

In 1 Thessalonians we will hear about how Jesus is the one who delivers us from the wrath to come.
Nowadays we don’t like to talk about “the wrath to come.”
That doesn’t sound very nice.

True. So let’s not talk about anything that doesn’t sound nice!
Let’s not talk about the war in Ukraine – that doesn’t sound nice.
Let’s not talk about global warming – or abortion – or human trafficking –
they don’t sound nice.

God says that there is wrath to come.
That he will judge each one according to his deeds.
And those who turn aside from the living and true God have rebelled against him.

Isaiah 44 describes the process of idolatry.
An idol is anything that we trust to deliver us.
As verse 17 says, “He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’”

The idolater knows full well that the piece of wood is not *actually* a god.
But the idolater is seeking to worship his god *through* that piece of wood.

“He feeds on ashes” Isaiah says,
“a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself
or say, ‘Is there not a lie in my right hand?’”

Idolatry is fundamentally built on lies.
When we worship something other than the living and true God
when we think that *something else* can deliver us –
we are deluded!

What is your situation right now?
What is it that you are counting on to make your situation better?

I know.
I’m the same way.
I know the right answer – “Jesus!”
But then – in the moment – I’ve got a better answer, ‘cause Jesus is taking too long!!

This is why we are singing Psalm 115 – because the LORD is our help and our shield!

Sing TPH 115A
Read 1 Thessalonians 1

I want us to start at the end of the chapter –
because this is the heart of the gospel!

The gospel is the good news of what God has done to save us – to deliver us from the wrath to come!

Paul says it this way:

We are waiting for God's Son from heaven,
whom he raised from the dead,
Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Jesus is the Son of God from heaven.

The focus here is on the kingship of Christ.

God had promised David that his son would sit on his throne forever.

David's throne was a picture of God's throne.

And Jesus is the Son of David – the Son of God –
the one who joins God and man in one person,
and who sits on God's throne forever!

Brothers and sisters, this is something to get excited about!

There is one who bears our humanity at the right hand of God!

All through the OT, there was no way for humanity to ascend into the heavens!

Moses goes up Mt. Sinai – but can't get any higher.

The High Priest goes into the holy of holies – but no further.

Every time man meets with God, it happens on earth.

Even Isaiah and Ezekiel – in their visions –

remain firmly fixed below the heavens.

How can man reach God?

And yet now – there is a man from heaven!

There is a man sitting at the right hand of God!

The Son of God from heaven is seated in glory in the heavenlies!

Because he was raised from the dead!

And that's the second thing –

“whom God raised from the dead...”

Do you know how important the resurrection is to Paul?

He emphasizes it as the key point at the end of every sermon in the book of Acts!

Acts 13:32-33 – “And we bring you the good news

that what God promised to the fathers,

this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus...”

Acts 17:3 – when he preached in Thessalonica, Luke says,

“he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

explaining and proving that it was necessary

for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead...”

Paul likewise shows the centrality of the resurrection throughout his epistles –

Romans 1:4 – “and was declared to be the Son of God in power

according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead”

I could keep going for a long time!!

The resurrection of Jesus is the declaration by the Holy Spirit
that Jesus is the Son of God in power!

So Jesus is the Son of God from heaven.

We know this because God raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand above!

And therefore, Jesus is the one who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The wrath to come is an important image of coming judgment.

What is it that drives you?

What is the hope that motivates you?

If you acknowledge that there is wrath to come –

even if you just say, *maybe* there is a wrath to come –

then how you expect to escape that wrath is important!

And that – Paul says, is something that the Thessalonians understood very well.

We saw last time that 1 Thessalonians was written to a church that was only a few months old,

Paul had been hurried out of the city due to threats from the Jewish community,

so he is eager to communicate with this fledgling group of believers.

And partly because Paul only had a short time in Thessalonica,

this epistle gives us a glimpse into what Paul thought was *most important* for the church to know.

He seems to think that some of his teaching and conduct

may have been misunderstood -- so he writes to the church,

seeking to correct the misunderstandings that have been reported by Silas and Timothy.

At the heart of his concern is to encourage the Thessalonians

to continue in "faith, hope, and love".

You can never do without faith and love!

If you lose faith, or if you stop loving – you won't have hope.

But what is it that enables us to endure?

What is it that you hold on to when the world is crashing down around you?

