

February 14, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Waiting for the Son

1 Thessalonians 1:1 – 10

This is a short little letter but it is packed with some great themes of the Gospel. And as we open this letter to see what was on Paul's heart we are going to develop those themes more fully. But there are two themes that run large through this letter and dominate Paul's burden for the Thessalonians. The first is the **second coming of Christ** – there is a reference to that in each chapter of this epistle. And running side by side with that is the theme of Christian living. These two themes run throughout this letter, and the next, to give us a sense of Paul's burden for the Thessalonians, which I have used as a banner over the whole thing: ***Living in the light of Christ's return***. Our entire Christian life should be lived in view of our Lord's imminent return.

This theme goes back to the very beginnings of the church. From the Bible and historical records we know that Christians, when they met or parted, didn't say hello or goodbye – but rather ***Maranatha*** – which means '***Our Lord comes***'. Evidently these early Christians had a deep and abiding awareness of the immanence of Christ's return. Peter told the believers in his first epistle that '***The end of all things is at hand...***' 1 Peter 4:7; James tells his readers, '***You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand***' James 5:8 Paul reminded the Romans that '***...the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed***'. Romans 13:11 Ignatius, a church leader living in the second century, encouraged his people: "***The last days are upon us. Weigh carefully the times. Look for Him who is above all time, eternal and invisible***". Expectation and anticipation of our Lord's soon return runs all through the New Testament and through the history of the church.

And so, under the revelation of that great event, Paul writes to the Thessalonians: ***Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.*** 1 Thessalonians 1:1 We noted last week that this letter was written upon the return of Timothy to Paul in Corinth where he gave a good report of the church in Thessalonica. Remember the church had been founded during Paul's second missionary journey with Silas, or as he is called here in this letter, Silvanus – the Gentile form of Silas. Paul begins and ends nearly all his letters with this familiar blessing: ***Grace to you and peace.*** Grace looms large in Paul's life I suppose because he knew the depths of his own depravity – and apart from the grace of God knocking him to the ground and changing the course of his life – he would still be a fire-breathing, saint-persecuting pharisee on his way to hell. And the message is, 'Don't ever get away from the grace – it is only God's grace that brings real 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. 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 Paul never took the life of faith for granted. He was always in prayer for the churches. Read his letters and what you find is prayer – lots of prayer. He knew that our faith is initiated and sustained and perfected through much prayer. Because prayer is essentially calling on God to fulfill His great and precious promises in us, and because as he says later in this letter: ***He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*** 1 Thessalonians 5:24

In his praying, Paul says that he remembers before our God and Father '***...your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*** Paul's remembering was meant to convey two things. One, that he was thanking God for being so faithful in the Thessalonians to bring them to faith and to cause them to labor out of love and be steadfast through hope. And secondly, for him to mention this was to encourage the Thessalonians to remain faithful, continue to let love birth self-denying labor, and to cause hope to bear the fruit of endurance.

When Paul talks about ***your work of faith***, he is talking about the working reality of faith – that is the Thessalonians received by faith the word of the Gospel and it had its effect in bringing them to Christ. This is not mere mental agreement, but a realizing, working faith; not in word only, but in one continuous chain of work – a stance of remaining in the faith. When the people around Him asked Jesus "***What must we do, to be doing the works of God?***" Jesus answered them, "***This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.***" John 6:28-29

And then Paul speaks of the Thessalonians **labor of love**. In the Greek, this word implies toil or troublesome labor and indicates a kind of self-denying working on behalf of others. It implies that we are stimulated by love to bear the burdens of others that are not necessarily convenient or easy. We get a picture of what that is in Acts 20:35: *In all things I have shown you that by laboring in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* This is the work that flows out of love – the love of God that has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit when we believed. It is evidenced by a love for the brethren and for the lost that is expressed in a higher care and concern for others than for ourselves. It is an other-centered love that expresses the love of Christ to others.

Then Paul says he remembers before God their **steadfastness of hope**. **Steadfastness** here is that Greek word **hupomone** which is most generally translated '**endurance**'. It means to remain under. It implies that our circumstances are ordered by God and our response in faith to whatever He brings our way is to remain under His loving and caring hand of providence without complaining or whining or running away. And Paul is pointing to the fact that the Christian life is a life of endurance.

And **endurance is born out of hope**. The persevering faith that is necessary for salvation flows from hope. Romans 15:4 tells us: *For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* This is not a hope that says I hope that the Seahawks will be winners next year. In other words they might be winners or they might not. Instead this hope is a certainty of occurrence. That is a predictive hope – it will one day come to pass. Now you can't say that about the Seahawks, but you can say that about the hope we have – the hope of eternal life, the hope of glory, the hope of a new body without sin and imperfection, the hope of a new heaven and earth, the hope of eternity with Christ. That is the kind of hope that births endurance in the Christian. And it is based on the solid rock of God's word.

