

# A Time To Encourage

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[ 0:00 ] We're going to look at 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, the whole chapter really, but I just want! to read again verse 2 and 3. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Do you feel encouraged in the work of the gospel today?

Or as you were coming up to church this morning to gather together here, was there a sense of coming here to be encouraged, but also to be an encouragement to others here and to think about being an encouragement to all around us. There's a sense of encouragement that runs throughout this letter that Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica. And we read in two different parts in the book of Acts in chapter 17, for there we see just how Paul and Silas ended up going to Thessalonica and how they weren't there very long. They were only there for around three weeks, but in that time the gospel made such a powerful impression on the people there. It left a great impression on that city. As you read in chapter 17, you see that taken hold, many came to faith and a whole host of different people. When you go back to

Acts chapter 17 there, you see in verse 4, 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. And it's interesting how it there mentions and not a few of the leading women. It seems just like a throwaway comment. And yet, as we'll see when we come back, so we're looking at 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, we see just how much of an impression this gospel made and how much of an impression was made through those who had heard this gospel.

And if you continue to read through Acts chapter 17 and into 18, you see that although the gospel was being proclaimed there by Paul and Silas, it met with opposition. You read that the Jews were disturbed by this. The gospel had disturbed people, both in a good sense, but also in a negative sense as well. In a good sense, it disturbed people to consider where they were at. They were very much a people who had no thought of a living God, but worshipped idols. But the good news of Jesus came to them and disturbed them in this and showed them that there was a greater God to worship and that it wasn't just an idol. It was the living God. But it disturbed in a bad sense as well in that there was much opposition. And Paul and Silas were forced to quickly leave and continue through to other places, such as Berea, Athens, and Corinth. But the gospel continued to spread. And as you read on through the book of Acts, you see just how that gospel spread. Paul spends, after being in Thessalonica, about a year and a half then in Corinth. And there the gospel again took hold among many people. But it's there that he hears what has been happening in Thessalonica since he left. And that is where this letter comes from. He writes back to them. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 3, we see there what news has come to him. It says in verse 6, but now that Timothy has come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you. This is what Paul heard from Thessalonica a year and a half later. Timothy came back and he's hearing the good news of their faith and their love. And so he writes to them, thankful for what has happened since he left, with a great desire to encourage them as you read them in the New Testament, encouraged by them. And the letters of Paul, as you read them in the New Testament, there's a variety to them. There are letters that are quite challenging. The letter to the Corinthians, it's quite challenging as to their behavior, to their attitude in certain things. And so Paul doesn't hold back sometimes. He challenges where there is wrong. But there's also times when he's just reflecting on the joy that there is in the Lord Jesus Christ. And here in this letter to the Thessalonians, it's very much a letter of encouragement, how he's been encouraged of hearing them and how he's writing to encourage them as well.

Encouragement is such a great thing that can make such a difference in people's lives. And this church flourished and was a great example to others because of the encouragement that they had received. And you could see as a result of this encouragement, they loved two things.

[ 5 : 43 ] They loved joining together as the people of God. There was a great sense of being church in that sense of being together, worshiping the Lord. And there's great encouragement as we do that to this day.

And as they met together in worship and were encouraged together, the second thing they loved then was serving the Lord and his people and the people around them. And so this was a church that was flourishing because there was great encouragement in their midst. And you see other churches at the time, Corinth and Galatia, for example, they met with discouragement. And as you read these letters, you see that this was causing disruption in Corinth where people were not meeting together. It was causing people to go away from God in Galatia where they were, it says, who has bewitched you. It's like, who's turned you away from the gospel. So they met with challenges and discouragements and it had a negative effect. And that is true to this day as well, where negativity and discouragement can lead us to, you know, not meeting together as often as we should or not wanting to be together or just being so discouraged we almost fall back from this gospel. And so we need encouragement. And there's always encouragement as we come to the word of God. Encouragement in the Lord can build us up and help us to be examples. And that's what I want us to take from this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians today.

There is encouragement here for us today to keep going and meeting together and loving each other and loving all around us. So the first thing we want to see is the elements of their encouragement.

The elements of their encouragement. How do we see this? Well, we see it in this opening chapter. The church here in Thessalonica gives us a clear example of just what a witness every church should be.

