

Gospel Burden

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[0 : 00] All right, good morning. Hope everybody's doing well. As Jesse said, my name's Elliot, one of the pastors here at City Grace. And yeah, as we are going through a series in 1 Thessalonians, and we're just going to jump right into it today.

We're going to be picking up where we left off the text last week, starting in chapter 3. So if you have your Bible, you can start turning there. If not, no worries. It's going to be on the screen behind me. But as we prepare to read this segment from 1 Thessalonians today, I want to start by just taking a moment to kind of collectively ask this question.

Have you ever wondered or thought at all about how the gospel was so effective at breaking out from this little region around Judea and spreading across the entire kind of known Roman world there within the first century?

I mean, it's a fact of history. You can read about it. You don't have to marvel at it not happening because you can read about it. But I think we do often gloss over the fact that in a lot of ways it really was a miracle.

Because if you knew nothing, you might assume that, hey, maybe, like a lot of ideas in society grab hold of people and spread, you know. But it obviously wasn't spread at the end of the sword because Christians didn't have any ability.

[1 : 28] They were a very small beleaguered group at this time. And so maybe you would think that, hey, maybe the message that Paul was bringing to these Greco-Roman cities was really welcome.

Like maybe there was something about that cultural moment that made it really ripe to hear the message. But Paul himself is actually really clear in Scripture that that wasn't the case at all. He says in 1 Corinthians 1, We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews, and folly to the Gentiles.

So Paul is saying, when we took this message to the Jewish community, it was offensive. It was offensive to everything they knew.

And maybe somewhat understandably, right, you think about the message they were bringing and basically saying, Hey, the law, the prophets, the temple, literally everything that you've known about yourself, what has made you a community for the past several centuries, everything that you know about yourself and you treasure is fulfilled in Jesus.

[2 : 37] It's all a shadow of something better. And oh, by the way, this Jesus who is the Messiah is also the God you have worshipped. It would have been blasphemous.

It was an offense, a stumbling block. And then to the Gentiles, it was really just foolishness.

Because for them, I mean, they had all kinds of myths and stories about God's becoming people and even, you know, people rising from the dead and from the ashes and things like that.

And it wouldn't have been anything new to them, but it would have also not been something that was kind of in line with the themes, the things that they thought showed what real human wisdom were, kind of the ideas, the ideas of knowledge that were percolating.

And certainly not the exclusivity of it. They wanted to hear all ideas. They didn't want to hear Jesus. And that's the truth. So needless to say, like the gospel was facing headwinds as it went out into the world.

And yet, by the end of the first century, it had been proclaimed all the way to Rome itself. And thousands of people across the expanse of that area had come to know Jesus.

[3 : 48] Now, certainly I think in large measure, you can say some of that is due just to the power of the message itself. I mean, it is the pleasure of God by His providence.

It says in Scripture, He chose something that was foolish to confound the wise of this world. And by the power of His Spirit, He saves who He wills through the good news of the gospel.

But Paul is going to show us in this passage that it's not just the truth that they went out with, but there's actually something that matters about the gospel messenger as well.

He's going to give us some insight into the people who were taking the good news forth. Kind of what was the secret sauce that made this such a powerful thing in the first century?

And then he's going to tell us that when you take that good news forth, there's both a privilege and a burden in it. And that's part of what we need to know.

[4 : 47] So, jumping into 1 Thessalonians chapter 3, beginning in verse 1, Paul speaking to the church, Thessalonica says, Therefore, when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone.

And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker, in the gospel of Christ to establish and exhort you in your faith that no one would be moved by these afflictions.

For you yourself know that we were destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction just as has come to pass, and just as you know.

And 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 have been in vain.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and has reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you.

[5 : 51] For this reason, brothers, in all of our distress and affliction, we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live if you are standing fast in the Lord.

For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.

This is God's word to us. Now in this passage, Paul is, as he's done earlier in Thessalonians, he's recounting to them to remember something that he and his companions did among them and he wants to tell them about it.

He wants them to remember it. And that thing is simply this. He's calling to remembrance that when they were amongst them, they really did give their hearts away. They really didn't come to them as indifferent observers.

They were with them and amongst them. And he's letting them know that, you know, there is, there's a cost to taking the gospel forth, just the message itself.

[7 : 04] Like you, you might encounter resistance just to the truth of the gospel. There is, there is certainly that persecution that may follow. There is certainly being made fun of that may follow from just giving the word of the Lord.

As a matter of fact, what, when they had to abruptly leave this church the first time, that's what happened. Those who had opposition to the gospel because it was messing with their power centers and it was messing with their pocketbook, stirred up persecution and a riot happened in the city and they had to get out.

