

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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At this time, I want to invite children who are four years old to 1st grade to be excused to their time of children's church as we together turn in God's word to the first letter to the Thessalonians. And as you do so, you might notice in your outline that the title of the series is An Advent People. And that may seem odd. It shouldn't be, and I'll explain why. The reality is we are still a people of advent. We chose this letter as we began this new year. What we're going to do this year is we're going to begin in one of the shorter epistles, and we're going to complete it. And as we do so, we'll then move to a series of topics, and then we'll come back to another book this year.

With that said, why did we pick 1 Thessalonians? It is because for Paul, this letter is meant to remind them that they are a people of hope who are waiting for the return of the Lord Jesus. But what does this waiting look like? What are we called to be as a people of advent as we look for the Lord's return? And so, we have this letter, and he begins it with great encouragement. He begins with one of the earlier letters of Paul. And it is written somewhere between 51 and 53 A.D. And he has received word from Timothy that things are going well. Paul was concerned because already in his teaching, this being his second missionary journey, that there were those false teachers who were rising up in the churches after they were planted and beginning to sow seeds of doubt in the ministry of the gospel and the disciples, but the truth and voracity of what Paul was teaching with regard to the gospel. And so, he was concerned that this might also be taking place in Thessalonica.

And so, this is where we find Paul, and he's uttering what are the very early teachings of Paul as it relates to what is the Trinity. Though, the word "trinity" is not present here, the work of the Trinity, the reality of the Trinity is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But this is a word of encouragement not only to Thessalonica, but it is also a word of encouragement to us as the church in 2019 as we begin this new year. And it is to be an encouragement, but it is also intended to be an exhortation. So, as the letter goes on, he'll begin to unpack what it means to be a people of advent, a people of hope, as they await the Lord's return. And how do we live in this tension of the already – that is, Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ has been resurrected – but we are awaiting His return. So, we already see the power of God at work, yet it's not yet fully realized.

How do we live in this tension? How do you live in this tension? How do we corporately do so? So, here we see the unpacking of this first idea of the church's mission, the building for the kingdom. Hear now God's word, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in 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 before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 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, and 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Again, pray with me.

Now Lord, we ask in this new year as we open up your word anew in this letter, that we would receive encouragement and power from your Holy Spirit through the word that you would increasingly make us a people who are in Christ Jesus, who are awaiting Christ Jesus, but who are living out the mission of the kingdom of God. Help us, we pray. In Jesus's name, help the teacher. Amen.

And so, you'll see as we look at these verses together, we have "praise of virtue, verses 2-3," and then "reception and response, verses 4-10." So, the praise of virtue. What Paul is doing even in the salutation, he's beginning to praise them for what is happening in their midst. And before we can look fully at this praise, you need to understand the heart and life from which it comes, and that is the heart of Paul working with Timothy and Silvanus as his assistants. But what he declares to them is something which is easy for us to overlook in these opening words of encouragement. He greets them in the name of the Lord. There is also no verb present in the Greek, and yet, there are verbs implied in what he is saying.

But what makes it interesting is not only just what he means by the verbs implied, which I'll get to. He also is greeting them in the name of the Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And then he mentions in verse 5 the power of the Holy Spirit. So, it might seem odd that I even bring this up. It might seem unimportant. But the reality is, unless we understand that Paul was grounded in a full trinitarian theology, we will not understand what he means by the work which he's getting ready to call them to.

And it's this. Paul, if you remember, was a first century Jew who was considered to be a pharisee of pharisees, one who knew the word one way or the other and he was a strict monotheist, which means he held to Deuteronomy 6:4, "The Lord our God, the Lord is One." And so, for Paul now to then say, "I greet you in God the Father," and then "Lord Jesus," the One who means "to save," or "by the One, He will save His people from their sins," He is the Christ – as we've looked at before – He is the One who will be the sacrifice. So, we have Lord Jesus Christ. He is Lord. He is the Savior. And He is also the sacrifice. And he says, "Grace to you."

This idea of God's favor, he's saying to them not just: hello. He is giving them an active blessing without the use of a verb. It is implied because he is saying, may the Lord God Jehovah, Lord Jesus Christ, the One who redeems by His sacrifice, may He pour out grace on you. This is to be an encouragement to them, but also to you. As you begin this year, my prayer is for you on a daily basis, that the Lord's grace will not just be experienced by you, but that it would be overflowing upon you. Because it is only by grace that we are here. It is only by God's grace that we are breathing. It is only by God's grace that we are still married. It is only by God's grace that our children are living and breathing. It is only by God's grace that we are sitting here worshipping the Lord, and not of ourselves. It is all of grace.

