant part of our Christian lives.

It was a constant part of Paul's life and practice too. He's always concerned with others, it seems. Note also how he begins verse 2 with the words, we.

[16 : 43] He's referring, of course, to his ministry team, if you'll put it that way. Because if you remember at the beginning of the letter, he's not just addressing it from himself, but he mentions Silvanus and Timothy also.

They were a team who worked together. But this team didn't just go from place to place, planting churches and moving on and kind of forgetting about them as they go on to the next place and the next thing.

They remembered them. They remembered the people there and they prayed for them. They practiced what they were preaching. They are praying together as a team for gospel fruit to grow in the places that they had ministered to, which is something we all ought to be involved in.

Not just the ministers or the elders or the deacons or any kind of church leadership, because all of us are involved in some ministry of some sort or other.

All of us is a missionary in a sense, whether it be as a parent or as a grandparent or a student or a teacher or just a colleague at your place of work or maybe as a boss.

[17 : 55] Your life is your ministry. And Paul goes on, we'll see that the Thessalonians have taken this idea to heart.

Verse 3, it reads, Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

So this church was brand new, remember. It was barely maybe a few months old, maybe six to eight months old, and yet it would seem that they had been very, very busy during that short period of time.

They'd been very busy doing gospel work in the city in which they were based. And the reason why it is is based on what it is that they have. They have what John Stock called the three most eminent Christian graces.

These are faith, hope, no, faith, love, and hope. But rather than being inward things, all of these three graces are outgoing things.

[19 : 03] Their faith faith wasn't based upon themselves but went outwards towards God. God who made them, God who gave them his grace and his mercy, God who is now their Lord and from whom they now derive their purpose and their strength.

Their love is not love for themselves. It's not a selfish love but rather it's a love of their neighbours both within the church and also outside of its community also.

It's a love which encourages them, which drives them to serve one another, a desire also to reach out to those who are yet to be saved. This love comes from God and as it fills them up it overflows from them like a river bursting its banks and spreading to all those around them.

And then thirdly they have their hope. Their hope that is not based on themselves, not based on their own labours or on their own good deeds but a hope which is based upon the Lord Jesus Christ and the promise of his return.

Faith rests on things that God has done in the past. Love is something we work on in the present and hope looks to the future and the wonders that are to come.

[20 : 32] The Christians in Thessalonica had hope excuse me all of the hardships they'd experienced I'm sure things like being cut off from family and friends putting their businesses at risk because of their new faith even risking arrest or even death.

Despite all this despite all these hardships despite all these struggles they were able and they were willing to work for Jesus.

They were willing and able to labour for Jesus because of the endurance in them inspired by the hope they had in what Jesus had done and what he was going to do.

Paul stresses this hope to them this steadfast hope which meant that despite everything that was arrayed against them they could do amazing and wonderful things.

The world in all its power tried to crush this baby church in this pagan city but despite their best efforts the church instead of dying expanded it flourished and it reached out with the good news of Jesus more and because of their hope in Jesus they could do these things.

[22 : 00] Paul reminds us of this when he says in Romans 8 verse 31 if God is for us then who can be against us? If you have the almighty God himself the all powerful creator of the universe at your back then why be afraid of anything that a simple human being could ever do to you?

One commentator writes that hope for the world is ephemeral a fancy word really isn't it ephemeral it basically means fleeting or passing something that's short lived something that's hard to grasp it has no anchor in reality as my grandfather would say it's like trying to nit fog doesn't matter how hard you try you're never going to get anywhere but hope for the believer is a certain hope it's a firm hope it's anchored in the reality of the risen Lord and his lordship over the world and what a hope that really is so we have a steadfast hope and secondly then we have a powerful hope we read in verse four 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 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 the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia as we have seen then the Christian's hope is based on the return of Jesus and the wonderful thing it will bring for his people we have this hope because we have heard the gospel because we have believed it and we believe the gospel because as Paul says that the gospel came to us not simply with words but also with power with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction because they they were chosen by God and it's this power not only to persevere but also to flourish throughout your difficult days that is really a hallmark of

