

Faith, Hope and Love in the Furnace

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[0 : 00] A friend of mine and his wife last year, nearly a year ago, had a little boy, the first. Through complications in the pregnancy, he was born eight weeks early, only weighing three pounds, eight ounces, a tiny wee baby.

He spent his first month in an incubator covered in wires and tubes, and though they got one or two cuddles with him, they couldn't really hold him.

They couldn't really be with him. They couldn't feed him. They could only go to see him in his little cot. But now I can barely imagine how that felt for them, the intense love of a parent for their newborn, the incredible concern for his health, and the heartache of being separated from him.

Even to taste such a strong cocktail of emotions is enough, isn't it? Well, tonight we come to open Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica, and it might shock us to see that Paul felt surprisingly similar to my friend and his wife about the church that he is writing to.

Just glance down at chapter 2, verse 7. Here's Paul reflecting on his time with them. He says, just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you, because we loved you so much.

[1 : 42] We were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well. Or verse 11. For you know, he says, that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children.

Encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. Some of you parents will relate to this.

I sometimes think, my kids will never, never understand how much I love them. Well, this church will never understand how much Paul, Silas, and Timothy love them.

Like a mom and a dad, they gave themselves body and soul to this church. They didn't hold anything back, because he says, we love you so much. But, now have a look at to verse 17.

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.

[2 : 56] Paul and the others were torn away from the church too soon, he says. It's as if one metaphor can't capture the intensity of that experience. He says, we felt like mom and dad to you, but when we had to leave, it was as if we were orphaned.

Now, we're going to see how that happened and how that played out. But I think it's worth us, before we kind of think about it, feeling our way into this letter.

We can all see the facts of history recorded. But this is how Paul describes what happened. Paul birthed this new church in Thessalonica. He loved this church with a parental love.

But then they were separated. And there was a time where he couldn't tell whether this newborn church would survive. So, he says, 3 verse 5, for this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith.

I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and our labors might have been in vain. All the way through this letter, the love, the concern, the heartache bleeds through.

[4 : 11] He left this baby church on life support. Would it still be there when he went back? That's what weighs on him. And so, now feel the relief.

Wash over us in these words from 3 verse 6. But 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 long to see you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution, we were encouraged about you because of your faith.

For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord. You know, don't we, when those we love have been unwell and we hear that they are well.

Well, then it's like life begins again, doesn't it? The weight is lifted. Life goes on. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? [5 : 24] Night and day we pray most earnestly we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your face. Friends, this letter is a love letter from a parent to a child whose life has been on the line but who he has just found out is not only surviving but is thriving in his absence.

This is Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. And we're going to take the Sunday evenings up to Easter to learn from it together.

Let me encourage you to read through the whole thing later on or at some point you can see it'll only take you 15 or 20 minutes to do. Because tonight we're just going to get the feel for it.

And we're going to see where Paul's going with it. And to do that, we're going to go back to Act 17, which we looked at earlier, the history behind this letter. So if you just turn back there, it's on page 1113 in the church Bibles.

Where we see in our first point, the world turned upside down. The world turned upside down. Act 17.

[6 : 41] So we join Paul on his second missionary journey. He's taken Silas with him and they pick up Timothy on the way in a place called Lystra. Lystra was one of the places Paul had preached the gospel before, not so long ago.

I reckon he was really encouraged when he heard people speak so highly of Timothy's faith. And to see the Lord not only convert people and grow a church, but raise up gospel workers and leaders in that church.

And so he and Silas take Timothy via Philippi to Thessalonica, which is in what is now northern Greece. And this is really the frontier of the gospel.

Paul, the furthest that the good news of Jesus has yet reached. And when they arrive at the start of chapter 17, Paul does what was his custom, verse 2. He went into the synagogue and on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.

How do you start a church? How is a church? How is a church born? Take note. That it is when the gospel is preached to people who are ready to listen.

[8 : 02] Wherever he went, Paul started in the synagogue preaching to the Jews there because they have the scriptures. And so Paul is doing nothing more complicated than what I'm doing now, preaching God's word to God's covenant people.

