

1 Thessalonians 1
1 Chronicles 29
Psalm 71

“Prayer and the Gospel”

October 1, 2023

Whenever I think about the relationship between prayer and the gospel,
my mind goes straight to 1 Chronicles 29!

What’s going on here?

David is about to die.

He has made all the preparations for Solomon to build the temple.

But there is one thing missing!

“There’s one thing I gotta do!

You can work on your situation any way you please –

but there’ll never be a substitute for working on your knees!!” (Covington)

We’ve been seeing this as we went through Book One of the Psalms.

Now we’ll see it again, as we turn to 1 Thessalonians!

But I want you to see how David does this in 1 Chronicles 29:

David’s prayer starts by remembering who God is.

“Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory...”

“Yours is the kingdom.”

And then David says, “But who am I, and what is my people?”

All things come from you – and of your own have we given you –

so how can man give to God?

When we are reconciled to God –

when we are restored to fellowship with the living God –

then everything else in life begins to come back together again.

I said *begins!!!* – it’s a very slow process, and one that goes backwards and forwards –

remember that David himself had an uneven path!!

But David isn’t talking about his own greatness.

The greatness of the gospel is not found in how great *we are*.

The greatness of the gospel is found in the greatness of God –

indeed, in the greatness of his electing love for us in Jesus Christ!

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 71 –

a song that focuses on how the LORD himself is “my hope, my trust from my youth.”

Psalm 71 remembers the mighty deeds of God in salvation.

So let us sing Psalm 71 together.

Sing TPH 71

Read 1 Thessalonians 1

Today we turn to 1 Thessalonians -- one of Paul's earliest epistles.

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 some of his 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" –
a triad that will play a key role in Paul's writings for the rest of his life.

1. Paul's Greeting (v1)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

It is worth noting that while Paul often uses the first person singular in his epistles,
1 Thessalonians is almost entirely first person plural!
This probably means that Silvanus (often called Silas) and Timothy are true co-authors –
because they had just come from Thessalonica –
and so they knew the situation there intimately.

Many times, Paul will refer to himself as an apostle – or as a servant of Christ Jesus –
but here he simply identifies himself as “Paul.”
The Thessalonian church is so brand-new that they might not even understand the “titles”!

And so he writes:

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is probably one of the first letters he wrote.
He refers to a series of events (also recorded in Acts) that took place in 50 or 51 AD –
in such a way as to make clear that he is writing at that time.

He had planted the church in Thessalonica in 49 or 50 AD –
so he is writing only a few months after their conversion!

This is a new church at a time when the Christian church itself has only existed for 15 years.
At the time that Paul is writing, there are only a few thousand Christians in the whole world.

Acts 17 tells us the story of the founding of the church in Thessalonica.
If you turn over there, I'd like to show you the context:

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ

to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

You can see here a snapshot of the people to whom Paul is writing!

There are “some” Jews who believe in Jesus as the Messiah – the Christ –
but there are a “great many” devout Greeks,
and not a few of the leading women (probably also Greek – but maybe Jewish).

In other words, most of the Thessalonian Christians were Gentiles –
but Gentiles who had been hanging around the synagogue
(that’s what “devout Greeks” means).

In the first century there were many Greeks who found Judaism fascinating.

They didn’t want to be circumcised and become Jews themselves –
but they were drawn by the idea that there was *one God* –
and that this God had actually revealed himself to Moses.

You can see in the book of Acts that the early church was largely comprised of two groups:
believing Jews – and devout Greeks (God-fearers), who embraced the message
that what God had promised to Abraham was now in fact happening!
That all nations would be blessed through Abraham’s seed.

But Acts 17 goes on to say (verse 5):

⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

So Paul only spent a few weeks in Thessalonica.

It appears that one of his main reasons for writing
is because he feels as though he didn’t really get to finish the basic teaching
that he was trying to give the new believers.

In addition, the opposition in Thessalonica was strong.

As Acts 17 continues to say (starting in verse 10):

¹⁰ The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. ¹² Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. ¹³ But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as

possible, they departed.

Since the opposition in Thessalonica was strong enough to send delegates to other cities – you can easily imagine how vigorously they opposed Paul’s teaching in their own city!

At the beginning of Acts 18 we hear that Silas and Timothy then came from Macedonia (where Thessalonica is) – and joined Paul in Corinth.

So 1 Thessalonians is plainly written from Corinth
“now that Timothy has come to us from you” (3:8).

In Acts chapter 20 we hear that Paul finally visited Thessalonica again – long after this letter was written.

And notice where he starts:

Grace to you and peace.