God's love in people's lives the Holy Spirit brings unimaginable power into our lives it brings the power of God not so that we can conquer those who we disagree with but so even when they are trying to kill us with everything they have we can minister to them we can pray for them we can love them God chose Paul and his team to go to this city and then he hit the Thessalonians with a double whammy double shot espresso of power he gives them both the words of the gospel themselves and the power holy spirit behind them God chose that city at that time at that point to hear the preaching of the gospel God chose the people who would hear it and be saved God chose the very day and the hour when salvation would come to that city 2000 years ago and

I'm sure he did the same for many of you as he did for me it brings up the question though why doesn't it why is it that God works in this way and the honest answer is I don't know I understand the doctrine of election is a difficult one many people wrestled with it for forever it leaves so many questions that I really understand the difficulties around it but the reason why I believe it to be true and the reason why I hope you will believe it to be true are simply this firstly because I believe the Bible teaches it and we could have a lot more discussion on this for hours and hours on end if we had the time unfortunately we don't but secondly because believing this gives us a powerful hope it gives us a powerful hope because otherwise I think we wouldn't have any hope because when I look at myself in the mirror in the mornings

[26 : 42] I see a man a very flawed man a man prone to sin a man who left to his own devices would just walk away from God and do his own thing and do things that eventually lead to my death but I know because for whatever reason God chose me because God chose you because God chose the Thessalonians we can have a powerful hope because knowing that despite our weaknesses and our failings we know that the Holy Spirit is at work within us to bring us to the end of our race faithfully to keep us on the path that God has chosen for us and allowing us to inherit the wonderful promises of Jesus Christ John Calvin wrote that the plague of submitting to our own rule leads us straight to ruin but the surest way of safety is neither to know or want anything on our own but simply to follow the leading of the

Lord sorry my throat scared a bit tingly the people of Thessalonica suffered greatly for their faith we may suffer for hours in our day our brothers and sisters around the world are suffering for theirs some in ways that we couldn't fathom but this shouldn't stop us it shouldn't stop us from proclaiming the gospel whenever we can nor should it cause us to forsake the hope we have in Christ the Thessalonians believe that when Jesus returns he would finish the work he began at the resurrection that's what they believed that's what gave them hope in face of all their troubles but do we really believe that same thing here today Thessalonians believed they were God's chosen people do we have that same belief today do we have that same grounding today the Thessalonians worked for God's kingdom despite violent persecution do we do that really today when we have relative peace and freedom they had become imitators of Paul and his team as they were imitators of Jesus as before them they were all working for the Lord together despite all risks they faced because they had this powerful hope within them brought through the Holy Spirit and his working in their lives this is the truth that all Christians have we all have that same spirit that they had then within us today now it hasn't changed one of my favourite psalms is Psalm 138

I have it on a little cross on my bedroom wall not the full psalm but just the last couple of verses which my parents gave to me many years ago and the last verse says this it says the Lord will fulfil his purpose for me your love O Lord endures forever do not abandon the works of your hand the Lord will fulfil his purpose for me whatever it is wherever he's called us to go the Lord will fulfil his purpose for you whatever it is he has for you to do also and we can have a great hope in that powerful promise so we have a steadfast hope we have a powerful hope and then finally we have a meaningful hope we read down from verse 8 for not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and in 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 turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead

Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come in our day today so much of what the world sees as a good thing is unfortunately the opposite a lot of what people think is being good is actually meaningless things like having a big car or a big house or having an attractive partner having a great job having the latest technology being able to choose your gender or your sexuality any of these things all of it is ultimately meaningless if you want your life to have meaning to have purpose to be good then do it not for yourselves but do it for Jesus if you have a great job that's wonderful that's amazing praise God but don't do your job for you do your job for Jesus if you have great power or wealth or influence then that is great you know praise God but don't do it for you do it instead for Jesus if we dedicate our lives to serving Jesus who gave up his life for ours then our hope will be a meaningful hope what do I mean by that three things briefly it'll be a meaningful hope because then people will hear the gospel it's one of our first tasks as Christians is it not to share the good news that we ourselves have received because if nobody shared it we'd never have heard it in the first place and we'd be lost if we lived our lives for Jesus then evangelism wouldn't be something that we dread or we stumble over it would just become a part of our lives it would become a part of our work a part of raising our families a part of whatever ministry we have that God's called us into become a part of who we are that's what it was like for the Thessalonians their evangelism was so passionate

