



# 1 THESSALONIANS

*living in hope*

## THE NATURE OF FAITH

**Sunday 23 October 2022**

*SERMON TRANSCRIPT*

>> *Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17 - 3:13*

Well, we've been working our way through the book of 1 Thessalonians and today we're going to pick the story up in 1 Thessalonians 2:17 through to 3:13. It's a strange section because, in it, we find something we don't see very often. We see Paul very stressed out. This is the guy who's been shipwrecked, beaten almost to death, in prison... And he always looks like he's so calm and rejoicing - but here we find him stressed out and anxious about this young church that he's established in Thessalonica. He's had to leave, and he's worried about their faith. Is their faith going to make it? He'd only spent a couple of months there, only a short time, and they immediately face persecution.

Now, the book of Thessalonians is really the end of the story, so I'm going to start back in Acts chapter 17. Scott also covered a lot of this in his introductory sermon 2 weeks ago, so I encourage you to listen to that. But we're going to work through this situation and, hopefully, we'll learn a lot about the nature of faith as we see Paul's stress over this young church and whether they're still standing firm in the faith.

When Paul set off on his first missionary journey, he went up through the churches in Asia what you might call Asia-Minor or modern-day Turkey. And he established a number of churches there. And then he went back to Israel. His calling is to establish and plant churches, so a couple of years later he decides he'd better get off and start doing some more but he doesn't know where to go. So, he decides he'll just head off through Asia again and just strengthen up the churches he's already established and see where it takes him. And as he works his way through Asia-Minor the Spirit kept saying, "Not here... Not here." He keeps blocking him! So,

one night Paul goes to sleep and he has this vision of a Macedonian man saying, "Come over here," and he realises God is speaking to him. So, then he goes across the Aegean to the Roman Province of Macedonia. He spends some time in Philippi preaching there and is eventually forced to leave Philippi, so he makes his way down to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica is a seaport. It's one of the major Roman seaports of Macedonia. It's also on the Via Egnatia, the Roman road that connects Rome right through to modern-day Istanbul, a major transport route. So, Thessalonica was a very strategic city.

So, let's pick up the story in Acts 17:1-4:

*"When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women."*

Paul goes into the synagogue, as was his custom, opens up the Old Testament scripture, and he proves to them through the scripture that Jesus was the Messiah and that He had to come because all people - whether they are Jews under the Law or Gentiles without the Law - have sinned and rebelled against God and pushed God away. The Messiah had to come, and He had to give His life on the cross. And on that cross, He had to take upon Himself all of the sin of both the Jews and the Gentiles, and He gave His life to pay the price for that sin. But then, three days later, He rose from the dead to prove He had defeated sin and that anyone - whether they're a Jew or a Gentile - could put their faith in Him and be made right with God. And Paul proved all of this through the Jewish scriptures - it's all there in the Old Testament.

Many of the Jews believed what he said. And an even larger number of the God-fearers converted (the God-fearers were Gentiles who had converted to Judaism). And even a few of the prominent women in the city were converted. So, Paul has this young church up and running. He then goes and preaches to the Gentiles and even more people come to Christ.

Now, Paul describes exactly how this happens in 1 Thessalonians 2:13. He says:

*"And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe."*

Firstly, to come to faith in Jesus you have to hear the Word. You can't put your faith in Jesus without hearing about what He's done. And they heard it from Paul.

Secondly, they heard the Word as it is: as the Word of God. See, the scripture is not just another human word – it is the absolute Word of God. It was given by the God who made us. The God who is all-knowing caused the scripture to be written. And they accepted it as such, as truth.

Thirdly, they put their faith in it. They chose to say, "I'm going to live my life according to this truth. I accept Jesus as my Lord. I accept Him as my Saviour. And I am going to live according to the scriptures."

So, the first thing we learn about faith is that **faith comes through hearing and hearing the Word of God**. This means if you want to be growing and maintaining your faith, you need to be hearing the Word of God regularly. It's not like you just hear it once, become saved, and then that'll get you through for all eternity. It's a bit like eating food: you need to be taking it in regularly to maintain your strength / faith. That's where faith comes from.

One of my concerns about this sermon is you might think it's all about looking inward at your own faith. But the thing is when we're in faith we're actually focused on Jesus. Faith is about Jesus, about believing in Him. And faith comes through hearing the Word because the Word is about Jesus.

*"But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go." (Acts 17:5-9)*

So, some of the Jews heard the message about Jesus and believed. But others heard it and were jealous. They didn't like this one little bit. And so, they formed a mob and they sent them down to Jason's place to drag out Paul.