It is all of grace that Paul is now spouting and expressing a trinitarian trust and now a blessing of God's grace upon the people of God. Only by grace. And then he starts, and he says he praises them. He gives thanks to God constantly mentioning them in his prayers as he says, "remembering them before God," and then he gives these three things. These are three virtues. He also mentions a similar set in Colossians where he says, "And the greatest of these virtues is love." He considers faith, hope, and love – or, it should be faith, love, and hope; I mis-ordered them in my outline. So, it's faith, love, and hope. I'll get to the reason why in just a moment. But this idea of, he is thinking of faith not merely as a gift, though it is that, love, it is also a gift, so is hope. But they are also virtues, things to be worked out. So, if we've received the grace, we respond to it by seeking to act out in these things.

It's a new year. It's a new you. We don't get muscles by sitting on the couch and watching the Ravens football game this afternoon. I expect many of you might be doing crunches while you're watching the game. Or should you be watching the game at all? Nah, I'm just kidding. But you get the idea. The idea is it's absurd, of course, we begin to laugh cynically at the idea of new year resolutions, particularly as it relates to exercise. Because we all know we have good intentions, but we don't follow through. But know this, God's grace is not an intention. Having faith is not a good intent. Having good love is not an intent or hope. These things are more

than an intention. It is something to be worked out because he uses the word there when he says, “your work of faith.”

Now, “work” in the English is kind of boring, kind of flat. But in the Greek, it has far more contrast than dynamism. It’s this idea of intentional exertion. So, how can one exert faith? We exert faith by doing the very thing we did when we walked in this room and we sat in these chairs. You exercised trust because you sat in them. You presumed they would uphold you. But you’re practicing what trust looks like in chairs. How do we practice the virtue of faith? It means that we take all that we have, all that is in our minds, and practice something akin to a daily brain dump.

Do you wake up like I do with your mind racing – or at least after a cup of coffee – of all the things you have going on that day? What would it look like for us to do a regular brain dump and say: Lord, this is me. I am scattered beyond belief. I can’t do any of this unless you help me. Show me the way. Help me to number my days and give me a heart of wisdom, for this is what is in my mind. This is what is preoccupying my imagination when I have a brief moment of quiet. Lord, come and help me.

Now here’s the point. Does the Lord already know them? Yes. Does it mean that the Lord isn’t going to work if we don’t pray that? No, the Lord does work. But guess what? Part of His work is getting us to be a part of that work. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves we need to let Him do that work. So, exercising, exerting the virtue of faith is by exerting ourselves while we’re driving, while we’re walking, while we’re cooking, while we’re praying, whatever it is. Lord, take this. Help me. That is exercising the virtue of faith.

What about this idea of love? It sounds good. Here, again, in the English “love,” we become cynical. It sounds flat, not much interesting there until we see how it is to be exerted within the New Testament. How it is exerted within the New Testament is this. For Paul, this is precisely the issue that was happening just a few miles away in Corinth or what wasn’t happening. His whole teaching on the Lord’s supper in 1 Corinthians 11 is about saying to them, you’re gathering together to celebrate the Lord’s supper. You take the bread and the wine, which points us to what Christ has done for us on the cross. You pray for forgiveness, yet, you are failing not even to discern the body, the people around you. You’re acting and living in selfish ways. You are neither loving or forgiving to the others. And then you allow things in your own life. And so, your failure to love is all about horizontal relationships.

The exertion of love looks like this. Are there people in this room – now, let’s be real, church. Are there people in this room from whom or to whom you need to ask forgiveness or to give it? If we’re going to take seriously the grace of God that has been blessed on us and pronounced over us through the apostle Paul and remember that Jesus’s high priestly prayer is, do you know how the world is going to know that I am real? It’s because you love one another.

And something funny happens when forgiveness breaks out, testimony does. Columbia Presbyterian Church, who holds high the cross with the sun behind it gleaming in front of us every Sunday, how important is this cross in the midst of our relationships? Is there someone with whom you need to love more intentionally? This is what it means to exert it. It’s not just good flowery language.

But he ends with hope when he says to them, “your labor of love and your steadfastness of hope,” in fact, one could say the word “work” and the word “labor” and the word “steadfastness,” what he’s doing is he’s using three different Greek words but meaning the same thing. All of it is exerting. And here, he’s saying the “steadfastness of hope.” The problem was, they were facing a very uncertain future. The reality around them was the persecution against their faith from those who were converted Gentiles was going up, not down. Those with whom they used to call family members had rejected them. Those who were their friends are now ridiculing them because of their exercise of their faith. And some are beginning to doubt the importance of faith in Jesus Christ because of the persecution they are receiving. And yet, he praises them and says, I praise you for your earnest exertion of hope. That is, they had to remind themselves that what the reality was around them is not the end of the story. That the end of the story is not persecution and rejection. The end of the story is a victorious Christ coming again. Not coming again to take them to heaven. Coming again – which is what we believe – He’s coming again to bring a new heaven and a new earth. He’s not taking us to heaven, y’all. He’s making a heaven out of earth. He’s changing this.

