

I have a very important question... that I would like to ask you... as we begin this morning. ... The question I want to ask... is this: How do you stay **vibrant**... in your service to Christ...? ... Specifically... here is what I mean by that... When you involve yourself in a regular church activity... or a particular **ministry**... or perhaps even an area of **leadership** and oversight... how do you keep going month after month for years... or even decades in some of your cases... when you have had to overcome certain emotional... and relational... and spiritual... and financial... obstacles...? (Nobody said church work would be easy... and if they did... they were not being truthful.) ... Has it ever been your experience where the normal... and sometimes expected human encouragements... simply evaporate... and you feel **forgotten**?

What does it take... to hang in there... when the glamour is **gone**? ... Anyone who has been around church activity very long can tell you... that the limelight is terribly fickle. ... It moves from ministry to ministry in the local church... and sometimes is not apparent anywhere for a while. ... The excitement of the church might focus for a while on AWANA... then the next thing you know Celebrate Recovery is in the limelight... Then we have some of our wonderful missionaries come for a visit... our hearts are enlarged for world missions... and we thrill at our opportunity to be such a missional church. ... Then great things begin to happen in KIDS church and the church suddenly seems to be all about our young kids... In time... someone announces a new home Bible Study... and for several weeks 1/3 of the church is congregating in people's homes and building dynamic relationships with one another. ... On Sunday mornings you can't miss the fact that things are hopping among the members of our deaf ministry... real

life change becomes obvious... and a hunger for God's Word seems to be the driving force. Then... a new youth pastor comes on staff and the appearance of young people... out of thin air... brings a vigorous energy to us all... like a shot to the arm. ... Even the grandparents in our congregation are re-vitalized by all the energy from the youth.

As the limelight moves... and focuses on one ministry after another... while it is on one ministry... it looks bright and exciting... volunteers and participants are in abundance... there is a sense of thrill... and joy... and camaraderie... and power.

But then the limelight moves on. ... Gradually no one seems to be talking about your ministry any more. ... Your area of ministry involvement is no longer the pulse beat of the church. ... Another ministry... and other things seem to be getting people excited now.

Is it the will of God... that ministry would only flourish when they are in the limelight of attention and glory? ... Does He want dynamic ministries of AWANA... KIDS Church... Home Bible Study... Celebrate Recovery... World Missions... Deaf Ministry... and youth ministry... only when they have the limelight of church-wide attention...? ... You and I both know the answer to that... (clearly... "NO!") ... What then is needed? ... Here is the answer... ... Endurance! ... So... then I am right back to the original question: "How do you stay vibrant... in your service to Christ...?" ... Where does endurance come from?

Absolutely indispensable... to the ongoing life of our church... is the power for all of our members... to keep going month after month... year after

year... even decade after decade... in the path of obedience... in their service to Christ. ... How do we do this... and overcome the obstacles of finance... relational issues that come up... health challenges... family needs... and... when the encouragements of the limelight... and the attention and the glory... and the admiration... are gone... ... when we feel like the joys of life are passing us by...?

Well... because you asked... I am opening a new series this morning... studying through the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians... Paul wrote 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians to a very discouraged church. ... This was a church that did many things well (boy that reminds me of us)... but endurance had become a real issue. Paul's concern is to keep them going as a strong and vital ministry. There was a real possibility that they might loose steam... and see vital ministry fall by the wayside... and so Paul writes this letter (1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians) to re-invigorate them.

Today I want to simply introduce this letter... but there is so much that we can learn in this... for our own staying vital... for our own endurance. ... The first section of the letter is really the first ten verses... or the entire first chapter. ... Normally I like to preach an entire unit... the whole section... in a single sermon... but every now and then it is necessary for me to break it in half. ... This is because there is just too much good stuff to pass over... in the interest of time. ... So today... I am only going to take the first part of the section... where Paul reveals what is right about the church at Thessalonica. He has plenty to say... that give us a clear picture of what a strong church looks like. ... The picture he paints for us in these verses... is a model for all churches. ... It is the picture of a church strong... in

carrying on a work for the Lord. ... We are going to stare at... only half... of this picture this morning... and next week we will gaze at the other.

