

Let faith work

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[0 : 00] Well, it's been a very long time since I brought God's Word to people in front of me and not just a camera or pixels on a screen. So this is kind of a new experience for me all over again, but it's a pleasure to be able to do that.

Just make sure that the Bible is open in front of you as well. We're going to run through the scriptures. That's where the power comes from. Let's ask God for his help as well. Father, we thank you that you have indeed brought us your Word.

Father, help us now to welcome your Word. May it come to us in power with deep conviction and with the help of your Holy Spirit that indeed our hearts might be softened and that we will leave here wanting to live as your church.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, I want to begin by getting you to do some thinking. What is it that fuses you with gratitude? Sorry, who is it that fuses you with gratitude?

Not what, but who? Which group of people makes you want to say, thank you God that they are in my life? During this pandemic, perhaps our minds automatically go to the frontliners, those in hospitals and clinics who have been working tirelessly to keep our public health systems afloat.

[1 : 13] Perhaps they might go to our teachers who have had to get really creative to keep educating our kids regardless of the circumstances. Perhaps one or two of you might even think of our poor network engineers who make sure that your Wi-Fi connection remains uninterrupted during this time.

But this morning, we're going to be looking at Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. And Paul is filled with gratitude. He's especially grateful for this group of people, the church in Thessalonica.

In 1 verse 2, he says, we always thank God for you. And if we read through the whole letter, we soon discover that's not mere rhetoric. He really is always thanking God for them.

We find him doing so again in 2 verse 13, and we also thank God continually. And then halfway through the letter in 3 verse 9, he says it again.

How can we thank God enough for you? He can't stop expressing his thanks. His heart is bursting with joy just thinking about these people.

[2 : 20] Wow. What a group they must be, mustn't they? But what is it about them that feels Paul with such gratitude? Well, let's establish first of all who they actually are and what Paul's relationship with them actually is.

Let's set this letter in its historical context. Back in Acts chapter 17, Paul was in the middle of a journey. And now he arrives, together with Silas and Timothy, in a place called Thessalonica.

This was a strategic Mediterranean city, located along a very important trade route called the Agnesian Way. And so it had a pretty cosmopolitan population, with a good mix of Jews and Greeks.

And as soon as Paul arrives, he heads straight to the Jewish synagogue, as is his custom. In verse 2 of Acts 17, over a number of weeks, we discover that he reasons with his audience from the scriptures, proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.

And then verse 4 tells us that quite a number of them became Christians, including a few prominent women. And so straight away, Paul made a significant impact.

[3 : 36] But not everyone is happy about that. In verse 5, we're told that there were quite a number of Jews who got jealous. Perhaps they didn't like the fact that some of their rich congregants were now leaving the synagogue for the church.

And as a result, they began to stir up trouble for Paul. They got a few dodgy people around, they formed a mob, and they made things so bad that even though Paul had probably been there for less than a month, Paul had no option but to flee.

And so what we have here is a young church, a church that had to stand on its own without its founder and its most important teacher quite quickly.

And it was a church that faced all sorts of hostility and persecution right from the start. And as we'll see in the coming weeks, they also had to deal with gossip and insinuation for word was getting around that Paul was actually just a religious con man.

He's a smooth talker, selling you his nice message, but he abandons you at the first sign of difficulty. And so since Paul is unable to pastor the Thessalonians, he naturally gets worried.

[4 : 59] Will they grow? Will they persevere? Or will they, in the language of 1 Thessalonians 3 verse 3, be unsettled by trials? Will they believe the gossip and decide that Paul's ministry and Paul's message was just a fraud?

Will their faith prove to be short-lived? Having heard no news, Paul needs to know. And so 3 verse 5, for this reason, when I could stand it no longer, Paul says, I sent to find out about your faith.

I was afraid in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain. Paul needed to know what was going on.

And so he sends Timothy to Thessalonica. And the report Timothy brings back is exactly what causes Paul to break out in thanksgiving.

You see, in 3 verse 6, Paul brings good news. He says, they are still trusting Jesus. In verse 7, they can be encouraged because of the Thessalonians' faith.

[6 : 11] They are standing firm, verse 8. And so Paul is deeply, deeply thankful. But what exactly about their faith is Paul so thankful for?

What is it that he saw in them that made him so encouraged? Well, that's where our passage today comes in. For today, we will find a picture of a church who, despite being under pressure, despite being far away from the guy who founded them, who planted them, has remained a church in love with Jesus.

We find a church whose faith works. Just look at verse 3 of chapter 1. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

As Paul looks at this church from afar, he sees clear evidence of God's work in their lives. He sees faith, hope, and love. And that's what captures his heart.

