

Gospel Hope

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Date: 04 November 2018

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[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians 1, I'm going to read the first 10 verses together.

This will be familiar to some of you because we went through 1 Thessalonians 8 years ago. That was a joke, I mean I don't expect you to remember that, but we did. It's one of the first New Testament letters that we addressed.

So verse 1 through to 10, now hear God's word. Paul, Savannas 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 your 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 and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction.

[1 : 17] 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 Ikea.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Ikea, 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 true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath of God to come.

Well, may God bless both the reading, the hearing, and of course the message upon his word. And we'll come back to that after this next hymn. Thank you.

One Thessalonians there, open in front of you. It'll serve you well. And we could begin, I think, in many ways by referencing the fact that, you know, seven and a half years ago at least, we went through this book.

[2 : 46] And the book is a huge encouragement, especially to the reader. But more importantly, I think because One Thessalonians offers real answers to real church issues.

I think that is a, the whole scripture does that. But I think in this first ten verses in particular, the answer that it provides is just so clear and so encouraging.

Challenging, no doubt, but super encouraging, especially for where the church is globally. Perhaps more so in the West than the East.

And so the answer that it gives is just a huge encouragement. So, you know, you can read these first ten verses all by yourself at home, if you like, and just sort of soak in the encouragement.

The other thing to notice about One Thessalonians is that it is a letter written to a church that is suffering much affliction. And therefore, it's all the more amazing when you hear the response of the church, knowing that it actually comes out of an incredibly difficult life.

[3 : 58] We're going to watch this video on Wednesday evening about release and persecution and tortured for Christ. And, you know, these Christians here in Thessalonica would have understood what that kind of affliction would have felt like, that kind of persecution would have been like.

And so that's the kind of understanding perhaps we need to be able to read this book. In fact, even the hymn that we've just sung, I mean, perhaps many of you don't know, but it was written by a man who waved goodbye to his wife and children on a boat.

And as the boat left the dock, he saw it sink. When peace like a river like sea below rolls, it is well, it is well with my soul.

And he wrote that even though he saw that tragedy happen to his family. Yet that focus on God, being able to still the soul, being able to provide, let's say, safe harbor for someone who's witnessed with their own eyes.

Yet he himself didn't drown, but to perhaps witness your wife and child is much worse than yourself drowning. To witness it, that is.

[5 : 17] You know, affliction. Here in 1 Thessalonians, again, it comes with this welcomed truth. The truth is both challenging and encouraging, that Christianity is always meant to be understood as a body, never as an individual.

Robinson Crusoe Christianity is not something you find within Scripture. You always find that the importance placed on being together, being part of a body. Now, of course, a gathered group of people does not qualify as a church.

You know, if you ever watch a football match, and you see all these people sat around the stadium, okay, they're gathered, okay, they're perhaps divided by the teams that they support, but there's nothing there that holds them together.

Their lives could be entirely different from each other. It's just that they have perhaps one or two things in common. You know, if Christianity is reduced to that kind of understanding, then we're in trouble.

Aren't we? We're kind of in big trouble. But Paul affirms here, no, that Christianity is actually reflective of the book of Genesis, where God says, you know, it is not good for man to be alone.

[6 : 38] Do you know, this was brought up, actually Karen brought it up in the knowing Christianity. She says, it's interesting that God would put it that way. You know, why is that? Well, think about it this way. Too often people say, all I need is God.

And yet Karen rightly pointed out, well, if that was true, then God wouldn't have said that it's not good that man be alone. I mean, Adam, in the garden without Eve, had God.

He had everything that he needed, and he had God. And yet, even in that circumstance, God says that it's not good for man to be alone. And so this idea that Christians can say, all I need is God, it's not true.

It's not true. God wouldn't agree with that. And Genesis' statement where God says, it is not good for man to be alone. Even if man, all that man has is me, and the beautiful creation that he lives in, no, no, man needs someone else.

Someone similar to him. You know, a complementary partner in that respect. And the church should embody that complementary nature of man and woman being a body.

[7 : 48] Yes, we do need God. And yes, God is the answer to all of our needs. But God says that you need a body. You need somebody else like you with you.

I think that is both challenging and encouraging. One of the other things you begin to realize that if you understand quickly that that is the case, that the church is a body and not a group of individuals, one of the things that becomes immediately apparent is that the load of serving God lessens.

It decreases. You know, too often you get people in church, and my prayer has always been the same, Lord, I'm tired in the work, but never let me get tired of it.

