

1 Thessalonians 1 – Turn and Wait for Jesus

The Power of Hope

Hope is a powerful thing. What do you hope in? When I worked among asylum seekers and refugees, I realized how important hope is. Many of them had been in detention centres across Australia. And before that, refugee camps in other countries. Why so many of them try to harm themselves or take their own lives is because they have no hope. They might have daily food, clothing and shelter. But they have no end in sight of their detention.

The Asylum seekers I met with were now able to live in the community. But they had no idea of when or if they would ever get a permanent visa in Australia. In our rich world, full of technology and human achievement, we can be fooled into thinking we can do anything. But it's in times like these, when we lose control of our lives that we realise how much we need hope. You cannot live without hope. But with hope, we can get through almost anything.

As we read the letter to the Thessalonians, there is one key idea that shines through it all – hope! That's why I've called this series, Here Comes the Son – Son. It's all about living in light of Jesus' return. The Thessalonians had been through a fair bit of suffering. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, who were writing this letter, had suffered too. And they were chased out of Thessalonica while the church was very young. But Paul is so thankful for their faith and love. So he writes to them, comforting and encouraging them to hold on to the great hope they have in Jesus.

And he reminds them of three things. 1) Loyalty: He looks *back* to when they faithfully received the message of God. 2) Loved: He reminds them of who they are *now*: brothers and sisters, loved by God. And 3) Longing: He points *forward* to their great hope: the day when Jesus will return and save them.

1. Loyalty

Paul remembers with joy how the Thessalonians responded to the gospel message.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ 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.

They had faith in God. But it wasn't just a belief in their heads, it changed their lives as they worked and laboured to serve God and each other, even through suffering. They were Loyal. The great reformer Martin Luther said, 'We are saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone.' Faith is like a seed that is planted in rich soil. Everything needed for life is contained in that seed. But a plant that does not grow is dead. Every fruit tree is programmed to grow and produce leaves and flowers and bear fruit.

And so Paul remembers how the Thessalonians worked and laboured and endured because of the faith, hope and love within them. And they became model disciples.

1 Thessalonians 1:7-8 *And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.*

Paul had brought them the gospel message, and now they were spreading that message throughout the whole ancient world. Again, it's not just words here. Everyone around them could see how they turned from idols to serve the true and living God. Their faith in God had completely transformed their lives.

From this chapter we can learn from Paul to reflect on the past. Remember when you first believed in Jesus. Or if you grew up as a believer, remember a time when the pieces of the puzzle finally fit. When you first really understood grace. Remember the joy that filled your heart. Remember the energy and desire to serve God that worked in you. It's important for us, when we go through hard times to remember the good times. It encourages us that God has worked in our lives. And it helps us to recover the joy that we might have lost because life is hard sometimes.

But Paul goes further and tells the church that their security is not in their hard work or love. It's in God. Paul describes the church in a beautiful way:

1 Thessalonians 1:1 *To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to you.*

The church is *in* God and Jesus. That means it has its source in God. And it belongs to God, now and forever. God's attitude to the church is always grace and peace.

So let us remember why we first believed. He is the same God, yesterday, today and forever. We are secure in him. His loyalty to us produces our faith and loyalty.

2. Loved

The second thing that Paul reminds them of is their current situation. They are chosen by God, and dearly loved brothers and sisters. This is an amazing thing for Paul to say. Paul was an Apostle of Christ. He was also a Jew. And the Jews were the chosen family of God. In the Old Testament, God set apart the Jews from all the other nations to be his precious possession. In Isaiah God says, 'do not be afraid, my servant Jacob, my beloved Israel, the ones I have *chosen*.'¹

Here Paul speaks to the Thessalonians in very similar language.

