



## HOW LIVES ARE CHANGED

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 1 Thess 1:1-10  
 First Message  
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Most of us are familiar with the story, "The Little Engine That Could." It is the tale of a little engine loaded with toys and goodies for boys and girls on the other side of a hill, that broke down as it chugged up the slope. The engine was deeply disappointed for the children who now would be deprived of the goodies. Then along came a sleek passenger train, but it was much too busy to stop and help. A freight engine came by, but it had a lot of weighty matters on its mind. An old, rusty train that could hardly move came along, and it said it couldn't help. Finally, a little blue train came by, and it thought it could help. The first train emptied all its goodies onto the little blue train, and away it went. You know the refrain it made as it struggled up the hill: "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can," all the way up the hill until it reached the top. And it did! And all the way down the hill, the engine said, "I thought I could, I thought I could."

That is a much loved story, and I don't want take away from the beauty of that little classic. But along with all the wonderful things that it communicates, it also perpetuates the myth that the possible can be done immediately, but the impossible takes a little longer. That is a part of the American dream that says that with enough time and gusto, we can get everything done that we want to. The problem is, when we wake up from the dream, we find there are a number of things that we cannot change. We run into an irresistible force: various passions, lusts and urges surge within us that we cannot deal with. We have emotions, fears and anger that we cannot come to terms with; they dominate us. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

The glory of Christianity, however, is that the gospel has power to change lives. Today we begin a series in the book of 1 Thessalonians that illustrates this wonderful theme. The apostle Paul wrote these letters to the young church at Thessalonica, because people there had found in the good news about Jesus a way to be changed. The focus and purpose of their lives had been drastically and irrevocably altered.

Paul had founded the church at Thessalonica himself. The city still exists, but today it is known as Salonica. Located in northern Greece, it is one of the few New Testament cities that is still flourishing. The founding of the church is recorded in the Book of Acts, Luke's history of the early church. Paul and his companions, Timothy and Silas, traveled there from Philippi, about one hundred miles west of Thessalonica.

After Paul had ministered in the synagogue for only three Sabbaths, the Jews of the city became so enraged by his teaching about Jesus that they caused a riot. They captured Paul's host, Jason, and held him responsible for the apostle's behavior. Paul left the city, having been there

only one to three months at the most. But he left behind the gospel, and the good news that he had preached continued to have free rein, changing the lives of the inhabitants of that place. He went south to Berea, and there began to preach again. The Jews from Thessalonica, however, followed him and caused another uprising. Finally, Paul was sent by himself to Athens. From there he went on to Corinth, the city from which he wrote this letter to these new Thessalonian believers.

As we study Paul's words, we would do well to remember that this is a letter. When God wanted to communicate with man, he did not drop a volume of systematic theology on us, an encyclopedia in which we could look up whatever topic we wanted to know about. No. God worked through human instruments who wrote letters, thus giving a personal touch to the gospel.

A study in Acts 17 of the history of the beginning of the Thessalonian church reveals that the fellowship there was born out of persecution, and that persecution continued throughout the life of the church. Paul will be referring again and again to the fact that their response to the gospel came out of a great deal of opposition. It was not easy to be a Christian in Thessalonica. Twenty years after this letter was written, the entire ancient East would be absorbed in warfare and rebellion. In AD 70, the armies of Titus surrounded Jerusalem and, following a bloody siege, the city was overrun, the temple destroyed, and the Jews taken captive. The movements that culminated in those events had already begun when this letter was written. So the Thessalonian Christians were facing perilous times.

Thessalonica was a large seaport town of about two hundred thousand people. It was a commercial center on the Egnatian Way, the main highway from Rome to the East. Thessalonica was a wealthy city. It had a competitive, cut-throat atmosphere, much like the valley we live in today. There was a lot of pressure on Christians to conform, so Paul wrote this letter to encourage them on how to live in the midst of opposition, misunderstanding and pressure.