Lets get started by first covering some essential information about the writers of this letter... the circumstances that surround it... and prompted this letter to be written... and the 1<sup>st</sup> century city of Thessalonica. ... This will help us draw more from the Apostle's actual words.

We read about Paul's first visit to this city and how the church was started in Acts chapter 17. Next week we will actually start there... in Acts 17... and pick up some of the background information... which will help us interpret this letter. But this morning... I would simply like to summarize some of those details... and then launch into the first chapter.

Almost all 1<sup>st</sup> century letters... from the Greco-Roman period... begin with a threefold opening: #1. The Writer... (which we normally put at the end of our letters today)... #2. the person or group to whom he/she is writing... and #3. A formal greeting. ... Very often... as is the case with Paul's letters... the next item in the letter... would be a wish (sometimes a prayer) for the health or well-being of the addressees. ... Paul's letters... usually include a thanksgiving — also directed toward God. In some cases he also includes a prayer report... telling them not only that he remembers them in prayer... but also spelling out in some detail... the what ... the content of his praying. These features are all present in this first letter... we are about to study.

Normally... when Paul starts off his letter to a church... he identifies himself... "Paul"... but then he adds his authoritative title... "Paul, an

Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ...” ... Interestingly... he doesn't do that here. He does not utilize his normal influential citation.. ... I would suggest to you... that this is because Paul did not feel that he needed to assert his apostolic status... as he did... for example to the church at Galatia... where there were false teachers who were challenging his authority... or to Rome... where he had not yet met the believers of that church... or to Corinth... where he had to do some heavy-handed confrontation. ... .. Right away... we see that Paul apparently felt different... about the occasion that called for him to write this letter... than he does in his other letters... to churches. ... Immediately he will launch into a litany of characteristics... that made them a strong and vital ministry.

Paul is the main author... and he is mentioned first. But there are two others who are with Paul... and who he positions as co-authors... in agreement with what he writes.

**With** Paul... was Silvanus. ... Luke called him by a *different* name. Perhaps you are more familiar with the designation that Luke used throughout the Book of Acts. So that is what I will refer to him as. Luke called him **Silas**... while Paul called him Silvanus... but they are the same person.

Silas initially appears in Scripture in Acts 15:22 where he accompanies Paul and Barnabas to Antioch... after the Jerusalem Council. But when Paul and Barnabas come to Jerusalem... there he is... known as a prophet and one of the "leading men among the brethren" in the Jerusalem church.

Paul chose Silas to be his traveling companion on his second missionary journey... after an argument erupted with Barnabas over whether or not to risk taking John Mark again... Paul and Silas head off together... while Barnabas and John Mark go on a different missionary journey. (Acts 15:36-41).

The closeness of Paul and Silas... as ministry partners... can be concluded by what Luke writes in the Book of Acts... especially the endurance of persecution in the Philippian jail... where they sang hymns together (Acts 16:25)... followed by the persecution that drove them out of Thessalonica... after just 3 days with them (Acts 17:5-10). They had experienced a lot together... and must have been very close colleagues.

After the second missionary journey... Silas is no longer mentioned in the accounts with Paul. ... One later biblical reference shows that he became a messenger for the apostle Peter. It was Silas who delivered 1 Peter to believers throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:12). ... Thus Silas had the privilege of working for and with the two greatest apostles.

Timothy was the third co-author of this letter. This young man who ministered on occasion with Paul... is mentioned more than twenty times in the New Testament. ... Only Barnabas among Paul's traveling companions is mentioned more.

Timothy had a Greek father but a Jewish mother (Acts 16:1). Paul would come to look on Timothy as the closest reflection of his own ministry.

## **Philippians 2:20 (ESV)**

*For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.*

Timothy was considered more than a brother in Christ. He was a spiritual "son" to the apostle (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2) and greatly loved.

Now here is something very important for us to understand about Timothy... that will help us understand this letter that Paul, Silas, and Timothy are writing. ... Paul trusted Timothy's maturity to the point that he sent him to Thessalonica to encourage the believers in light of their affliction and persecution (2 Thess. 3:2).