And it's evident even just in this first chapter, just what an example they have become, not just in their own place, but how this has been heard of far and wide. Remember, when we speak of the church, it's the people. We are speaking about the people who make up the church, just like we are here.

[ 8 : 26 ] The church here is you who are gathered together here. As we gather together, we are the church. And the church here, the people here were witnesses to all around them. And we must remember that ourselves. That is a great element of our encouragement when we think of what kind of witness are we to those around us, to the community here and further afield as well. People see us. They look at us.

They look to our conduct among ourselves and among others around us, and they form opinion. They form opinions about us, but they'll also form opinion about the Lord who we say we love and serve based on what we see. And what they saw in Paul and Silas when they came to Thessalonica in the book of Acts, as we read in chapter 17, it was something powerful because they said about them, these men have turned the world upside down. There was such a disturbance in that sense, but it was in such a positive way, in such a positive light. The gospel was disturbing people.

It was turning the world upside down in the eyes of those who were against them. But really, you could say it's the other way around, turning the world the right way up when we begin to see God for who He is. But there were those who were against this. But what we see in Thessalonica was that as the people heard, and as they remained steadfast in their faith, and as they were encouraging one another and encouraging those around them, there was the strength of unity and this building up of this oneness together. And what we see in the Thessalonian believers, that is what we should demonstrate ourselves today. We can speak about marks of the church, what a church should be marked out by. We speak of the preaching of the word, the sacraments, and church discipline as three of the main marks of the church. But alongside that are other things that feed out from that, that should flow from that and give encouragement. And we need to examine ourselves and see whether we have these elements that mark the church in Thessalonica out as well.

The marks that we see, even as you look at verse 3 here, you see that element of saving faith. In verse 3, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith. Faith was at the heart of this church, of this people. And there's a faith that is in action, a faith that is lived out.

In Hebrews chapter 11, you read that great passage of the people of faith. They believed and they did. It's so often what you read of when you go through that chapter. By faith, they did. And that's what we're seeing here in Thessalonica as well. By faith, these people did. But faith was the foundation.

[ 11 : 46 ] It wasn't just a people who were gathered together with no idea what they were doing or still worshiping idols as they were in the past. They were a people who now had a focus. They had a focus through faith. Their salvation that was in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith marked them out.

Are we a people of faith? As we gather here today, do we come with that sense of a great knowledge of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, that our greatest encouragement is through Him? Do we come believing all His promises and His Word? There was once a farming community and it was experiencing a time of severe drought. Crops were failing. The ground was so dry that it was starting to crack.

And the community, the church, decided to call a day of prayer. It was great that they saw this need. We need God in the midst of this drought. We need to come to Him in prayer. And as they made their way up when the day of prayer came, some of the people who were walking up, they saw a little girl carrying an umbrella. And they asked her, where are you going with that? And the girl's response was, well, we're going to pray for rain, aren't we? They were going, but were they going in faith? This little girl had a simple faith. If we're going to ask God for rain, we better be prepared for the rain to come.

Do we have that sense of faith as we come to worship God? There was a sense of serving faith in this as well. They believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. And it goes on there in verse 3 to say, and labor of love. Everything that faith led to was then a labor of love. And a labor means effort.

Behind this word is toil and effort and sweat. Because of everything that had been done for them, theirs was now a labor of love for the Lord as well. And what a great community of believers it is when that is at the heart of what we do as well. In our encouragement, we are encouraged to labor in love.

[14:15] We serve others, whether they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, whether they are the strangers around us who maybe we don't know, whether it's even other parts of the church or our people throughout our world.

We seek to labor in love for the goodness and the glory of God throughout. But there was also this sustaining faith as well.

The labor of love and the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Again, the Lord Jesus is behind everything that they are doing here, the steadfast hope that they have in him.

As you look at verse 9, it says there that they are turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God. And it goes on then, and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come.

There was this hope. Faith has hope. It looks for something better as well. And so there were these elements of encouragement that they had.

[15:31] And one of the greatest testimonies is a faithful service. A labor of love to God. And especially when it is in the midst of afflictions.