And my prayer for all the people that serve in this church is, Lord, give them strength for being tired in the work, but prevent them from becoming tired of it. You know, and here in Thessalonians, that very situation is answered and we begin to see it.

Well, here's the summary then as we go through. It opens with a familiar greeting, verse one, and it moves on to the type of things that Paul is able to give thanks to God about because of what he remembers, verses two and three.

[9 : 05] Thankfulness and remembrance. Then in verse five, he mentions that the gospel came to them with full conviction. There is no half-hearted conviction on their part, but full conviction resulting in these Christians becoming imitators of Paul and, of course, imitators of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, verse six.

They have also become an example to everybody that their faith is known everywhere, that nothing more needs to be said, verses seven and eight, that their faith is so widely known that there's nothing more that needs to be said.

They used to be a people who worshipped idols, but through the gospel they have turned from idolatry and now worship the one true God, the living God, verse nine. And as they do this, they wait for Christ to return.

Why do they wait for Christ to return? Because when Christ returns, there's something coming with him and that is the wrath of God. And Christ needs to come when the wrath of God comes so that we may be delivered from that wrath of God to come.

So, again, you've got the challenge and the encouragement and, of course, the future hope of this deliverance. You know, that Christ returning is an act of deliverance for the church because the biggest problem that man faces is not sin, but rather the wrath of God upon that sin.

[10 : 29] And the only way of escape from that wrath, of course, is forgiveness in Christ Jesus. So, of course, by belonging to Jesus Christ today, you are spared and delivered from the wrath of God to come because you're already forgiven, you're already saved, you're already protected.

In other words, what is coming is both encouraging and frightful, fearful, encouraging for the Christian because the future hope produces in them the fact that they have a way of escaping Christ Jesus.

For the unbelieving world, it's not good news. It's just not even the beginning of good news. So, we begin then, I think, the same way Paul does with this act of faithfulness.

In other words, the only way you can be thankful for anything is to be able to recognize the things to be thankful for in the first place. You know, if somebody does something for you and you recognize that they've done something that you couldn't, suddenly it's not hard to be thankful for them or hard to be thankful for what they have done because you're able to put the two things together.

I thank you for doing that. Thank you very much. Well, Paul, in the same way, is thankful to God because of the lives of the people down here in the church.

[11 : 49] They're full of faith. The word of God is spread forth from them. The gospel came to them with just a straightforward conviction. And Paul recognizes all of this fruit, as it were, and gives thanks to God for the evidence of the gospel transforming lives.

I thank you, God, for taking these people who once worshipped its statues, who once worshipped idols, and you have opened the eyes of the blind, you have renewed their hearts, you have brought them into relationship with you, the living God, and I thank you, God, that you have spared these people from the wrath of God to come in Christ Jesus by bringing them into relationship with you through Jesus Christ.

I thank you, God, for that. And so, as Paul looks at the church, he gives huge amount of thanks to God because he understands exactly what God has done.

That these people are no longer destined for the wrath of God to come, but they're actually, they're actually safe in the arms of Christ, as it were.

That your future is so much better than your present. So much better than what you're going through right now. And all of the temporary, and let me emphasize that word, the temporary pains and struggles that you have are real, they are painful, and none of us want them, but they are temporary.

[13 : 18] They are temporary, and that is something that hope encourages us to remember, that the afflictions that we have are temporary. They're not, it's not, Paul is not saying that they're not real.

Paul is not saying that they don't hurt. Paul is not saying that they don't matter. What he's reminding us here is that in Christ, they are temporary, and we will be delivered from them, and of course, delivered from the wrath of God to come.

He's also thankful that this church is an evangelizing church, that their lives have not only been transformed by the gospel, but in being transformed by the gospel, they then go and tell others about that transformation, or rather, the gospel that transforms.

When was the last time you spoke the gospel to someone? It's not a criticism. It's simply for you to observe the reality of the gospel in your own life.

In other words, how real is it? How real is the gospel? Well, of course, is it living? Is it active?

[14 : 29] It's all of those things, but sometimes it can be nullified by a Christian life, can't it? That sort of loses track of the future hope and loses track of the fact that what is actually coming in the future is a wrath of God.

You know, Christians seem to be absolutely brilliant. You know, well, I'm safe. I can sit back and relax now. And partly that's true.

We have a hope in Christ which allows us to feel that kind of assurance and not worry about the future. But at the same time, the world still is heading towards that end.

