

Sunday Jan. 17, 2021
Lesson 7: Hope Because of Christ
Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1: 2-10

Context:

Our series continues to focus on God's hope for humanity. For the season of Epiphany, we will look at "The Good News" found in scripture and the hope God gives us as found in God's Word. This week we will consider how faith, love, and hope are marks of the Christian life.

The book of Thessalonians is one of the smaller books of the New Testament, yet it is theologically rich. The book is a letter written by Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the Christians in Thessalonica.¹ At the time of the writing, Thessalonica had been under Roman rule for over two centuries as the capital of the province of Macedonia and was the seat of Roman administration.² As a port city, Thessalonica would be considered cosmopolitan with many people from different backgrounds living there and bringing their cultures with them.

The purpose of the letter appears to be a build-up, or encouragement for the congregation. As he includes an account from a report from Timothy, Paul wants to consolidate or confirm the faithfulness of the Thessalonians.³ Throughout the letter, Paul affirms the key relationships with coworkers of the gospel there and also urges the Thessalonians to exhibit Christ like behavior to mark them as a distinct Christian community.⁴ Paul also stresses for them to focus on following Jesus Christ and not being tempted by the gods of the world.

Our passage this morning is from the opening of the letter as Paul reminds them of his love for them and reminds them of God's call on their lives. He calls attention to the gifts to come from faith, love, and hope. These things are what will bring goodness from Jesus Christ into their lives.

Paul also urges them to remember how their call from God and leads them to being imitators of Christ. In fact, their imitation has led to others noticing their behavior in places such as Macedonia and Achaia. As they have done great things in the name of the Lord, others have noticed so they do not even have to have Paul, Timothy, or Silvanus tell others about their good works. They are encouraged by how Jesus has come and will continue to deliver them from wrath. As the Thessalonians serve God, goodness will be in their midst.

¹ Gaventa, Beverly Roberta. "First and Second Thessalonians," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 2.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid.

Application

Faith, hope, and love are often paired with the Corinthians passage and are read at weddings. We always hear the focus on love as the greatest of these. While love is certainly a gift and the passage is appropriate for weddings, Thessalonians provides us with a different message. In the case of the people at Thessalonica, all three virtues are needed for them to live and to see the good news of Jesus Christ at work in their lives. The virtues work in tandem with each other to help us be the disciples God has called us to be.

Love is often a word I think has been robbed of its dignity. When we think of love, we conjure up images of valentines with red hearts or of songs written by the current artist of the day telling of the heartbreak or euphoria of a relationship. While those certainly can offer us a glimpse of love, love often transcends those allusions.

In my understanding, to love means to see a person in their entirety and to cherish them, warts and all. You may not like someone, yet to love them means you see the gifts with them and how God is still at work on them. To love someone means knowing when to encourage, challenge, or console them.

For the Thessalonians, their love has led them to efforts to try their best. When we love something or someone, we pour what we have into them always rooting for them. The Thessalonians seem to understand this and as we read the letter, we see of the mutual love shared between pastor and church. Their love has made them appreciate each other to see the gifts God has given them all to share for the laboring of the gospel.

Before love, Paul speaks of the faith guiding the Thessalonians. As they have placed their faith in Christ and in those sent to preach them the good news, they have blossomed and flourished. To have faith does not mean we will always see what is in front of us or what the future hold. Yet to have faith does mean we have placed our trust in God to lead us through whatever may come. For the Thessalonians, their faith has led them to work for the kingdom, which is life-giving and replenishing.

Finally, the Thessalonians are reminded of their perseverance, which has come from a hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. As the Thessalonians have faced obstacles and challenges, their hope has led them to persevere even when the cards are stacked against them. As a result, they have become a prayer of thanksgiving for Paul. Even when the world is amuck, they have been given an example in a strong community of believers who are resilient.

Have you ever thought of hope as a form of resilience? I have noted that those who are the most hopeful are those who are resilient. These are the people who see there is something bigger than themselves and even when challenges come their way, their hope is rooted in the God who always provides and sustains. I think it is why I love stories where people defy the odds, knowing the reality of their situations and yet are hopeful through whatever may come.

As we continue to navigate a tumultuous time in our country when there is chaos and strife between political parties and the ongoing pandemic, I hope that we may mirror our Thessalonian brothers and sisters from hundreds of years ago. They too knew the dangers all around them and perhaps even the tensions within their own congregation. And yet as Paul praises them, we see a people who were rooted in gifts from God. Whatever was happening in their midst, they had been given love, faith, and hope. They could face whatever came their way and so can we.

What is the power of faith, love, and hope in your life? Is your congregation full of faith, love, and hope? What marks a life of faith, love, and hope? How can we cultivate the marks of these virtues in our life together? Why do you think being full of hope is so important in our walk with Christ?

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