

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

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Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0 : 00] as we saw last week in many ways like New Haven as well. Now Acts 17 tells the story of Paul and Silas coming and preaching the gospel of Jesus in Thessalonica on their second missionary journeys.

They spent some time there, they preached about Jesus, they gathered a group of believers, including some Jews, some Greeks, but then some of the leaders, some of the Jewish leaders who rejected their message became jealous and hired a mob and caused a riot.

And so they arrested some of the Christians in town. Paul and Silas had to leave very quickly and abruptly and continue on their journey. But Paul didn't forget about the church in Thessalonica. He'd only been there a short time, maybe a few months, and he left them abruptly surrounded by opposition. And so he was concerned about them and he kept them in mind. And he tried to go back, first he tried to go back and visit them in person, it seems like a couple of times, but that didn't work.

And so eventually he sent Timothy, who was one of his sort of delegates, one of his friends and co-workers. And Timothy could sort of fly under the radar a little more easily than Paul.

[1 : 08] So Timothy goes back to Thessalonica and then he comes back with a report to Paul and says, they're still there and they're doing well. And Paul's heart is just rejoicing at that.

And that's the context when Paul writes this letter. When Timothy comes back with a good report and Paul writes this letter, 1 Thessalonians, to encourage the church. It's maybe Paul's first letter. Perhaps Galatians was written right around the same time as Galatians, written in 50 A.D. So that's what we're looking at, 1 Thessalonians, over these next few months. And today we're looking at verses 2 and 3 of chapter 1.

And let me just read chapter 1, verses 1 through 3. 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 labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 22] Let's pray. Lord, we give you thanks that you have gathered us here this morning. We give you thanks for this letter. Lord, that you preserved the Thessalonian church, despite opposition, that you have preserved this letter for us through the centuries, that we might read it today.

And as they were encouraged by it, we pray that we would be encouraged and built up by it today. By your Holy Spirit, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So as I said, we're looking at Thessalonians because it gives us a picture of a church, a people, shaped by the gospel of Jesus.

Now this is the beginning of Paul's letter, and in those days it was common to begin letters with a greeting and a thanksgiving, or a good wishes section. So verse 1 is the greeting, and then verse 2 and 3 is the beginning of the thanksgiving section.

Now typically, in Greek letters, the thanksgiving or good wishes section would go something like this. May the gods protect you in your travels and give you good health. Or sometimes the writer might say, Thanks be to the gods.

They have delivered me from harm. I hope they will do the same for you. Now it's interesting, in almost all of his letters, all except Galatians, Paul follows this custom of beginning with thanksgiving and good wishes for, and not just good wishes, but a prayer for his readers.

[3 : 49] But he does it in a distinctly Christian way. So the most obvious difference, he doesn't pray to the pantheon of gods, he prays to our God and Father, the one true and living God.

And second, he doesn't just give a sort of generic wish, good health and safe travels, but he gives thanks for and prays for specific things, and particularly prays for their spiritual well-being.

In these verses, we will see their faith, love, and hope. And 1 Thessalonians, actually, has a particularly extended thanksgiving section. We're just looking at the beginning of it today, but the thanksgiving section extends at least to the end of chapter 1.

And then if you look down at chapter 2, verse 13, it seems to continue there. We also thank God constantly for this, that when you receive the word of God, you accepted it as the word of God. And then again, in chapter 3, verse 9, what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel, for your sake before our God. So you could even see the first three chapters of this five-chapter book, over half of the book, as Paul's thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians.

[4 : 58] So the thanksgiving wasn't just sort of a routine custom that Paul was following. It was part of the heart of his letter. He writes to them because he's thankful. It's not just, you know, sometimes you write a letter and you give a few compliments at the beginning to prepare the way for the criticism that you really intend to deliver in the middle.

But that's not what Paul's doing here. He's genuinely thankful. And that's one of the main purposes of this letter. And that's also the main point of what we're looking at today.

The main point of this passage is, thank God for what God has done in you and in other Christians. And in particular, thank God for giving faith, hope, and love.

So today I want us to look at three things. As we look into faith, hope, and love. Faith, love, and hope. I want us to look at the nature of faith, love, and hope. The fruits of faith, love, and hope. And the source of faith, love, and hope. If you look at verse 3, your work of faith, your labor of love, and steadfastness of hope. That's where we're getting this from. So first, the nature of Christian faith, love, and hope.

[6 : 07] Now we need to ask, what exactly does Paul mean when he's talking about faith, love, and hope? Because all kinds of people talk about faith, love, and hope.

