

The Reach of Newborn Faith

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[0 : 00] that page in your Bible open. We're going to spend time looking at those verses together, but as we do that, let's pray for God's help. Our Father, how we thank you for your grace and love that you have given us in your Son, Jesus.

We thank you for the Holy Spirit, who, as we've just read, gives us joy in receiving your Word. And so tonight we pray that we would have joy and that you would give us a heart to receive the message of the Gospel as you present it to us. Speak, Lord, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, last week I introduced you to my friend's little boy, born to his parents, terror at 32 weeks, tiny and vulnerable. What I forgot to tell you is that he's doing really well. And a year on, growing and developing normally, I don't know how much he weighs, but he's a lot bigger than he was when he came into the world. And in such a short time, amazing, isn't it? A baby whose health and even whose survival was his parents' daily concern and burden has, by God's grace, grown into a big, strong lad. And that's where we left the church in Thessalonica last week in this letter. If you remember here, we saw how Paul with Timothy and Silas had planted the church in incredible hostility.

They were only in the city for two or three weeks, but in that time, people from a whole range of backgrounds became Christians. And those Christians had begun to be dragged out of their homes by an angry mob. And things got so bad that the believers there sent Paul and Silas and Timothy away to the next town, but they were chased by the angry mob. So Paul went on to Athens, and the newborn church in Thessalonica was left for a time without the parental love and care that she really needed, the discipleship and teaching and leading. And Paul was desperate to know how the church in Thessalonica was getting on. Had they survived, not only bodily but spiritually, but now Timothy has come back and has brought news about their love and faith. The church that you left Paul in an incubator, he says, is sitting up and smiling, saying her first few words, taking her first few steps, all on her own.

But in our passage tonight, Paul wants the church to know that in the most important sense, they're not learning to walk and talk in the Christian faith all by themselves. Rather, Paul wants them to know that the fact that they are growing up in their faith proves that the living and true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is powerfully at work in them and through them.

[3 : 26] Because their faith in him, as small and as new as it is and vulnerable, it stretches not just into the few weeks since they've known him, and not just to the four walls of their house, or even to the end of their street or their town. But he says their brand new faith in God stretches into eternity and to the ends of the earth. Tiny and vulnerable though it is, because of the one who their faith is in. And if our faith is in this living and true God tonight, brothers and sisters, then the same is true for us. Whether we were born again yesterday or a long time ago, that deep encouragement that Paul gave to the church back then, he gives to us tonight. Because he wants us to see that even newborn faith, tiny, vulnerable new faith, even that faith, it reaches backwards and outwards and forwards.

Firstly, then, let's see the reach of newborn faith back into eternity. Now, how much can we really say that we know about each other?

How can we get to know each other really? Have you ever wondered that? We can ask each other questions, can't we? What's your name? Where are you from? But even then, we might not be told everything, might we? Might not be the complete story. Might not even be true. Might be a total lie.

How can we tell who someone really is? Or how can we tell who we are? Now, Paul says in verse 4 that he knows something remarkable about these people.

Just see it there in verse 4. Now, I don't know if you had asked the Thessalonian Christians who they were, that this is the first thing that they would have said. You, Paul, tell me about yourself.

[5 : 53] Well, I'm loved and chosen by God. I've lived in Thessalonica about 10 years, work in the Toga showroom. You know, in fact, I think if you'd asked these Christians, perhaps they would be wondering whether by now they really were loved by God.

How could we be chosen by God? We're under pressure every day to give up worshiping and living for Him. You're the gospel that Paul shared with us. It was brilliant. And we believed it.

And we believe it. But as soon as He came, He left. And how can we really know then who we are spiritually? Is this really our life? Have we really got it? You think about it, we're not facing, are we, what the Thessalonians went through in terms of the hostility they faced. But even for us, how confident would you be tonight to stand up and say, I know I am chosen by God?

Not, I think I am, or I guess that I am, but I know that I am chosen by God. How secure are you in that identity? You know, I think a lot of us would hesitate before saying that, even to ourselves, let alone out loud. You know, we've got a bit of a complex, haven't we, about our unconditional election. We think it's a bit presumptuous to say, I know that God chose me before the beginning of the world to belong to Him. Even when it says it right in front of us, God tells us that in His Word, doesn't He? Why, we think, would God ever have loved me and chosen me?