There's a cost to taking the gospel forth, but what Paul also wants us to know is there's also a cost to simply opening your heart to the people you intend to bring the gospel to.

And he says, that's what we did amongst you. But it is a burden that Paul is willing to bear because he knows something that he wants us to know today, which is, if you want to speak truth into someone's life, it is important that they know that you care about them.

Tim Keller told this story years ago about his time in ministry. And like a lot of people know Tim Keller because he had this big church in New York City. He was pastor, redeemer, and like, you know, became kind of this international speaker and a lot of people learned about him through that.

[8 : 27] But what a lot of people don't know is that he spent most of his formative years in ministry in small town America, like in an area where there's like one hospital, like one school, like that's where his kids grew up.

That's where he learned about ministry. And he told this story one time when he showed up fresh out of seminary, 24 years old, and he said, you know, I had in my head the things you would probably expect from seminary.

He felt like, what I'm going here to do is, number one, I'm going to preach dynamic sermons. I'm going to open up the truth to people in a way that's engaging and that they haven't seen before. And then I'm going to use my skills that I've learned as an organizer to help people build ministries in this area. Like, that's what I'm going to do. And so he got there with kind of that idea.

And one of the things he did, which you often do if you're going into a new place to minister, is he sought out people who had been in that area before. And in particular, kind of one old minister that had been in the area for a long time, ministering to people.

[9 : 30] And he said, he met up with him and he said, I'll never forget it because number one, he met up with him at this hospital, the only hospital in town. And the first thing that struck him was, this guy knew everybody's name.

He knew everybody who was working there, everybody who was coming in to get care. Like, he just knew everybody in the town. And he said, when he met with him after, this guy told him pretty bluntly, he said, look, I know what's in your head coming here from seminary.

And he said, look, here's the truth. You can come here and preach like Charles Spurgeon, but it is not gonna matter a lick if the people here don't know that you care about them.

And he said that changed the whole way he kind of looked at ministry. Because, you know, you see, there really is a way where you can invest a lot of time with somebody.

Like, you can invest a lot of time in their lives and give them some truths in their lives and still never give your heart away. There's a way to do that where their trouble doesn't trouble you.

[10 : 37] Like, your heart is never stirred by their condition. And people know it when that's the case. Now, maybe there's some subtle part of you that's protesting, and we're gonna get to this a little later in the sermon, but maybe there's a part of you right now saying, like, I don't know about all that.

Like, all this touchy-feely relationship stuff. I mean, the truth is the truth. And I can just give people the truth, and that in and of itself will change them.

And I guess the question I would just honestly ask is, is that working? Like, I mean, how's that going online? A lot of people changing their minds out there?

Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. Like, part of being a gospel minister is an obligation to tell the truth. And we're gonna talk more about that in a minute. And I certainly don't wanna disparage the impulse to be bold and take a stand and be identified with Jesus, which is oftentimes, I think, the heart behind when we give truth into people's lives.

But, the thing that Paul specifically wanted the Thessalonians to remember is that as followers of Jesus, you don't get to be indifferent observers.

[11 : 57] And it would be foolish for us to presume that the love and the bond they built with these churches wasn't part of how the gospel spread. Like, they didn't go and just preach a sermon.

They went and lived with them for months, sometimes years. I like to think of it like this sometimes. So, like, let's say you wanna drop some truth off in somebody's life.

There's a truth that you really think could help them or that you think it's really important and you wanna get it to them. So, it's kinda this image of like, you're here and they're over here and like, let's just say in between is the relationship you've built.

Like, this is how you're gonna walk that truth across to them, right? Now, the truth of that is some truths don't take a whole lot of bridge to drop off in somebody's life.

Like, you don't, it doesn't have to bear a lot of weight. If it's something trivial like someone has been driving a certain way to get to work every day for 10 years and you let them know, you know, hey, actually, there's a way that's 10 minutes faster to do that.

[13 : 02] A route you could take that's faster. Like, you don't have to have a lot of relational bridge built for that. Like, being acquaintances will do, right? there's trivial things in life.

Somebody comes and says, hey, brother, like, what's the best mayonnaise out there? It's Duke's. And don't waste your time with anything else, right? See, some of you already showed up. We haven't built enough relationship.

You're like, I don't know. Some truths don't require a lot of a bridge, but if you think about, if you're gonna back up a dump truck of heavy truth, I'm talking life-altering truth, heart-breaking truth, you're just gonna need a much stronger bridge or chances are it's never even gonna get to them.

they're not gonna accept you driving that truckload of truth into their life. And I think in some ways, whether we realize it or not, what we really kinda want is sort of a drive-by version of Christianity.

