

How To Solve Our Problems

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[0 : 00] minds to your word. We pray that you will show us things that we have always known but never seen, that you will show us a reality which constantly surrounds us but which we're not even aware of, and that we may be very mindful of your continuing redemptive and healing purpose in our lives, which we so often neglect.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. I want you to turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and...

I want to just look at the first sentence in beginning at verse 2, and if you follow through to the end of the sentence, which you may be surprised to learn, even though the English doesn't follow this, the first sentence ends at the end of chapter 1, so we're just going to look at one sentence tonight, and it's just that it happens to be eight verses long.

It was read for us. We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers. Maybe I'll do this silly thing first, and then we'll get down to it.

I brought this as a kind of sermon illustration. I managed to track the problem with the Holly heads. I don't know if you send somebody Holly for Christmas, whether they would appreciate this or not, but I am physically just one of the common behaviors, so the descendants go on and on and on, and it branched off here, and it branched off there, and it branched off there, and it branched off back again, and it keeps going on and on and on.

[2 : 16] And finally, there's some people in the gym. So you have to go a long way looking into the life, and so one that goes in this text of 1 versus 2 to 8, you draw their life with friends, and go all the way to get your work for it.

And now how you're supposed to break all your terms down into the life. Paul would say it without running his one sentence into eight verses.

I don't know how I can handle three points, but nevertheless, there are lots of three points in here that I'd like you to look at as we go along. First, in praying, there are three ways that you pray.

Do you see what they are? When you pray, you remember, that's verse 3. The prayer is a prayer of thanks.

That's how it begins in verse 2. And when you pray giving thanks, these are the things that happen. You constantly mention, you remember, you know.

[3 : 25] And you know. So if you want a guide as to how to pray for a particular group of people, you can pray by constantly mentioning them, remembering their work, and knowing their election of God.

Or that they are chosen by God. Those three things. When you are, just another way of looking at three points in here, you can remember this too, I hope. The things that you are to remember are three.

You are to remember a work of faith, a labor of love, a labor of love, and steadfastness of hope. So there's another branch that he goes off on and tells you about those three things.

And then when you come to the description of the declaration of the gospel, you'll find that the gospel came not in word only, but in three ways.

In power, and that power was in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction. And if you go on further, you will see that the chapter ends with the three things that you're called upon to do.

[4 : 47] To wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, and the one who delivers us from the wrath to come. The son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, whom God has delivered, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The reason I would really like you to look at this chapter tonight is because I would like you to become, self-consciously, a community of Christians.

And this first of Paul's letters to one of the very early churches describes how the word of God came to that church, and how that church responded or reacted to it.

Now, what I want you to think of is in terms of how it comes to us and how we are to respond and to react.

Now, it tells you, I think, in effect, how things keep going for you.

[6 : 08] In my job, and I run into lots of people in this congregation in the course of a week, and there's all sorts of problems that people have.

problems that concern a child in hospital, problems that concern an adoption, problems that concern sort of personal defeat, problems that concern a sense of deep unworthiness, problems that concern a great longing to do something for God, but quite incapable of knowing what it is or how to do it, problems that concern marriage, problems that concern education, problems that concern the future.

So by the end of the week, I am up to my ears in problems for which I don't want you to feel in the least sorry for me because I can't solve them, and I knew at the beginning of the week that I couldn't.

But it is my happy privilege to try and show people how it works, how you keep going in the midst of the situation. Because very often what happens is that you focus on a particular problem in your life, and that problem completely obsesses you and totally cripples you from accomplishing anything at all.

And you become more and more built around the particular problem which marks and perhaps distinguishes you as a person.

[7 : 36] And that becomes, and you're expected in our society to become totally absorbed with that and to be caught up entirely in it. And so what I want you to see from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, that there is something else happening when you encounter the gospel or the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Something else takes place. First, you become the object of somebody's prayer that you are prayed for by others. And Paul tells you how he prays for those in Thessalonica, and therefore how we should pray for one another.

But then he gives those three things which are to mark our lives. Somebody who, with great enthusiasm, started out to do something in the church quite recently, really threw themselves into it wholeheartedly.

They were utterly committed, completely devoted, took on the job, never looked back, carried forward, and just went right at it and really, really did a good job.

And within a few months was totally defeated by it. Just very hard work. And I think that you must know that taking Christian faith seriously is very hard work.

[9 : 02] And God doesn't really begin to direct you until you discover just how hard it is. If you think that it's a sort of lollygag that you can do along the way, you're quite wrong.

You won't begin to get anywhere until you find out how very difficult it is. And that's why, Paul says, of this church in Thessalonica, that he is so happy to hear and to remember them prayerfully because they are involved in a work of faith.

That is, because they have come to believe something about God and his Christ and his kingdom, that on the basis of that, they begin to work. And they do the work of the kingdom as Jesus, as Lord, directs them.

And that's called a work of faith. And it's a gift that's given to them. And when you become a Christian, you become aware of that. Wednesday morning, we're studying Klaus Bockmiel's book on living by the gospel.

