

When Christians imitate the Lord and his apostles by turning, serving, and waiting, their faith in God's word is commended far and wide. This early church model is a brief summary of the Christian life. Let us follow their example to gain a faith, love and hope that cannot be shaken.

Introduction – The end of the calendar year is the beginning of the church year. Both are characterized by waiting for the Christmas holiday, but the objects of their waiting can be quite different. The differences are not always good vs. bad, or spiritual vs. worldly, although there is a danger of corrupting Christmas for selfish purposes. Waiting for the Christ of Christmas requires a very different kind of attitude, a different kind of waiting.

Background – Paul and his missionary team write to the new believers in the church of Thessalonica. Paul is constantly prayerful and thankful for them as they have become a model for all Christians. The shape of their Christian life is described in verse 3 and explained in the remainder of the chapter.

I. A Faith that Functions

A. Rooted in election (vv. 4-5a)

1. Faith, love, and hope are evidence of election. These spiritual qualities are bound together and can only come from God. By calling those in the church "brothers", Paul shows his warm affection for the believers in Thessalonica. But he is not the only one who loves them. They are first "loved by God". This is language originally spoken of OT Israel (Deuteronomy 32:15; 33:12; Psalms 60:5; 108:6; Isaiah 41:8-10; 44:2; Jeremiah 11:15; 12:7), and now spoken of the Jew-Gentile church. The elect church is the renewed Israel of God.

2. Paul also sees proof of their election in God's blessing his missionary labors in Thessalonica. His gospel (which he received by direct revelation from the risen Jesus Christ) came to the Thessalonians not only in spoken word but also with the power of God by the Holy Spirit. Not with the power of classical rhetoric, but with the Spirit's power to work signs and wonders, change hearts, give new life, and convert sinners to Christ by convincing them the gospel is true. This gospel is undeniably authentic because it came with God's powerful seal of approval (1 Corinthians 2:1-5; 4:19-20; cf. Acts 14:3; 15:12; Romans 15:18-19; 2 Corinthians 12:12).

B. Turned from idols (v. 9)

These believers, particularly the Gentiles, were recently converted from idolatry through Paul's missionary endeavors. The apostolic plea to turn from idols was a common and necessary aspect of repentance preached to Gentiles as opposed to Jews (cf. Acts 14:15; 17:22-31). The gospel calls you not just to abandon your various idols for fatalism or atheism, but for Christianity, because worshiping idols debases you in such a way that you need not merely escape but restoration (Psalm 115). The Thessalonians converted from bowing to dead statues (1 Corinthians 8:4-13; 10:14-22) to worshiping the "living and true God". They converted from dead worship to living worship, crossing from death to life when they heard the gospel and believed.

II. A Love that is Active

A. Service to the living and true God (vv. 5b-7, 9)

If you have a faith that functions, love will naturally flow from you in acts of worship and service. The best way to cultivate this kind of love in your life is by imitation. Paul imitated the Lord, and the Thessalonian believers imitated Paul as he imitated the Lord. They were able to trust Paul and his missionary team and thereby copy their Christian service because Paul was a man of conviction and integrity. He practiced what he preached. He lived what he believed. He obeyed what he taught and commanded. Not even their experiencing "much affliction" could hinder these believers from joyfully receiving God's word. That's how the Holy Spirit works love into a believer, even when life is rough. Though active service to God, acting out the part of a good disciple, obeying everything Jesus has commanded as a joyful, willing servant of the living and true God. Loving God is an act of service. If love does not labor, it is not love.

B. Evangelism and testimony (v. 8)

This act of service, this labor of love for God, must eventually manifest itself in love of neighbor. The church in Thessalonica imitated Jesus and Paul in evangelism and testimony as their labor of love. Paul employs a beautiful word-picture here. "Sounded forth" is a rare Greek verb only used this one time in the NT, from which we derive the English word "echo". The image is an ongoing sound like a trumpet blast emanating from the church that reverberates throughout the hills and valleys of Macedonian, Achaia, and beyond. What is the "sound"? The gospel ("the word of the Lord") and the news of the Thessalonian's newfound vibrant faith that produced faith that functions, love that is active, and hope that endures. Paul knew the news of their faith had spread because he had heard the reports as he traveled throughout Greece. He didn't have to give missionary reports on Thessalonica. The reports had preceded him. This verse holds together both *verbal* and *rumor* evangelism. Verbal is evangelism proper. Rumor is evangelistic testimony that authenticates and adorns the verbal gospel.

III. A Hope that Endures

A. Waiting for Christ's coming (v. 10a)

These new believers were still hopeful, but they needed encouragement and further instruction on what they were waiting for and how they were supposed to wait. Why? Because the Christian's hope is incomplete and vulnerable to tribulation without the hope of Christ's second coming. By reminding the believers that God raised his Son from the dead to defeat the only enemies that can really get us in the end—sin and death (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; the doctrine of the resurrection)—Paul gives them hope. Since Jesus is not dead but now lives forever, you can hope for his return. Since Jesus is raised in resurrection life, if you are "in the Lord Jesus Christ" and thus "in God the Father", then you can be confident he will also eventually raise you to resurrection life.

B. For salvation from God's coming judgment (v. 10b)

Similarly, when Paul reminds the believers of God's coming wrath, he is preparing them for further teaching on God's judgment due to us for sin, and salvation in Christ as a way to escape that judgment (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; cf. Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28; cf. Isaiah 2:10-22; 13:9). Through the sacrifice of God's Son on the cross to pay the penalty for sin, believers are able to escape the coming judgment that their sins would otherwise deserve. And through his resurrection, believers are able to escape the sting of death and instead gain eternal life.

Conclusion – In this passage, God's word unites these to the cardinal Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love—uniting *turning* from idols to a faith that functions, *servicing* God to a love that is active, and *waiting* for the Lord to a hope that endures. Do you see how on one hand defeatist attitudes and negative self-

perceptions have no place in the church because God loves us, gives us his grace, and has made his choice to love us. And on the other hand, there is no place in the Christian life for triumphalism or pride because believers have faith, love, and hope by God's grace alone. Instead, the gospel opens to you a better way: the model way for us to believe, to love, and to wait. It's what every Christian should be and every church should be. And most of all, it is what God made you for and the reason why Jesus died and rose for you (Ephesians 2:8-10).