“your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Hope has to do with the future.

What is your hope?

What is it that motivates you to do the things you do?

If I am motivated by *what* I get – or if I am motivated by *how* I feel –

that suggests that my *hope* – the thing that drives me –

is centered on myself.

And every self-centered hope

is a hope that will fail me.

But there is one hope that will not fail!

There is one future that will endure forever!

“your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Well, you *know* that King Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father.

He has already poured out his Holy Spirit upon you – to join you to himself –
so that already, you are joined to his life!

Hope in our Lord Jesus Christ means that in what you are doing – at every moment –
is connected to Jesus.

He is at work in you –

“and I am sure of this – that he who began a good work in you
will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil 1:6)

Hope says “YES! – that’s what I’m looking forward to!”

“That’s what I’m longing for!!”

And so I will keep believing God in my work of faith.

I will keep loving God and neighbor in my labor of love.

Because of my steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ!

And we saw in verse 5 the second triad – how the word came to the Thessalonians:

The gospel comes to you in *power* – namely, the power (the ability)
to carry on the work of faith in the midst of trial and suffering.

The gospel comes to you in the *Holy Spirit* – the third person of the Trinity –
who comes to you as the presence of the God *who is love*
in order that you might continue in your labor of love!

And the gospel comes to you in full conviction – full assurance –
of that hope – the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ!

And that sets us up for verse 6!

1. Your Imitation of Us and of the Lord (v6-7)

⁶ *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord,*

We see again in verse 6 the importance of the first person plural.

It is not just that the Thessalonians are imitating *Paul* –
but Paul, and Silas, and Timothy.

Paul does not simply hold himself up as the example –
but he holds up the whole of his traveling presbytery.

As we saw last time, Silas and Timothy had stayed behind,
when Paul was driven out of Thessalonica.

Paul himself had been there only a few weeks – maybe a few months, at most! –
so they had very little time to gain an impression of his character.

And so Paul highlights the *plural*.

You became imitators *of us* – and of the Lord!
The way that we walk as your session – as pastors and elders –
is to imitate the Lord Jesus himself –
such that the congregation follows in the imitation of Christ.

Which means that it's not just leadership – but the whole church is supposed to resemble Jesus Christ!

And what that looks like is laid out in the rest of the sentence:

a. Receiving the Word in Much Affliction (v6b)

for you received the word in much affliction, [with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.]

Do you see how the pattern continues?

It's not a "top down" pattern.

It's not just Christ – elders – congregation.

It keeps going!!

Because when *you* become an imitator of us and of the Lord –
then *you* are now making disciples
and bearing witness to Jesus in your life and testimony!

(And remember that's a *plural* you!)

Just like Jacob said in Sunday school the other week – putting on the whole armor of God
is something we do *together*!

Imitating Christ – bearing the cross – is something we do together!

It's hard.

None of us are very good at this.

I'm not very good at this.

As Americans we are trained to be individualists.

When I was in college I was bemoaning American individualism –
and a friend of mine laughed and said,
"Peter, you are the biggest individualist I know."

But this is what affliction is for.

What is God doing in your suffering?

What is God doing in the trials and afflictions in your life?

David Powlison said it this way (he was talking about cancer – but it applies to everything!):

<https://www.ccef.org/dont-waste-your-cancer>

Suffering really is meant to wean you from sin and strengthen your faith. If you are God-less, then suffering magnifies sin. Will you become more bitter, despairing, addictive, fearful, frenzied, avoidant, sentimental, godless in how you go about life? Will you pretend its business as usual? Will you come to terms with death, on your terms? But if you are God's, then suffering in Christ's hands will change you, always slowly, sometimes quickly. You come to terms with life and death on his terms. He will gentle you, purify you, cleanse you of vanities. He will make you need him and love him. He

rearranges your priorities, so first things come first more often. He will walk with you. Of course you'll fail at times, perhaps seized by irritability or brooding, escapism or fears. But he will always pick you up when you stumble. Your inner enemy—a moral cancer 10,000 times more deadly than your physical cancer—will be dying as you continue seeking and finding your Savior: “For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my iniquity, for it is very great. Who is the man who fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way he should choose” (Psalm 25).

That’s what God is doing with your suffering!

There may be many other things as well – but at the very least,
God is conforming you to the likeness of his Son.

