

Gospel Witness

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Alex. Thank you, thank you. All right. If you got a Bible, go ahead and turn to the book of 1 Thessalonians. We are kicking off a series going through this wonderful letter to the church in Thessalonica.

And I'm excited for us because it is actually, I know we're not supposed to have favorite books of the Bible, but this is like really one of my favorites. The way Paul writes to this church, the relationship they seem to have, and also the way this church is just living out the gospel is just one of those things that always stirs me, encourages me, and something that I'm like, man, Lord, when I pray about City Grace Church, the stuff that the Thessalonians are doing is the stuff that I pray just becomes normal habit and evidence for City Grace Church as well.

So we have a lot to learn from them. We have a lot to consider in these passages today. And to kind of kick this off, I want to start us out by getting acquainted with Thessalonica as Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus would have known it.

And Thessalonica, the Greek way you say it is Thessaloniki. Yes. I feel so smart now. Hopefully you feel smart too. You can impress your friends and family at community group this week if you want to by using the actual Greek term.

But Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki. Thessalonica. See, I'm messing with myself now. Thessalonica, it was considered the mother of Macedonia. It was a provincial capital of its day in the Macedonia region.

[1 : 32] And it was a well-situated city. It was on the mouth of the Mediterranean in this place called the Thermaic Gulf. And it was at a crossroads of a major trade route.

And that trade route gave it access, gave everybody quick access to the resource-rich Macedonian interior. And so it was kind of like really pivotally situated.

It made it an important city. And yet it wasn't as significant of a city in the Roman Empire as, say, Corinth or in Athens or in Ephesus or Rome.

But still, it was important. It really was a kind of city that punched above its weight class, so to speak. And a big part of that was because it enjoyed the emperor's patronage.

And we'll get into what that means a little bit. But essentially, it was kind of politics from the emperor where it was like he showed this particular city favor that he didn't show with anybody else.

[2 : 30] And in return for that, they worshipped Caesar as a divine god. They considered him son of God. And so there was this cult worship that was well-established in Thessalonica because of that.

And the city also maintained the emperor's patronage through its wealthy Roman ruling class that lived there. They were a minority, but they lived there. And they were well-connected. They were very rich.

They were well-connected to all of Rome's power players. You can kind of see the political landscape of Thessalonica right now. And Thessalonica relied heavily on this social structure.

And what happened was, like a couple centuries before, Rome came and they conquered that area. And kind of what they did, they took all of the goodies out with them back to Rome. And so Macedonia and Thessalonica was kind of left really, really impoverished.

But then over the centuries, they just got back into this relative era of prosperity. But the politics of patronage was necessary to that.

[3 : 34] And so it was very well-established in the Thessalonica culture. You had the rich patrons, and then you had the clientela that depended on their favor. Okay? The other part was the worship of Caesar was well-established there as well, along with some other Roman deities.

Now, while the minority of the patronage class, the upper crust, was very few, the majority population consisted of just everyday folks, like working-class artisans or farmers or tradesmen, fishermen even.

I'm sure they had shrimpers there. Right? All right? So when Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus first came to Thessalonica and preached the gospel, they did it to anybody that would listen, right?

The rich and the poor, the patron and the clientela. And because of that, both rich and poor believed. And this gospel message, while they were there for just a few days, it says, it did not curry favor with many in the city because they were preaching Jesus as the son of God.

He was the king of kings. And so Paul and his team had to leave within just a few days, as Acts 17, 7 points out.

[4 : 51] But not before the gospel had already taken root and had already borne fruit. It says this in Acts 17, 4, before they left. And some of them were persuaded, speaking of the people in Thessalonica, 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.

Here we see the church of Thessalonica. It's born with this, like, amazing diversity, rich and poor, Roman, non-Roman, Jew, Gentile, because God's favor, unlike Caesar's patronage, is impartial. And it comes to us through the preaching of the message that Paul said is foolishness and weakness to the wise and the powerful of this world. And yet, we will see this gospel is God's power to save and radically change us.