Particularly, he was explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. That is the heart of the scriptures, the words of the gospel. God promised the king would come who would suffer and die for our sins and rise again from the dead to give us a right standing with God. Now that in itself would have taken time to prove, not because it wasn't obvious, but because the congregation had so much to unlearn. The Jews at that time were searching for a Messiah who would conquer their enemies, not suffer at their hands.

The gospel had become for them a political solution for the here and now, and not a whole of life solution for eternity. And so all Paul is doing is pointing out what the Bible really says about the Messiah, that he would bring God's kingdom not by force, but by taking the punishment for his people's sins and rising from the dead to give them a new and right relationship with God.

And once you know who you're looking for, it's really not hard to see what Paul says in verse 3, that this Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah.

[9 : 34] The very recent events of Jesus' life fit with what God promised long ago. That's what he's truing them. It's that basic. It's that simple, bread and butter.

And it's interesting, isn't it? The word Luke, the author, chooses to describe the response is that some of the Jews were persuaded. It makes sense.

It adds up. It was there to point to. It was there for the world to see. Paul seems to have spent three Saturdays, however long their services were, simply showing them from the Bible that the Christ had to suffer and be rejected, die and rise again, and that Jesus is therefore the promised Christ. Now, getting there is not based on human reason. We can't get ourselves there, but it is reasonable. It appeals to their minds.

Yes, we need someone to show us, but it makes perfect sense once we see it. And once you have seen it, you can't unsee it. That was the experience of the people in the synagogue.

[10 : 39] And so, some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. And suddenly, simply through, the simple preaching of the gospel, the simple persuasion of the gospel.

There is a group of Christians where there have never been Christians before. A church has been born. But as in so many places where that reasonable gospel was preached, it was met also with an unreasonable response, verse 5.

But other Jews were jealous. So, they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. He paused opponents.

They've had to resort to physical violence because they have been overcome by reasonable words. And we get a really stark report of what happened.

They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they didn't find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials shouting, these men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here.

[11 : 54] And Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus. Now, that would be terrifying for anyone, wouldn't it?

But imagine that experience for brand new believers. Jason's door is being forced open, his home invaded, the Christians are being dragged out before the city council.

Paul had only been there two or three weeks. These people have only heard and trusted in Jesus for a number of days. And presumably, the people doing that to them, they know well.

Perhaps these are people they shook hands with at the door of the synagogue and talked about their families. Now, these people grab their hands to drag them out of their homes and accuse them before the city council.

Perhaps most confusing of all is the words that they were shouting. Some of what they're saying is just an outright lie, slander, that the Christians are not at all going against Caesar's decrees.

[13 : 04] Nothing they've done has broken the law. Some of what they're saying, though, is kind of half true. That's confusing, isn't it? There is another king called Jesus.

But as Paul has so carefully and painstakingly proved to them, Christ is not going to start an uprising. He's not in competition with the kings of this world.

His kingdom is not of this world. What he is doing is over and above the rulers and authorities of this age. But some of what they're saying is true.

Paul and his friends have famously, in the original, turned the world upside down. And now they have come to Thessalonica. And there's really no comeback to that because the gospel that Paul preached does turn the world upside down.

We're going to see in Paul's letter to this church that that disruption to their lives, that the flipping over of their tidy world was a huge part of the experience of these young Christians.

[14 : 10] And so often, I think, we want to be able to say that becoming a Christian will make life easier. And it will help us get along with other people better.

But listen to Jesus in Matthew 10. He says, Do not suppose that I've come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Jesus couldn't be clearer, could he, that putting your trust in him can create problems where there weren't any problems. It can ruin loving relationships.

[15 : 21] It can turn people against you. Because now we love someone more than we love even those closest to us.

Our own families, which is, of course, an unconditional love. And a total love. But his love, his welcome, his peace, it must be more to us than any other love.

Being welcomed by any other person, being at peace with anyone else in our lives. Now, we don't want to fall out with people. That's not what we want.

We try not to. Peter says, insofar as it's in your power, be at peace with everyone. But sometimes, brothers and sisters, it is not in our power. If you look at history, more often than not, however hard

we try, however reasonable we are, not everyone will want to be at peace with us because we love Jesus.

In fact, if we're not willing for people to turn against us because we love Jesus, in the end, we'll water down the gospel. We'll let go of Christ completely because wherever Jesus goes, wherever Jesus goes, he divides people.

