

As a college student... I first heard the story of German pastor - Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was executed for resisting the Nazis... under Hitler's regime. ... But before he was executed... he had boldly led an underground community of believers in staying true to Scripture.

Bonhoeffer... was widely influenced by the biographies of bold Christian living. He was greatly moved by reading books about courageous young people... who... (with selflessness and clear thinking) often saved others' lives... sometimes at the cost of their own. Shortly before Dietrich Bonhoeffer's execution... Bonhoeffer was reading *Plutarch's Lives*, a book that explores the courageous character of ancient figures.

Can anyone doubt that Bonhoeffer's reading – profoundly molded his own behavior... including his decision to risk his life to save others?

(LISTEN!) Ethics and behavior are more formed by the stories with which we surround ourselves... than by the rules (alone) that are drilled into us.

Tell us what stories you value... and we have a GOOD START on knowing WHO YOU ARE and HOW YOU WILL ACT in the world.

So... with that in mind... let me (also) tell you the inspirational story about St. Augustine of Hippo (North Africa). ... When he first became a Christian... his ambition was to merely live as a private citizen... focusing on prayer and quiet contemplation. ... But this was just not to be.

Church leaders noticed that Augustine had a sharp mind and quite a depth of spirituality... so they forced him... (very much) against his own will... to be a bishop of the church. ... From that point forward... Augustine lost all hope of living a quiet and private life. Almost immediately he was thrust

into the lime-light... so he dedicated himself to a proper overseeing of his large number of churches.

It did not take long before false teaching which threatened the church found Augustine. He had to confront the heretics... and their attacks on correct beliefs. By using his brilliant intellect... Augustine formalized many of the doctrines that we hold dear as evangelicals (today.) ... His writings have had a lasting and protective influence on the church from countless heretics and their false doctrines – down through the ages. ... The reluctant bishop turned out to be just the right man... at just the right time.

But in 427... Arian Vandals... who sought to stop Augustine's influence on Christianity... invaded North Africa (where Augustine was bishop.) Genserik (their leader) started raiding expeditions and slaughtering the people in Augustine's churches... around North Africa. Refugees from the outlying area began to pour into the City of Hippo... where Augustine was based.

Genserik then focused his efforts on Hippo. He and his invaders completely surrounded the city. They slowly and tortuously strangled Hippo through a siege. The swelled population inside Hippo (now with a large number of refugees) were without food and water. The incoming asylum seekers also brought disease. ... The bloated number of people (packed into the cramped city) inevitably created an epidemic.

At this point... Augustine had three choices. He had an opportunity sneak out and to flee... perhaps preserving his own life... or he could stay holed-up in his palace (to try to remain healthy... but ignore the needs of the people)... or he could remain at Hippo... engage himself personally with the people... risking his own health.

The very fact that I am telling you this story... probably reveals which of the three choices he took. ... Augustine said that he did not know how to be a bishop from afar... so he stayed in Hippo and kept up his normal busy schedule - being among the people.

Now at this point (if you do not know the Augustine story) you may be thinking that God surely would have rewarded such selfless service by preserving Augustine's life. But I will not tell you that.

In August of 430A.D.... during the third month of the siege... Augustine developed a high fever... from which he never recovered. ... This powerful man of God... (whose writings have protected the church from heresy to this very day)... gave his last hours ministering to the most basic needs of a frightened flock.

How is ***this*** an inspirational story...? ... It does ***not*** have a “happy-ever-after Hollywood ending... No... But the Augustine story models for us FAITHFULNESS TO THE END. Augustine's life honored God and stood for truth... which (even) death could not shake.

Tell us what stories you value... and we have a GOOD START on knowing WHO YOU ARE and HOW YOU WILL ACT in the world.

My time with you today... will include ***one more story***... and I hope (by now) you know ***part of my reason*** for doing this. ... Next I will tell you the story behind Paul's very first letter that he wrote (contained in our Bibles.) It is a wonderful story – one that I hope will influence who you are... and how you will act in the world. ... AND it is my way of introducing the next book of the Bible that we will be studying for the next several weeks.