And so, he's saying, as you look around at this, you are discouraged. But I praise you because you are continuing to say, the Lord is greater than what I see. My hope is in His power, because if His power has redeemed me and He's promised to return, then that is where I'm going to live out of. And so, he's calling them again to this idea. Your circumstances do not define you. What defines you is the Lord Jesus Christ who will come again. And so, this is what he is praising them for.

He then turns and simply says, but look how you've received and responded, verses 4-10. And he uses these three phrases, there's a word of power, there's imitation, and there's reverberation. So, after he's praised them for these things, now he's going to remind them of the fruit that is come from their response. And he looks in and he says, "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." This is the word of power because there in verse 5, he says, "because the gospel came to you not only in word," orally, but also with dynamite. And it is a dynamite that brings with the power of the Spirit with full conviction.

So, it does two things as one commentator says, it brings destruction and construction. First of all, we know that it destroys false belief and idolatry. He says so. You turn from your idols. But it constructs in that it brings conviction. That is, they recognize their sin and now they look to the Lord for salvation. So, it's constructing a whole new way of understanding who they are. They have been created for the Lord, by the Lord, to live out before Him, to walk with Him. So, they must flee from their former idolatry. But in this twofold sense of destructive/constructive, it is part of the Lord's work. It is all the Lord's work from beginning to end. And yet, he still praises them for their reception. For you have received us, you've heard the word of testimony, you heard our preaching. And what was that preaching? That the Lord has set his salvific love on you not because of anything you've done or anything you will ever do. He chose you. This is talking about His electing love.

Thanks be to God that the gospel is about God's electing love, God choosing to demonstrate the gospel to open us up by the power of the Spirit to see who Jesus is. And it's not dependent on my intellect or yours. It's not dependent on my obedience or yours. It's not dependent on our address or zip code or background or age. God in His electing choosing love by the gospel has brought about the dynamite of the Holy Spirit, and it brought conviction. It brought destruction that they fled in repented of their former idolatry. But it brought construction that that conviction brought them to a greater understanding of who Jesus is.

This is the question. Does that mean it stops there? Thanks be to God it doesn't. God's power to deconstruct us and to remake us is an ongoing process. So, here is a question for us as a church. When we come to worship, are we expecting the dynamite of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and in the life of the church gathered? What would it look like for this congregation to pray, Lord, by your power make us new? Make me new. Make this body new because you're not done with us.

Believing in the Lord is only the beginning of the journey. But it is an ongoing process, and this word of power continues. Does the Lord need us to pray that? No. But it actually involves us in praying that. I can't prove it. I can't point to it. But I sometimes wonder whether what the Lord is desiring of us is us simply to ask Him, Lord, would you demonstrate your power in our midst, to break old habits of sin, to bring reconciliation where there's brokenness, to bring new those who did not know you but now are coming in new conviction and trusting in you?

Is the Lord waiting for us to cry out to Him in that, and until we do, we won't experience that kind of work? How can we as a church this new year begin to pray, Lord, may the dynamite of the Holy Spirit have its way in this church. Lord, do this.

But when it does, we know as he says here, verse 6, "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." He's calling us to look at his life, to look at the life of the disciples, to look at the life of Jesus and say, I want to walk like that. Not that we're trying to be Paul, not that we fall into the false apprehension that we can reach perfection in this life, because we can't. But we can look at the life of Christ and we can look at the transformation that the Lord wrought in Paul and say, I want to walk in that way. We can walk in the way of the psalmist David.

I have a couple of Psalms that I read over and over again because I know I cannot master a Psalm until that Psalm has mastered me. And if David, while in caves fearing the enemy which was someone he was close to, can call out to the Lord, Lord, you are my refuge and my strength. I'm hard-hearted and hard-headed. I need to pray that over and over and over again and be mastered by it. And I'm following the path of David. Not that I'm like David, but I want to put these practices in place.

When the Holy Spirit begins to break out in our midst, we begin to have a vision beyond where we are and then where we could be. And we say, Lord, who can I follow? I can follow Christ. I can follow Paul. Make me more like them.

And finally, this reverberation. This wonderful phrase he says here, verse 8, "For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you," again, flat English. It's much more dynamic in the Greek. It carries this idea of a large horn being blown with great volume that reverberates, it echoes. So, watch the logic. As they've begun to continue this exertion of faith, love, and hope, because of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ by His gospel and by His electing love drew them to Himself, and therefore, He's given them the power of the Spirit as they walk in imitation. What happens? The consequence is the testimony of their faith reverberates.