Like, something where we spray out truths from afar, but we don't have any skin in the game. I mean, it really is the picture of, like, you wanna shout, Jesus loves you, or repent and be saved from the window of a car as it drives down the street.

[14:23] Like, you don't actually wanna get out amongst the crowd. That's not what you see, that's not the picture you see in 1 Thessalonians because Paul shows us here that being in gospel community is going to mean bearing burdens!

you wouldn't otherwise. Maybe the most obvious burden that gospel community brings is, you cannot love anyone without some risk.

And I think in a lot of ways, we actually do live in the age of just putting Teflon over our hearts. And some of that comes, I think, we kinda get it honest from just the rampant brokenness of our families and our world and our country.

Like, we learn not to give our hearts away at an early age because you never know who you can count on. And you never know how long someone's gonna be in your life and how much it hurts if you get connected to someone and then they leave.

I think some of it's kinda connected to the highly mobile nature of modern life. Like, we don't live in a community in just one place like we used to say 100 years ago.

[15:37] Like, we're highly mobile and so just the reality of like, hey, I'm only gonna be here for a year with my job. Like, why am I gonna spend all the effort and pain to get connected to someone I'm not gonna see?

And it makes us not wanna dive in. We actually know something about that being in a military community. And can I just like, kinda pause on a side road and say one of the things that has always strengthened my faith in this community, one of the things that has always just made my heart sing is, I constantly marvel at how the military families in our community have really set an example of how to do this.

Like, they have cultivated the gospel skill of coming in and loving with all they have, even though they know in a few years there's a tearful goodbye coming, but they don't stand at the side, they don't stand at a distance, they've learned how to model what that looks like.

To love is not the safe path. C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Four Loves*, he said, to love at all is to be vulnerable.

Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal.

[17:01] Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries, avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your own selfishness.

But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken, but it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

To love is to be vulnerable. If you want to see people change by the gospel, it's going to make you vulnerable.

And that burden, that burden of being vulnerable, that burden of feeling the weight of loving people, it's both for individuals and it's for whole bodies of believers.

Paul speaks often in the scripture of the burden he had for the churches. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, he tells us, and apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

[18:10] Paul says, when you're a disciple of Jesus, you wind up bearing some burdens that you wouldn't otherwise. You wind up caring deeply about your fellow believers.

And he says, it's not just the normal burdens in life. It's the same thing that all people get. We are burdened when our friends are going through stuff, when they're suffering sickness or financial hardship, when their relationships are struggling.

We feel that burden, but Paul says, when you're in a church, when you're a part of a body of believers, there's other things that show up you have to deal with, like he had a burden for is their faith flourishing or is it being choked out?

He said, are the churches thriving in the truth or are they falling prey to another gospel? Are those people putting their hope in Jesus or something else?

You don't get to be indifferent to the fate of the body of believers. So if we're going to bear that burden well, and a good question is, how do we do it?

[19 : 20] And I actually think that's part of what God is trying to show us here in this passage from 1 Thessalonians. Because in recounting this story, Paul is actually showing us a few key things to handling gospel burden well.

And the first thing he tells us is that you handle gospel burden well by not laboring alone. One of the things we see throughout the New Testament when it talks about how to do gospel ministry is that you don't do it alone.

Paul tells us in this passage, he says, therefore when we could no longer bear it, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone and we sent Timothy our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ to establish you and to exhort you that no one would be moved by these afflictions.

you know, when you see Jesus training his disciples in kingdom ministry, when he starts to send them out to demonstrate and show the gospel, how does he send them out?

Two by two together. The church at Antioch, when the first missionary journey is being launched, the Holy Spirit shows up and it says, the Spirit sets aside Paul and Barnabas.

[20 : 52] They go out together. And I think in Thessalonians, Paul actually shows you really both sides of that coin because listen to what he said. He said, he was in Athens and Timothy was there with him.

So he says, I was not there laboring alone. His loyal yoke fellow Timothy was there with him but he wanted so badly to know what was going on with the Thessalonians.

He sent Timothy to him and listen to what he says about it. He says, we were willing to be left behind. He's saying it was a risk to be left alone because he knows being left alone was a risk. But he was a risk he was willing to bear because he didn't want them to labor alone. So he sends Timothy that they might be strengthened and he might know how they're doing.

I know we say this a lot here at this church how it's like you really have to be in community. Let me just say this to you as well. It's like as a person, meaning me, who gets a lot of growth in their life from reading and listening to other preachers.