Although the people that Paul wrote this letter to... comprised a model church for us to take inspiration from... they were a church that was beginning to falter (a little) in their optimism. Even though they were such a good example as a church... they were starting to wonder if God had (perhaps) forgotten them.

Not wanting **us** to experience any loss of hope... is one of the reasons why I selected this next book of the Bible that we will be studying (here) on Sunday mornings. ... (All that is happening in our nation and in the world today... might be causing some of our optimism to falter!)

This letter (that I am introducing today) and the one that follows it... are known as **'the eschatological epistles'**. ... They deal with end-time prophecy. ... Almost one third of these two letters is **eschatological** in content (42 of 136 verses). God's prophetic promises to the church gave them a future hope... which prompted their ability to endure hardship. ... We need strong hope from prophetic scripture... and we need powerful examples that will inspire.

Please consider (now) the example of the believers to whom Paul wrote his first letter in our Bibles...

As far as the scholars can tell... it was probably the Spring of A.D. 50. Paul and his partner Silas had embarked on what would be known as "Paul's second missionary journey." This trip had already been plagued by a very rough start. Originally the team (making this journey) was to be Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark on this second trip... but Paul did not want John Mark to come along... because John Mark had

proven “not-up-to-it” on their first trip. John Mark left Paul and Barnabas at Pamphilia and went home.

Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance... but Paul wasn't about to. Their disagreement was so strong that Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways. Paul (then) took Silas as his companion... and Barnabas took John Mark going a different direction.

Paul and Silas traveled to the region of Galatia. During Paul's first mission trip... a young man named Timothy had been converted. Paul saw that Timothy would be a great help... so he had Timothy join he and Silas. So now it was Paul... Silas... and Timothy – taking the Gospel to new places.

As they were trying to determine where they would go... they visited the churches which Paul and Barnabas had started during the first mission trip. They travelled around Asia Minor (which is known today as Turkey.) ... Now as they wandered around Asia Minor... they considered one place after another to go and start another church. But every place they contemplated... God said “No.” ... *“What about Bithinia...? “No!” ... O.K. How about Mysia...?” ... “No. Not there either...”*

After several “No Not There” messages from God... Paul received a vision from God. It was a Macedonian calling them to leave where they were trying to plant churches (all around Asia Minor)... Instead... they were to move further away from Jerusalem and their sending church in Antioch... They were to go deeper into the Roman Empire... all the way into Europe. Specifically... God wanted them to go to (modern-day) Greece.

Their first stop in Greece (which... back then was called Macedonia and Achaia)... was the city of **Philippi**. Things went GREAT for a while... a

fledgling little church was born... but things suddenly turned ugly when Paul cast a demon out of a slave girl... who had been making her master a lot of money... as a fortune-teller. ... Paul... Silas... and Timothy were beaten... imprisoned... and run-out-of-town.

Staying in Greece... they moved up the road a little way... to a large cosmopolitan (and very important) city. It sat on a vibrant ocean port... where a lot of goods came-in and went-out. ... But not only that... this city was located right on the main highway between Rome and the Far East.

So this was a very big... thriving... worldly city... with people and cultures... from all over the globe. Every religion and philosophy was well represented – except for the truth of the Gospel. This would make a great place for them to plant a church.

Acts 17:1-2

Now... notice something very significant here. We are given a time-marker – **three consecutive Sabbaths!** That was all the time they had to evangelize and convert enough people to start a church. Possibly only two full weeks! (But no more than three.) Just **three Saturdays** is all they had – according to Acts 17.

You and I might look at this and think: *“There is just no-way!!! How could anyone come into such a worldly (cosmopolitan) city... where no one is a Christian... transform several lives... and start a church – with only three days of teaching?!”*

When I was a pastor in Northern California... our association of churches had a very aggressive church planting effort. Dr. Mark Platt constantly recruited and trained seminary graduates... and helped them plant

churches around Northern California. They took years to launch – with a lot of prayer... careful research... and planning. If I were to ask Mark if he would ever consider a three day plan... he would laugh himself – silly!

But this is what we see here in Acts 17. It is absolutely astounding! (But let me tell you something.) ... We serve a God Who loves to show off! Oh! How we need to remember this right now... because of all the uncertainty we face in our nation and world. Our God loves to show off! Can I get an “AMEN!”...? God defies human logic – time after time – and we cannot forget that.