And that’s why Paul adds:

b. With the Joy of the Holy Spirit (v6c)

with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

You received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit!

Notice that Paul does not say that you received *affliction* with joy!

You received the *word* with the joy of the Holy Spirit –
in much affliction.

It is very much the point that Paul will write later to the Corinthians –

“This light momentary affliction is preparing for us
an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,
as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.
For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”
(2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

The joy of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of the unseen things.

If all you do is look at your circumstances – the things that are seen –
you will find no joy.

But what happens when you look to the things that are unseen?!

What happens when you fix your eyes upon Jesus – and, by faith,
see him who sits at the right hand of the Father?

Again, David Powlison:

Our culture is terrified of facing death. It is obsessed with medicine. It idolizes youth, health, and energy. It tries to hide any signs of weakness or imperfection. You will bring huge blessing to others by living openly, believably, and lovingly within your weaknesses. Paradoxically, moving out into relationships when you are hurting and weak will actually strengthen others. “One anothering” is a two-way street of generous giving and grateful receiving. Your need gives others an opportunity to love. And since love is always God’s highest purpose in you, too, you will learn his finest and most joyous lessons as you find small ways to express concern for others even when you are most weak. A great, life-threatening weakness can prove amazingly freeing. Nothing is left for you to do except to be loved by God and others, and to love God and others.

And that is Paul's point in verse 7:

c. Becoming an Example to All the Believers (v7)

⁷ *so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*

When we respond to affliction and suffering with the joy of the Holy Spirit,
we become an example – we imitate our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word translated “example” has the idea of becoming a model – or mold.

Children, have you ever used molds for making cookies?

You use the mold to cut out the cookie dough into shapes –
maybe you have a star, or a circle – or a doggie!

You can use the same mold over and over to make lots of cookies that all look the same.

That's what Paul is talking about.

You can use lots of different kinds of cookies –
you can make sugar cookies – ginger snaps – chocolate chip –
all with the same pattern.

And for the Christian, that pattern is the pattern of Jesus!

And when we live in the pattern of Jesus – when we endure the cross faithfully –
we become an example – a model – for others.

We demonstrate in our actions that the gospel is true.

Now – here is the amazing part!

Paul does not say that you became *models* – *examples*.

He says “you [pl.] became *an example* to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.”

This is something that you cannot do by yourself.

This is something that Paul could not do by himself.

Paul did it with Silas and Timothy (and the rest of their traveling company).

The Thessalonians did it together – as a church.

This is what we must do *together* at Michiana Covenant.

If we try to do this singly – individually –
we will fall into the trap of American individualism.

We need to demonstrate together that the gospel is true!

We need to walk together in the pattern of Jesus –
and thus become *an example* to the rest of the churches around us.

Now, Thessalonica is one of the leading cities of Macedonia –
and after Paul had been driven out of Thessalonica

he had continued to preach the gospel in various cities
throughout Macedonia and Achaia (what we now call Greece).

So why does Paul say that the Thessalonians, in particular, became an example to all the believers?

Look at how he says it in verses 8-9:

2. Your Testimony Goes Forth Everywhere (v8-10)

a. The Word of the Lord Sounds Forth (v8)

⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

Wherever Paul goes, he hears from others about the Thessalonian Christians!

Now – how did that happen?

They didn't have social media – so there won't be an Instagram post...

Word has spread by word of mouth –

Thessalonica was the leading city in the region –

and as Silas and Timothy continued their labors in Thessalonica,

the result was that many people from throughout the region

had heard the word of the Lord from the Thessalonian church.

Indeed, verse 8 says that the word of the LORD has *resounded* through the region.

It “rang out” – the word is used in Greek literature for ocean waves,

howling dogs, the uproar of a crowd, or the blowing of trumpets –

so that one commentator says that the gospel

“seemed to reverberate through the hills and valleys of Greece” (Stott in Beale, 59)

And the result was that when Paul went to a new city,

people would come to him and say, “We’ve heard what you taught the Thessalonians –

we want to hear more!”

I’ve seen this sort of thing happen over and over!

For several years I was chaplain for an African-American mime group in South Bend.

Why were they willing to listen to a white pastor?

Because they respected Monte and Mihkail –

and they liked what they saw in Monte and Mihkail –

and so when Monte and Mihkail said “you should listen to this guy” –

they were willing to give me a chance.