We don't know anything else about Jason, he's an interesting character. He's one of those heroes in the Bible whom we only hear a little bit about, this is all we know about him. He's obviously heard the message from Paul, he's believed, he's then invited Paul back to his house and the new church probably meets there as a house-church. So as soon as the Jews want to get Paul, they go to Jason's place. They try and find Paul, but Jason and the

other leaders have hidden Paul away. So, they drag Jason and the leaders out and they make them post a bond. In other words, they make them put up a large sum of money and say, "If we see Paul in this town again, you're going to lose this money."

The Jews were jealous because they saw themselves as the superior race. God had spoken to them, they had the Law, everyone else was not as good as them. They liked things as they were. They didn't want to hear that, even though they had the Law, they were still sinners under the Law. They didn't want to hear that they needed to put their faith in Jesus to have their sins removed. And they certainly didn't want to hear that Gentiles could do exactly the same thing and put their faith in the same Jesus. They didn't want to hear any of this because they believed they were the superior people! And so, they were jealous.

See, the Gospel is a fulfilment. It's hard to believe you can read the Old Testament and not see Jesus - it's all pointing to Jesus. He's the fulfilment of their scriptures. But like a lot of people who reject the Word of God, their self-deceived. Here they are saying, "Jesus claims to be a king but only Caesar is the king." As if the Jews believed Caesar was the king!?! That's so hypocritical. In fact, it's interesting, because in John 19:12 we read:

*"From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.""*

See, this is exactly what they did when they crucified Jesus. They said, "We only have Caesar as king," which is such hypocrisy.

So faith comes by hearing the Word, but **faith is refined by trials**. This early church received Jesus and put their faith in Jesus by hearing the Word about Him, but immediately they come under trial. 1 Peter 6-7 says:

*"...now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed."*

So, you believe by hearing the Word, but then when you come under trials your faith is challenged and tested. You find out what you really believe when you're under fire. And that's often the time when Jesus reveals Himself most clearly to you. All of those extra rubbishy bits fall away, and your faith is strengthened and refined. So, faith comes through hearing the Word, but it's refined by trials.

*"As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character*

*than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men."* (Acts 17:10-12)

The mob can't find Paul because they sneak him out of the city at night and he heads off to Berea. As soon as he gets there, 40km away or so, he goes to the synagogue and starts preaching again. He's unphased! He just started preaching again! And the Bereans are more noble than the Thessalonians. They hear him with eagerness and they go away each night and open up the Bible themselves to see if what he was saying was true. So, a large number of them convert.

*"But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible."* (Acts 17:13-15)

So, he's been chased out of Thessalonica. He's now preaching in Berea. The mob comes to Berea. He gets chased out of Berea. And so, Paul leaves Timothy and Silos there to keep strengthening up the Bereans and he heads down to Athens. When he gets to Athens, he then calls for Silos and Timothy to come and join him down at Athens.

We then pick up the story in 1 Thessalonians. We finally come to our passage for the day:

*"But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you - certainly I, Paul, did, again and again - but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy."*

(1 Thessalonians 2:17-20)

Here we find Paul desperately anxious about this church he's set up in Thessalonica. They're only a young church, they've only just come to Christ, and now they're left on their own with these forces against them. And Paul desperately wants to go back and see how they're going. But Satan keeps blocking him - and not least if he goes back, they're going to lose all that bond money they put up and they're going to face more persecution.

It's interesting, he shows a fair bit of his heart here. He says, "What is our hope, our joy, our glory? It's you!" See, Paul's treasure is to see people built up and grow in the faith. That's what brings him joy. That's what brings him hope. He longs for the day that we can all stand up in glory together and he can see all the people he's nurtured in the faith standing

there in Heaven. And so now he's anxious that this little group is not going to be able to make it.

*"So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know." (1 Thessalonians 3:1-4)*

See, Paul couldn't stand it any longer. He was so stressed, he was so anxious, this man who's been through the beatings and the shipwrecks with such calmness can't stand it now because he's worried about this little church. He had Timothy with him in Athens to help him with his work, but he couldn't stand it any longer so he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to see if he could find out how they were going. Timothy obviously had a lower profile than Paul so he could sneak in and find out what was going on.

*"For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain." (1 Thessalonians 3:5)*

See, Paul knew that we have an enemy who wants to attack our faith. It's the one this Satan wants to do, is to attack and draw us away from Jesus. Satan rebelled against God, but God is beyond Satan's ability to harm Him. Satan is a flea compared to God, He can't actually do anything directly to God. So, the only way He can get at God is by drawing these people, whom God loves, away from Him. So, Satan's big task on earth is to attack our faith and to try and draw us away from Jesus. That's what he does.

