Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Gratitude for a Faithful Church
Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1-2
Code: 90-413

Well obviously my heart is very full this morning and my time is very limited…which is a good thing because I would probably say too much if I didn't limit myself to the time I have.

I want you to turn back, if you will, for a moment to 1 Thessalonians that I read to you earlier. The reason I chose to speak on 1 Thessalonians today and next week is because when I think about Grace Church, I think about the church in Thessalonica. That city is still there today, it's called Saloniki.

The church in Thessalonica was a very special church in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul. He had the privilege under the leading of the Spirit of God in his life to take the message of the gospel into the Gentile world. And even though he was an Apostle to the Gentiles, every time he went into a new city, he went immediately to the synagogue. And the first thing he did was endeavor to evangelize the Jews and see if he couldn't see some of them come to faith in their Messiah. The Lord graciously allowed him that and so he had some folks to help him with the evangelization of the Gentile population.

In the places that he went, the Lord allowed him to establish churches. In establishing those churches, obviously, there were some great joys. But not all of those churches brought him unmixed joy. There was the Corinthian church that caused him no small heartache. He wrote at least four letters that we know about, two of them included in the Scripture, very long letters, trying to straighten out the carnality and the sins and the worldliness and the indulgence and divisiveness and pride and animosity and everything else, corruption, drunkenness, prostitution, if you will, of the Lord's table into something ugly. And the Corinthian church was not a church necessarily to make a pastor happy.

And then there was the church at Colossae, the church at Colossae also struggled to be faithful to the Lord. The church at Colossae was drawn toward carnality and drawn toward sensuality, and drawn toward mysticism, and drawn toward legalism.

And then there was the church at Ephesus, proud, lacking humility, impatient, following patterns of sin from its past life, lacking forgiveness. There were many sins in Ephesus that had to be addressed as well as evidences of spiritual weakness, in spite of the extensive ministry Paul had there.

The Galatian churches, more than one, proved to be defective and disloyal and even abandoning what had been begun by the Holy Spirit for the causes of the flesh, causing him no end of grief. The Philippian church which in many ways might seem like a good church was characterized by discord, complaining, worry and two cantankerous women were so much a distraction in that church that their named in Paul's letter to the Philippian church.

When he wrote to those churches in every letter that he wrote, he addressed problems in the church, things that were grief to him, serious griefs to him. Stole his joy. In fact, even threatened the fact that he had begun a work there, because that work could disappear. He was afraid, for example, in the case of the Corinthians that he had labored in vain for nothing, it was that bad.

Paul pastored many churches from their beginning. And most of those churches, all but one of those churches, gave him all kinds of concerns. But not the Thessalonian church. This is the letter that he wrote to a church that brought him the greatest joy…the Thessalonian church. That was the exception to the rule.

In the end of the first century, the Apostle John was given the book of Revelation from the Holy Spirit while he was on the island of Patmos. And in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, the Lord addresses seven letters to seven churches, seven cities in the area known as Asia Minor which is modern Turkey, seven cities that kind of follow the postal route. Those churches had been established just a few decades before, under the influence of the Apostles. They had known the Apostles. They knew many people who were eyewitnesses of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus. They knew the Apostles. They knew the associates of the Apostles. They had the fresh new books of the New Testament that were being penned and circulated among the churches. They had every reason to be flourishing churches that brought joy to the heart of their shepherds.

But when our Lord addresses seven letters to seven churches, five of the seven churches are under such severe warning that they could actually go out of existence. Churches that must have broken the heart of the Apostle John who would be the last living Apostle and would certainly know of these conditions, and would know in detail how the Lord felt about them when He received and wrote down the letters. Only Smyrna and Philadelphia escaped severe threats from the Lord of the church; that just a few decades after their foundings in the fervor and the passion of apostolic ministry and the Holy Spirit's power. Again, two out of seven, one out of all the ones to whom Paul addressed his letter.

It is always that way throughout the history of the church. You can follow the two thousand years after that until we come to this time, and you will find that exemplary model churches, churches that are the source of nothing but joy, are the rare exception. Spiritually healthy, biblically sound, faithfully loving, serving churches, passionately evangelistic churches, Christ-exalting, God-honoring, serious worshiping churches are as uncommon now as they have ever been.

So through the centuries, through the years, many pastors have struggled trying to shepherd very difficult sheep, with some goats thrown in that weren't even sheep.