[16 : 39] He is the line. And we stand one side of it or the other. Wherever the gospel goes, it turns the world upside down.

1 Thessalonians reminds us as a church family, and I think we need the reminder that having your world turned upside down in painful ways that you wouldn't choose is a normal experience for Christians.

Pressure and persecution from the outside, people not getting on with us, is something that we should learn to expect. I think the last hundred years or so has lulled the church in many places into a false sense of security.

We have all grown up in that security. Generations, Christians in the West, have been generally an accepted part of society, but that has changed.

And it is changing quickly. We have, in this country, wonderfully, a Hindu prime minister and a Muslim first minister.

[17 : 51] But people ask, in all seriousness, can a Christian hold the highest office in the land? That question, 20 years ago, it wouldn't have occurred to anyone to ask.

In some ways, our world is being turned upside down again. But friends, Jesus says, and Paul confirms, that that is normal. That is normal.

We have so much to learn from the Thessalonians, don't we, about how they survived and how they thrived in that environment, how they persevered, how they grew through persecution and suffering. Even for their time, the Thessalonians had it particularly bad. The night of the riot, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea, where they did exactly the same thing.

They went to the synagogue and they preached exactly the same gospel. The people of Berea are much more open, much more reasonable, but it's not long before trouble comes knocking, verse 13, when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea.

[18 : 55] Some of them went there, too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. So like Paul once had himself, so now the Thessalonian Jews are going from place to place to hound the gospel out of the town.

They're not satisfied simply to protect their own way of life in their own place. They will not rest until the gospel has stopped being preached entirely everywhere.

At that point, Paul is sent across the Aegean to Athens, Silas and Timothy stay in Berea, and the Thessalonian mob goes home to Thessalonica, where the newborn church, only a month or six weeks old, is waiting.

Where are we at the start of January? All of this has happened in the time since the end of November or the beginning of December. Your church, believers who are that young in the faith. Now in Athens, Paul says he felt, as we've heard, like a parent separated from a child. He is agonizing over the survival of the church.

[20 : 08] And it's there that Timothy comes with news. And it's good news. News about their faith and love.

Paul, they're still there, he says, and they're still growing. And it's out of that overwhelming relief and joy for the church in Thessalonica that Paul with Silas and Timothy write this letter.

Paul's wording suggests that it's as soon as Timothy gets there that they start writing it. They're that excited. Out of his thankfulness, we could say that in a world turned upside down was a church turned inside out.

So as we come towards the end, turn back with me briefly to 1 Thessalonians for our second and final point, the church turned inside out on page 1186.

I'll just touch, as I say, on the first three verses so that we can see what's happened in the space of those few weeks since Paul has been away. Now notice on the way past, he greets them really unusually.

[21 : 15] Normally, it would be to the church in Christ at Thessalonica. It's only in this letter that Paul writes to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

In God the Father. Now some of you know this better than me in maths. There's an idea called transitivity. You can correct me about this later if I've got this wrong.

The idea is if two things are equal to a third thing, then those two things must be equal to each other. Well, if as Jesus says, I am in my Father and you are in me, then we who are in Jesus must therefore in a mysterious way be in the Father.

Now Paul in Colossians 3 says we are hidden with Christ in God, but that's not usual. It's not common language in the New Testament. Paul could simply have said, couldn't he, in Christ without kind of filling in the theological blanks.

So why does he say this? I think given the context we have just seen, it stresses their safety, doesn't it?

[22 : 29] This is a baby church, but they are held safe in God the Father. People point out this is a letter full of family language.

We've already picked up the way Paul speaks about himself, Silas and Timothy, as mothers, fathers, and children. But the Father that this church really can't do without cannot be separated from them because they cannot be separated from him.

It's not Paul that this church can't live without, is it? It is God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, his full name and title as if to remind them of the majesty and greatness of the one their lives are bound up with in the dangerous city of Thessalonica.

That is how safe, how secure they are. They are like Daniel's friends thrown into the fiery furnace, turned up seven times hotter than usual that a fourth figure like the Son of Man is with them and they are in him.

And they will come out unharmed because they are in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ because of the grace and peace that has come to them in the gospel.