Faith comes through hearing the Word. Faith is refined by trials. But **faith is under constant attack by the enemy.** That's why you can't be passive in your faith. We are in the middle of a spiritual battle. Satan is trying to destroy and undermine your faith. It'd be like sitting in the middle of a battleground having a picnic - you can't be passive. In fact, one of the saddest things to me about Covid was that I saw a number of people who, when they couldn't come to church, they just drifted away from the faith. There was nothing holding them there. And I think that was said because you can't be passive about your faith. There's an enemy, there's a battle going on, you've got to stand firm in your faith.

*"But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now*

*we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."* (1 Thessalonians 3:6-10)

So, Paul is desperate to find out about these Thessalonians. When he's in Athens he sends Timothy back. And in the meantime, he heads down into Corinth. And so, Timothy goes up to Thessalonica and he finds out that the Thessalonians are fine. They're standing firm, they're going great-guns! He stays with them, he brings messages from Paul, he preaches a bit, and then he heads back and catches up with Paul in Corinth - and it's in Corinth that Paul is writing this letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul gets the news and he's overjoyed that the Thessalonians are doing great! And it just brings him such joy. He says, "for now we really live." To him, this gives him life to know they're still going great. He says, "I'd desperately love to come and join you and have a cuppa and maybe have a meal and worship together," but he still can't get up there. And he said, "I'd love to supply what's lacking in your faith."

See, our faith can always grow more. Jesus would often point to people, saying, "You of little faith," and then the next one He'd say, "This one has great faith," and the next one had exceeding faith. We can always be growing in our knowledge and our trust and our belief in Jesus. And we can always push our faith further into all the corners and all the areas of our life. You first come to faith in Jesus because you believe Jesus will give you salvation, so you have faith for salvation. But as you move on, you might gain faith for holiness and faith for healing and faith for peace and faith for prospering. And you find out, it's all the same faith, it all comes from the cross - but it applies to so many areas of our life, and we press it out further and further. For example, we learn from the scriptures that by His stripes we're healed, the punishment poured out on Him has brought us peace, He became poor that we might become rich - we see the implications and we press our faith out into all the corners of our life.

Paul says our faith comes through hearing the Word, it's refined by trials, it's under constant attack by the enemy - but our **faith is strengthened as we meet together**. Paul says, "*I long to come to you to supply what is lacking in your faith*" (1 Thessalonians 3:10). He explains more about how this works in Ephesians 4:11-13:

*"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."*

When we come to Jesus, He gives us spiritual gifts and spiritual abilities. And He gives me

gifts and abilities that He didn't give to you. And He gives you gifts and abilities that He didn't give to me. And each of those gifts shows a different aspect of who Jesus is. So, the only way we can get the whole picture of Jesus is when we all come together and we all exercise our gifts together. And that's why Paul says, "I want to come to you and supply what is lacking. I want to bring what I have to you, and receive what you have for me." So, if some people are not exercising their spiritual gifts, to that extent, the church misses out. That's how Christ designed it, that we need us all. So, faith is strengthened as we meet together.

Then Paul finishes this little section with a prayer. And Scott's going to cover this in more detail next week:

*"Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13)*

We see in this section that Paul - as stressed out as he ever is in the New Testament, as he's anxious about the faith of this new church in Thessalonica - can do absolutely nothing about it. There's nothing he can do. He can't go back. All he can do is pray. And so, Paul prays earnestly for them. And I know there's a number of people here who are worried about loved ones and their faith, and there's nothing you can do about it. But be encouraged: Paul prayed fervently and what a great answer to prayer that this young church is thriving, even without Paul being there.

Paul prays they'll be strengthened in their love, strengthened in their holiness, and that they'll be ready when Jesus returns. Thessalonians has a lot to say about the return of Jesus and Paul wants them to be ready for when Jesus comes. See, **faith is how we overcome in this life**. 1 John 5:4-5 says:

*"...for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."*

Faith comes through hearing the Word, it's refined by trials, it's under constant attack by the enemy, it's strengthened as we meet together and exercise our gifts together - and it's how we overcome the world. We face difficult times in this life. Our faith is challenged in many ways. But it is through looking to Jesus and trusting Him that gets us through because faith is what connects us to Jesus. See, it's not our faith that has the power - it's Jesus' power, but faith is what connects us to Him. And Paul's prayer is that these people will stand firm in the faith, in spite of trials, in spite of difficulties, and they'll be standing there



firm when Jesus returns. And that's what we want for all of us.

So, that's my encouragement as we study this section:

- How are you going in your faith?
- Is your faith standing firm?
- Are you in the Word regularly?
- Are you regularly meeting together and exercising your gifts and helping build each other up?
- Are we standing firm?

Because we can't take it for granted especially when, as Scott mentioned the other day, in Australia the dial has turned up a notch in persecution. We've seen the Andrew Thorburn situation and various things like that. I was to encourage you: we get to be the winners! We have a beautiful future ahead! But let's stand firm in the faith, in Jesus.