And so Paul is incredibly thankful that these church, these Christians in this church, haven't kept the gospel to themselves, but have now taken the gospel out to the surrounding areas to the point where he says, nothing more needs to be said.

In other words, I don't need to go there and proclaim the gospel because you've gone ahead and done it yourself. In other words, you have lessened the load of evangelism by being faithful.

[15 : 36] There it is. You have lessened the load of evangelism by being faithful. He also recognizes that their witness is consistent, which is something different from evangelizing.

Sometimes we address these things together, don't we, that we speak of witness as it's the same as evangelizing. I don't think it is the same. In fact, I don't think scripturally we're meant to understand that they are the same.

And let me try and explain this in a slightly different way. Vance Havner was a very famous gospel man in America and he used to say, jokingly, but with a hint, with a little bit a seriousness in his voice.

You know, the gospel is not something you bring people to church to hear, but rather something that the church goes out and tells the world. In other words, you've got it all the way, you've got it the wrong way around.

Jesus says, go forth and tell. Go and tell the gospel. But the church, over the years, have sort of reversed that and say, well, this is the place to hear the gospel.

[16 : 48] Well, the church is the place to hear the gospel, but it nullifies the mission of God, which is to take that gospel out to the world.

So evangelization is that going and telling. Witness, on the other hand, is when people look at you and notice that the only way you're able to live this kind of life is because there is something dramatically different about you.

And of course, they may not know what that difference is, but it leads them, of course, they're then led to Christ through your witness. In the same way, an unbelieving husband can be led to Christ through his believing wife or an unbelieving wife can be led to Christ through her believing husband.

And you have this because, of course, in Corinthians, when people were converted when they were already married, it was a great difficulty that Paul had to address because one would get converted and the other one wasn't converted.

They were already married, so what do you do? It would have been a lot easier if God had just saved both at the same time. But in his mercy and in his grace and in his, what I would call, frustration for us, he doesn't do that.

[17 : 58] And so, we have to put on our theological hats and work out what it means. Witness. The only way someone else is going to be led to the true Christ is if you are truly reflecting the true Christ in your being.

That's what Paul is saying. here about this church. The other thing to notice, I think, also, is that truth always emerges. Always emerges.

I can remember being at Sheffield University speaking at Freshers' Week. And of course, there's, I know, maybe 200 students sat around listening and each week they had different talks by different ministers and I did the Freshers' Week and there were other weeks that took place.

And of course, being students, they had more answers than questions and sometimes more questions than answers depending on who they were. You know, I was, I felt entirely out of my, out of my depth and completely and I had no idea of what the mix of people were in terms of did they believe, were they seeking, were they questioning, what were they doing?

And of course, when it came to question and answers because that was the kind of thing that they enjoyed it seemed, I had one guy say, there's no such thing as truth. There's just no such thing as truth.

[19 : 29] Now of course, I've read a few different books and by God's grace he helps me to remember them and I've read one by a guy called Leslie Newbigin and Leslie Newbigin says, whenever you come across a person who says to you, there is no such thing as truth, ask him if that's true.

Have you got it? And wait for his answer. So there I was, no such thing as truth and I said, thanks Leslie.

Is that true? And suddenly he realised the difficulty of his own situation. If he says it's true, then he denies his own claim that there's no such thing as truth and if he says that it isn't true, then also he must be claiming that there is a truth in order to say that there must be truth from error.

Truth always emerges. You can't actually get rid of it. You can try. In fact, Romans 1 speaks of people in their sinfulness have to suppress the truth because they can't get rid of it. They have to cover it up but time and truth go hand in hand.

Moses was probably brilliant at this. I'm terrible and I forever ask God to make me like Moses in that respect. That Moses never once defended himself.

[20 : 47] At least it doesn't appear that he ever defended himself. Rather, he adhered to the biblical standard that time and truth go hand in hand. That given enough time the truth will always come out.

And that's what the future is, isn't it? When Christ returns that time and truth go hand in hand. That given enough time the truth is going to be plain to everyone. And the truth here is that these Christians understand this.

That the idolatry that they have been released from through the gospel means that they are now able to serve the one true living God and they are able to serve the one true living God until Christ returns and they are meant to do that, of course, until Christ returns.

In other words, thankfulness for total transformation is what we see here. Here's the next thing that we see. Faithfulness. Now the faithfulness of the church here is obviously witnessed in a couple of different ways but one of the things that we notice is this and this is really the main point of faithfulness.

That when a congregation is faithful it lessens the load of evangelism and serving God in the church. When each member is faithful to God it lessens the load on each faithful member in the church.