It begins, as John Stott said, "its own form of whisper campaign." What has happened at Columbia Presbyterian Church? They used to be kind of like this. Here's how it happens. Over the last several months, I've had more than a few people walk up to me and they said the following: this is one of the nicest churches we've ever visited. What's beginning to reverberate is, as we welcome those we may not know around us and ask that person for the fifth time what their name is because we struggle at remembering names, that's okay. Because if our desire is to make someone feel welcomed in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that reverberates. But more than that, the Lord intends for His church to be the trumpet in the world. Not that it draws attention to itself, but that it points to the glory of Christ that is at work within us, that we would be a testimony of faith in God and that it might go forth everywhere.

Our new church plant that we've partnered with in Turkey. As we seek to love the Lord, we seek to give away the resources and invest them in places where the gospel is going forth in a very difficult place. Our love for the Lord reverberates. How can this begin to do this in a multiplicity of ways?

This morning, we began this lecture series on being a confessional church and a missional church together. Confessional and missional, what does that look like? And in preparation for this, we sent out a survey that was patterned after a survey that was sent out by Ligonier Ministries along with Lifeway Publishers. And so, we got the report back on this survey, and its different theological questions. And it was very interesting. People did quite well. It was good. Now we only had 33 people take the test. So, go ahead and take it and we'll see how you do.

But here's the point. The point is we were trying to discern what is the state of our theological belief? My experience with you as a congregation is that by and large, many of you are theologically well-informed, well-educated. Your reputation goes before you. We met a man this week who remembers the first Presbyterian church he ever visited – he's now a Presbyterian minister, he really was not at that time – was CPC sometime in the mid-1980s. And he greeted us as he was now examining us as to our theological belief.

And so, he said, "Columbia Presbyterian Church, let me tell you a story. I visited there as the first Presbyterian church I visited, and I think it was Allen Harris who was preaching. And I remember he was preaching that God is sovereign over all the earth including even wickedness. He is sovereign over it. He allows these things to happen. But He's also sovereign over the good. And I thought that was absolutely insane." Now he's a Presbyterian minister who teaches these things. And I thought, that's kind of cool.

And then I thought more deeply. We need to be a church that is deeply rooted in the theology and doctrine of the Scriptures. But the question is, are we doing it for the sake of being heavy-minded? Thick theology, full brains. But how is it issuing forth in doxology, in worship? How is it going forth in terms of being sent into the world, to love the world? A theology that does not end in doxology, that does not end in being sent out, is a dead theology. A doxology, a worship, without a firm theology is aimless. But the question is, we are not merely meant to be a theology station proud of ourselves, of our theological knowledge. We're meant to be

a people who have an understanding of the Scriptures, but we are also ones who put ourselves underneath it and say, Lord, by the dynamite of the Holy Spirit, may we never be satisfied with our knowledge. May we be reborn and remade as a people who are sent out for your kingdom.

I end with this idea. Author N. T. Wright in talking about being a people who are working for the kingdom of God, he says the following:

“Atonement, redemption, salvation are what happen on the way [following Jesus] because engaging in the work of the Lord demands a people themselves who are rescued from the powers that enslave the world in order that they can be, in turn, rescuers. To put it another way, if you want to help inaugurate God’s kingdom, you must follow in the way of the cross. If you want to benefit from Jesus’s saving death, you must become part of His kingdom project. There is only one Jesus, only one gospel story. And heaven’s rule, God’s rule, is thus to be put into practice in the world resulting in salvation in both the present and the future, a salvation that is both for humans and through saved humans.”

The gospel has been announced. The grace of God has come in Christ, who works salvation and conviction by calling us away from idolatry and into new dependence in the Lord, to be a people who are working at faith, love, and hope so that through us, not just in us, so that through the church of Jesus Christ the gospel might reverberate. How does the Lord want the world to reverberate with the faith of this body? Let’s go before the Lord and ask Him. But it must begin with us. Have mercy, O Lord. Forgive us, for we are sinners in need of grace. Come, Holy Spirit, by your power and remake us. Renew us as we give ourselves to you, and as you work through us to proclaim Christ. Let’s do that. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your word. We thank you for the ways in which you intend to encourage and to exhort us. Lord, may your Holy Spirit, may the dynamite, may the power of God have its way with us. May the word of truth work conviction in us, but also forgiveness and love, reconciliation. May it also, O Lord, make us a people through whom the gospel is going forth. Lord, how do you want the faith of those who belong to you here to reverberate in the world? May you do that in us. May you do this through us for the glory of Christ alone. In the mighty power of Jesus, we pray. Amen.