Right? Not just Christians. I mean, even if you just walk through the mall and listen to what's playing over the speakers or turn on the radio. Right? You might hear, don't stop believing. Right? Or, I believe I can fly.

Or, all you need is love. And love is all you need. I get knocked down, but I get up again. And you'll never keep me down. Or, I will survive.

I know I will stay alive. As I've got all my life to live. I'll survive. Right? I could go on. Right?

All these songs are calling us to some kind of faith, love, or hope. And there's a recognition. We, as human beings, we need faith, love, and hope to flourish and even to survive.

[7 : 11] You know, everyone has faith in something. It's not too much a question of whether you have faith. It's more a question of what do you have faith in.

It's impossible to live life by doubting absolutely everything. At the very least, you have to doubt some things less than you doubt others. And in that case, you're effectively believing those things. Tim Keller writes in his book, *The Reason for God*. He says, All doubts, however skeptical and cynical they might seem, are really a set of alternate beliefs. You cannot doubt belief A except from a position of faith in belief B.

Even if you say, I'm completely agnostic. So maybe you're here. Maybe you're agnostic. Maybe you say, I have no belief about God one way or the other. I have no faith in God, but I'm not an atheist either.

I wouldn't be that dogmatic. I just don't feel a need for God. It doesn't particularly matter. But even if you say that, you're assuming, as he says, that the existence of God doesn't matter unless I feel an emotional need for it.

[8 : 17] You're assuming that there's no God who will judge you or hold you accountable for your beliefs and actions unless you feel an emotional need.

Now, that may or may not be true, but that's a leap of faith. Even science, right? Even science is based on a kind of faith. Paul Davies is a physicist at Arizona State, and he wrote this in a *New York Times* editorial.

He said, science has its own faith-based belief system. All science proceeds on the assumption that nature is ordered in a rational and intelligible way. You couldn't be a scientist if you thought the universe was a meaningless jumble of odds and ends haphazardly juxtaposed.

You have to have faith that the universe is governed by dependable, absolute mathematical laws of an unspecified origin. And you've got to believe that those laws won't fail, that we won't wake up tomorrow to find the speed of light changing by the hour.

But he goes on to say that science can't tell you why those laws exist or why those laws aren't going to change tomorrow. As a scientist, you have to operate by trusting, by believing that your assumption is true, even though you can't prove that scientifically.

[9 : 36] Right? Everything we do is based on some kind of faith, something that we're trusting or believing. Right? At a more practical level, we all decide every day who to trust.

And if you hear conflicting advice or conflicting reports, you have to decide, will I listen to my parents or will I listen to my friends or will I listen to my co-workers or will I listen to myself or will I listen to a friend who I really trust who tells me I'm wrong and I should reconsider.

Right? Every day we have to decide who to trust. So the question isn't so much whether we have faith, but who or what do we have faith in? And it's the same way with love and hope.

Right? We all love someone or something, even if it's just ourselves. Right? We all look forward to something. We hope in something unless you're severely depressed or unless you're living completely in the present moment and just not thinking at all about the future.

But you can't last that long that way. Right? We make it through hard times because we look forward to something better. And then if our hopes are dashed to pieces, we either collapse into despair or we find something else to hope in.

[10 : 49] So the question isn't whether we have faith, love, and hope. The question is where is our faith, love, and hope directed? And Paul is saying the kind of faith and love and hope that he's talking about, he says it's faith, love, and hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, Paul's not saying just cling on to anything. Have faith, love, and hope in something. Because Paul would say, you know, some things aren't worth believing.

Some things aren't worth devoting your life's work to. Some things aren't a proper object of your hope. You see, Christian faith doesn't mean being willing to believe anything that anybody says. It doesn't mean being gullible or not asking questions. Christian faith is belief and trust and reliance on the person of Jesus Christ as revealed in the scriptures. And similarly, Christian love is self-sacrificial action for the good of others, following the pattern of Jesus.

Paul says, walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. And Christian hope isn't just a vague optimism that it's all going to work out somehow.

[12 : 04] But it's confidence that Jesus is on the throne and that Jesus will continue to be on the throne and that he will do everything that he's promised to do. Christian hope isn't just a projection of our wishes.

It's trusting God's promises. So you see, Christian faith, love, and hope all point us outside ourselves to Jesus. So that's the nature of Christian faith, love, and hope.

And these things go together. Right? You can't really have one of them without the other two or even two of them without the third. That's why faith, love, and hope appear together in about ten different passages in the New Testament.