Did you notice that? Paul is not thankful for this church because they have a lovely building. He's not thankful for them because they have a great preacher, or they're big in numbers.

[7 : 33] He's not thankful for them because they have an amazing Sunday school program, or because they're able to deliver a dynamic worship experience. Of course, none of those things are bad in themselves, but it is not what makes him go, thank you, God.

Instead, what brings a huge smile to his face is the fact that this church is defined by these three virtues. Now, imagine if Paul was our pastor today, and because of the pandemic, he can't be near us, he can't meet the church folk that he loves, he's worried about the pressure that we're under.

But if he received news about us, what would get him excited? What would make him give thanks? We might think that it's about how much people give generously, or how much people rave about the sermons, but Paul says, no.

What would bring me joy is whether we are bearing spiritual fruit. Well, look again at verse 3, and pay close attention to what exactly Paul is giving thanks for.

Notice that Paul is not thankful just because the Thessalonian church believe in faith, love, and hope. he isn't delighted simply because they affirm orthodox beliefs about Jesus, or that they agree that love is primary, or that they like the idea of having hope.

[9 : 10] No, he's not thankful simply for virtues in the abstract. What he's thankful for is not just the faith, but the work produced by faith.

It's not just the love, but the labor prompted by love. It's not just the hope, but the endurance inspired by hope. In other words, it is not just the underlying spiritual realities that have him rejoicing, but what those spiritual realities produce.

You see, Paul isn't just thankful for orthodox doctrine. He isn't just happy that, oh, the church can explain the Nicene Creed very well. No, no. Now, Paul obviously thinks that orthodox doctrine is supremely important.

He says so again and again in many of his letters. It's supremely important because our lives must be built on truth, not lies. It's supremely important because authentic love, faith, and hope cannot be generated from false doctrine.

Only gospel doctrine can produce gospel culture. But that is exactly the point. Gospel doctrine produces gospel culture.

[10 : 31] Gospel doctrine doesn't produce nothing. The gospel never produces a faith that doesn't work, a love that doesn't labor, a hope that doesn't endure.

For the gospel doesn't just give us more facts about someone called Jesus, or even just more rules to know about. rather the gospel renews a person and changes their entire nature.

And so Paul is thankful because if the Thessalonian church has a gospel culture, then it must have the gospel at its very heart. If faith, hope, and love are not just nice words on their vision statement, but are a living reality in their community, then that means Jesus is really the beating heart of their church.

Because true faith, love, and hope can never be hidden. They will be seen, they will be felt, they will be visible.

If you've ever been part of a truly Christian community, you would know that, wouldn't you? Perhaps right now a couple of you remember your university days when you were away from home and you remember with fondness your Christian fellowship, how they helped you to settle into a new place, brought you meals when you were sick, kept you sane when you were suffering exam stress, who generally brought joy, laughter, and meaningful conversations into your life, and most importantly of all, who helped you know and deepen your relationship with God.

[12 : 09] Perhaps a few of you remember your small groups who helped you to pull through even in those early days when you just had a baby, or who encouraged you by pointing you towards God's goodness when times were tough.

We are grateful for these Christians because for them, faith, love, and hope were never just a matter of talk. It was always evident in their walk.

And that makes all the difference, not just what they believe, but how they live. And so here is a church that is worthy of an apostle's thanksgiving.

And I don't know about you, but when I remember people whom I'm grateful for, I find that I want to be like them. I'm inspired by them. And I hope right now you're feeling inspired as you hear about this group of people in Thessalonica.

You want the church in Kuching to be like the church in Thessalonica. But how can we be a Thessalonian church? What does a church worthy of an apostle's thanksgiving look like?

[13 : 22] Well, that's more or less what we'll be exploring throughout this entire sermon series. We'll see what habits Paul wants to encourage, what practices he wants to make endemic to our church.

and faith, hope, and love will all be explored to some degree throughout the letter. But in chapter 1, it is faith that will get the bulk of the attention.

And so as we turn to the remainder of this passage, let's explore what does a working faith look like? And today we'll discover two characteristics in particular.

Let's look at each of them in turn. Firstly, a working faith welcomes the gospel. A working faith welcomes the gospel.

I wonder if you notice who Paul gives thanks to. It's not the Thessalonians themselves, it's certainly not himself. Rather, he thanks God. Why?

[14 : 21] Well, I think it's safe to say that because he knows God is the ultimate reason why their faith works. How do we know that? Because God alone is behind the transforming power of the gospel.

