



FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE IN A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE-DOWN

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

First Message

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“The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men Gang aft agley.” So wrote Scotland’s national poet Robert Burns. Translated from Scots into English, “The best-laid plans of mice and men Go oft awry.” Many of you may be familiar with these words. John Steinbeck used them for the title of his novel, *Of Mice and Men*, in which the best-laid plans of George and Lennie go awry. Burns wrote this line in his beloved poem *To a Mouse*. Not just any mouse; he wrote this to a very particular mouse, a “Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim’rous beastie.” To understand what happened to the best-laid plans of this mouse you’ll need to read the whole poem. Then this particular line will make a lot more sense.

Our best-laid plans have been turned upside down by a tiny virus. Events have moved at a dizzying pace: now that we are confined to home, the cancelation of the King City and Liberia trips last week seems rather mild! We are adjusting to this new normal and finding silver linings: the Chinese can hear the birds in Wuhan, the Italians are singing from their balconies, the Spanish in unison are applauding their medical workers every evening. And we are finding that we can continue in community thanks to the technology that some of you develop—thank you!

But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. (1 Thess 2:17 NIV)

I cannot see you, but you can see me. I thank those who have made every effort to make this possible, to allow us to continue to gather on Sunday mornings, now virtually.

This sentiment of intense longing is made by Paul, Silas and Timothy in the first of their two letters to the church of the Thessalonians. Today we begin a new series in these two letters. Compared to Paul’s other letters they receive relatively little attention, except for a few verses about the rapture and the man of lawlessness which generate much speculation. We will discover that there is so much more in these two gems.

Of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 are letters or epistles. Actually, the Book of Revelation is also a letter, so make that 22. Most are written to specific churches, some to specific individuals. They are written into specific situations. But we live in a very different time, place and situation. To understand why Robert Burns wrote a poem on a particular day to a particular mouse we need to know the circumstances of his encounter with that mouse. In the same way, we need to understand the circumstances into which Paul wrote his letters: particular letters written at particular times to particular churches or leaders dealing with particular matters. So why did Paul write his first letter to the Thessalonians? The background is given in Acts 16–17, which Brian preached through a couple of years ago.

The apostle Paul knew what it was to have plans overturned. On his second missionary journey, with Silas and Timothy, he had wanted to enter new territory to preach the gospel to those who had not heard. But they were “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (Acts 16:6). They turned north, and “tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (16:7). They turned west again, and came to Troas on the northwest coast of what is today Turkey. Here Paul had a vision of a man begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (16:9). Paul saw a new plan in this Macedonian call: “we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (16:10). They sailed over to Macedonia, where they went first to Philippi.

Here Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace and brought before the magistrates under the charge of promoting an illegal religion: they “are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice” (16:20-21). Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten and thrown into prison. When the officials belatedly learnt that they had shamed and mistreated Roman citizens they were alarmed, and begged the two to leave town.

They journeyed deeper into Macedonia, to the capital Thessalonica. Here it was Jews who opposed them. They assembled rent-a-mob from the market-place and set the city in an uproar. The charge before the city authorities this time was “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here... They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus” (17:6-7). The authorities were disturbed, and Paul and Silas were sent out of town by night.

They continued to Berea, but Jews from Thessalonica followed them there, “agitating the crowds and stirring them up” (17:13). Immediately Paul was sent away to the coast, then to Athens. Silas and Timothy stayed behind in Berea, with instructions to join Paul as soon as possible.

What a tumultuous few months this had been. Thwarted by the Spirit of God and of Jesus from entering Asia and Bithynia, they were convinced that God was calling them to bring the gospel to Macedonia. But this preaching provoked riots wherever they went and they had to abruptly leave each city. The best-laid plans of mice and men had gone awry. What must Paul have been thinking when Silas and Timothy joined him in Athens. Was he licking his wounds? Was he in despair? Was he wondering how it had all gone so terribly wrong?

There’s a key little word in Luke’s narrative of these events: “brothers,” or better, “brothers and sisters,” for the word can be gender-inclusive. NIV sometimes translates it as “believers.” After release from prison in Philippi, “they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with *the brothers and sisters* and encouraged them. Then they left” (16:40). In Thessalonica it was *the believers* who sent them away by

night. In Berea it was *the believers* who sent Paul off on his way and some escorted him to Athens. In each city there were some who had responded to the gospel, to this good news that there is another king, Jesus. In each city there was now a little church.

So how was Paul feeling when Silas and Timothy joined him? So intense was his affection for the Christians in Thessalonica that he felt orphaned from them, as a father torn away from his dear children. He wanted to know how they were doing.

...when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way... So when we could stand it no longer... we sent Timothy... to find out about your faith. (1 Thess 2:17–3:5)

Timothy brought back a good report:

Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. (3:6)

Paul's immediate response was to write a letter to the church in Thessalonica. This is his first letter to a particular church, so this is a landmark event in the New Testament. Hear how he started this letter. I invite you at home to read along with me.