Mostly in Paul's letters but also in 1 Peter and in Hebrews. And you might ask, well, how do they work together? What's their relationship? In all the passages we see that faith is the foundation. Right? We're made right with God simply by faith in Jesus. By trusting in what he has already done. By dying on the cross for us. We're not made right with God by our works.

[13 : 11] And we're not even by our love for God or each other. So faith is the foundation. But then we see that love is the fulfillment of faith and hope. We read earlier from 1 Corinthians 13 where it says, now these three things abide.

These three things remain. Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. And it's the greatest because faith and hope are temporary. But love will last forever.

You know, when you see, when you, when Jesus comes back, when we're in heaven, we see Jesus face to face. You won't need faith anymore because you'll have perfect knowledge.

And you won't need hope anymore because God's promises will have been finally fulfilled. But we will love God. And we will love each other for all eternity.

And so love is the fulfillment of faith and hope. But actually this passage puts hope last in the list. And it emphasizes hope.

[14 : 14] And there's quite a lot in Thessalonians. We'll look later at Paul's teaching about Christian hope at the end of Thessalonians. Because hope is the sustainer of faith and love.

Faith is the foundation. Love is the fulfillment. But hope is the sustainer. Right? Hope in God's promises makes us steadfast in the face of suffering or temptation or even hostility like the

Thessalonians faced.

Without hope, our faith will falter and our love will grow cold. So you see, we need all three of these. They're like a rope of three strands woven together.

It's not meant to be untangled because then it all falls apart. But God, it's a rope connecting us to Jesus. Faith, hope, and love.

So one scholar put it this way. He said, faith rests on what God has done in the past. Love works in the power of God in the present. And hope looks to God's promises in the future.

[15:14] Another put it this way. Confidence in God's promises. Hope, because of trust in His provisions, faith expresses itself in obedience to His commands. Love. We could even say that faith, hope, and love is a summary of what it means to live as a Christian.

Simple, clear, and complete. A life of faith, love, and hope in Jesus Christ. So that's the nature. That's the first thing. The nature of the faith, love, and hope that Paul's talking about.

Now second, Paul shows us the fruits, the results of faith, hope, and love. And those are work, labor, and steadfastness. Now if you walk through the mall or turn on the radio, you won't hear quite as many songs about work, labor, and steadfastness.

Unless they're complaining about work and labor. Right? But Paul says work, labor, and steadfastness are the ordinary fruits.

They're the results. They're the outward expression of faith, hope, and love. Right? And Paul says, I thank God for your faith, hope, and love.

[16:27] Now Paul, Paul didn't have a special spiritual gift to see directly into the Thessalonians' hearts and say, I discern that God has given you faith, hope, and love. No, he just looked at their lives and he heard the report from Timothy that they were standing firm and that they were holding fast.

And so he says, I see in your lives. I see by your work, your labor, and your steadfastness, your faith, hope, and love. Now, Paul goes on to explain and give some examples of what he means by these things.

So, Paul uses work and labor. If you look at chapter 2, verse 9, and chapter 3, verse 5, he describes his own example of when he was in Thessalonica.

So he says, you remember our labor and toil. We worked night and day. Probably Paul's referring to his tent making business. He made tents to earn money when he needed to on the side.

And he said he did this so that we might not be a burden to any of you. Well, we proclaimed the gospel of Christ. And then he uses the same words in chapter 5, verse 12, and 13 to describe the Thessalonian church leaders, the people who labor among you and admonish you.

[17:40] So work could refer here to manual labor, sort of working to provide for yourself and your family and to be generous to others, or to teaching, admonishing, and encouraging, working to build up the church family in holiness and love and truth.

And labor is a word that especially refers to hard, strenuous, or exhausting work. Work and labor aren't always pleasant or easy. But when they're motivated by faith and love in Jesus, they're beautiful in God's sight.

You know, according to the Bible, you can do any kind of work, whether it's manual labor or academic research, whether it's submarine construction or social work, and each one of these can be exhausting in its own way at times, right?

Each, whatever your work is, there's ways that it can be hard and exhausting, but you can do almost any kind of work for the glory of God, motivated by faith in his provision and love for his people.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry.

[18:49] He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well. You know, when you go to work tomorrow, maybe Tuesday if you have tomorrow off, let the way you go about your work be shaped by trust in God's provision and love for his people.

Or if you're in between jobs, let your job searching this week be shaped by those same priorities. Right? Resist the temptation to procrastinate out of laziness or fear. Commit your way to the Lord and go forth.