And we know from other texts that endurance and perseverance is the mark of real Christians. In fact, it is only those who endure to the end that are in the end, saved. This is a biblical truth that is a coin with two sides. On the one side you have **the assurance of salvation through believing in Jesus**, the Son of God, and the promise of endurance. The Bible is filled with these texts. Jeremiah 32:40: *I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of Me in their hearts, that they may not turn from Me.* And Ezekiel 36:27: *And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.* **Endurance is a promise of God for those who believe.** And then we read in Philippians 1:6 a resounding echo of this: *And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* And 2 Timothy 1:12: *But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.* And there are so many more. And these promises are meant to infuse us with assurance and joy when we feel weak, and rekindle hope when we have looked away from God's grace and power that we can and will endure in the faith.

On the other side of this coin, we have the equally solid truth that **we must endure to obtain the reward of salvation**. On the one hand we **will endure** because of the great and precious promises of God's word – on the other side we **must endure**. The Bible says we will endure because we are saved – and it says we must endure in order to be saved. Matthew 24:12-13 says, *And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.* This verse clearly implies that our enduring is crucial to our salvation. 2 Timothy 2:12 puts it propositionally: *if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us.* This is a clear conditional statement – **if you endure, then you will reign**. In Romans 2:6-7 Paul says: *He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by endurance in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life.* And the writer of Hebrews 10:35-36 makes it clear that endurance is one of the conditions we must meet to receive the reward: *Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.*

One side of this truth assures us that we **will** endure – the other side says that we **must** endure. Either side of this coin by itself is a dangerous half-truth. If we believe only that we **will** endure without **having to** endure – we are in danger of living just like we please and ignoring the necessity to live faithfully all the way to the end. If on the other hand we only believe that we **must** endure without the solid assurance that Christ is both the author and finisher of our faith, we will live like pharisees, applying the strict technicalities of the law without the inward reality and we will be harsh and unforgiving and legalistic.

The fact that we will endure has the effect of stripping us of any self-reliance or boasting and cause us to rely on Christ alone. It gives us the peace and confidence that come from knowing that God is mighty and He will save. The fact that we must endure has the effect of focusing our hearts on heaven and the coming reward and sobering us with the realization that real conversion means real change. **You cannot come to Christ and have everything in your life remain the same.** The gospel has the effect of real change – there must be evidence in our lives of the work of faith, the labor of love and the steadfastness of hope.

The promise is that we will endure – the commandment is that we must endure. So one side give us peace and certainty and hope, and the other gives us passion and urgency and purpose. One reminds us that our foundation is the sovereign grace and power of Christ, and the other incite us to depend on His saving grace and limitless power. On the one side we have all the promises of God that are Yes and Amen in Christ – on the other we have the commands of God that carry within them the power of God to do in us what we could never do.

Paul's prayer was not only full of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope, but also for **the fact of their election**: *For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you,* 1 Thessalonians 1:4 Paul says that they were chosen or selected by God. This should stagger us. Christians often have the idea that we chose God – but the Bible teaches that **we would never have chosen Him if He had not first chosen us.** In Ephesians, as we went through the heart of the gospel the past two years, we saw that He *'...chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him'* Ephesians 1:4 In 2 Thessalonians Paul says *'But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.'* This tells us that God not only ordains the end – salvation, but ordains the beginning, and He ordains the means to that end through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the gospel.

If we are not stunned by the good news of the gospel – that in the midst of our rebellion and sin and outright hostility toward God – He loved us and extended His hand to save us, then we might be tempted to think that salvation is all about **our** choosing God. This is stunning – this is staggering – if we are not blown away by this thought then we do not really understand the depth of our own depravity and our utter inability to produce a single God-ward thought or emotion. The Bible is not downplaying the necessity of our choosing God – but rather emphasizing the fact that He chose us before we ever had a thought of choosing Him – in fact His choosing happened before the foundation of the world. And whether you believe the world is billions of years old or a few thousand – that is still a very long time ago – long ago enough for us to realize that we had no hand in this. **His choosing us means that He gets all the credit and all the glory and we get all the good.**

One of the main objections to this truth is **'That's not fair'** because God's choosing some for salvation, implies inescapably that He passes over others. But what people don't understand is that **if God had chosen no one – no one would be saved.** The truth is the fact that God chooses some for salvation reveals the mercy, grace and love of God because unless He chose, not one person in the whole history of the human race would ever have chosen to trust in Christ and turn from sin. No wonder Paul is thankful! We have pointed out before that God never sends anyone to hell – they go there willingly and defiantly, thumbing their nose at God. The real question is not, **'Why are so many lost'**? but rather, **'Why are any saved'**? No one deserves salvation – all our rebellion and sinful pride deserve is death – and yet on some God has mercy and pays the debt of sin we owe.