Now, I don't think that the Thessalonians shed our insecurities, but for different reasons, I think they would hesitate too to say, I know that I am loved by God, and I know that He chose me.

[8 : 10] How brilliant then for someone to come and tell them something better than we would even dare to tell ourselves. For we know, brothers and sisters, loved by God, that He has chosen you.

Now, how can you possibly know that, Paul? How do you know there's not something we haven't told you, or we're faking it, or we haven't really got it? How do you know? No, says Paul, I know that you're chosen. I know that you are, because, verse 4, Luke, our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. If you want the proof, he says, here it is. Remember how the gospel impacted you when we preached it. Remember, it wasn't only up here, your response.

Intellectually, although you weren't persuaded by it, it hit you with a force that compelled you to believe it, and to rest the whole weight of your life on it. The gospel came to you with power.

Paul's introduced us to the Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus, in this letter. Now, he brings in the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, and he says, He was personally at work in you when we shared the gospel with you, so that as you heard the good news, the Holy Spirit produced this deep conviction in you. Yes, it was a head response, but with it came a heart response, so that it's that point back then in the past, when you put your trust in Jesus Christ, in His death and resurrection, to save you from your sins, that's how I know. That's how I know that you are loved and have been chosen by God, because you didn't do that on your own. Even your power, he says, to have responded to the gospel came from a person and a power outside of yourself. It came to you with the Holy Spirit, your friends. How long do you think you have to have been a Christian before you know that God chose you? Paul says, the second that you put your trust in God's Son, Jesus, then you know that you have been loved by God for all eternity, and that before the beginning of the world, he set his heart on you to belong to him. I think it was Charles Spurgeon, the Victorian pastor, who said that becoming a Christian is a bit like going through a doorway. On one side over the door, it says, believe and you will be saved.

You go through the door, you turn around, and on the other side of the door, above the door, it says, chosen before the foundation of the world. The point is that these things, they are two sides of the same truth. It's the truth that the real trust that we genuinely put in Jesus has its origin and its source before the beginning of the beginning of the world. It says, before the beginning of time, when God set his love on us. We love brothers and sisters because he first loved us. And understand that it's not only a seasoned and a lifelong Christian faith that reaches back that far, but a newborn faith and a brand new trust reaches back just as far. Do you understand however long that you've been trusting in Jesus, even if you've put your trust in him today, that your story begins in eternity past.

[12 : 37] Paul puts it a different way in verse 6. How long did it take to prove that the Holy Spirit was really at work in their hearts? Only as long as it took for them to believe in the gospel, verse 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. He says, like Jesus himself endured the shame and pain of the cross for the joy set before him. So Paul and the others were thrown out of town for the joy of sharing the gospel with them. So the Thessalonian church welcomed the gospel with severe suffering, with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. When babies are born, people say, don't they, who do you think she looks like?

Well, Paul is saying, this church was born looking just like her older brother, Jesus. She was copying him before she even was old enough to know, and not because she lived a good life.

Interesting, isn't it? That's often what we think of as imitating Jesus, living a holy and a godly life. No, but look at what he says. We say imitated him because this church threw both her arms joyfully around the gospel, even though it brought pain and suffering with it. Brothers and sisters, if you've counted the cost and you've said yes to the good news, whatever it cost you and with whatever pain or suffering it brought or could bring, know that that could only have been the Holy Spirit's doing. We naturally, we're pain avoiders, aren't we? We run from pain. We want comfort and happiness, security, health and peace. But when we are born again, well, we come out looking just like Jesus and his people, full of joy, full of joy, even though we suffer because we've welcomed the best news that we could ever hear. So, I hope, you know, I hope Paul's convinced you that it's not a proud or a presumptuous thing for us to say, I know that I am loved by God and I know that he chose me because we only know that. And it could only be true because of his grace in Jesus, because his grace is bigger than our sin and his grace is bigger even than our faith. Our faith reaches back into eternity, but our faith also, secondly, reaches outwards, out into the world. So, Paul said that the church became imitators of him and of the Lord in the way they welcomed the gospel, but verse 7, notice he also says they became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Now, this made me think about how Jesus, remember the time that the little children came to him and the disciples said, no, no, no, don't bother him. But Jesus said, no, let the little children come to me. And he pointed at the children, didn't he? He gathered them all around them and he said, whoever does not receive the kingdom like them, like a little child, will not enter it. Children are expert imitators, aren't they?