So 1 Thessalonians 1, chapter 1, verse 1, will begin with this. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the church of the Thessalonians, and God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering for our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[6 : 09] For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

This is God's word. So let's begin at the beginning. Paul opens up with a greeting. What's in a greeting? Well, it depends. If you say hello, that's nothing more than just being polite, right?

If I then would go a little bit further and say, hello, how are you doing? That goes a little bit further. It expresses some interest in wanting to know more about you, more about what is going on in your life right now.

[7 : 31] But if I write a letter that opens, to my dear son Riley, whom I love and cherish, that is a different kind of greeting. That says a lot about who Riley is and the nature of our relationship.

And I am also ascribing to Riley a certain identity using identifier words. And now, this letter was written by Paul and his team after Timothy's recent return from the Thessalonian church.

Timothy was sent to check on them to see how they were doing. He got to bring back great news that indeed their faith was flourishing. And so, Paul writes this letter knowing all this.

And he opens it with this amazing just affection for them and encouragement to the church of the Thessalonians. In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace to you and peace. What Paul is saying here is he's declaring very confidently what he believes to be true about the Thessalonians. They are more than just a social club, a particular class of people in the Thessalonian social strata that stands out from the rest.

[8 : 37] No, no. They are different because they are God's people. And the gospel gives us a new and better identity. Paul says, you are the church. He calls them the church. That Greek word is ekklesia.

Ekklesia. Which means to be called out, to be set apart. They are a called out, set apart people. In Roman times, that term ekklesia defined the popular governing assembly of free citizens. And what's interesting about that, that could happen in any Roman city. But you weren't allowed to be a part of this ekklesia if you were of the poorer class. Only kind of the rich and the wealthy got to be a part of this. And many cities in Roman's empire had these governing ekklesias or churches. A group with authority among the general population. To get me wrong, it's not, they're called churches, they weren't called churches because they believed in Jesus. But God's ekklesia is a little bit different.

Yes, they are also a subset of people, but they're a special group set apart. They are different. They are people under his authority, and they're also assembled with his authority being present among them.

[9 : 43] And as Jesus said to us, to his church, you are in the world, but you are not of the world. And while this ekklesia, this church Paul is writing to is not of Thessalonica, nevertheless he says you are the church in Thessalonica.

And we can love the town and the city and the nation we live in, but that's never our ultimate allegiance or identity. Paul has no problem calling them Thessalonians, but that identifier doesn't have the last word because he goes on to say, yes, you're the church in Thessalonica, but you are the church of the Thessalonians, but you are Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

That has the last word. This may not seem very significant, but it would have been to the believers reading this letter because it communicated an affront and a challenge to the social and religious and political structures of that city as it was a part of the greater Roman Empire.

And Paul is saying, look, you aren't sons of Rome. Caesar isn't your lord. Caesar isn't your great patron. You and I, we aren't sons of North Carolina. We aren't sons of the United States of America. And the POTUS is not our lord. My son Rory recently got an award last year at his school from a group called the Daughters of the American Revolution, which at first we were like, well, don't Daughters of the American Revolution hand that out to daughters?

[11 : 13] But it's not the case. Anyways, we had a lot of fun with that with him, and it was a nice award to win. It was really encouraging. And I'm not picking on them for any reason. They're just like, I'm using them as an example here.

If you're in a club like that, what it does, it confers upon you an identity that carries with it certain values and allegiances that are required of you, right? And again, I'm not saying such a club is bad, but it's a helpful example today.

Paul is using his words very carefully in this opening. He is challenging everything Rome held as sacred and cuts at the foundations of Roman society when he says to them, they are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

He says, sorry, Caesar, we have no father but God. We have no patron but him. Sorry, Caesar, we have no king but Jesus. Caesar can call himself whatever he wants, but he can't call me his.