Acts 17:3-4

Every time I read these verses I can hear and see our dear brother M.G. Brown with a gleam in his eye – “*Whew! Mmmmm-mmmmm! That’s our God, Isn’t it...?... We’ve GOT to believe that our God is a God of Miracles.*”

Some of the Jews believed... and a large number of devout Greeks! ... This incredible scene involves Greeks (in large numbers) who left their worldly culture (which was very pagan with multiple gods.) They came alongside and joined with the Jews who were converted. ... I probably don’t need to remind you that the Jews had a vivid hatred of associating with gentiles (let alone worship with them.) But here they are! ... And a number of women were also converted. But not just any women – “*leading women*”... (Very likely these were wealthy women who were seen as important and well-established in the culture of that city. So God was REALLY showing off here!

Acts 17:5

Down in the market place... just hanging out... there were some Greek thugs (they would be the most vile persons of any given city... drug dealers... murderers... thieves... and pimps of our day.) No proper Jew would ever go near such people. But they laid that aside because they saw that they could use this despicable element to carry out their stronger feelings of jealousy for the Christian church planters.

Acts 17:6-7

Apparently... The missionary team of Paul... Silas... and Timothy had converted so many people... that the status quo of the city had been disrupted... and jealousy came roaring out. But try to think how this would have affected all the brand-new converts. They are just new-born babies! And immediately they had to live in the face of persecution. They were forced to live-out their faith with the pressure of their society rejecting them. Look how the city authorities responded...

Acts 17:8

All of these new believers were being baptized with fire! Their decisions to follow Christ had to be solid! So after only three Sabbaths... Paul... Silas... and Timothy were run out of town. ... They moved on to Berea (the next town.)

But when the Thessalonian Jews heard that... they came to Berea and ran them out of there as well. So on they went to the next city. (AND) that was Corinth.

Acts 17:9-15

This is as far as I will take you through Luke's account in the Book of Acts. But this is not the end of our story.

Paul moved on to Athens (where he didn't stay long) – leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea. But Paul eventually wound-up in Corinth. ... Scholars estimate that about three months after the three missionaries had been run out of Thessalonica... (out of a deep concern about the people of the new church in Thessalonica)... Paul sent Timothy (who was not very far away)... back to Thessalonica... to check on the church. Silas joined Paul in Corinth... and Timothy also (eventually) came there with his report on the Thessalonian church.

1 Thessalonians 3:5-7 (ESV)

⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. ⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.

What a **remarkable** church! They may have been babies... but their diet must have been more than milk! ... They are only a few months old and holding firm against persecution.

But Timothy's report was not **all** a relief to Paul. ... Timothy also reported some concerns of a little discouragement that was beginning to set-in. (We will see Paul address them... when we come to chapters 4 and 5.) ... But with great joy and relief... Paul wrote to this young (and already a “*model church*”)... to encourage these new believers... in what... (as I have been saying)... is the first letter Paul wrote ...that we have in our Bibles.

We are only going to look at a few verses from it today... as we begin our new study through 1st and 2nd Thessalonians.

1 Thes 1:1

Silvanus is the full name of Silas. Silas is the Roman abbreviation... and Silas was a Roman. ... So the entire church-planting team (Paul... Silas... and Timothy) are writing this letter. (And) one of the first things that they write is: “*Grace to you and peace.*” This would become a standard greeting that Paul would use in his subsequent letters... but the most common Jewish greeting was only “peace” or “*shalom.*” ... Now... the typical Greek way of greeting others was to say “*peace to you.*” But Paul does something very interesting in this first letter. He used both. ... (Perhaps you can see why.) Certainly what the church back in Thessalonica needed was the grace of God... in order that they could have peace... in their turbulent circumstances. (Paul found a way to turn a perfunctory “*hello*” into a theologically meaningful salutation.)

I think that Paul continued to use this greeting in his other letters... because he was making an important point with it. The order of the two words is always the same – first “*grace*”... and then “*peace.*”

The message of God’s grace must first be accepted... and then peace with God will follow. This is the message of salvation. (First grace... and then peace.) But because the recipients of this letter were already saved... I think that Paul was wishing upon them something else. ... There is a universal truth here that applies to our home-life... and to church-life.