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (1 Thess 1:1-10)

1. Faith, Love and Hope

Paul begins with a lengthy thanksgiving. He is overjoyed at the good news that Timothy has brought back, and is eager to share his joy with the Thessalonians and with God. Specifically he gives thanks for “your work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope.” Three Christian activities: work, labor and endurance, on the part of the believers. Three Christian virtues: faith, love and hope, anchored in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is these virtues of faith, love and hope which produce the activities of work, labor and endurance,

as NIV clarifies: “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope.” We'll look at each of these in turn.

1.1 Work produced by faith (fulness)

Work and faith. For us these two words don't easily sit together. Surely it's one or the other. Since we're saved by faith, to mention work alongside faith implies that somehow work contributes—works righteousness. But what actually is the faith of these Thessalonians? They are very young Christians; the church is only a few months old. So I'm sure there is plenty that they don't know or understand. But they do know two things: about God and about Jesus.

They have “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1:9). They recognized that their idols and what they represented are false. We all worship and serve someone or something, whether we acknowledge that or not. We all look to things that give us meaning and purpose in life, and we give them our allegiance. But they have accepted Paul's proclamation about God, the living and true God, and now they seek to serve him. Secondly, they have responded to the proclamation that there is another king, Jesus. Even if this is all they believe it is already enough.

Faith is responding to the good news of who God is and what he has done in Christ. Having responded we then seek to grow in understanding, which is a lifetime task. “Faith seeking understanding” is an ancient dictum of the church. We often turn it the other way around: understanding seeking faith.

We can also read *faith as faithfulness*. The Thessalonian Christians have given their allegiance to king Jesus, and now seek to live out their lives in loyalty and devotion to him. The Thessalonian mob was right: the apostles were turning the world upside down by proclaiming “there is another king, Jesus.” To proclaim Jesus as king and lord meant that Caesar the emperor was neither the true king nor the true lord. All other persons and things to which we have given allegiance, consciously or unconsciously, are deposed by this proclamation that there is another king, Jesus. The world, busy in its pursuit of false gods, might dismiss this as upside-down, but we know that the gospel message turns us right-side up, as Shawn has repeatedly reminded us in his series on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is the rightful ruler and lord. It is to him and to the living and true God that we give our allegiance, loyalty and devotion. We have two symbols of this allegiance: baptism and communion. Baptism is like the oath of citizenship, transferring our allegiance. In baptism we publicly affirm that our allegiance is now to Christ Jesus, that we now belong to his kingdom. Communion is like the pledge of allegiance: on a regular basis we affirm that we belong to Christ Jesus, that our loyalty and devotion belong to him. The work of the Thessalonian Christians is produced by this loyalty.

Paul continues, “we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you” (1:4). Loved by God and chosen or called by him. This is language from the Old Testament, where Israel was the object of God's affection and election. He loved Israel and called her to be his people, the people in and through whom he was at work. Israel was the apple of his eye. Here the same two terms are used—loved and called—to describe those who have accepted the gospel. Jews and Gentiles together in Christ through the Spirit are God's beloved and called ones. We are the ones in and through whom God is at work in Christ through his Spirit. We are called to live life a new way, the true way. We are called to a Third Way, neither Jew nor pagan Gentile, but the Jesus Way.

“Loved and called by God” was a familiar concept for Jews, though they would be offended by the claim that the locus of this love and calling was now in Christ Jesus. But to be loved and called by God was a radically new concept in the Roman world. Their gods didn’t love people and the people didn’t love their gods. But God loves us and we love God in return. In this time of great fear, anxiety and uncertainty, it’s good to be reminded of this: we belong to God’s kingdom, to Christ’s kingdom, and God loves us dearly. God has called us: he is at work in and through us. The work produced by faithfulness flows from our love for God who first loves us in Christ Jesus.

1.2 Labor prompted by love

The second virtue evident in the Thessalonians is love, love for one another. The Christians are now part of a community of love: love towards God and love towards one another. Paul addresses them as “brothers and sisters” (1:4); he does so fourteen times in this short letter, and another seven times in his second letter—a higher frequency than any other letter of his. In the Roman world sibling love was the strongest love. People competed to acquire honor for themselves and promote their family. But siblings promoted one another; they cared for and protected one another. We are all now siblings, brothers and sisters together in Christ. It is this intense sibling love that prompts our labor. Labor is a stronger word than work, implying some discomfort or hardship. We are willing to inconvenience ourselves, if necessary, in loving and caring for one another.

Our outreach to King City and Liberia is motivated by love. These trips are canceled, but we still have opportunities to labor out of love for one another. Our elders care and our deacons labor out of love for our body. This week’s PBCC Coronavirus update sent out on Wednesday contained this invitation:

The PBCC leadership also wants to assist and encourage our entire church family in caring for one another as we walk together during this season... As we reflect on this invitation to participate together in the Lord’s work...we can each personally respond.

So, as brothers and sisters together, let us consider how we might respond, laboring for one another out of our deep love and affection.