Look at verses 4 and 5. For we know, brothers and sisters, loved by God that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

And so what is Paul saying here? He's saying, brothers and sisters, how did you end up with the faith that you have? How do you know that you're chosen and beloved by God?

Let me tell you, it wasn't because you were running around looking for God. It wasn't because you were searching to have a deeper faith. No, it's because God came looking for you.

His gospel came and grabbed you and never let you go. There was a day or a season when someone, somewhere, somehow, announced this message to you that Jesus has come.

[15 : 34] That through his life, death, and resurrection, God is now establishing his kingdom. That those who trust in him will be reconciled to God. That one day, all evil will finally be overcome.

And this particular message poked you in all the right places in your heart and convicted you like no other message has ever done before.

And you knew that this was no man-made message. This was a message from God about God. It was a message that pulled no punches because it read a long list of accusations against you.

Accusations that you knew were 100% accurate. That meant you were 100% guilty when you stood before God, the judge. This message made you cry.

How could I stand before you, O Lord? And then, this message from God about God invited you back to God because it then told you about God's son, Jesus, who offered himself and died in your place for your offense.

[16 : 50] this message never came to you with just words. It came with God's power and with spirit-empowered deep conviction. And this is what you need to know.

That's where your faith was initially forged. Your faith never began with you. Now, in doing so, Paul is not pitting words against power as if the two are mutually exclusive.

One of the things that we've been stressing in the Doctrine 1 classes that I've been teaching is how God doesn't bypass human language or the human mind but actually uses both in bringing the gospel to us.

Remember what he was doing in the synagogue in Acts 17? Paul was explaining and reasoning and proving things to his audience.

And so, Paul is not against the use of reason or persuasion. But he is saying that the gospel is not just another TED Talk or a rousing cherrama.

[17 : 53] No, it carries the power of God in itself. A TED Talk or a cherrama might leave you buzzing for a short while but the gospel is a word that can bring the spiritually dead to life.

It is a word that can change a person's deepest allegiances. It is a word that so turns a person's direction in life that they become unrecognisable. And if you're a Christian today, you know that, don't you?

You know how although you still experience many ups and downs, that the gospel has fundamentally changed you inside out. And that's why you have a faith that works.

Because God worked in your heart in the first place through this powerful gospel. The Spirit of God worked through the Word of God to bring you to faith in God.

And so, the Spirit and the Word always go together, never apart. They are not opposed to one another. And so, a faith that works is a faith that has welcomed the gospel.

[19 : 06] Or perhaps I can also state it in reverse. A faith that has welcomed the gospel is a faith that works. The equation is simple.

Where there's no gospel, no working faith can be produced. If there's no gospel, there is no Holy Spirit presently regenerating and renovating your heart.

And so, do you want a faith that works? Then you must have a faith built on the gospel of Jesus Christ. And not a gospel of self-reliance or a gospel of self-improvement or a gospel of self-confidence.

So, the question is, is this the gospel you believe in? For you see, only a faith that welcomes the gospel and places the gospel at its core can do verse 6.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord. For you welcome the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

[20 : 20] Now, come back with me again to Acts 17. Remember how some Jews got jealous and ran Paul out of town? Well, that wasn't all they did. When they couldn't find Paul and Silas, they decided to make some of the new believers the scapegoats.

they made them come before the city authorities and made serious charges against them. Charges that could result in the death penalty.

Now, imagine if that was you being dragged. How would you have reacted? Now, if you became a believer simply because you like your Christian friends and you wanted to follow them or because you thought that believing in Jesus would improve your fortunes in life, would you now stay a Christian?

Or if you are watching this as a bystander, would this make you want to follow Jesus on a human level? No way. Not if you never welcome the true gospel but simply a pale substitute.

But if you welcome the true gospel, the biblical gospel, the gospel that says Jesus is savior and Jesus is king and no one else is, then you can follow in the footsteps of Paul who had to endure suffering too.

[21 : 50] You can follow in the footsteps of Jesus himself who knew what it was like to stand falsely accused before the authorities. For if you welcome the true gospel, then you have the spirit.

And that spirit can give you joy even amidst suffering. That's what I keep seeing in my friends who believe the gospel.

Let me tell you about one of them. Dan Lee is a pastor whom I got to know a little when he came to speak at a NextGen conference quite a number of years back. In 2018, Dan's wife was pregnant with their fourth child, Evie.

They discovered during the pregnancy that she had Edwards Syndrome, a rare genetic condition that meant that her chromosomes were messed up and that she might not survive birth.

She would almost certainly not live past her first birthday. And so on June 8, 2018, Evie was born alive, kicking off a journey which would see them spend more days in the hospital than at home.