[23 : 50] Now those are familiar words. Paul greets almost every church with grace and peace but in case they're lost on us just think where these words are coming from. Paul is an apostle.

He is Christ's ambassador sent from his kingdom to the Gentile world. So when Paul comes with grace and peace it is Christ speaking, isn't it?

And what does Christ say to his church through Paul? Grace and peace to you. Whatever we think Christ thinks or feels about us tonight, hear these words that he speaks to every faithful church and every generation.

his greeting is grace and peace. That's what he thinks, how he feels towards us. That is what he wants us to know whenever he opens his mouth to us.

That his words come to us with grace and peace from him. And then in verses 2 and 3 we get the first of three prayers or three prayer reports in this letter.

[24 : 56] And this is where I want us to land. Notice the three things Paul is thankful for. He says, We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.

We remember before our God and Father the work produced by your faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is so thankful because what Timothy has come back and told him is that while he has been away, what Timothy has seen in them is faith, hope, and love.

Last Sunday I was wearing my beloved tweed jacket and someone, I won't say who, came up beside me and opened the side of it and wondered what was going on and he looked at the lining and he said, yes, the real thing because inside in the lining is a little kind of badge that has the branding, the logo, the trademark of the Harris Tweed Company and that's what Timothy's done and what he's shown Paul, what he's so thankful for that on the inside of these Christians are the marks that show that they are the real thing.

Faith, hope, and love, the presence of those qualities, that's God's trademark stamped on them. That's what Paul looks for in any church.

[26 : 29] You see those words listed together in lots of his letters and the fact he can see them in this brand new church and in such a hard beginning, he cannot stop thanking God for them and praying for them because it's not the Christians themselves or the church or Paul that's produced those things.

It's actually the other way around. It's the faith, hope, and love that has produced the Christians and the church. It's not their faith produced by work, verse 3, it's their work produced by faith.

Not their love prompted by labor, but their labor prompted by love. Not their hope inspired by endurance, but their endurance inspired by hope.

In other words, their life as Christians and as a church, and it was clearly a busy and a hard-working church, has sprung from the faith, hope, and love in their hearts.

And where do faith, hope, and love come from? They come from God, verse 2. Particularly, God the Father, verse 3 again.

[27 : 42] And so Paul is delighted, overwhelmed, that this is a church turned inside out by the gospel. Faith, hope, and love on the inside have produced work, labor, and endurance on the outside.

And that is what Paul is so thankful for, that though their world has been turned upside down in such a radical way, they have been turned inside out in such a genuine way.

Now he knows through Timothy's report that they do have everything they need to keep going. Faith, hope, and love in the furnace of persecution.

And as we start this letter, and I look at you, I want you to know that that is what I see.

I hope that's what you see as you look at each other, as you look at our church life. You, so much of this letter, it puts into words the way that I feel about you.

[28 : 57] You know, that's partly why Donald and I wanted to preach it, because it kind of catches our church family at a point where this is so relevant, and we can really say this, that we have so much to give thanks for.

So much to give thanks for. At a time when, like the Thessalonians, we are safe from the worst danger, which isn't outside pressure and persecution, but inside conflict and confusion.

And the apostle simply says, keep going, keep growing. Ebonicord is a wee bit older than the Thessalonica plant, isn't it?

But in so many ways, the family likeness is uncanny. And I hope that just as that fact brought Paul to his knees in thanks and in prayer, that that causes you to thank God and pray continually for the church family here.

What God has done, what he's doing in us and for us, what it's producing among us, there's still so much room to grow. That's why we come to God's word, isn't it? Not only to be encouraged, but to be stretched.

[30 : 10] But thank God for the church here. Thank God that over many generations of trials and difficulties and persecutions, that here is a living church.

That's what Paul rejoiced in, that's what we rejoice in, that we are still here, loving, trusting, and hoping in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us never take that for granted.

And so, as we see over the next few months, how this faith, hope, and love were worked out in the life of a young church, and we hear what Paul calls them to in their suffering and persecution, let me encourage you to have one eye on the people next to you.

Have one eye on the church here. See what God has done. See what God is doing. Give thanks to Him and pray to Him as we hear this love letter, this letter written to beloved children.

a young church in a difficult world. Let's pray together and give thanks now. for like, that's part of the