When *your life* has been transformed by the gospel –

I’m sorry, I need to make sure that you remember that this is plural –

when *y’alls* life has been transformed by the gospel –

when *our life together* has been transformed by the gospel –

then people around us will be ready to listen!

Whether they come to church or not – they will be able to see it.

Because they see the fruit in you – they see the fruit of that *life together in Christ*.

And at the heart of this life together is the *steadfastness of hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ that Paul mentioned in verse 3.

Paul doesn't use the *word* "hope" in verses 9-10,
but the concept of hope is very much the crucial idea!

After all, hope has to do with the future –
hope has to do with what we are waiting for – what we are looking for –
what is the future that you seek?

Indeed, the future that you are looking for is what will motivate you in the present.

b. How You Turned to God from Idols (v9)

⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

The Thessalonians *present* is described by their turning to God from idols
in order to serve the living and true God.

We'll talk about the hope that motivates this in just a minute –
but I want you to understand what Paul means by "turning to God from idols."

Turning to God from idols was not just a matter of preference –
it had tremendous social and economic consequences!

We saw last time from Acts 17 that the Thessalonian congregation had a few Jews,
and many God-fearing Gentiles (Gentiles who had been connected to the synagogue –
but had not converted to Judaism).

Now the Thessalonians have been ostracized by the Jewish synagogue –
ridiculed by their Greek neighbors –
and in the first century, that's more than just a social problem.

In the Roman world, your economic well-being depended on your social network.
For a Jew, the synagogue was the center of your economic and social life.
For a Greek, your patron was the center –
and he would host occasional gatherings at a pagan temple!

And you were expected to show up and participate!

So with that in mind, what are the "much afflictions" of verse 6?
"You received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit..."

We'll hear more about this in chapter 2 – verse 14 –
where Paul will say that the Thessalonians
"became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea.
For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews,
who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets,
and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind,
by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved."

If you have turned to God from idols –
then you will no longer show up at the idol feast that your patron sponsors!

Oh – and by the way – that “idol feast”
is the one that he put on for his son’s “coming of age” party.

You didn’t show up to support his son...
Guess how dad feels about that?!

Technically, he’s still your patron –
but if you need something, he’s not especially well-disposed toward you,
so he might just ignore you;
and when there is a business deal that he would have given you last year,
now there is someone else who has his ear...

Sure, we tend to focus on the violent persecution – when someone gets killed –
but far more common was the petty...

And the petty adds up after a while!

Why would you put up with this?
Why not follow Jesus *and* continue “networking” at the idol feasts?

That’s where hope comes in (verse 10):

c. To Wait for His Son from Heaven (v10)

¹⁰ *and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

Paul goes into much more detail about the social and economic issues in his letters to the Corinthians.
Here he just gets right to the point.

Why are you enduring this affliction?
Why are you suffering from your countrymen?

Because you turned 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 delivers us from the wrath to come.

Many have noted that Paul is again using a triadic structure –
just like the faith, hope, and love of 1:3,
and the power and in the Holy Spirit, and in full assurance of 1:5 – so here:
You turned
 To serve
 And to wait.

Turning to God from idols is the expression of faith.
Serving the living and true God is the expression of love.
Waiting for his Son from heaven is the expression of hope.

A life that is characterized by faith, love, and hope

will also be characterized by turning to God, serving the living and true God,
and waiting for his Son from heaven!

Waiting might sound passive.

But it's not!

What does it look like to "wait" for God's Son from heaven?

If you are waiting for him to come –
what will you be doing?

Let me put it this way:

if your dearest friend is coming for a visit –
and you haven't seen your friend in years!

What will you be doing before their arrival?

Sitting around...twiddling your thumbs...wishing that he'd just show up...

No!!

You are thinking about your friend!

What does my friend like to eat – I should make sure that we have that on hand...

Oh, and we'll want to go to restaurant – so I'll make reservations...

And the guest room is kind of a mess – I don't my friend to sleep on dirty sheets...

That's what we do for *ordinary friends!*

If I am waiting for God's Son from heaven –

the one whom he raised from the dead – and seated at his right hand in glory –
Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come –

And if this Jesus has told us what to do as we wait for him –
then we should be eagerly about his business!

Oh yes – we are *waiting* for him –

but our waiting is an expression of our faith, our hope, and our love!