[23 : 06] And because they didn't know how long they would have Evie for, they began to number the days. They read a psalm for each and every day Evie survived.

They held her, hugged her, and rejoiced daily in the precious life that God had given to them. And then after 77 days, just when she was beginning to look a little more stable, Evie took her final breath and went to be with the Lord.

Let me just read some of their reflections from the funeral. world. It was a hard day in so many ways, but we were comforted by a God who is no stranger to our pain as we watched his son die on the cross, and by a Jesus who himself shed tears upon seeing a dead Lazarus.

We've tried to keep up reading the Psalms, and God again comforted our heavy hearts on what would have been Evie's 12th week birthday. We read Psalm 84 verses 4 and 5.

As painful and as difficult as this journey has been, we wouldn't have done it any other way than with our Lord and our Saviour.

[24 : 38] God's way is always the best way. The God who loaned Evie to us for 77 days is now holding her in his hands. Until the day when we hear Jesus say, Talitha kum, get up, we'll forever miss our gorgeous girl.

And here's another paragraph from the New Year's Eve reflection that year. As we come to the end of the year, we look back and wish that things had been different.

We long to have our daughter and our baby sister back in our arms. However, we're seeking shelter from the battering we feel in God our rock and refuge.

We're clinging to the secure hope of the resurrection that Jesus has won for us that remains our hope. We're surviving thanks to him. Just a few days ago, we read this in a family devotional.

Question, can you see any evidence that God is alive? answer, Lamentations 3 verse 22 to 23, because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail, they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.

[25 : 58] how is it that they can say such words after such a tragedy? The answer is this, in the midst of severe suffering, Dan and his wife Teresa welcomed the gospel.

They understood the difference the death and resurrection of Jesus made to their situation. They let it shape their entire outlook on the tragedy that befell them.

Diaz was a faith that worked because it was a faith based on who Jesus is and what he had done. There were tears and sadness but with the Holy Spirit's help, never despair.

A working faith is a faith that welcomes the gospel. Secondly, a working faith witnesses to the gospel.

Working faith witnesses to the gospel. In the town of Hamilton, which is just 15 miles southeast of Glasgow, Scotland, lies the Hamilton Mausoleum.

[27 : 11] In case you don't know what that is, that's a building that houses tombs. It's a pretty big and old style Roman building, more than 150 years old. But what's especially interesting about this building is how any sound made in this structure will echo for a long time afterwards.

So a single slam of the entrance door will result in an echo that will last for a full 15 seconds as the sound bounces off the walls. And that's what the Thessalonian Christians are like.

In verse 8, Paul now showcases another characteristic of their faith. The gospel, he says, is echoing forth from the Thessalonians, bouncing off the walls of Macedonia and Achaia and being heard and known everywhere.

You see, having welcomed the gospel, the Thessalonians had no thought of keeping it to themselves. They've heard the voice of God come to them in the gospel, and now they intend to be the mouthpiece for God.

For what brings great joy to their heart will always bubble up to the lips. But that is not all verse 8 says.

[28 : 25] For Paul goes on to say, your faith in God has become known everywhere. You see, what exactly was echoing and reverberating throughout the region of Macedonia and Achaia and beyond?

It wasn't just the verbal message of the gospel. It was your spirit inspired lifestyle. It was the work that was produced by faith. Once again, it wasn't just gospel doctrine, but gospel culture that was setting the tongue's wagging.

As people watched the Thessalonian church, they realised that they weren't just trying to peddle a message. Their faith was real to them. They really believed what they were saying, and it impacted how they live.

And as the Thessalonian church let faith work in their lives, that in itself had a significant impact. The evangelist D.L.

Moody used to say, out of a hundred men, one will read the Bible, the other ninety-nine will read the Christian. Well, that was what was happening.

[29 : 37] A significant portion of Mediterranean society were reading the Thessalonian church and seeing the impact of the gospel on them. And it wasn't just the non-believers who were reading the Thessalonian church.

In the original Greek, the beginning of verse eight actually starts with the word for, which for some reason the NIV leaves out, you will see it in the ESV.

And that's actually a very important preposition because it joins verse seven and verse eight together. You see, verse seven tells us that the Thessalonian church were a model to other believers.

How so? The answer is verse eight. When a church lets faith work in their lives, they not only command the message of the gospel to unbelievers, but also act as a model to other believers.

A godly life teaches just as much as a doctrine class. In a way, that's what Pastor Dan Lee was doing when he so powerfully lived out his faith in the midst of his suffering.

[30 : 52] He was encouraging his church. He was encouraging me. And hopefully through me, he was encouraging you as well. And so here's a question for today.