The apostle begins his letter, following the pattern normally found in first century letters: The sender, to the recipient, and then a salutation. Verse 1:

**Paul and Silvanus [this is the longer version of Silas] and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. (1 Thess 1:1, NASB)**

These Thessalonians had two addresses: They lived in Thessalonica, but they were also "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Those of us here this morning who enjoy the friendship of God also have two addresses. We live in Cupertino or Sunnyvale or Santa Clara or Campbell or San Jose, but we also live "in God the Father and the

Lord Jesus Christ.” It is that second address that makes it possible for us to live with the first address. Jesus referred to his disciples being “in” him as branches are “in” the vine. Paul sees us being “in Christ” as limbs are in the body. Our relationship with Christ is a vital, organic union that makes possible the sharing of a common life.

What encouraging words to a young and persecuted church! Paul is reminding them that in the midst of their trials, their security is in God. Jesus said in John 10: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.” We can’t jump out or wiggle out of God’s hand. God won’t let us alone. That is the flip side of the truth that God will never forsake us. He won’t leave, and he won’t let us run away. That is our protection in this world. It’s the only protection we have.

A few nights ago, my youngest son Timothy and I were enjoying ourselves watching Tim’s bother Steve practice football. Tim was playing in the grass about ten yards from me. I noticed a great big insect buzzing around him. In the space of a few seconds, Timmy kept crawling closer and closer toward me until finally he was sitting in my lap. He knew where to find his security. The threats to us are much more dangerous than anything an insect can pose. There is a great deal of misunderstanding of what it means to be a Christian in our world, and much hostility toward Christians. But we are in good hands. Whenever tragedy strikes, when we hurt and our hearts ache, God’s loving arms surround us. We may be in a great deal of trouble, but we are also “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

What follows in the first three chapters of this letter is a series of anecdotal reminiscences. This is a deeply personal communication. It is one of the first inspired letters that Paul wrote, probably the second, depending on whether he wrote the letter to the Galatians before the Jerusalem Council. The first three chapters are autobiographical. Paul describes in great detail his love for the Thessalonians, his concern for them, and the way he conducted himself while he was with them. Whenever he thinks of them he is filled with thanksgiving, remembering the work that God had done in their hearts. The book divides into two sections. The first is narrative, recalling his visit with them; the second is exhortation, addressing their concerns and problems.

After his initial greeting, Paul continues (verse 2):

**We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. (1:2-3)**

As we read the apostle’s description of the Thessalonian church, remember that this fellowship was only a few months old. These were all newborn Christians who had been converted from either Judaism or paganism. All their Christian convictions, their moral standards, were newly acquired. Add to that the persecution they were experiencing and you might expect the church to be very wobbly. But no. Paul is confident about this, because his confidence is in God. He knows it is God who is doing the changing.

The apostle is continually thankful for three things these believers already possessed: “a work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.” Notice the three tangibles that are evident in this sentence: work, labor, and steadfastness. And there are three things that are unseen: faith, love, and hope. These are the underlying, unseen qualities that make the external manifestations of God’s life possible. There is a work that God is doing in our lives by faith; there is a labor that we engage in because of God’s love; and we endure, we hang in there, because we are inspired by hope. Here is how John Stott put this: “Every Christian, without exception, is a believer, a lover, and a hoper. Faith, hope and love are the evidences of God’s regenerating work of the Holy in our lives. Together, they reorientate our lives, as we find ourselves drawn up towards God in faith, toward others in love, and towards the second coming in hope.”

I think the work produced by faith is simply Paul’s way of referring to the process of salvation, summarized in verse 9, where he says the Thessalonians “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” That is faith at work. Faith is not merely a mental belief. Faith works. Faith has the power to change. Faith enables us to turn from what is wrong to what is right, from hurtful things to helpful things, from worshipping idols to worshipping God. Only God can deliver us from our idols, the things that we worship, the things that preoccupy us. Turning to God delivers us from idolatry to serve the living and true God. We can choose righteousness, but we cannot produce it. Only God can do that. How audacious of us to think that we can do God’s work! Only God can change people. Only God can deliver us from our past. Only God can die for our sins. Only God can preserve us through this life. Only God can prepare heaven for us. What makes us think that we could do it? We did not save ourselves. That is the argument of the book of Galatians.