I'm sure if I looked at them they would have glowed almost in their evangelistic zeal Paul sees this he sees how the Lord's message has rang out from these people in this city not only Macedonia he writes and Achaia but your faith in God has become known everywhere the message of Jesus and how it has affected their lives has rang out from that city like a bell we don't really have church bells really anymore or if we do have them they're rarely ever rung but when you hear a church bell being rung you can hear it can't you from miles around likewise the word has spread far and wide of this new church's zeal for sharing the gospel and Paul who is usually so quick to correct error or to offer advice to other Christians is effectively driven speechless here therefore he says we do not need to say anything about it therefore the Thessalonian

[34 : 33] Christians though beginners in the faith really and they still had a lot to learn and Paul will address some of this in this letter and later although they were beginners they were already examples examples they were examples to others of faith and love and of hope so I just want to encourage you that you shouldn't let your length of service as it is be any kind of barrier to you as a Christian it doesn't matter you've been a believer for five minutes or fifty years it's a wonderful thing and you can serve your God and you can do it all for Jesus secondly it's meaningful because it's based on truth Paul writes that they tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and the true God people from other areas reported to Paul that the Thessalonians had repented of their idolatrous past they had forsaken the pagan gods they once served and they committed themselves to serving the living and the true God and they were waiting for Jesus to return two key traits of genuine

Christian conversion you may think well we're living in a very different world nowadays to that of the Thessalonians but the reality is there's not much difference between us as you might think the ancient world was obsessed with religion it was a part of every aspect of public life and to forsake that in favour of something else would make somebody an outcast and it's the same in many places in the world for Christians today predominantly Muslim countries if somebody were to forsake the Islamic faith to become a Christian they would become an outcast from their society and it's the same in western secular countries too believe it or not because we have our own religion in a sense in our nation we have our own idols that we worship they may not be gods in temples stone idols made of marble or whatever but rather our idols are ourselves or they're the material goods that we have or they're the power and influence we can have over others and if we forsake those things in favour of the living and the true

God then we risk being outcast too because people will think what's going on there despite the risks of being outcast it's definitely worth it in the end and thirdly and finally then it's a meaningful hope because of who it's based on because it is based on Jesus Christ and it's of course awaiting his second coming where his children will be delivered we're told from the wrath to come Christ has once and for all redeemed us he is our deliverer always we have hope in Jesus because he is the son of God most high we have hope in Jesus because only he lived a perfect sinless life we have hope in Jesus because he gave himself up to the point of death even death on a cross for our sins so that we could have a restored relationship with our

God and be counted to him as righteous we have hope in Jesus because he rose from the dead defeating death forever and showing us a glimpse of the glorious resurrection that is to come for all his children we have hope in Jesus because he ascended into heaven and is right now this very moment seated at the right hand of God interceding on your and my behalf we have hope in Jesus because he is our great high priest we have hope in Jesus because he promised to return and fix this broken world forever we have hope in Jesus because he will fulfill his promises two things to consider then as we close firstly the church that receives the gospel must pass it on we must and finally the church which passes on the gospel must live it don't let your evangelism or your working for

Jesus be an outward thing only but instead live it embrace it accept it as we wait for the son of God to return from heaven that is why we can have hope friends so that is why I want you to put your hope in Jesus tonight as you go home put your hope in him because it is a hope that is steadfast a hope that is powerful and a hope that is meaningful amen heavenly father we thank you for these wonderful encouraging words from the apostle Paul who reminds us of the hope we have in Christ the hope of his coming the hope of his working within us through the Holy Spirit to bring us to the end and a hope that we so desperately need and want to share when times look bad when we're going through troubles when things look uncertain when we don't know what's ahead help us to have hope and to trust in you our God for you have promised that your son will return that he will make all things right that there will be no more death no more suffering no more tears the old order of things will have passed away help us to have hope and help us to use that hope to work for you in all that we do so that we may give up our idols of self and wealth and instead trust and serve the living and true God in this day in Jesus name we ask you amen you