So they had this great testimony themselves that had its foundation in faith. A saving faith, a serving faith, and a sustaining faith.

But then secondly, we see that they got encouragement. They got encouragement in this. Paul having left the people in Thessalonica, and more than a year having passed, and having received encouragement himself in what was happening, and that their faith was growing.

It wasn't just a faith that was plodding on, as we might say. It was a faith that was going from strength to strength. And so Paul writes back to encourage them.

To encourage them. He wants to encourage them in all of this. There's so many positives here in how they were living.

[16:42] In what they were doing. And it's seen in just how they had, in verse 6, they had become imitators of Paul and Silas, but above all, of the Lord.

When Paul and Silas had been in their midst, and you think, three weeks. It doesn't sound a lot, but it had left a great impression. To my mind, it just comes when you think of almost like these short missionary times.

You think of the faith mission, and how they often come to different parts of our islands here. And very often, it's maybe just for two weeks. But there's that intense teaching.

There's that intense time of worship. There's that intense time of prayer. And you can very often see a stirring up among people in these days that can then go on and last for weeks and months and even years afterwards.

That's what you're seeing here. Paul and Silas were in their midst just for a few weeks, but they had heard this precious gospel and the power that it had.

[ 17:45 ] And even after a year's time, it's still having a powerful impact. And so he's writing to them here about their faith, their work of faith.

It's had a past, if you like. He's taking them back to where they were rooted first and foremost in Christ. And so often, maybe sometimes, we have to go back and remind ourselves of where our faith is placed.

As maybe weeks and months and years go by, when we feel ourselves weeding, maybe it's great to be encouraged in the gospel and to come back to remember our faith and its foundation.

that hour I first believed, as the hymn says. To go back to that. We don't just stay there, but sometimes it's good to go back and remind ourselves of when the Lord brought us from darkness into light.

When by His grace He worked in our hearts. And to remember what encouragement we received. Because encouragement is such a great thing. And there is no greater encouragement than the Lord saving a wretch like me.

[ 18:56 ] When He came into my life, when He came into my heart. Because discouragement could so easily turn us the other way. There was an artist in America in the 18th century called Benjamin West.

He went on to become a famous artist. But it began at a very young age. And it could so easily have gone another way.

And what happened in his life, and he often goes back to this when he reflected on his life. He would go back to this point. He said, it was a day when I was babysitting my little sister Sally.

He said, my mother left me with her. She went out. And what he found in the house was bottles of ink. And so he decided for himself that he was going to paint a picture, a portrait of his little sister.

By the time his mother returned, when she entered into the house, she looked around. And what she found, you could have looked at it, was just a mess. There was ink splotted everywhere, on the furniture, on the floor, all over the place.

[ 20:05 ] What did she do? She remained calm. And then she saw the painting that he had made of her daughter, of his sister. And that is what she focused on.

And she said, what a beautiful picture of your sister. And she kissed Benjamin on the head. And he said, I often go back to that because it could have easily sent me the other way if she had discouraged me, if she had rebuked me for the mess.

But instead, she looked on the masterpieces, as it were, of a painting of her daughter. And we could reflect back as well and think, well, what do we see?

Do we see the mess that our lives were in? And are we discouraged in that? Or are we encouraged by the beauty of what Jesus has done?

How he has brought us to know him and to love him. And so Paul is here encouraging them, not just of what their past was.

[ 21:12 ] He says, you turn to God from idols to serve the living God. He doesn't dwell on the fact that they were idolaters, but on the fact that he's encouraging them that they have turned to the living God and continue to turn to the living God.

But their labor, it also has a present. Their faith also has a present. And he encourages them in that as well. When he says, the labor of love, he's speaking into their present now.

And he's saying, you are going on in this labor of love. You remember your faith that came in the past, but this faith is now still working in your labor of love.

And so they're encouraged to keep going. They're encouraged to go on in strength to strength in their labor of love because he first loved us.

And he encourages them that their faith has a future. The steadfastness of hope, he says there. What is he focusing on there? Their faith has a past, a present, but the future is hopeful too because it's all about the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 22 : 32 ] And so what great encouragement he is giving, not just to them, but to ourselves today. To reflect on our lives, to look at our lives, the faith that we came to or the faith that we need, the labor of love that we do or that we should be doing or the hope that we have or that we need looking ahead as well.