1.3 Endurance inspired by hope

The third mark of the Thessalonian Christians is endurance inspired by hope. It is clear that the Christians in Thessalonica are suffering. They “welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering” (1:6). It seems that some have died under this affliction. But Paul adds that they have received the word also “with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” How are they able to have joy in the midst of affliction? How are we able to have joy in the midst of our current trials of being confined to home, with our routines so disrupted? The Thessalonians had joy because they had hope. People can endure almost anything with hope. But without hope we wither and shrivel. Having turned from idols to serve God, they now “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1:10). Yes, they may die in the affliction, but death has been defeated. There has already been one resurrection, the most important resurrection of all, the one that really matters. Jesus is the one whom God raised from the dead. He will one day return and God will put all things right. This is the Christian hope: not a general vague hope that somehow things will work out, but the absolute confidence that this same Jesus whom God raised from the dead will one day return and that we are safe in him. It is

this hope that inspires endurance. In the meantime, while waiting, the Thessalonians didn’t down tools and wait. Instead they worked and labored. We are called to do the same as we endure the current hardships, which increasingly look like they are going to last a while. We endure: this doesn’t mean we just grin and bear it. No, we bear up under it because of the hope that we have.

2. Imitation

The Thessalonians have become imitators of the apostles and of the Lord. In turn, they have become a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Notice the chain of imitation: Jesus to Paul to the Thessalonians to the rest of Macedonia and Achaia.

At the head of the chain is Jesus. He is the pattern of what it means to be truly human. He set this pattern in his faithfulness, love and hope, in his work, labor and endurance. He was faithful to God in contrast to the unfaithfulness of both Adam and Israel. He loved his disciples and his people. All his behavior was motivated by this faithfulness, love and hope. He endured opposition and suffering all the way to the cross, where he entrusted himself to the God who vindicates the faithful.

Next in the chain is Paul. He thought he was being loyal to God in persecuting Christians. But then Jesus met him on the Damascus Road, and his life was reoriented onto Christ. For Paul Christ was now everything. God called him into a life of imitation, imitation of Christ. Paul, too, endured great suffering and opposition in faithfully serving the Lord. Some of this suffering and opposition we’ve read about this morning, in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

Paul urged the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). And now the Thessalonian Christians have become imitators of both Jesus and Paul. They show the same virtues of faithfulness, love and hope, which inspire the same activities of work, labor and endurance. And the chain continues. They have become a model for the rest of Macedonia and Achaia. It is not just the gospel that has gone out from Thessalonica throughout these two provinces, but also news of their faithfulness, of how they are remaining true to God, to king Jesus and to one another in the midst of affliction.

The Western world prizes individuality. The modern world prizes uniqueness: be your own unique self, be true to yourself. But we are called to conformity, conformity to a pattern, conformity to Christ. This is God’s great goal for us, that we become like his beloved Son. His Spirit is at work in us so that day by day we become transformed into his image (2 Cor 3:18).

The current crisis inconveniences us, but also presents us with many opportunities to imitate Christ, Paul, and the Thessalonian Christians, in their faithfulness, love and hope, which are ours in Christ Jesus, and in our work, labor and endurance inspired, motivated and produced by these virtues. We have many opportunities to be the hands and feet of Christ to one another and to the wider world. Parents at home with your children: your children are observing how you live through this difficult situation. May you so imitate Christ that you set them a model worthy of imitation, for they surely will imitate you.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, the eminent sociologist Rodney Stark wrote,

The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs... Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they *love one another*. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice,

humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of *one another*. Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to ‘all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 1:2). These were revolutionary ideas.¹

The Thessalonian church had embraced these revolutionary ideas. Rodney Stark, writing these words as an agnostic, embraced these revolutionary ideas: he became a Christian.

He wrote these words in a chapter entitled, “Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion.” The epidemics that swept through the later Roman Empire provided plenty of opportunity for the Christians to love their neighbors near and far when the pagans abandoned them. In this epidemic may God give us the grace to see the opportunities not the inconveniences; may he give us the grace to imitate our Lord. We all are privileged have a part to play in this crisis. God has gifted each one of us with spiritual gifts through his Spirit, he presents us with different acts of service we can do unto the Lord, and he is at work in and through us, energizing it all. As Paul writes,

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. (1 Cor 12:4-6)

May we all be like the Thessalonian Christians. Through us may God’s will be done, his kingdom come, a little bit more now on earth as it is already in heaven. This can happen in our current crisis. Indeed, dare I say, it’s more likely to happen in this current crisis, as people become aware of the powerlessness of the things that they have chased after, the things in which they have placed their hope. We have the privilege of being part of God’s kingdom, of having embraced the good news that there is another king, Jesus. We have the privilege of being brothers and sisters together, who love, care and look out for one another. And we have the privilege of a sure and certain hope which enables us to endure this crisis with joy.

Let us close by saying the Lord’s Prayer together. We petition God, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, [in your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ]. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thess 3:12-13; 1:3)

1. Rodney Stark: *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 86.

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