[22 : 13] Well, what does that mean? Well, on the flip side if there is people in the church who are unfaithful in their devotion and serving God then that load doesn't disappear rather it shifts over to those who are faithful and they just take on more and there becomes this unhealthy balance in the church.

There becomes this unhealthy tilt where the unfaithful are being carried by the faithful and the work of the church is not being done by the unfaithful but rather by those who are faithful to God.

And so faithfulness to God from every member lessens the load on every member when it comes to evangelism and serving God.

Church history shows that when a person decides that they're going to do their own thing in the church this only creates more work. It doesn't actually create less. And it also creates potential divisions further down the line.

In other words one of the biggest difficulties when the Reformation happened and this is widely reported in most history books that have written on the Reformation was that Luther understood that the moment the Reformation started there began this momentum of individualism where people just started doing their own things and so you went from one church to now you have what?

[23 : 37] 67,000 different Christian denominations. What is that? That's not the spread of the gospel but rather the spread of individualism that if it doesn't happen over here I'll just go and do it myself over there and you have a lot of self-appointed people who are just establishing this.

I think one of the things that hid it for so many years was the fact that back in the day families used to live within the same geographical area. Mum was at the top of the road.

Her mum was down at the bottom of the road. The aunties were on the next street over and suddenly families were far more knitted together because they were geographically closer together and suddenly this tighter knit of also relying on each other because you didn't have social services, you didn't have the kind of benefits that you have and suddenly the lack of benefit in these other organisations meant that the benefit had to come from your own family and your own organisation.

But of course the moment the social welfare state started to increase, then of course you have a breakdown of the family unit. You have more single mothers, you have more children who are leaving home earlier.

Why? Because the rise of individualism happens when there is a breakdown in the thing that actually is meant to keep us together and that is the family itself.

[25 : 03] But the moment other options are provided, you know, that individualism spreads and that's the danger with the church today. That because so many Christians can self-serve themselves so well, there's no need for each other.

I rely on the state for that. I rely on the hospital for that. I rely on this for that. I rely on my bank account. And suddenly all of these so-called blessings, are actually eroding the structure of church.

Because now we don't rely on each other for them. Like the early church did. The reason why the early church was so strong is because it didn't have the social benefits or the finance or the bank accounts that you have.

It's not that they were just more faithful, but rather they understood the nature of a body, I think, way better than we do. And so the issue here for Paul is that he notices that the load lessens when faithfulness increases.

The load of evangelism lessens in the church when the faithfulness of each member increases. The load of serving God in the church lessens on each member when each member's faithfulness increases.

[26 : 26] And so the more faithful people you have, the lesser the load is on each individual member in the church. Because to put it simply, everyone's pulling their weight.

But of course, as you know, in a family, you never pick up after yourself. My wife says too, you can figure out who that is. But it's not me.

Okay, but that, right, okay, well if you don't pick it up, who's going to pick it up? Don't tell me you've not had these conversations in your house. Okay? If you don't tidy it up, who's going to tidy it?

How do you think it gets clean? Do you think it just, you close the door and you open it again and suddenly the carpets are hoovered? You know, how do you think these things happen? Suddenly people enjoy the benefits of others in the family and their faithful labors without ever thinking about how does it remain clean all the time?

How does it remain tidy all the time? How is it that there is always food in the cupboard and drink to drink? How is this? Well, of course it's the grace of God, but of course the faithfulness in the family unit.

[27 : 34] Some are, of course, ages come into play here. We don't expect a two year old child to do the same as the dad, but you understand that that growth is to happen, that not only is the child to grow up, he is to grow up in his faithfulness of contribution.

Well, Paul is saying it's the same in the church. The load of evangelism lessens when each member is faithfully engaged.

The load of serving God lessens when each member is faithfully engaged. You know, and why do we do this? Well, Paul says it's really quite obvious.

Because there is coming a day when the wrath of God will come, and you are to proclaim this gospel to men and women, boys and girls. Why? Because it is the gospel that will transform them from being idol worshippers, from being rejecters of God, to be coming into relationship with the one true living God.

Only the gospel is going to be able to do this. So, faithfulness in this area is not just lessening the load for the church, but rather it is as huge advancement in the world when it comes to the salvation of souls.

[28 : 52] Before Christ returns, of course, there's a time limit here. Christ is going to return. This is why we have gospel encounters. And this is why we've had lately knowing Christianity. Why?