[21 : 58] And what I mean by that is I could legitimately point to a lot of my discipleship over the years not coming from someone standing in front of me. Like a person I've never known.

I got it from a book or I got it from a message or I got it from some work of antiquity. Like that is a thing and I would affirm that as a way you can be discipled. But can I just say even as a person that has gotten a lot of discipleship like that in my life, I would have given up a long time ago on this gospel journey if it wasn't for friends that were walking alongside me.

Every church I've been in, part of just walking the road is just knowing you're not doing it by yourself. There are other people that care about it. There are absolutely no style points in the kingdom of God for being a ranger, a lone ranger, or a maverick.

We're meant to do it together. And that's particularly important because the Bible is pretty clear it's not going to be all roses. And it will make all the difference in the world to have somebody beside you when it gets hard.

And it will get hard because you also handle gospel burden by getting comfortable with being uncomfortable. At the end of that passage, Paul says, what thanksgiving could we give back to God for all this joy that we now feel on your behalf?

[23 : 29] And we pray earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith. Kind of circling back to this earlier concern maybe about truth itself, Paul shows us that while they did fully give their hearts away to the Thessalonians, they didn't lose their gospel head.

Because there's of course a version of loving someone or a group of people that isn't really love in the sense of what it wants most is someone to actually be whole.

to actually flourish, to actually be moved back into the relationship with their heavenly father that they were meant to have. There's a version of love that just wholeheartedly refuses to tell someone the whole truth about a myriad of situations because of what it might mean.

And in that case, a lot of times, if you're honest, what you really want isn't the person's joy or holiness or well-being, the thing you want the most is just their approval.

Like the disappointment that you're unwilling to suffer is the disappointment of them being disappointed with you. That's clearly not the case here because Paul ends this segment talking to them not just about his joy but his earnest desire to supply what is lacking.

[24 : 57] You know what he's literally saying there? It's like he's wrapping up that section by saying, I can't wait to see you and address your shortcomings. I mean, sign me up for that, right?

Like, thanks for coming back, Paul. But I think that really proves the point, right? Like you can't write a letter like that and you can't sustain a ministry like that and you can't say that to people if they didn't know he really loved them.

Paul's not afraid to write that because there is no question about the depth of the love that he and his companions showed them. And so he's not afraid to tell them the truth.

He's not afraid to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. He also tells us that there's something else that's going to make you uncomfortable and that's just the fact that you're going to bear a burden when you become materially connected to someone.

Their fate is going to affect you in ways you might not have wanted it to. He says, you know, recounting here, he says, but now that Timothy has come back and brought us the good news of your faith and your love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you.

[26 : 16] For this reason, brothers, even in all the affliction and distress we're enduring here in Athens, we've been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live.

If you are standing fast. It's kind of this image, it's this image of life rushing back in. Like if you can imagine maybe like a fish in the ocean and by some, you know, crazy and random wave it has been spit out onto the land.

And what does that look like for the fish? It's flopping around, right? Like it's struggling and going along, but as it's there, it's slowly suffocating. Like life is slowly going out.

It feels like it's just, it's got less and less life. But then if you can imagine a wave comes in and catches it back up, immediately the fish is back to life. It's like literal life has flowed back into its lungs.

It's been revived. And that's what Paul says here. He says, we live and breathe again. Like we were in Athens suffocating because we didn't know what was happening to you.

[27 : 21] And now I know your faith is flourishing. And it was like we came back to life. So I mean, don't you see like that was the secret sauce.

Like that was the, the chemical mixture that kind of exploded the gospel across the Roman world in the early days of the church. It was the powerful and active truth of the gospel that was carried into people's lives by gospel messengers who loved with their hearts out.

I think that tells us something too about what God intends here. Because you know, here's the truth. God could have chosen to deliver to this world the good news of the gospel in any way he wanted to.

He could have sent it via heavenly messengers, angels, beings of glory and splendor that we can't imagine. He could have just chosen to tell, that's probably how we would have done it, shock and awe.

He could have just chose it to like, maybe like he did with the Ten Commandments, like just carve it in stone on a mountainside. Here's the truth, go read it. But that's not what he chose as the vehicle.

[28 : 38] He chose the church. He chose people. I think that also tells you something about how he wants to shine the light of the gospel.

It's not unlike what he did in his very own son, right? Like what did Jesus do? How did he come to us? He could have come in glory with a message.

He came, as we say, incarnate, as a human. Fully God, fully man. And so when God sends this message out, he doesn't send it on the lips of heavenly messengers, he sends it on the lips of humans.