Jesus said, “The flesh [that is, our basic humanity] profits nothing. It is the Spirit that gives life.” What a relief it is to discover that we don’t have to try harder to be acceptable to God, to deal with our sin, to atone for our past, or to grow as believers. No. It is all of God. Unfortunately, for some believers the Christian life is a treadmill. They try their hardest, but trying only makes them more miserable. In spite of what Jesus said about his yoke being easy and his burden light, they have not understood that only God can produce his life in us. It is the indwelling life of Christ inside us that produces righteousness. There is no other way. We simply have to ask God to do his work in us.

Paul says, secondly, that the Thessalonians were possessed by a “labor of love”—a labor prompted by love. He uses a stronger word for labor, suggesting that sometimes it is arduous. Basically, he is talking about loving and serving people. The work of faith has to do with our personal salvation; the labor of love with our service to others. Our service is prompted by love. As someone has put it: “By love our love is inspired.” In other words, it is because of the love of God for us that we can begin to love and care for other people. It is sometimes hard to love others, because we are born into this world as self-centered people. But once we understand the intensity and immensity of God’s love for us, we can grow in our ability to love, and we can accept people just as they are and begin to love them as God loves us.

We cannot produce this kind of love ourselves. We cannot love from a vacuum. This love comes from a relationship with God as we put our roots into him, devote ourselves to him, draw upon his word, and live in his presence. Then, from his love comes our ability to love others. Instead of thinking only about ourselves and our things, we begin to give our time and our toys away, devoting our energy and efforts for other people's sake. That is the radical change that begins in us when the love of God is poured into our hearts. Our high schoolers learned that this summer. They did not have a speed boat for their lake trip until just a couple of days before they were due to leave. Then someone whom our high school pastor didn't even know called him and said he could use their boat. That is what the love of God does in our hearts.

Finally, Paul notes their endurance, their steadfastness, which is inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. They kept working and laboring, because they knew what was in store for them: an inheritance laid up for them in heaven, which was certain and sure. That is what hope is. Most people are without God and without hope. They think that when they die, that's all there is. That takes all the life out of living, doesn't it? But once we know that we have an eternal destiny, and that destiny is fixed, we are not going to lose it. We are encouraged to minister to others, and to ask God to change us. We don't give up, because we know that there is something ahead.

John puts this thought this way in his first letter: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." That is our hope! That is what is up ahead. That is the only thing we are really hoping for, because everything else disappoints. One of these days, Jesus is going to come back and get us, or we are going to die and join him. But in any case, we are going to get our inheritance, everything that is coming to us. That is what keeps us working on our marriages. That is what keeps us loving our children. That is what keeps us helping those who are weak, because we know that this life isn't all there is.

This also protects us from the delusion that the next big event is somehow going to satisfy us. It never does, of course. When we take our kids to Disneyland, the most often asked question on that long drive is, "Are we there yet?" That's the way we go through life, too. We get our license to drive, and we wonder, have we arrived yet? No. We get our first boyfriend or girlfriend, and we ask, are we there yet? No. Then we get married. Are we there yet? No. We have children. Have we arrived yet? No. But it is the certainty of our arrival, the thought of going home, that keeps us persevering as Christians. That is what Paul means by "the steadfastness that is inspired by hope."

In the next paragraph, Paul tells us how these miraculous changes that we have been talking about take place. What causes people to leave their idols for God? We live in a world where men and women are eaten up with selfish ambition for money or power or fame. Others are obsessed with their work or sports or television. They are infatuated with a person, or addicted to things like alcohol, food, drugs, or sex. These are all idols, and every idolater is prisoner. What is the process by which we are set free? How does the gospel change our lives and the life of a community. Here is what Paul says (verse 4):

**...knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1:4-10)**

One of these days, God will take off the wraps and he will judge the world—and Paul is saying that you won't be there. You will be delivered, rescued from the "wrath to come." The thing that characterizes your life now, says Paul, is that you are serving the living and real God, and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. Oh that that might be the apostle's description of us as a church and as individual Christians: that we are serving God and waiting for his Son! In other words, that we have a divine, eternal, heavenly perspective. We are storing up treasure in heaven, rather than piling it up here.