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5a *For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.*

The Thessalonians were mostly non-Jews. They were Gentiles. But now through Jesus, anyone from any country or place can be part of God's special family. Paul calls them 'brothers and sisters' more than 20 times in this short letter, to show that they are equal with him. Loved by God and part of his family. At the start of almost every letter, Paul says that he is an Apostle of Christ. But here, he just says, 'From Paul, Silvanus and

¹ Isaiah 44:2

Timothy. It's like he's saying, you Gentiles are equal with me and all the Jewish believers as chosen, beloved children of God. Two of my children are colour-blind, and mostly they see it as a bad thing. But here we see that God is colour-blind. Anyone of any race or colour can be part of God's chosen family.

One of the most beautiful things I witnessed was when I went to Sri Lanka on a training trip. The Sinhalese and Tamils had been in a Civil War for 30 years. But what I saw was Sinhalese and Tamil pastors talking, laughing and praying together. They would switch between Tamil and Sinhalese, and sometimes English, to serve each other. They really embraced each other as members of the one family of God.

Here Paul is sure the Thessalonians are chosen because of the way they received the gospel message. Not simply as an empty word, but a powerful conviction worked by the Holy Spirit in their hearts. And this is even more amazing when you think about the strong opposition they got from the Jews. In this way, they were like Paul and like Jesus himself.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 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.

They were so powerfully convinced of the gospel that it changed their lives. They had work produced by faith, labour produced by love, and endurance inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, what will get us through the hard times we're going through? It is the deep conviction that we are loved by God. We are chosen by him before the beginning of the world to be part of his family. Not only will we survive this crisis, but we will work hard to serve one another because we believe that we are dearly loved children of God, and brothers and sisters to each other.

In our Growth Group, Talal mentioned Paul's example of praying for the Thessalonians. He said, 'It doesn't cost us anything to remember each another in prayer. And it's a beautiful expression of us being one in Christ.'

Who can you love and work hard for this week? Who can you pray for? Not because they are the same skin colour as you. Or the same education or stage of life. But because they are loved and chosen by God, and brothers and sisters in your family?

3. Longing

And finally, Paul returns to the hope they have in Jesus. Paul says that everyone around that region knows about their faith.

1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10 They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

This is such a great description of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. They have turned from idols. They have turned to God and away from things that do not save them or give them any hope. And they have been

given a new hope. A new purpose: to serve the living and true God. And to wait for his Son from heaven, who *will* save them from the coming wrath.

Christians are those who are longing, waiting eagerly for our Saviour to return and save us.

Brothers and sisters, what are you longing for? Are you longing for the Coronavirus to end? Are you longing to see your friends and family? Are you waiting for life to go back to 'normal'? Friends, life has not been 'normal' since the fall: since we rejected the true and living God. We have instead worshipped the false gods of wealth and pleasure and control of our lives.

The Thessalonians had real physical idols that they turned from. But we too have idols. What do you sacrifice your time, money and energy to worship? What do you look to guide you, provide you security and comfort? Is it your money? Is it your ability to control your life? We've lost that haven't we? Is it your parenting? I know I've been reminded of my failures as a parent through this lockdown period. None of our idols are able to provide for us or save us.

Why do we have sickness and fear and loneliness? It's because we have rejected our Maker. And he is rightly angry about that. He is against everything that has ruined his good world. And one day he will judge. But he has sent Jesus to die for us, to take all the consequences of our sin. Our idolatry. And he has raised Jesus to life again. So now, we are to turn from our idols, to serve the true and living God.

And the great hope is that one day Jesus will come back to judge the world. To set everything right, and to save us from God's wrath. *That's* when everything will be good again. *That's* what we hope for. Not for the coronavirus to end. But for all suffering and evil to end for good. And it's that hope that gives us endurance through the darkest times. It's a hope that goes beyond the grave. For God has raised Jesus from the dead as the Lord and Saviour of the world.

Brothers and sisters, what do you hope for? As believers, we are those who hope and wait and long for Jesus our Saviour to return and take us home. And it's that hope that helps us to work hard, and love and endure the sufferings of this life. Let's pray.