And I think our prayer, as we kind of conclude today, is just God, give us the grace to continue to be the church in that way today.

To bear the gospel burden so that others may know you from our lips. As the band comes up today, if you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus, there's probably no way that I could convince you, certainly not in a single Sunday, to trust that there are actually people in this room who have never met you who care a great deal about your life.

[30 : 03] People for whom, like particularly if you think about, well, I'm not a believer, like what you might think, there are people here that don't see your presence as a threat or as a nuisance to what we're trying to do or as an inconvenience.

They see it as a privilege. And I know I can't convince you of that, and frankly, you'd probably actually be foolish just to take my word for it. But nevertheless, that is the case.

There are people here who are burdened for you, not out of guilt and not out of shame, and not because they feel like they need to make everybody and everyone in the world exactly like them and believe like them.

There are people who carry that burden because they know what it was like when they didn't know Jesus. And now they do. And they just want you to know it's the best thing that ever happened to them.

And if that's where you're at today, let me just say, you are welcome to come and just be among us. Like, you're not required to sign a contract here. Like, you can put to the test.

[31 : 11] It's funny because, like, one of the things that you hear a lot, and I think it's just all this, like this idea of like, hey, I like Jesus, but I don't like his people. Look, I trust his people too.

I do. Like, I understand you can get hurt in church, but I would say put to the test whether the community of Jesus actually cares about you. Like, if you're curious but not convinced, then this place is open to you.

Or maybe you're in that camp, and again, you're not ready to believe all this Jesus stuff, but I don't have to convince you. You have no doubt that somebody in this room or several somebodies actually do care for you because you've seen it.

And if that's the case, like, if you felt the love of the community, then I would at least invite you to consider the truth they've built their lives on. And what I would tell you, and you don't have to take my word for it.

They would tell you as well. I don't want to put words in their mouths, but I think what they would tell you is that the truth that they have found is not a religious practice. The thing that has brought them joy is that they have learned that although all of us are broken, and though all of us have done evil and hurt people, and all of us have made choices that have hurt our life and have separated us from a relationship with God, Jesus has made it possible to come back.

[32 : 36] I mean, they would tell you that there is bad news, and the bad news is you do actually deserve to be judged for what you've done in your life. But the good news is, it is a judgment that for those who trust in Jesus, it's a judgment that you will never come, because he's taken it.

And if any part of that resonates with you, man, we would just love to talk to you. There'll be a prayer on the screen that's a way that people over the years have expressed that to him, but we'd love to talk with you. If you are a follower of Jesus and friends, family, it is our burden and our privilege to carry the good news on our lips and in our lives, and we do it with hearts out.

I mean, I understand, like, God is certainly sovereign, and he can and sometimes does just save somebody from a book, from a gospel tract.

Like, I don't want to disparage, I'm trying to disparage those ways of putting the gospel forth, but the primary way you see the gospel go in scripture is through the open hearts of people who are willing to be vulnerable and live amongst other people.

In all the uncomfortable situations that brings you, but people that don't believe like you, that don't know the gospel, that's sin. And somewhere in this town, you're called to do that.

[34 : 04] I don't know where it is, but there's somebody somewhere in this town that God wants to take you there. And my prayer this morning, and it doesn't have to be a light prayer.

You can say, God, I'm struggling with this. You can pray, God, give me the grace to go where you want and the grace to bear the burden once I get there. Sometimes for a long time, a long time before they're interested in hearing anything about Jesus.

When you've done that, if you're a follower of Jesus, we have a moment of communion. Again, it's just, it encourages my heart that in God, God just doesn't, in Jesus, he gives you a picture.

He doesn't do it from a mountain. Jesus spent years dropping truth into people's lives just by being with them, by going about life with them, right up to the very end where he's just having, he's having a meal with them, a Passover meal.

And it's the same kind of picture, like the people that followed Jesus, he was asking for something, quite frankly, ridiculous. His call was, I want everything.

[35 : 23] I want the total surrender, even into death of your life. But he didn't do it against just any backdrop. We did it against the backdrop of the cross.

Because whatever people thought about, like whatever you think about Jesus, the cross demonstrates, he loves you. Whatever he asks, it's not because he didn't give all. And so when we take communion, you take it back to your seat, you can, again, just do that in the faith of, and you're loved. And you can love like that. Jesus did and will, to the end of the age, be with his people in this mission. He'll be with you. This meal testifies to that. Father, we give you this moment. Come in your spirit and do what you will in the hearts of your people. We ask in Jesus' name.
[36 : 25] Let's pray.