Or if you don't have a paying job, remember that work in the Bible is not limited to things that you earn money for. Right? The work of raising children or the work of leading a small group or the work of diligent prayer and Bible study or the work of serving your neighbors as a retired person. All these kinds of work can be carried out in faith and love and to the glory of God. So the Thessalonian Christians were characterized by work and labor but not only that but also by steadfastness, by perseverance despite suffering, temptation and hostility. And they demonstrated this steadfastness from the very beginning of their Christian lives. You know, just imagine if you became a Christian as an adult.

[20 : 13] Now some of you did. Some of you grew up in Christian families but imagine if you became a Christian during your adult life and three months after you became a Christian a mob came to your house demanding to know the whereabouts of your friend who had told you about Jesus.

so they could go beat him up. And then since he wasn't with you they dragged you away and dragged you to the police and then the police asked you to post bond on behalf of your friend to guarantee that he wouldn't cause any more trouble in town.

Well that's exactly what happened to Jason who was one of the first Christians in Thessalonica according to Acts 17. Right? And if you were there you might be tempted to just cut off all ties with that guy.

Well I didn't know I was getting into all this by just believing in Jesus. Maybe I'll just be a secret Christian and I'll just be a secret Christian in my heart but not be associated with that guy Paul. But no the Thessalonians didn't do that. They actually stood fast in their allegiance to Jesus and their love for Paul. Now Paul left quickly that was wise and prudent.

[21 : 27] Right? But they stood fast in their love for Jesus because their hope was firmly fixed. And just like them we need a firm foundation for our hope in order to remain steadfast in our faith and love despite suffering temptation or even hostility.

You know but in reality I think many times our hopes are not firmly anchored in God's promises. But our hopes go back and forth and waver between different things.

Our hopes are often a projection of our wishes. Sometimes we even spiritualize our wishes and say that God told me that I'm going to have what I wish for.

But actually it's really just our wish. You know when I get into bed at night this is a slightly trivial example but when I get into bed at night especially if it's later than usual I'm really tired I sometimes console myself with the hope that our two-year-old son will sleep until a reasonable hour the next morning perhaps 6.30 or 7.00 a.m.

The problem is I have no basis for such a hope and my wishful thinking doesn't help me at all when at 5.30 I hear Daddy I'm awake from next door and if anything it only makes me slightly annoyed that I'm really tired and once again my futile hope was disappointed.

[22 : 49] Now as I said it's a somewhat trivial example but so often we put our hope in things that are merely wishful thinking even sometimes trivial things and then we get angry or depressed when they don't work out and so we can go through life grasping on to one hope after another or struggling not to give up hope altogether.

You see the object of our hope just as the object of our faith the object of our hope makes all the difference and the only secure unshakable and unchanging hope source of hope is God himself. See only if our hope is defined by God and his promises rather than by us and our wishes can we remain steadfast and immovable and even joyful when we face suffering or trials or even death itself.

So let me challenge you what is the object of your faith love and hope? What's the thing that gets you out of bed each day that drives you every day to work and labor and persevere and whatever that means for you?

Is it your future career success or your children's success or a hope that your boyfriend or girlfriend will fulfill you or is it just your plans for next weekend?

[24 : 09] What is it that drives you on a daily basis? Is God at the center of your hope? Is he the one who above everything else makes you steadfast in your work and labor and perseverance?

Paul says in Romans 5 one of the other places where faith hope and love come together he says we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and more than that we rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces

hope and he says and hope does not disappoint us you know hope in God and in his promises will not disappoint us other hopes will we steadfast like the Thessalonians joyful even in the midst of suffering and trials are we ready to even face death itself you know on April 3rd 1968 Martin Luther King said like anybody I would like to live a long life but I'm not concerned about that now I just want to do God's will it happened that the next day he was assassinated can we say that I'd like to live a long life but more than anything else

I want to do what God has set before me I want to live by faith and love and hope in Jesus Christ so we've seen the nature of faith hope and love the fruits of faith hope and love and finally Paul points us to the source of faith hope and love where do we get faith this kind of faith hope and love and quite simply the answer is the source of faith hope and love is God himself alright Paul mentions God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and other passages he mentions the Holy Spirit as well God the Father Son and Spirit is involved in giving us faith love and hope so it's ultimately not something that we can take credit for they're a gift from God itself and that's good news because we don't have to look deep inside ourselves and try to find faith hope and love deep inside ourselves but we look outside of ourselves we look to God and we ask him and we listen to his word and he produces in us faith hope and love which then produce work and labor and steadfastness as we look to Jesus so if you need faith hope or love ask God because he loves to give good gifts to his children and then thank God