Do we take seriously the call for our faith to produce a distinctive lifestyle? I'm well aware that sometimes I'm known as the pastor who's always stressing the Bible.

I want us as a church to take doctrine seriously to see how significant and important it is. But in stressing doctrine, I don't want us to forget that the end goal is not simply being able to read the Bible more accurately.

The end goal is not simply to make sure that our doctrine is sound. The end goal is to live out our faith to the glory of God. You see that even in Paul's ministry.

In verse 5, he doesn't just appeal to how the word of the gospel came to the Thessalonians, but also how he was living in light of the gospel for their sake.

[31 : 59] And we'll see this more next week. And so what was distinctive about the way the Thessalonians worked out their faith? In verses 9 and 10, Paul summarizes their distinctiveness in three action words.

First of all, he says, there's a turning. They've turned their backs on fake gods, pretend gods, gods that are not actually gods. They've turned their backs on what they used to live for, financial security, a comfortable life, a risk-free existence.

They are saying, my decisions are no longer governed by what will most build my savings nest, or what will endure my greatest comfort, or what will guarantee my personal safety.

That is no longer how I live. Instead, my decisions are those that are governed by God's priorities, those that please him. A working faith turns from idols towards God.

And then second of all, verse 9 again, he says, there's serving. People who are safe are people who serve. The Thessalonians understand that. Being redeemed, you see, doesn't mean that you have no master but yourselves.

[33 : 16] If that's how you think of redemption, you've got the wrong idea. That's not what the Bible means by redemption. No, redemption simply means you've changed masters. But the difference is, you're no longer serving someone draining, someone fake, someone dead.

You're serving the one who is faithful, genuine, dependable, truthful. And so a working faith serves.

And finally, third of all, verse 10, Paul says, there's waiting. Now, that's something we've talked a lot about in the past few months, haven't we, from the Old Testament. But this is New Testament faith too.

But we don't wait like how we wait for an exam that we are completely unprepared for, or a meeting with someone that we really dislike. Instead, we wait like we're in a queue to meet our favourite pop star, or our favourite author, or whoever it is that inspires you.

No, because we're waiting for Jesus, who is coming to rescue, not accuse. Jesus. And so, we wait with anticipation, getting ready to meet Jesus when he comes again.

[34 : 38] And what does it mean to get ready for Jesus? Well, it must surely mean a continual turning and serving, amongst other things. And when those three action words are all evident in your lives, Paul says, that's when you have a working faith that witnesses to the gospel.

That's how Paul says we can become a model to others, and messengers with credibility. So, my brothers and sisters, do we want to be a church that is worthy of an apostle's thanksgiving?

Then here is a habit to start developing today. Let faith work. Don't let your faith be something that lays dormant.

And actually, sometimes, it's only as you begin to work out your faith that it becomes stronger. You don't wait for your faith to become stronger, however you define that, and then go on to do something like that, go on to work for God.

Yeah, don't wait till you have a faith like Martin Luther or John Wesley or Billy Graham or whichever Christian hero you think of before you can do anything.

[35 : 57] No, let your faith work right now. Ask the Lord to soften your hearts, to welcome this powerful gospel so that it shapes our entire outlook and begin making us into Christ's copycats.

Ask the Lord to move us to daily turn from other gods that capture our hearts and daily turn to serve the true and living God. and ask the Lord that as we do so, we'll create a powerful echo chamber for the gospel so that more people know Jesus and more Christ's copycats are produced.

Ask the Lord that even in endemic times, our faith will be so endemic that this precious message about Jesus will persist in coaching. Yes, there will always be people opposed to Christ, but you know what?

when you work out your faith, you are actually creating opportunities for many other people to give thanks.

Now, what a privilege that is to be a church worthy of thanksgiving. Shall we pray to God that we might be a church like that?

[37 : 19] Father, once again we pray for your Holy Spirit to be at work, that as the word of God comes to us now, we pray that indeed it is now softening our hearts, shaping our outlooks, transforming our mindsets, and moving to our hands and feet.

Help us to be a church whose faith is not just a faith in theory, but a faith that works. We pray, Lord, that you will help us to be a church that seeks to imitate you, imitate the Apostle Paul as he imitates you, and that we would be a church whose faith will be made known everywhere, here in Kuching, and even beyond.

Please convict us, Lord, even in these strange times, even when we are under pressure, even when we are away from each other, even when the leadership of the church and the people of the church cannot so easily come together, we pray that in spite of all these challenges, you will still help us to be a church that is faithful to you as it is worked out in our lives.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.