What achievements do you want to be remembered for in life? There are many good things that we can do in life. And it's always in a positive sense that we see good deeds being done or a life lived well or riches or prizes of all these things we can labor for in this life.

But what do we want to be remembered for? Well, wouldn't it be great to be remembered in this way? As verse 3 says, a people who are, have a work of faith, a labor of love and a steadfastness of hope.

Is that what you have today? That's what Paul is encouraging his people, God's people to hear in Thessalonica and to ourselves today. The encouragement to have that faith, that work of faith, that labor of love and that steadfastness of hope.

So there's that great encouragement that they got here and that we get. But there's also finally just that sense of the encouragement that they were. this wasn't all just coming into them.

[ 24 : 10 ] This was also going out from them. As they were encouraged themselves, they were also encouragers. You see this that their vibrant witness in verse 7, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

This is a huge region that we're talking about. and they become an example. It's like the word example just refers to a stamp.

You know, when you stamp something, it's impressed upon. And so this is what they're seeing here, that they are an example to others. Their faith, their witness, it is stamped upon others.

They are seeing and hearing of what they are doing, and their witness is going far and wide. And it takes us back to Acts chapter 17 and to those who were transformed by the gospel.

And where it said even not a few of those women, those business women. It's saying how God used everybody in this city to be an example to others.

[ 25 : 28 ] Men and women, boys and girls. it was this encouragement that they were to others around them. Verse 8, For not only has the word of God sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that there is no need to say anything.

People were hearing about what had happened in Thessalonica and the word was going far and wide. It was stirring up an interest in the gospel.

What kind of example was the church at Thessalonica? Well, they were an example of faith and love and steadfast hope.

But I'm sure if you had asked any of them there, what kind of example have you been? What kind of response would they have said? I'm sure many of them would have said, I'm just a poor witness.

I'm just a poor example of what a Christian should be. And yet you see there in verse 6, they had become living imitators of the Lord.

[ 26 : 41 ] They were representing the Lord. If I asked any of you here today, what kind of example of a Christian are you?

who would put their hands up and immediately start talking about how good an example I am? Few of us would, but believe me, you are a good example to many around you here and far and wide.

You are an encouragement to many people. In your prayers, in your faith, in your labor of love, in your steadfast hope, you are an example to others.

And that is what church should be, to be a positive influence in the community and far and wide, sharing in our labor of love in the gospel.

That's what the people wear. And you be encouraged that you are too. Discouragement can lead to our walk, our example not being what it should.

[ 27 : 50 ] But be encouraged in your faith, be encouraged in your labor and continue to walk as imitators of the Lord. So that people will hear about the good work, the prayerful spirit, the unity of this place, here, throughout our islands, throughout our nation, throughout the world, that people would hear of the work that the Lord is doing in your midst.

They were a faithful church. church, you be a faithful church too. This church led by example.

But their example was always in the Lord Jesus Christ. And God had a plan and a purpose. Maybe they didn't see it themselves, but as Paul writes back over a year later, he's saying, what you have done has spread far and wide.

The church grew as the people were faithful. You continue in faithfulness. They were faithful because they were encouraged.

You be encouraged today. And they were encouraged because Jesus had taken hold of them.

[ 29 : 12 ] remembered come back to that point where faith is the key. That the Lord takes hold of us when we look to Him, when we put our trust in Him.

They had come from idolatry, but they turned to the true and the living God. So if you haven't already, maybe today is the day to turn to this living God.

God. And if you have, it's to continue looking to the true and living God, the one who delivers us from all our sin.

Somebody once said, flatter me and I may not believe you. Criticize me and I may not like you. Ignore me and I may not forgive you.

encourage me and I will never forget you. Paul wrote to encourage them. And what a blessing it would have been for them to receive this letter and hear this great encouragement that he has not forgotten them.

[ 30 : 23 ] Well, God has not forgotten us today. Be encouraged. He is with you. He is for you. He is building his church.

That is his promise to us. And so we go on with that in mind, praying for all glory to be his, but remembering before our God and Father your work of faith, your labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Be encouraged. Let us pray.