I belong to Jesus. You and I, we belong to Jesus. We belong to God the Father. And that citizenship in heaven, the citizenship that we hold because of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, it has a greater meaning and allegiance over me than anything, any citizenship that I could try to belong to in this world.

[12 : 30] Do we hear that in our present day? Do we feel how strongly that is when it comes to ourselves and in the places that we live? See, Jesus' followers, we live in places, but we exist in a subversive kingdom that has no boundary lines.

Nor is it partial towards certain nationalities or ethnicities. It cuts across all of those things. We are God's people who live in every nation, every political structure, and we peacefully undermine them through gospel fidelity to bring about God's redemptive purpose.

That's our calling, to be the called out ones. You and I should not feel satisfied nor comfortable in any political party or political system or governmental structure, whatever it may be.

We can't, we're never gonna feel fully at home in any of those places. You and I should not feel that way at all. And here's the thing, all those things are gonna go away one day because they aren't perfect, you know?

Now, I wanna say this, we can praise them and acknowledge when they align with God's righteousness, that's good. But when they don't, we should be a prophetic voice of God's truth and saying like, hey, these are not how things ought to be.

[14 : 01] But the ultimate undermining that you and I do as the church is done in small, incremental, seemingly insignificant ways.

It's in our day-to-day living because the gospel changes how we live. Paul begins by calling out exactly how their lives reflect a radical change that only God can do through the gospel.

Verses two to three says this, we give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before God, before our God and Father, your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is mentioning three of the highest of Christian virtues here, faith, hope, and love. And these folks here in Thessalonica, they're living in a way that manifested all three, they could see it.

But it wasn't just faith, love, and hope in just anything. It was faith, love, and hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul says. And that's what mobilized them into action, right?

[15 : 08] It caused them to work and labor and persevere in steadfastness. And when God's grace and peace are upon us, it doesn't mean we live a life of holy leisure and entertainment for ourselves.

We get involved in kingdom work. We do the things of the kingdom. We participate in God's redemptive purpose. Faith and love, love for Jesus, hope in Jesus, these are animating virtues.

They manifest through us because they live inside of us at the very core of who we are, our soul and our hearts and our minds. And these places, they're the place of our deepest desires.

They're the place of our will and our reason. And what we're seeing is when God comes into our lives, those things, these Christian virtues begin to shape us, begin to shape those deep desires and will and reason.

And we see that for the Thessalonian believers, the core of their being had been transformed. You can, here's the thing, you can have faith and love and hope towards a lot of things.

[16 : 13] Not just Jesus. Think about that. What you have faith, love, and hope for will become evident because it will manifest through your life. If your faith, hope, and love is in politics, it's gonna be reflected in your social media posts, your conversations, and where you spend the bulk of your screen time consuming.

You can switch that out. You can switch politics out for anything else. Money, sex, leisure, whatever you want it to be. Video games. It could be a lot of different stuff. Take an inventory of those things.

Take an inventory of your posts, your conversations, your media consumption. What are they saying your faith, hope, and love lies in? Is it in Jesus or is it in something else?

Disciples of Jesus have their faith, hope, and love set on their Lord Jesus Christ alone. That's it.

Nothing else. And before you think that is in your power to change yourself at that core of a level of your being, let me tell you it is not.

Because verse four says this, we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

[17 : 24] So Paul shifts his focus from the virtues that manifest in us to the God who makes it happen. Because it is God who transforms us through his gospel. See, friends, the gospel is merely just good news.

That's it. It is a message compiled of words strung together into sentences that communicate a story of what God has done as our savior. And here's the thing, many hear these words and nothing changes for them.

But for some, it brings about the kind of change Paul gives thanks for in verse three. And Paul does not give the Thessalonian believers credit for this change.

He gives it to God because it is God who saves. And this salvation, this view of salvation cuts across our modern view of self today and all that we think that we are capable of.

And it isn't unique to today. Actually, in the fourth century, there was a war wage at the heart of the Christian faith over salvation by grace or salvation by man's own ability. And you may have heard this name.