When Paul and Silas first went to Thessalonica... they were only allowed to stay long enough to teach for **three days**...before an uprising of the Jews pushed them out of the city. THREE SABBATH DAYS – was all they had... but in that time Jewish and Greek citizens in that city came to Christ... a lot of teaching occurred... and a church was born. But when they were run out... from there... Paul and Silas went to Berea. In a very short time... the Hateful mob that pushed them out of Thessalonica... came to Berea... and pushed them out of that city as well. ... Paul and Silas went to Corinth... and it is from Corinth... just a few months after they planted the church in Thessalonica... in that whirl-wind three day... rushed effort... that they are writing this letter.

There was obvious reason for them to be concerned for the fledgling young believers in Thessalonica... who they had to leave among the hateful mob of anti-Christian Jews... Certainly they would not make life easy for the new

believers... this infant church. So Paul sent his trusted Timothy to check on them. ... Now Timothy has just returned... given his report to Paul... and this is what has prompted the letter that we are studying today. The church had **flourished**... even in the midst of persecution... but there was also a hint of discouragement... their zeal was beginning to diminish...

## 1 Thessalonians 1:1

“To the church of the Thessalonians...” Thessalonica was the capital and largest city (about 200,000 population) of the Roman province of Macedonia. Rome had divided Greece... after conquering them... into two provinces. The North was called Macedonia... and the South was called Achaia. ... The most important Roman highway (the Egnatian Way)—extending from Rome all the way to the Orient... went through Thessalonica. This highway... along with the city's thriving seaport... made Thessalonica one of the wealthiest... and most flourishing trade centers in the Roman Empire. ... Recognized as a free city... Thessalonica was allowed self-rule... and was exempt from most of the restrictions placed by Rome on other cities in the empire. ... But with its international flavor... came many pagan religions... and cultural influences... and Paul will address some of these challenges to the young Christians in this letter.

Verse one employs the phrase... “*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Believers enjoy a mysterious **union** with both the Father and the Son... Jesus Christ. We have been brought into the sphere of what He is doing here on earth. We have been included in His eternal plan of the ages. ... And what we are about to read in this 1<sup>st</sup> chapter... is that God **chose** us... to be included with Him. That is in verse 4.



You know... a vital church recognizes this... and is not “ho-hum” about it. This is a BIG DEAL ! ... “Living Water... in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...” “Living Water... a church that painstakingly seeks to discern the difference between what its **people** want... and what the will of **God** for them is...” “Living Water... a church that does everything possible to ensure that it is doing what **God** wants... no matter if it has never been done that way before... regardless if a big donor has a different plan... no matter if its most articulate and influential members... or a major voting block want to go in another direction...” What truly matters is what **God** wants – not the political landscape! ... It seeks God’s will through prayer... and Biblical evidence. ... That is a church “*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” It is **in** the scheme of all that He is doing... it is the very reason that they exist... to gladly participate in all that He desires for them. And if you ever suspect that the Leaders of Living Water are not **driven** by this... that they are **not** actively seeking God’s agenda above their own... then it is time for new leadership. ... To be a vital church... we must diligently seek to be “*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

I could say a lot more here... but it is time to move on...

Still in verse 1... “*Grace to you and peace.*”

This greeting was common to Paul... and a standard greeting of 1<sup>st</sup> century letters. “*Grace!*” was a common greeting among Greeks when they would see one another on the street. ... And the second part... “*peace!*” (shalom) was the common greeting among the Hebrews. ... Paul simply combines them both. However... although this may be the modern equivalent of “Hello” as a greeting today... it is likely that Paul’s intention is stronger. By

his usage the apostle gave to these words a richer and deeper meaning to convey the message of the gospel... which comes by way of grace and brings peace with God. ... More than one commentator notes that... by Paul's wording... he actually "turns a perfunctory 'hello' into a theologically meaningful salutation." The Apostle includes the phrase "to you" in a way that implies that the Thessalonians had this grace and peace already... as a reality in their lives... and he is wishing for them to have a deeper experience of both grace and peace in the midst of their situation.