Well, because the importance of the gospel is, okay, I've tried to put it into a format that makes it easy on you, that makes it easy for you to take for yourself and do with your friend.

I've just tried to structure it in such a way where all the hard work is perhaps done for you, but the act of faithfulness must be your very own. Why?

Well, Christ is going to come back. Christ is going to return. And when he returns, what comes with him, whether it comes at the same time or how this comes, is that he comes to deliver us from the wrath of God to come.

And we're told in two Thessalonians that the wrath of God comes upon those who do not obey the gospel, who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel.

[29 : 53] What does it mean then? Well, it means this. Faithfulness. Faithfulness. It lessens the load on everybody else. Your personal faithfulness to God lessens the load on everybody else.

In the family. In the church. Wherever you are. It's the same ever. Think about it in terms of commitment. And contribution.

Your level of commitment and contribution and faithfulness lessens the load on the people around you. And this is what Paul is giving thanks for here in the church. Well, here's the exhortation as we sort of bring this to a close.

There is an attractiveness, isn't there, of thinking I can belong in a church where the load is going to be distributed evenly. There's something desirable about being in a church where the act of serving God is going to be distributed evenly throughout the membership.

And of course we take into consideration those who can serve, those who can't serve because of health reasons. All of these things are taken into consideration. We're not blind to the fact.

[31 : 07] But rather what we're addressing here is the simple fact that as faithfulness increases on your part, the load lessens on every other member in the church.

And therefore consider the church when you consider your own faithfulness. Consider the people that you have been brought together with in Christ Jesus when you consider your faithfulness. If you're sat at home thinking it doesn't really matter.

No, it really does matter. And the best way to be woken up to that reality is look at how much everybody else is doing. Could I possibly carry a bit of weight for them?

Could I possibly be more faithful in my evangelism in service to God so as to lessen the load for my brother or sister in the church? Could I do that? The other thing to notice is that evangelism all the way through scripture is not prominent in an event but it's most definitely prominent in the life of every Christian.

What does that mean? But what it means is this. Is it wrong that you should invite a person to an event, a gospel event? No, invite as many as you can. But can the event produce a laziness in that you do the inviting but you yourself wouldn't actually share the gospel?

[32 : 34] In other words, is it another one of those benefits that actually creates a greater negative? Think about it. Is these gospel events, though good and through hundreds and thousands of people have actually been saved from, you're going to say, well, you've answered your own argument.

No, that's not the point. The point isn't about how many people get saved. The point is about whether or not we are sharing the gospel. Whether or not we're doing it God's way.

Paul says here that he has nothing more to say. Why? Because this church has gone and said it for him.

What he's saying is this, that your faithfulness in the gospel has lessened the load for me. That I now no longer need to go into that area and proclaim the gospel because you've managed to do it for me.

Why? Because they themselves are faithful to the gospel. Should we have gospel events? Yeah, of course we should. But it should never detract or take away from the responsibility of each and every one of us to be able to share the gospel of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

[33 : 57] Here's the final thought. The most encouraging thing about all of this for me is this. That there's a biblical answer that shouldn't be overlooked.

And the biblical answer of how to lessen the load of service in the church on the individuals who serve and how to increase the amount of evangelism that actually happens from a few to the many is by encouraging those who are unfaithful in those areas to be more faithful.

That's the biblical answer, isn't it? The only way to distribute and to partner is if there is a fair distribution and contribution in the things of God.

And all of this is understood by this early church. I think most importantly by the fact that the clock is ticking. That Christ is going to return.

And when he returns, Paul says, there are two things, Thessalonian church, I'm just going to focus on verses 9 and 10, verse 10 in particular. There are two things you need to understand.

[35 : 08] That this Christ, whom God raised from the dead, delivers you. And he delivers you from the wrath of God to come. Do you know what?

We can enjoy that for the rest of our life. Knowing that in Christ we will not face a future of judgment, but one of deliverance from judgment.

But that's not going to be the same for the world. And God in his plan has got all things taken into consideration, but this church understands that the only way it can deal with the affliction that it has and the only way it can deal with the world that it lives in, the only way to wage war on a world is to proclaim the gospel of peace.

The only way to tackle the world is to proclaim a gospel of peace that transforms people who do the afflicting into people who then become afflicted because they serve Christ.

The only way you can transform a persecutor of Christians into a Christian who is then persecuted, not that you would want that, is through the transformation of the gospel.

[36 : 21] In other words, the only way anything can change for the better in this world is through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amen.