Paul doesn't just congratulate the Thessalonians and say what good people you are you have such faith hope and love no he thanks God he encourages them by thanking God for the faith hope and love that they have later in his letter Paul elaborated on each of these qualities in chapter 1 verse 8 he says your faith in God has gone forth everywhere everybody knows about your trust in God chapter 4 verse 9 he says you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another and that's indeed what you're doing so he encourages them by pointing out these specific ways that faith and love and hope are being expressed in chapter 3 verse 8 he says you're standing fast in the Lord you're steadfast because you placed your hope in Jesus in the same way we should thank God whenever we see these fruits in our own lives or in one another and we should encourage one another like Paul did by pointing them out and telling each other

I see the faith and hope and love in your life that God has produced you know it can be a great encouragement to receive a phone call or an email or a card just saying thanks I see your work of faith I see your labor of love I see that you're standing firm because of your hope in Jesus some of you I know some of you are good at doing this you do this regularly you look for opportunities to encourage others by pointing out ways that you see faith and hope and love active in their lives and I commend you for that but let's make that part of what characterizes us as a church body that we'd regularly be giving thanks to God and encouraging one another for the way that we see faith and hope and love working itself out as fruits of the gospel in our lives you know the Thessalonian Christians they weren't perfect and actually

[29 : 00] Paul we saw how Paul points out their faith hope and love later on but he also points out the ways they're lacking in all three of them chapter 3 verse 10 he says we pray that we might see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith chapter 3 verse 12 he prays may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all in chapters 4 and 5 he gives a lengthy teaching about how the hope that we have in Christ should impact particularly how we face death and dying so Paul isn't blind to their shortcomings right sometimes those are the most obvious things when you know people well their shortcomings are very obvious but he doesn't begin his letter by listing all their shortcomings and saying all the way here's all the ways you're lacking and all the ways you need to change no he begins by thanking God for what God's already done and for what God is doing in their lives and I think that's an example for us many of us live in cultures where critical thinking is highly valued right the glass is always half empty and so we're not very thankful because we either take all sorts of things for granted or we fear that if we express gratitude instead of criticism that things will immediately get worse but that's not

Paul's pattern Paul begins with thanksgiving for the Thessalonians it's not just a routine introductory sentence or two it's a long prayer of thanksgiving and the tone of thanksgiving permeates the entire letter you see when we begin by thanking God for faith hope and love in our lives and in other Christians it can put our present struggles in proper perspective you know if you've hit a rough patch in your marriage lately you're just not communicating well with your spouse it seems like all the same patterns are flaring up again and they'll never change for the better spend some time this

week thanking God for your spouse thank God for every good thing that you can think of about your marriage even if they all happened a long time ago thank God for the trials that you've experienced and how God's used them to refine your faith hope and love to be in Christ alone if your spouse is a Christian thank God for the faith hope and love that God's given to them despite their many imperfections or if you've had a conflict with another Christian or if you find somebody just annoying to you give thanks to God every day this week for them give thanks for every good fruit that you can see in their lives give thanks for every way that God has used them in your life to point you closer to him and then pray that God would supply what they lack give thanks that you're not the final judge and God is and pray that you would be an instrument in his hands finally maybe you're in a rough spot in your relationship with God maybe there's not a lot of communication going on between you and God you don't talk to him very much and he doesn't seem to talk to you or at least it doesn't seem to be received well maybe spend some time this week thanking God thank him for every good gift that you can think of that he's given to you thank him for every good thing that you see him doing in your life or even in the lives of people around you you know

Paul goes on to say a lot of other things and we'll see those as we go along and those are important as well but let's start here by thanking God for the fruits of the gospel in our lives thank God for faith hope and love in Jesus Christ let's pray I'm going to close in the words of a prayer entitled thank you oh Lord thank you oh Lord for having revealed yourself to us and given us a foretaste of your kingdom thank you oh Lord for having united us to one another and serving you and serving in your church thank you oh Lord for having helped us to overcome difficulties tensions passions and temptations and restored peace mutual love and joy in the communion of the Holy Spirit thank you oh Lord for the sufferings that you have bestowed upon us for they are purifying us from selfishness and reminding us of the one thing needed you in your eternal kingdom thank you oh Lord for having given us this country where we are free to worship you thank you oh Lord for our families husbands wives and especially children who teach us how to celebrate your name with joy movement and holy noise thank you oh Lord for everyone and everything great are you Lord and marvelous are your deeds and no word is sufficient to celebrate your miracles Lord it is good to be here amen thank you