You know... this is something else that a vital church makes a very BIG DEAL of... grace and peace... and the proper order in which they appear here.

In Paul's greetings, "*grace*" always came before "*peace*." ... This is true in salvation. The "*grace*" of the Gospel must come before the "*peace*" with God. ... Grace... or unmerited... unearned... completely undeserving favor from God is given to us... which allows us to experience peace with God and peace from God. First grace... then peace. But... because the recipients of this letter are already saved... Paul is wishing upon them a different aspect of grace and peace... than what is only associated with salvation.

I want you to recognize that there is a truth here... that applies to every level of society. In marriage... where peace is lacking in the home... when a couple is in a turbulent fight... the principle is first grace... and then peace. One of the partners must show grace... undeserved favor... to the other... and then peace will come. Oftentimes Patti has to show a lot of grace... a lot of favor that I don't deserve... that I certainly have not

earned... before I repent and we have a break through... but this is God's principle. ... (Please hear me.) If "grace" is lacking, "peace" will be lacking. ... This is also true in a church. ... church fights occur because neither side is willing to give grace to the other. Isn't it sad...? But even in church... believers will try to make other believers EARN their favor... They will be unfriendly to newcomers... because they have not shown themselves worthy to be welcomed. Or even if they have been attending for a while... if one member upsets another... "*Oop! You are not worthy of my showing you brotherly love!... "If you do enough penance... to my satisfaction... I might reconsider... You now have to earn my acceptance..."*" ... "*You look a little different... Your behavior is not quite what we like around here... so we are going to with-hold our welcome until you can prove yourself or earn our kind attention..."*" That is a church that needs grace! There are a lot of churches in desperate need of grace. ... A vital church is **full** of grace. Grace is a BIG DEAL! People don't have to prove themselves... or earn favor... before they are loved and accepted... even if they show up for the first time... wearing a nose-ring and purple hair! ... (Now I know that you believe this with me... so can I hear a robust "amen"? ... Thank you. Sometimes it is good simply to acknowledge things that we know are true... like that.)

Now... in the next two verses (2-3)... Paul expressed his gratitude to God... and set forth in a brief statement why he was thankful for the Thessalonians. Here is where we will see the answer to the question that I opened with this morning. Where can we find endurance... to stay vital in ministry? I hope you'll stay with me here... until we get to it... in verse three.

## **1 Thessalonians 1:2-3**

When Paul writes that he was constantly mentioning them in his prayers... he is not saying that he had an unbroken task that exclusively prayed for them... and that he did nothing else. What he is saying is that he developed a faithful... regular pattern... of praying for them.

Do you know what strikes me about this...? The church had been doing well. But Paul consistently and regularly kept them in his prayers.

You know... very often... church members will only pray for one another... when they know something has gone wrong. We pray for each other when we see each other's prayer requests... in the bulletin... over the phone chain... at a Bible study... or if it is given to us in person. But usually we pray... because of a known "need."

A vital church needs people to pray the way Paul does. We need those who will pray for our members and attenders with a faithful pattern of regularity – whether or not we know that there is a problem. I hope that God leads MANY who are here today... to begin a regular practice of using our church directory as a prayer guide. Pray through each name and ask that God would deepen their experience in grace and peace. Pray for their ministry endurance... and vitality. You might also pray on them... what we are about to discover in verse three here.

Verse three is what I have been itching to get to... all sermon long. So let's dive in...

## **1 Thessalonians 1:3**

Faith... hope... and love. Same three vital elements that we find a few other places in Scripture... although for good reason... Paul places them in a different order... here. ... . These are the spiritual **motivators**... of the Christian life! They are what fuel our tank. Faith... hope... and love... or as they are arranged here... faith... love... and hope... is where ministry endurance comes from.

The first one mentioned here is “*work of faith.*” ... Faith stirs the church to work. When a person believes in Jesus Christ, truly believes, he is stirred to work and serve the Lord Jesus. The same is true with a body of believers, the church. The stronger the belief of the people in Christ, the stronger they will work for the Lord. A strong faith stirs, arouses, activates, and energizes believers to work and carry out the mission of Christ.