In a marriage where peace is lacking in the home... (when a husband and wife are in a turbulent fight)... the solution is FIRST grace – and THEN

peace! ... One of the partners MUST first demonstrate grace... and then you can expect peace. If one will bestow on the other UNDESERVED favor (or a preference for the other)... renewed harmony can come.

Oftentimes... whenever we are in one of those big tussles... Patti will show a LOT of grace to me (a lot of favor that I do not deserve - that I certainly have not earned...) then I also repent and we have a major breakthrough. (And perhaps NOT often enough... I am the first to show grace.)

(Please hear me!) If “grace’ is lacking – “peace” will be lacking.

The same thing is true in the church. Whenever there are church fights... over non-Scriptural matters... there are two parties... and neither one is willing to show grace to the other. Believers foolishly think that the other party has to EARN back their respect and favor. *“You are not worthy of my showing you brotherly love... Only if you do enough penance – to my satisfaction... I might reconsider...”*

Grace... then peace. Grace and peace (in that order) is a big deal.

1 Thes 1:2-3

Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians are evidencing the essential marks of the Christian life — faith... love... and hope. ... Faith... hope... and love... are the three greatest evidences of salvation.

We often regard faith... love... and hope as invisible virtues. ... But in Paul's mind faith resulted in work... love manifested itself in labor... and hope could be seen in the perseverance of those in whom it dwelled. (All of three must be visible if they are genuine.)

How beautiful and fragrant those obvious spiritual blossoms must have seemed to these three church planters! ... They had been whisked away before they could be sure the seeds they had planted in Thessalonica had sprouted. ... But Timothy had returned with an encouraging report that lifted their spirits. ... Because of their evident faith... love... and hope... these missionary church planters were assured of the genuineness of the Thessalonians' relationship with God.

Having prayed some prayer a while ago... is not really the evidence that you are saved. The evidence that you are really saved are these same three elements. Are they visible in your life?

Faith is written (here) as a “work of faith.” It is demonstrated to others. A faith that saves... will always reveal itself in the saved person’s life.

The second element is “labor of love.” ... Love will labor. ... And when it does... it just doesn't seem to be labor. ... Consider the often-told illustration of a little girl carrying a heavy baby. ... A man passing by said to her, "*Isn't that baby too heavy for you?*" She answered, "*Oh no, he's my brother.*" ... Love makes all the difference in the world. Labor isn't labor when it is a labor of love.

John 14:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*

If you don't love Him... you will find it nothing but tedium and labor to try to keep His commandments. If working for the Lord is a great burden to you today, I believe the Lord Jesus would say to you, "*Give it up, brother. Don't bother with it.*" He doesn't want it to be like that. We are to love Him. Then

whatever we do for Him will be a labor of love. That needs characterize the life of the believer. ... There should never be anyone saying “*Well I think so-and-so is a Christian.*” If they labor for Christ in love we will know. Love manifests itself in obedience.

And the third evidence of salvation is “steadfastness of hope.” ... Every man lives with some hope for the future. ... And that hope... (whatever it is)... will sustain him.

Multitudes today place their hope in man... thinking that man can resolve all his problems and bring peace and prosperity to the world. - Man cannot do that. ... If your hope is in this world... you are chasing the wind.

Happiness that will burst like a bubble the moment you get it in your hands.

God put man out of Paradise because man was a sinner... and man has been trying to build a paradise outside ever since. ... Politicians... full bank accounts... and man-made religions fill the air with all sorts of false hope... don't they...?

The time we live in is a time of turmoil. My hope is in **God**. ... What is your hope today? ... Is your hope in some political party... in some man-made organization... or financial plan...?

God have mercy on anyone whose hope rests upon anything – other than a steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the **ONLY** thing that will bring us patience in the midst of trial. It was what was sustaining these Thessalonian believers. ... Their anticipation of the Lord's return helped them to be strong in the face of opposition and difficulty because they knew that God saw all and one day will make everything right.

We have a lot to discover in Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians – which are known as **'the eschatological epistles'**. May we find the same encouragement that they found... in the weeks to come... to face our own uncertain times.