That they learn by copying. We're at a point in life where we have to be really careful what we say at home because we've got a little boy who will repeat everything. It's like having an echo in the house.

But children, says Jesus, are also models of how to receive his kingdom. They love getting presents.

[16 : 47] They're not shy, are they? They're not proud or embarrassed when someone gives something to them. They're delighted. They rip into it. They're full of joy. They receive it.

So, this young church didn't only copy Paul and Jesus when they received the gift of the gospel. They also, says Paul, set an example to others of how to receive the good news. The Lord's message rang out from you. Not only in Macedonia and Achaia, your faith in God has become known everywhere. And again, I don't think that's the way that these young Christians would have thought about themselves. You know, children don't go around today saying, I'm a great example to all of you. But it sounds like the Thessalonians don't realize that the way that they came to put their trust in Jesus has become the gold standard around the world. So, that perhaps people would have said to one another or on a Sunday it would have been preached, we need to be Thessalonian in our faith to receive the gospel like the people in Thessalonica did. You know, the world heard the

Lord's message ringing out from them, says Paul, like church bells on a wedding day. Now, maybe that would have embarrassed them. I expect it would have confused them. I reckon they didn't think to themselves as they were being dragged out of their houses and brought before the city council that this is going to really inspire others or encourage other churches to hold the gospel so dear. But, you know, isn't that just what stories like that do for us?

We partner with different organizations that support persecuted Christians around the world. One of them is Wycliffe Bible Translators. I think in the summer, I mentioned a guy in Central Asia, a Bible translator.

When he became a Christian, his wife disowned him, sort of banished him to a different part of the house, but he started translating the Bible into his own language in his room in secret, in a language that the Bible had never previously been read or heard in. And in the most recent report last month, he wrote a wee bit and said wonderfully that he'd finished, the team had finished translating the New Testament into this language for the first time. But even better, he wrote, listen, we are seeking to engage people with it, which is not easy given the hostility to the gospel.

[19 : 51] I think not only to embrace the gospel in that environment, to count the cost and receive the good news of Jesus, but then to devote his life to sharing it with others in his culture.

You've got an example that is to us. What an encouragement that is to hear, isn't it? Now, that's far away. And I think sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking, well, that's just how life is over there. If that happened here, that would be a really big deal, but isn't that just how the rest of the world sort of works? Closer to home, I was reading just this morning about a woman called Hatan Tash. Now, she came from Turkey to the UK and converted to Christ from Islam. And since she became a Christian, she has been doing outreach to Muslims, mainly in London and in the southeast of England. And she'd go to Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park and speak to people from the Bible. But because of that, she's become a target for certain Muslim groups in that area. And in London, the police regularly uncover plots to abduct her or to kill her. Most recently, a man pulled a knife on her and slashed her face as she was speaking in Hyde Park. Now, she's in hiding, actually, just now. But she says she wants to go back to Speaker's Corner.

Because if the gospel stops being preached by women who have turned to Christ from Islam, then her enemies have won.

What an example to us. What a humbling example that is. Our persecuted brothers and sisters across the world and in this country show us that it's not only possible to embrace the gospel with joy, but it's possible to share the gospel with joy too, even if we are disowned by our families, even if we're hated by others, or we risk our lives or being reported for opening the Bible in public or meeting with other Christians. Perhaps as you sit here, you're not sure that you could suffer like that for Jesus if it came to it. But they can. And we can. And they do. And we would.

We would. Because they have shown us how. We need to hear those stories, don't we, from church history and from the global church. That's part of what we gain from partnering with persecuted Christians, that the encouragement of their witness in a hostile world. I said last time we've been living in a strange bubble of safety and security.