And so Paul is thankful because the Thessalonians were chosen. Which begs the question – How does he know that? Or to make it more personal – **how can we know that we are chosen of God?** Paul says that very boldly: *For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you.* He doesn't say, 'We think there is a good chance that you might be chosen', or 'It's a good bet that you are saved'. Paul says categorically **'We know'**. This morning – never mind about the Thessalonians, or the person sitting next to you – how about you – do you know that you are chosen of God? How can you be sure?

Paul was sure about the Thessalonians because of five things: the gospel, the power of the Holy Spirit the testimony of changed lives, a gospel-minded stance, and an anticipation of Christ's return. 'We know you are chosen' Paul says, *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.* 1 Thessalonians 1:5 Paul was confident first of all that **the gospel was the power of God unto salvation.** That is, when he preached the gospel, God worked to save those whom He had chosen. When Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel in Antioch, in chapter 13 of Acts, the Scripture records that *'And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.'* Acts 13:48

The gospel always works to accomplish the purpose of God in saving those whom He has chosen. We can be utterly confident that when the word of God goes out, it will have a saving effect on those whom God is calling to salvation. The gospel is not powerful and effective because we are such good preachers – it is powerful and effective because it is the power of God. That is why we should never be nervous or hesitant or shy about the gospel. We can be as bold as lions because all the power of heaven is behind it. So firstly Paul knew they were chosen because they heard the gospel.

Secondly, he knew because of the **evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit**. The result of his preaching was the gospel manifested *in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*. Conviction of sin, righteousness and the coming judgment is the work of the Holy Spirit and it isn't something you can fake. Either you are convicted of sin, convinced that you are not living righteously and certain that you are in danger of the wrath of God in judgment – or you are not.

Thirdly, Paul knew they were chosen because of the **testimony of changed lives**: *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.* 1 Thessalonians 1:5b-7 **The strongest argument for the gospel of Jesus Christ is the personal testimony of someone whose life has been changed by it.** Charles Bradlaugh, an avowed atheist, once challenged the Rev. H. P. Hughes to a debate. The preacher, who was head of a rescue mission in London, England, accepted the challenge with the condition that he could bring with him 100 men and women who would tell what had happened in their lives since trusting Christ as their Savior. They would be people who once lived in deep sin, some having come from poverty-stricken homes caused by the vices of their parents. Hughes said they would not only tell of their conversion, but would submit to cross-examination by any who doubted their stories. Furthermore, the minister invited his opponent to bring a group of non-believers who could tell how they were helped by their lack of faith. When the appointed day arrived, the preacher came, accompanied by 100 transformed persons. But Bradlaugh never showed up. The result? The meeting turned into a testimony time and many sinners who had gathered to hear the scheduled debate were converted.

Fourthly, Paul was convinced of their chosen status because of their **gospel-minded stance**: *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,* 1 Thessalonians 1:8-9 One true mark of those who are chosen and saved is a passion to save the lost.

C.H. Spurgeon wrote: *Have you no wish for others to be saved? Then you are not saved yourself. Be sure of that.... The saving of souls, if a man has once gained love to perishing sinners and his blessed Master, will be... an all-absorbing passion to him. It will so carry him away, that he will almost forget himself in the saving of others..... If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for."* C.H. Spurgeon

Finally, Paul was certain they were chosen because they lived in **anticipation of Christ's return**. *'...and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.* 1 Thessalonians 1:10 **The gospel response of the Thessalonians was to live in the light of Christ's imminent return.** The sure and certain truth is that Jesus is coming again. I think Jesus is coming sooner than most people think, but, of course, most people aren't thinking about it at all. And unless you have heard and responded to the gospel, unless the power of the Holy Spirit has convicted you of sin, righteousness and the coming judgment, unless there is a clear testimony of a changed life about you and your heart is breaking for those still without Christ in this world – you won't be anticipating His return – you won't be living with a view to His coming – you won't even be thinking about it. But for those chosen by God and whose hearts have been impacted and changed by the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, there can be no other response than to live in the light of Christ's return.

Our gracious God and loving Father,

We cannot fully express our wonder and awe of Your choosing and saving us. We are staggered by the display of Your grace and mercy to us and our hearts respond in adoration and praise. Grant O Lord that this truth would penetrate our hearts and saturate our thinking so that all our days and all our doing would be marked by it. May our work of faith and labors of love and steadfastness of hope be cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving by others and resound to the praise of the glory of Your grace. Let endurance and faithfulness be the testimony of our lives, and don't let the temptations of this present world seduce us away from the everlasting pleasure of knowing Christ and the sweet assurance of His return. For those who do not have the assurance that they are chosen of God, saved, sealed and secure in Your everlasting arms, I pray that today would be the day of their salvation. You have the power to break through sin-hardened hearts and overcome all resistance to Your grace. Fill our souls with the delight of knowing You and spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.