Faith comes by hearing... and hearing the Word of God. Make sure that you are in God’s Word every day... to keep your faith strong.

The next one is “*Labor of love.*” ... 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 should characterize the life of the believer.

Love stirs the church to labor. The word "labor" (kopou) means to toil; to labor to the point of exhaustion; to arduously labor. When a person truly loves Christ, he is prompted and driven to arduously labor for Christ. Note: the believer who is driven by love is the believer who has really seen the love of Christ. He is always conscious that Christ has taken his sins upon

Himself and borne the punishment for them. The believer knows that he is ever so short of the glory of God, and that he deserves to be punished as the transgressor of God's law. But he knows and walks around with the deep sense that Christ bore his punishment for him. It is the wonderful love of Christ that stirs the believer to love Christ ever so much. Therefore, he does all he can to please Christ and to fulfil the joy of Christ. ... What I am saying is this. If you need to increase your love for Christ... stop and think deeply about His choice of you... and why you are so undeserving. (We are going to get to this matter of His choosing you with verse four – next week.)

Now the third element is purposely held out as the last... as a dynamic the Thessalonians really needed. Most of this letter to revitalize this church... concerns itself with the hope of Christ's return. 23 of the 89 verses deal with the future return of Christ. Paul uses it for their increased hope.

Here in verse three... Paul uses the phrase... "*steadfastness of hope.*"

Every man lives with some hope for the future. That is what distinguishes us from the animal kingdom. ... I caught a little of Chuck Swindoll's radio broadcast... Insight for Living... on Friday morning as I drove to the office. He was preaching through Ecclesiastes... and he was commenting on what it means that God has placed eternity in our hearts. As I do with most of his explanations... I love the way he described this hope that God has infused mankind with. He said... "Eternity in our hearts" means "hope of a better tomorrow..." Man is designed by God so that he always has hope for a better tomorrow. A dumb beast... for example doesn't have this hope.

It will plow a field for 10 hours one day... and then go back out and plow the same field the next day for another 10 hours. ... But would you go plow a field like that... and then do it again the very next day... if you had no expectation of a better future...?

Every man lives with some hope for the future. God has placed eternity in our hearts. And that hope, whatever it is, will sustain him. Down through the centuries man has expressed this. Martin Luther said, "*Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.*" Long before him Sophocles, the pagan, had written: "*It is hope which maintains most of mankind.*" A modern man, O. S. Marden, says, "*There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great, and no tonic so powerful as expectation of something better tomorrow.*" The poet, Alexander Pope, wrote: "*Hope springs eternal in the human breast.*" And Carlyle, the Scottish philosopher, commented, "*Man is, properly speaking, based upon hope, he has no other possession but hope, this world of his is emphatically the place of hope.*"

What a glorious, wonderful life it is to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven. That is the "blessed hope." 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 a will-o'-the-wisp of happiness that will shatter like a bubble when you get it in your hands.

Listen – It is an active anticipation of Christ's return... when He will reward us for our Kingdom service... that is fuel for the Christian's tank.

Church! ... Jesus is coming! What will He say to you...? “Ah... that’s OK... I know how much you wanted to see those television programs which kept you from My Word...” ... “I know how much you dislike working with others and would rather be by yourself...?” ... “I know how badly you needed to be on the lake fishing every week... instead of building the faith of My loved ones at church...?”

Quite frankly... I don’t think He will say any of those things.

If it does not motivate us to want to hear Him say... “Well done, My good and faithful servant...” ... If we are simply happy knowing that we have fire insurance and will go to Heaven... then I would suggest to you that you do **not** love Christ... and those who don’t love Christ are not His disciples... according to Christ’s Own words in John chapter 14... and if you are not His disciple... then you have never experienced a saving faith.

There are a lot of people who depend on a faulty fire insurance policy. Somebody has sold them the wrong thing... there is no pay-out.

Faith... love... and hope in Jesus Christ... start filling your tank today!