And the second gift of the gospel that we're to live by is a commission to work, to do a work of faith. Now, it's not that we deserve our salvation through this work.

[10 : 19] It's the work that we do because we have come to faith in Jesus Christ. We recognize him as Lord and so we work for him. So you have that work of faith.

That work of faith, secondly, is described as a labor of love. And the commentators, in order to try and describe what a labor of love is, they talk about mothers or parents who, not only does a mother have to give birth to a child and care for the child and clean the child and wash the child and tidy the child and soothe the child and get up with the child and work with the child and be present to the child, and on and on and on and on it goes, almost without end.

The commentator says, that's what labor of love is. You do it because of your love for the child. Now in our society, motherhood is not highly esteemed for the simple reason that labor of love is not highly esteemed.

And yet Christians are to be involved in, as Paul says here, they are involved in, they have become involved in, a labor of love, something they do because of the love they've been given.

And then the third thing that they have, not only a work of faith, a labor of love, but then a hope. It's a special kind of hope if you look at it.

[11 : 49] You'll see that it's a steadfast hope. And the steadfast hope is because the circumstances that surround their lives are very, very adverse.

That is, they are being persecuted. They're subject to the violent jealousy of the Jews. They are under some restraint from the political authorities.

They are subject to the mob in the streets being turned against them because of their adherence to what Paul taught. Paul was driven out from among them after only three weeks.

And so that they have to have a hope, a steadfast hope, which overlooks the circumstances of their day-to-day life.

You know, now, you know, the problem for us, of course, is that in our technologically superior and materially prosperous world, we don't really need to have a hope because we can live on the benefits of the things that we've acquired and the techniques that we know.

[12 : 55] but in terms of the kingdom of God, you have got to have a hope which allows you to persevere in the face of consistent, undeserved adversity that's going to come at you all the time.

So, you need to be prayed for and what's more, and I think you really should know this, that I think this is entirely normative for your Christian life and spiritual growth.

Once you recognize that, then something very wonderful happens. The wonderful thing that happens is what the Thessalonians discovered, and you can find it if you look there carefully, and I am now looking here carefully, where it says in verse 6, you receive the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that this affliction, which need I remind you, is the word, flips this, it's a nice word, that's the Greek word, flips this, you might try it sometime, it's quite an enjoyable word to say, flips this, and what, the best, the best translation for it, we have a, a rather mundane English word, which is called, stress, and, so that in the midst of a good deal of stress, there is a good deal of joy.

Now, you see, what you've got to understand, is, that that is normal. Our society teaches that as being abnormal, that that shouldn't happen, that you should be able to get all the systems going for you, and to live happily in the midst of the prosperity which you enjoy, and in fact, what happens is quite different.

You're given a work of faith, which is over and above, just preserving your own height. You're given a labor of love, which is very demanding, because it knows no bounds, and you're given a steadfast hope in the midst of affliction, but when you become conscious of that process, then there is great joy in the middle of it, a joy given by the Holy Spirit, a joy that you are aware of the adversity, you're aware of the opposition, and you press on.

[15 : 30] Now, Paul was very impressed with this church, because when he went there and preached, it wasn't words only, and you see how the preaching went when he first went there, and the preaching is recorded in Acts 17.

The beginning of Acts 17 tells of Paul's visit to Thessalonica and how the church was established, and you'd find it worthwhile to look that up and compare it with what Paul says here when he writes them this letter, but he says that the gospel came to them not only in word, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

In other words, they heard it. And, you know, I don't know how that happens, you know, because you know, we're not, it's, I seem to spend most of my life producing words, words, words, words, until I am fed up with listening to myself.

But sometimes it happens that words are accompanied by power and the Holy Spirit and bring deep conviction.

And then you realize that God in his mercy and in his sovereign grace and power is taking words, words, words, words, but people are hearing them and they, those words are given power and the Holy Spirit and they bring deep conviction.

[17 : 06] So that as you're sitting here listening to me producing words, words, words, words, God the Holy Spirit may well take those words and with power and the Holy Spirit and deep conviction do something quite unique in your life with those words.

You'll come and say, thank you very much, that was wonderful. You'll say that to me and I'll think you're talking to me but you're not because it's God the Holy Spirit that takes the words and applies them to your heart and life.

And that's the way we need to be listening and it obviously was the way the Thessalonians listened when Paul went and preached the gospel to them. They heard the words but they also heard them with power and with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

And that's how the word was received by them. And Paul says that something began to happen and what began to happen was that you began to see forming in the midst of this congregation a certain reality which marked the fact of God being at work in the midst of them.

And when Paul goes to describe it he says look again at the text if you will you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

[18 : 31] In other words Paul is saying God the Holy Spirit worked in us and we proved to be this kind of people because so that God could use our lives to show you what he's like.

And so we were living way beyond ourselves. You know and sometimes people come here to church and they say what a wonderful congregation. well I know better but what they're seeing what they're seeing is God the Holy Spirit at work in the congregation and in a sense reflecting or exemplifying the wonderful reality of God's grace at work in people and sometimes strangers can see that and when they see that they find it very exciting.