The standard Greek greeting was “chairein” – “greetings”
The standard Hebrew greeting was “shalom” – peace.

Paul takes the standard Greek greeting and gives it a twist, and blends it with the Hebrew greeting!
Charis – grace (not chairein, greetings – but *charis* – grace)
and peace.

Grace and peace pretty much summarize the whole of Paul’s gospel.
It is by grace that you have been saved – through faith.
The grace of God has been revealed in these last days in the coming of our Lord Jesus!

And now the peace of God rules – the shalom – the well-being of his Kingdom –
is already beginning to take root in our hearts and lives.

And for this reason Paul gives thanks to God!

2. Paul’s Thanksgiving (v2-3)

a. Rooted in Our Prayer (v2)

² *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,*

This is a regular part of Paul’s opening in all his epistles.

Well – all but Galatians!

In ordinary circumstances, Paul begins with giving thanks.

It is a pattern that I have tried to keep in my own prayers –
regularly giving thanks to God for all of you!

But notice – not only does Paul do it –

not only does he *actually* give thanks to God for the Thessalonian church –
he also *tells them* that he is doing it.

It is encouraging to hear someone say – “I give thanks to God for you!”
“I have been praying for you.”

But not only does Paul say it generically:
he says it specifically!

b. Remembering Your Faith, Hope, and Love (v3)

³ *remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

What does Paul thank God for?!

Not just “thank you, Lord, for saving the Thessalonians...”
but remembering before our God and Father three specific things:
“your work of faith”
“your labor of love”
and “your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What is Paul saying?

Faith, Hope, and Love are found together all over the New Testament.

Most people think first of 1 Corinthians 13 – these three remain, faith, hope, and love –
but the greatest of these is love.

But if you watch for how these words relate, it’s everywhere!

Romans 5 says that we have been justified by *faith*,
and so we rejoice in the *hope* of the glory of God,
and *hope* does not put us to shame,
because God’s *love* has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 5:5-6 says,

“For through the Spirit, by *faith*,
we ourselves eagerly wait for the *hope* of righteousness.
For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything,
but only *faith* working through *love*.”

Ephesians 1:15-18 – “I have heard of your *faith* in the Lord Jesus
and your *love* toward all the saints... [and so I pray]
that you may know what is the *hope* to which he has called you”

I could keep going!

It’s in almost every epistle (and not just Paul – 1 Peter does this too!).

But Paul will bring together faith, hope, and love three times in 1 Thessalonians.

Here in verse 3 (where we might be tempted to pass over it –
it’s just his opening greeting...).

Again at the end of chapter 3 – where he doesn’t use the word hope,
but certainly uses the concept!!

And finally in chapter 5, verse 8, where he weaves faith, hope, and love into the armor of God.

Paul often does this.

His opening prayer is not just a throwaway line –
he is praying for the very thing that he most wants to see!

And what he most wants to see is for the Thessalonian Christians to continue to grow
in faith, hope, and love.

I want you to think about this.

How are faith, hope, and love related?

Paul speaks here of your “work of faith.”

People sometimes get confused by this –
because Paul sometimes contrasts faith and works –
but the *work of faith* is precisely *to believe God* –
even when everything looks impossible!

Is there something in your life that feels impossible right now?

The work of faith is to recognize that this trials – these afflictions –
are what God is using to conform us to the likeness of his Son!

Hebrews 11:1 says it this way:

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for.”

I use the old translation “substance” –

because Hebrews 11 is intentionally referring back to Hebrews 1:3
which said that Christ is the exact imprint of God’s substance.
(same word).

Faith is the underlying reality of things hoped for.

Just like Christ is the exact imprint of God’s underlying reality.

And so the *work of faith* is holding fast to Christ –

believing him – trusting him – even when all around you seems hopeless.

When Paul writes this letter, the Thessalonian Christians have been Christians for less than two years.

The Christian church is only 15 years old.

There are only a few thousand Christians in the whole world!

And now the Jewish community in Thessalonica has condemned you.

And the Gentiles think that you are ridiculous for believing that crazy lunatic Paul!

The work of faith can be hard work sometimes!

But that is why Paul always pairs faith and love.

The work of faith is connected to the labor of love.

Or as Paul says it in Galatians – “faith working by love.”

When Paul links faith, hope, and love –

he usually focuses on *our love* for God and for each other.
But he sometimes reminds us that *our love* is rooted in God's love for us.
For instance, the passage in Romans 5 that I mentioned?
Let me read it to you – Romans 5:1-5 –
and listen for how Paul weaves faith, hope, and love together!