[22 : 58] But the witness of the Thessalonian church should help us to prepare, perhaps, to suffer worse in the future than Christians have for many generations in this country. Wherever our pain threshold is now, brothers and sisters, at whatever point we think that we would give in and let go of Christ or just go into hiding and keep it a secret, we need to know, don't we? We need to hear that Christians have gone further and lost more and suffered harder than we think we could and stuck with the gospel. And not only stuck with it through gritted teeth, but stuck with it with joy given by the Holy Spirit. Because it's not in their own power, is it? And it's not in ours, but it's the power of the Holy Spirit. And more than that, we need to be encouraged that people have become Christians in harder circumstances than we now face. In fact, if you look at places in history and across the world where the church is most heavily persecuted, that often is where the church has most quickly grown. Because the diamond of the gospel, it glitters all the brighter, the darker the backdrop it is set against. Because people see in Christ's people a joy and a hope and a love and a faith that can't be taken away. Something real that remains there when everything that is fake has been washed away by suffering and persecution. If you're here tonight and you haven't yet settled your faith in

Jesus, maybe you're thinking about it or exploring it, let me encourage you not to let the idea that there's going to be pushback or opposition put you off. Look at the example of those who've gone before you and the example of people around the world, the example of people even in this room, and let their faith give you courage to welcome the gospel. Because the example of other Christians to us, it proves to us that the joy of the gospel is something that no amount of suffering and no amount of opposition or hostility can ever take away. And brothers and sisters, we cannot make the mistake, can we, of turning down the volume or turning down the brightness, the harder it gets? We are not, we're not being persecuted yet.

Okay, the police are not shutting down churches, are they? But even with the low-level resistance and hostility that we do face, we're so reluctant, aren't we? And we're so fearful of having anything to say about Jesus Christ to other people. And we say we're worried about the prospect one day of not being allowed to speak freely about our faith. But here's the question, do we speak freely about our faith now?

What difference would it make if someone passed a law tomorrow that said you couldn't speak without Jesus with your friend? The Thessalonians, they give us a far better example to follow, don't they?

The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, your faith in God has become known everywhere. Wouldn't it be wonderful to think that one day someone would say, our witness here at Bon Accord was so bright and so loud that the gospel had gone out from us not only into Aberdeen and not only to the Northeast but to Scotland and to the world. This church and this page, it is not a Bon Accord.

[26 : 59] It is a small, weak, struggling group of Christians. But the message rang out from them across the world.

So let us follow their example. Let them be a model to us. Let us imitate them as they have imitated Paul and imitated Christ. Newborn faith that reaches back into eternity, out into the world.

Finally, we see newborn faith reaches forwards. It's interesting, isn't it, how sort of consensus report grows about something that's happened. You hear everyone saying the same sorts of things. Well, a consensus had grown in the wider church about what had happened in Thessalonica. And Paul sort of gives the report of that in verses 9 and 10.

Here's what everyone's saying. They tell how you turn from God to 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. And now there's three doing words in that, three verbs that sum up what the Thessalonians had done.

First is that they had turned. Or another word the New Testament uses is repented. It's not a kind of halfway pivot, but it's a 180 degree turn in another direction.

[28 : 27] Once they'd spent their days serving idols, other stuff. Now they spend their days serving, it's the second doing word and verb, the true and living God. They serve him.

And it's really interesting, isn't it, how that's how their conversion is described. We would say, normally, that they turned and trusted in the true and living God.

And that's true that they had turned and trusted in him, but that's not what stood out to the world. What does it say about their faith that the most striking thing to other people was the way that they now served God?

Christian faith isn't satisfied with simply resting in him, is it? But we go to work for him compared to what we used to live for.

Isn't the true and living God all the more worthy of our hard work and energy and resources and time? You don't get the sense that these Christians regretted doing that, do you?

[29 : 40] They found joy in their service of him. Indeed, their faith produced work, verse 3, and their love prompted labor. And their hope in Jesus fueled their endurance.

Here's the third verb. Look there. Again, it's really interesting, isn't it?

We want to say, we're just longing for Paul to say that they turned and trusted in his son from heaven. And again, they did, but that's not what stood out about them.

What everyone said about them was that this was a people who was waiting. They talked not only about their faith, but about their hope in Christ. It wasn't only a backward-reaching faith, but a forward-reaching faith from eternity past into eternity future.