[18 : 29] He's a famous church father, Augustine. He stood for the apostolic tradition handed down from them of salvation by faith alone and grace alone. And the other side was a theologian named Pelagius who both denied original sin and also said, man could of his own will attain a righteousness that saves apart from Jesus.

If only we tried hard enough. If only we obeyed perfectly, we could actually attain that perfect righteousness. And thankfully, the doctrine of grace won the day.

And yet, the war has never been over. Grace is always under attack because the original sin of man is his belief that he can be like God and thus not need God's help for anything. I got this.

I got this without you. Who alone can save themselves, the song asks. Maybe I can, is the tempting thought.

Paul says something that strikes a death blow to this idea that maybe we can save ourselves apart from God. He says, he has chosen you. And that's a more reader friendly rendering of the Greek which is more literally your election by God.

[19 : 42] So put on your seatbelts, we're going there. Okay? So this set apart assembly we've been talking about are those selected by God.

The Greek there is ekklege. So in Greek terms the ekklesia, the set apart believers are those who have been ekklegade. The set apart assembly are those God has selected.

Kind of makes sense. Now this subject might make us a little uncomfortable but this doctrine of God's divine choosing or election occurs in dozens of places, dozens of places throughout the New Testament.

I would encourage you to go do a word study on it. And it's a thing we have to reckon with because it's in the Bible so much. Even if it raises objections or confusion. Now maybe we can, maybe something that we can all settle on is this.

When it comes to salvation, God is not responding to you, you are responding to him. Okay? When it comes to salvation, God is not responding to you, you are responding to him.

[20 : 49] He makes the first move and unless he does, we have no hope of salvation. Now whether you prefer the word chosen or election or selection or anything else, the Greek word Paul uses here means to be selected out of and into a given outcome.

That's what it means to be chosen by God. We are selected by him to be saved out of this world and the ways of this world and all of its values and all that it holds dear, all that it holds sacred and God brings us out of that and it brings us into his given outcome, his given purpose of salvation over us which by the way, he's eternally determined before time began.

It says that in the Bible too. Which means we are chosen, we are justified, we are forgiven, we are adopted and we are in the process by the Holy Spirit at work in us of becoming more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

This speaks to the supremacy of God's grace. He indeed is the ultimate father patron and king of kings. Sorry Caesar, sorry POTUS, the Lord God is better.

He shows no partiality and bestows his patronage favor upon us that has eternal consequences, things that will carry on into eternity forever and ever.

[22 : 14] And citizens of Rome who lived in Thessalonica, believed Caesar's favor had come upon them because he chose to do that. And in return, they worshiped him and rendered service and fidelity to him because of that.

Now I would say a large part of that was out of their own self-interest because if they didn't do those things, Roman soldiers were probably gonna show up and get their mind right, right, correct?

Caesar worship was fear-based, afraid of what might be coming retribution-wise upon them, whereas the worship of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is based in his love.

Paul says in verse four, we know, brothers, loved by God he has chosen you. The love of God had come upon them. Love and fear are two very different motivators.

Like, I don't want my kids to obey me from fear of reprisal. I want them to obey me because they love me as their dad. Now sometimes consequences help bring them back from wayward behaviors and that's okay.

We get them back into alignment but we only do those consequences because we love them and we know it's not good for them. But ultimately, I want them to know that my love toward them is unconditional.

[23 : 24] I love them because they are my children and that is it. And that's what God's love for us is. He chose us. He adopted us. He made us his sons and daughters and so he loves us in that way.

That is it. And he doesn't try to control our behaviors and enforce our allegiance through fear. He compels us through love and a proof of that love is his abiding presence.

Verse 5 says, because our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. Paul says his gospel came with the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit brings conviction.

Why is conviction so important? You know, the message of a God of love who saves us and forgives us of our sins can be heard and just be considered a blessed thought.

But a blessed thought does not bring about faith and hope and love out of us. I want to say this, unicorns are a blessed thought. Okay? But Jesus and his salvation can't be in that same category.