*Therefore, since we have been justified by **faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by **faith** into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the **hope** of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces **hope**, and **hope** does not put us to shame, because God's **love** has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)*

Here it is not *our love* but *God's love* that motivates our faith and hope.
Our labor of love is enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us –
indeed the Holy Spirit *is* the love of God who has been poured into our hearts –
because God is love!
And when the God who is love is poured into your heart – you also begin to love.

This is why the work of faith (believing God even when it's hard) –
and the labor of love (loving one another – even when it's hard!) –
can only happen with the third leg of our stool:

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

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says that love is the greatest of the three.
Why?

Because when Christ returns, faith will become sight –
and our hope will no longer be hope, but present reality!
(who hopes for what he already has?).

So in the New Creation – love is the greatest of these!

In Romans, the greatest of these is faith –
because faith unites us to Christ and gives us *access* to God!

So with respect to the *beginning* of the Christian life – faith is the greatest!

But in 1 Thessalonians 1, 3, and 5, the greatest of these is *hope*.
Faith is what gives us access to God.
Love is what will endure through all eternity.

But how do we get from here to there?

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 (this is the idea behind “steadfastness”)?

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?

Some people are motivated by money:

“I hope that I’ll get a paycheck!”

And so they go to work and do the things – in the hope of getting paid.

Some people are motivated by what people think of them:

“I hope that so-and-so notices what I did!”

But 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.”

What will hope in Jesus mean for you tomorrow?

When you go to work – when you are doing your schoolwork –
when you are fixing dinner –
what does it mean to hope in Jesus?

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 so Paul remembers this about you –

and then, in verses 4-5 he expresses his confidence – his *gospel* confidence!

3. Paul's Gospel Confidence (v4-5)

a. Knowing the Electing Love of God (v4)

⁴ *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,*

We know this!

How do we know it?

Because he has said it in his word!

He has promised – and he is faithful!

How do I know that God has loved you?

Because you believed the gospel!

How do I know that God has chosen you?

Because of your work of faith, your labor of love,
and your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ!

Paul is not making a statement that each individual in Thessalonica is elect.

But he is saying that God has elected us in love.

He chose us – we did not choose him!

God's election – God's choosing of us – is not based on anything about us.

Rather, as Luke says in Acts 13:48 –

when Paul preached the gospel, “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

When the gospel goes forth – the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of those who hear –

and those who are appointed to eternal life believe!

If you hear that and say – well, but what about everyone else?

Well, go preach the gospel to them – because then they might believe too!!

After all – look at the reason Paul gives in verse 5 for how he *knows* that they are elect!

b. The Power, Holy Spirit, and Full Conviction of Our Gospel (v5a)

⁵ *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.*

Many have noticed that Paul uses another three-fold pattern here:

not only in word – but also in *power*, and in the *Holy Spirit*, and with *full conviction* –

which could also be translated, “full assurance” –

referring to a most certain confidence.

Paul does not go into detail as to what is meant by “power.”

Some think that he is referring to miraculous signs

(though Acts 17 does not mention any).

Others think it refers to powerful preaching

and the remarkable transformation of the Thessalonian Christians.

But notice what happens when we overlay verse 5 with verse 3 –

the work of faith – connected to the power of the gospel;

the labor of love – connected to the Holy Spirit's presence;

the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ – connected to the full conviction,
the full assurance of the gospel!

What Paul is saying is that the gospel comes to you – not merely in word.
It's not just a piece of information to be considered intellectually!!

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 the gospel comes to you *through* the ministry of the word:

c. As Evidenced in Our Character (v5b)

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Paul is not afraid to say, “look at my character.”

I am one who has been changed by this same gospel that I preach.

As he had said to the Galatians –

“I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” (1:13)

The power of God is able to transform the lives of those who believe this gospel!

And so Paul says:

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Paul will go into more detail about this in chapter 2 –

so I won't go into all the details here –

but his opening point is that the gospel – the good news of what Jesus has done –
changes us!

“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord” –

when we are joined to the life of God by the Holy Spirit –

the result is that we are changed!

It's not always instantaneous!

There is much that is a long, slow process!

And Paul says that he and Silas and Timothy lived exemplary lives before the Thessalonians.

It doesn't mean perfect.

He doesn't mean sinless.

He means that he and Silas and Timothy lived the gospel before them!

And that means that when they sinned – they repented – they forgave each other –
they kept walking together.

And that is what we seek to do – as your elders.

We seek to demonstrate the work of faith, the labor of love,
and the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.