Notice the process by which believers are called into God's grace. The first thing you need to know is that God loves you. He loves you even before you are his. Everything starts with God's love. So many people think of God as an old, out of sorts, heavenly crank. They think he is so insecure when people don't respond to his love that he stomps around heaven, shouting judgments and getting angry at everyone. But that isn't true! We are deeply loved by God. As a consequence, our hearts set up a sympathetic vibration to that love. When God sings his love song for us, our hearts reverberate. That's where that longing, that yearning comes from. That's the origin of the ache we feel when we want something so bad we can taste it, but we don't know what it is. Nothing satisfies it, because it is God singing his love song to us. He wants us to move toward him. So the process begins with the love that God has for us.

The book of Ephesians says that God set his love upon us in eternity, and he chose his people in love. No explanation of God and his election is given. It is a mystery. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. As Deuteronomy 7:7-8 says, "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

God loves you because he loves you! There is no other explanation of the love of God except the love of God. And there is no other explanation of the election of God except the love of God. He chose you because he loves you, and he loves you because he loves you. He doesn't love us because we are lovely or lovable. He loves us because he is

love.

The doctrine of election remains a mystery, but because it is a Biblical doctrine, we seek to commit ourselves to it. And neither evangelism nor the pursuit for holiness are inconsistent with this doctrine. On the contrary, it is precisely by means of evangelism that God's elect are discovered; and by personal holiness that they give evidence of their election. It is only when people respond to the gospel and grow in holiness, that their secret election by God becomes apparent. That seems to be what Paul means when he says, in 1:4, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you." In other words, "We know it because you responded to the gospel and we know it because you are growing in faith, love and hope." And so it all begins with the love of God and our responding to that love.

That moves us to where we can begin to make sense out of the message, the gospel. Paul says "our gospel did not come to you in word only"—but it did come in words. And in verse 6, he says "they received the word," or as the NIV puts it, "they welcomed the message." Describing their spiritual journey, sometimes people will say, "I came to a church where the word was being taught, and for the first time it sounded like good news." It used to be that they couldn't stand to hear it; it didn't make any sense to them. But suddenly it began to appeal to them. After a while they found themselves welcoming the word more and more into their hearts. This is what Paul means when he says, "you received the word; you welcomed it." You invited it into your heart, convinced that it was true. Even though you did not have all of the necessary proofs, it sounds like truth, and you welcomed it.

After a while you began to think like God thinks. It was because you now had what Paul calls the "mind of Christ." Before you knew it you were thinking like God thinks. You realized how sinful you were. All along you thought you were a good person, but as the word began to penetrate, you admitted you had a lot of sins that no one knew about. You read that God came to earth to die for those sins and you believed that. Little by little God taught you more about himself. Then came this mysterious thing called the "new birth," which we don't fully understand. Your heart was changed, and you become a member of

God's family. Then you wanted to know more and more of God's word. Your appetite for it was insatiable. The word made sense. Not only did it ring true, but you began to ring true and live out the message. The word was doing its work in your life.

As the word penetrates our thinking, we begin to have the mind of Christ. We think God's thoughts after him. Our lives change and we exhibit more and more of the truth in our lives. People say, "There is something unique about that person. They have a different set of values. They respond to criticism differently. They are tranquil, gentle and strong. There is a winsomeness about them." Others wonder what has happened to us, and we have an opportunity to tell them about the Lord who has changed us.

The final thing is that we proclaim the truth to others. Paul says the "word of the Lord sounded forth from them." The gospel proclaimed by the Thessalonians made a loud noise, one that reverberated through the hills and valleys of Greece.

The most effective witness in this city, on your campus, in your office, at your home, is a group of people like you and me, living among their neighbors, making mistakes, not always getting it right, but moving progressively toward the likeness of Christ. That kind of transparency and openness has a powerful effect on a community. Evidently Paul had heard in some part of the Roman Empire that the story of the people in Thessalonica was known everywhere.

This is an important reminder to our media conscious generation. We should employ every means possible to communicate the good news, but let us never forget there is an even more effective way that requires no expensive gadgetry. You don't need Windows 95. You don't have to add more RAM. It's very simple. It's not organized or computerized; it's spontaneous. And it's not expensive. In fact, it doesn't cost anything. It is what John Stott calls "holy gossip." It is the excited transmission from mouth to mouth of the impact that the good news is making on people. When that happens, lives and communities are changed.

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