So that's what happened here was that Paul felt himself strengthened in a wonderful way because of the work that he was doing and that's why people like Susan like to go to Honduras.

It's like it's why people though it's a very serious investment of your life get involved in Christian work because they know that what is accomplished is infinitely more than they put into it.

Something far more than what they do happens. They do something piddling and insignificant it would seem but God accomplishes something tremendous by it.

[19 : 54] Do you know that story by Roger Kipling about the butterfly that's stamped? You know I mean it's almost hard to imagine a butterfly stamping his foot but this butterfly that's stamped created a great impact on his world and what happened.

You can read the story yourself but in a sense as Christians we're butterflies that stamp our foot and the whole world changes. And you get excited when that happens and that's what Paul is aware of having happened in Thessalonica that they went there and they did what he'd done lots of times before but the response convinced him of one thing.

You see what it convinced him of and it comes at the end of chapter sorry it comes at the end of verse I've got it oh yeah it's the end that God has chosen you you see that you know that the great problem in Thessalonica was that the Jews were terribly jealous of what Paul was doing and they went and stirred up the mob and had almost virtually had Paul taken out of town and it was because of their terrible jealousy because they considered themselves to be the chosen people and Paul writes to the Thessalonians and says well you were quite obviously the chosen people because you heard the word of God and you responded to it and that designates God's choice of you that's how

I know you are the chosen people well just I want to conclude because our time is up but I just let me take you down to the end remember I'm talking to you about the work of faith the labor of love the steadfastness of hope the impact of the word of God and how we begin to respond to that as God works in us and then the result of that look in verse 9 is sorry verse 8 was that this became the model from which other people heard about the word of the Lord sounding forth so that the word of the Lord became a kind of amplification system to the community you know just as we have this amplifier here by which I can talk to you this community became an amplifier by which all sorts of other communities heard about the coming of the gospel they didn't hear about it by a preacher standing alone on the street corner they heard about it because there was a community of people who responded and the story of their response was what made people listen to the message and so that as we respond to the gospel then other people come to listen to the message and that's what happened here in verse 8 when it says not only is the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in

Macedonia and Achaia that's the Greek peninsula but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything you know Paul finds that the message is traveling faster than he can he can't keep up with it because it's going so rapidly and that's how it goes and if you want to see how it goes make a study of this first chapter of Thessalonians and the report goes and the report had reached Rome and the report had reached other cities in the Mediterranean area and the report was what a welcome we had among you and what an impact this word had upon you you see what the impact was in verse 9 that you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God it was a very basic change and it was a change which was based on the preaching of Paul to the

[24 : 04] Thessalonians and it says that Paul went there for three Sundays and he preached to the congregation on three subjects the three subjects that he preached on were that that let me think that Jesus must suffer that suffering was what had to happen you say well how do you know it had to happen well Paul would argue that the scriptures said it had to happen and you all believe the scriptures don't you else what are you doing here this Sabbath morning well it's the scriptures that teach that Jesus must suffer it also he Paul went on with his argument and said Jesus must rise from the dead it was impossible the death should hold on to and the third thing that was in his message was that Jesus was the Christ that this man was God's

Christ you see when you come to terms with that reality that Jesus must suffer according to the scriptures that Jesus must rise again from the dead and that the scriptures bear witness to Jesus as the Christ of God you see once that happens then all the other stuff goes the other stuff that's spoken of as idols you move from idols to serve a living God a God who has died and is risen so that you you that the report that that had happened went out and then you are in the business of waiting for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead you know that Jesus is Lord you know that he's been raised from the dead and your business is to wait for him that's what he means when he says earlier about a steadfastness of hope in our

Lord Jesus Christ you know that the ultimate issue of everything is going to be the coming of Jesus and so you are waiting for the appearing of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and then Paul puts himself with the Thessalonians and says of Jesus it's this Jesus and look at it who delivers us from the wrath to come well I'd like to start all over again on that now but you see what it means is because we have been delivered from the wrath to come we don't spend our life trying to avoid it or trying to forget it we can face the reality of it and know our deliverance from it and that we know through Jesus Christ well that's the community you see and that's the impact the gospel had on them and as the gospel impacted on them so they as a community impacted on others around them and so the reality of what was happening became that now

I have to tell you that that's the most important thing that's happening in your life right now that you that you are in this position of having turned to the living God from idols idols will no longer satisfy you no matter how much they may demand your time and attention you are to turn to the living God from idols you are to wait for in the midst of much affliction the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ and you know that you've been delivered from the wrath to come it's that awareness which we need to well which we've been given which makes our life together in Christ a resonator by which other people hear about the reality of the gospel so there's

Paul's one sentence and you could go on with that one sentence studying it and looking at it and applying it and working it through and considering it and meditating upon it and doing all sorts of things with it and you just see that that one sentence would give rise to volumes and volumes and volumes that would speak to you about all the fullness of God's purpose of love towards us in Christ it's an amazing single sentence amen more for up to who in