[24 : 33] And so God does the work of moving us from blessed thought to conviction. God transforms us by making his truth about salvation our conviction.

The power of the gospel is God's truth accompanied by God's presence that transforms people who begin to live by that truth. That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

We live that truth out. We live his truth. And Paul testifies to that. He testifies to us today that is exactly what happened to the Thessalonians.

Their lives bore witness to the power of the gospel. Verse 6, And you became imitators of us and of the Lord for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

[25 : 55] When the gospel and the Holy Spirit come to you, watch out. It will bring conviction that changes you to your core, that transforms you to live in a totally different way.

He is the God who changes us from one degree of glory to another. That's his promise that he gives to us. And so, he comes with conviction in his truth.

Paul testifies to the impact this conviction had on those Thessalonians. Their faith resounded. It means, it sounded forth. It means it reverberated. Like when you drop a pebble in a pond and the ripples just keep going and going and going.

And it went far beyond their neighborhoods of Thessalonica. They became examples of a changed life which bore witness to the power of the gospel. You know, they didn't turn from idols and turn to God and wait for Jesus and his return because the gospel was a blessed thought.

It was their conviction. It became their conviction. God made it their conviction. And that conviction was proven in their witness. The power of the gospel transforms us to be a powerful gospel witness.

[27 : 07] So, to the church of the New Bernians and God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, where is your identity? Where is your allegiance?

Is the gospel of Jesus a blessed thought or is it your conviction? Is work of faith, labor of love and steadfast hope in Jesus our witness in our lives?

Are we turning from today's idols, politics, pleasure, leisure, greed, wealth and self? Are we turning from those idols and turning to the one true and living God?

What are our lives bearing witness to? Leo Tolstoy said this, until you do what you believe, you don't know if you believe it or not. We are people that live the truth of Jesus.

It's not a blessed thought. It's a conviction. So, the band comes up and we look to respond. We're gonna take communion in a moment but if you're not yet a follower of Jesus, I would say to you, don't come to the table.

[28 : 13] You come to the Savior that it points to. His name is Jesus Christ. And I wanna ask you, what do you believe? Is this good news that Jesus came and died on a cross for your sins to be washed away and clean that you can live in him and wait for his return one day that eternal life can be yours through faith in him?

Is that a blessed thought or is that a conviction? Where is your hope of salvation? I wanna say to you today, put your hope and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Put your love on him more than anything else because he died for you.

And there's gonna be a prayer on the screen for you to pray and I would encourage you to pray that today. If you're here already a follower of Jesus, I wanna ask you, has the gospel become a blessed thought in your life?

Or is it a conviction? As we come to the communion table, this meal, it is a sign, it serves as a sign and a symbol that we are in God the Father, that we are in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Why? Because he took initiative. He made the first move and he says, look what I did. You can come and you can partake of me.

[29 : 28] You can feast on my body and my blood. We eat this bread and we drink this cup that point to his sacrifice of body and blood.

Why do we do that? Because it's a conviction that we have, not a blessed thought. We take communion because we believe that we have union with Christ and this reminds us of that union with him, that we get to live in him.

And that's not a blessed thought, that is a beautiful conviction that we hold. So let us come, let us come with thanks to this meal of grace. Let me pray and then after I'm done, you can go to the table nearest you.

Take the bread and the cup back to your seat and you can take it when you're ready. Lord Jesus, we thank you. We thank you for this free invitation of grace to you.

Some of us in the room are coming to you as not having believed, as you just being a blessed thought, but now we're coming to you with great conviction and I thank you for that work that you do to save us, to open our eyes, that you are the Lord Jesus Christ.

[30 : 31] Some of us are coming to the table already as believers and Lord stir us, stir conviction in our hearts to remember how wonderful and amazing this gospel is. It is way more than a blessed thought.

We thank you for all that you have done, all that you are doing and all that you will do. Amen.