We're going to see as we go on that that hope is a really big deal in this letter. Possibly the bit of this letter, if we're familiar at all with this letter, the bit that we know is the bit in chapters 4 and 5 where Paul teaches about the return of Jesus.

[30 : 56] And that can't be a coincidence. You know, he's writing to a church where the day-to-day of being a Christian is hardly the life that they've always dreamed of, is it? Yeah, Anne was telling me in the week about a study of Revelation that they're doing in the Ministry Training Academy just now.

And how in Revelation, when Jesus shines a spotlight onto the day-to-day experience of the churches, the persecution, the temptation, the opposition, the confusion, how fervently and how desperately the churches set their hope on the promise of Christ's second coming.

Given what the church is going through, is it any wonder that Jesus' last words in the Bible are, surely I am coming soon.

And the last prayer in the Bible is, Lord, come. This is a church where a faith that reaches forward into a better future was so necessary, they needed hope.

And that is exactly what faith in Jesus gives us. Not a vague kind of punt at some sort of life after death, but a hope that is grounded in history.

[32 : 11] We hope in one who, as Paul says, God raised from the dead, and who promises to raise us from the dead. And so that hope is not just words, it's guaranteed by a resurrection that happened 2,000 years ago in history.

And if God did it for his son, he can do it for me and you, and he will do it for me and you, because he's promised to do it for me and you. And not only that, but when we rise, Jesus promises that those who trust in him will not face God's anger for their sins.

He rescues us from the coming wrath. Jesus says in John chapter 5 that there are two ways to rise in the end.

Jesus says we will either wake up to life or to judgment. One, a future of unending joy and life in the presence of God.

The other, a future of never-ending sadness and pain under God's wrath. And standing between those two futures is Jesus.

[33 : 31] The Jesus we wait for from heaven is the Jesus who rose again from the dead, is the Jesus who is able to save us from the coming wrath. All our hope, all our hope, friends, all our hope for change and renewal, for redemption and rescue, for deliverance and life and resurrection, it is all completely bound up in him.

There is not one thing that me and you have to hope for that is not in Jesus. And again, if you haven't put your trust in him yet, you need to know, you need to know that there is something worse than suffering for him now.

And that is suffering without him in the end. Our hope as Christians isn't that God would take away the pain and the shame that we face today. But it is the hope that he has taken away the pain and shame of the punishment of our sins forever.

And we have his promise that through Jesus' death and resurrection, his anger against our sins has been satisfied. Our sentence has been served by him.

And friends, if your trust is not in Jesus, listen, that promise is worth more to you than any suffering in this life. That promise is worth more to you than anything it would cost to follow Jesus, to know that your sins are forgiven and that you have been spared and rescued from God's anger.

[35 : 10] And his son is coming from heaven to bring you body and soul into his kingdom and presence. One of my prayers for us as a church in this letter is that it would stretch our faith forwards into eternity.

We're growing in faith. We're growing in love. We also need to be growing in hope. The newborn faith of this young church, it's stretched as far as it could in every direction.

And brothers and sisters, if we've relaxed our grip on any one of these dimensions of our faith, well, now is the time to hold on all the more tightly, chosen before the beginning of the world, witnessing to all the world, rescued for life in a new world.

So let's reach then backwards, outwards, and forwards in faith, hope, and love.

Let's pray that prayer together now. Let's pray. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, how we praise you for the glorious truths that we've been able to consider tonight.

[36 : 36] Father, we thank you above all for Jesus. Lord, it's in him that you've blessed us. And he is the one who rescues us. And Father, we pray that you would help those of us who need to put our trust in him to do so.

Lord, that the message would come with power and by your spirit and with deep conviction, even tonight. And Lord, we pray that you would help those of us who need to set our hope on him to do so.

Lord, that we would not just be living for today and tomorrow, but that we would be living for eternity. And the promises that you give us in Jesus that last forever.

Father, help us, we pray, to live between the day of his resurrection and the day of his coming, to reach backwards with our faith in him and his finished work, to reach forwards with our faith in his return and all that he will bring.

Lord, grant us, we pray, this faith, hope, and love. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.