Many pastors have endeavored to lead carnal churches and many carnal churches are the product of carnal pastors. It's a rare day to find a church that brings its pastors and its shepherds nothing but joy…nothing but joy.

In Hebrews chapter 13, as that book comes to an end, believers are told, "Obey your leaders, submit to them for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief." That's the exception, being able to do a ministry in a church with joy and nothing but joy. One church brought that to Paul, this church, the church at Thessalonica.

Now, Paul pastored many churches. I've only pastored one church, just one, just this one. And in my judgment, this is the Thessalonian church of Southern California, that's who you are. God in His mercy, God for His own sovereign purposes, I now know looking back in retrospect, desired for me by His mercy to be able to preach through the entire New Testament and to be able to make that available to people in this generation and the generations to come through electronic media and through a set of commentaries. That's what God had planned for my life. I didn't know that till it was over, till it was finished. But God also knew the limits of my weakness. And He knew that He had to put me in a church that was just well-nigh perfect, where I would be loved and supported and encouraged and prayed for and cared for and listened to so that it could continue. There are plenty of churches, you must know this, where if I tried to go there and teach through one book, they'd throw me out, let alone the whole New Testament.

The Lord also knew the limitations of my tolerances and knew that perhaps I couldn't handle some of the things that others are asked to handle, or I might have lost my focus or left. It doesn't run in the genes in our family. I think my Dad pastored twelve churches. And when something went wrong, he would feel he needed to go to another place.

So people have always been amazed that my life was just one and I think the Lord knew that and so He put me in this place with all of you, because you have loved and supported and encouraged me through all these years and there has never been a minute in all the years that I've been here since 1969 that I ever wanted to be anywhere else, or even thought about being anywhere else. And that was the very essential part of doing this and finishing the New Testament.

While none of us is perfect, this is an amazingly faithful church, obedient to the Word of God, loving, sacrificial, worshipful, joyful, generous, exemplary and evangelistic. It's a remarkable church. I don't…I don't like to say that outside of here because people think I'm bragging. And for the people who have never been here, they're not going to believe it. For the people who have been here, I don't

need to say it. So I just don't say anything. But they all know who have been here and who have been touched by your lives what this church is. There were two thousand people here last weekend, most of whom had never been here, vast majority had never been here, who will never stop talking about the kindness which was exhibited to them by the people of this church and the love that they felt here. Everybody knows about our theology. Our theology is out there, isn't it? TV, radio, books, tapes, CDs, MP3s, downloads, all of that, but what they don't know, they know about me, they know what I believe, they know what I say. What they don't all know is you. But the people who come here as strangers or come here as friends of yours, family and find out what this church is get a little bit of a taste of its very unique character.

The Lord doesn't choose to make it like this for everybody and I'm just deeply grateful that He did for me. He knew what I could take and what I could tolerate and what would contribute to the end that we could do this and get these commentaries done.

You say, "Well why are the commentaries that you do any more important than anybody else's commentaries? Well they're not." That's not the point. But there is an approach that I take in the writing of these commentaries that's very different from typical commentaries. Most commentaries interact with all kinds of scholars and all kinds of critics of Scripture, and so forth, and I determined at the beginning I would never do that. I would never bring critics and gainsayers and naysayers and people who attack the Bible in and try to defend the Bible to them in a book that I was trying to explain the Bible. I just said I'm going to explain the Bible, period. I'm going to act as if the dead German critics are dead, and they need to stay dead, and we're not going to resurrect them and bring them back and answer all their arguments. We're just going to say, "This is what the Bible says. This is what it means." And so the nature of these commentaries has in a sense been different from somewhat typical ones. So this was the Lord's purpose. What He does with them is up to Him. We've always said, "If we take care of the depth, He'll take care of the breadth." And that continues to be a blessing.

But the Lord knew I needed to be in a Thessalonian kind of church. If I was in a Corinthian church, I would have been a basket case trying to fix you all the time because I do have a high standard of how we ought to live before God and worship before God and that probably would have distracted me to the point that this would never have happened. to say nothing of make life miserable.

So the Lord has chosen to give me joy for a purpose. Joy for the purpose of preaching the New Testament to you for the joy of seeing you grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, joy for the sake of ministry extending beyond here through other means and that's why He put me here. And I've always known that this was a very, very special place.

Sometimes when I get together with pastors and I hear all the horror stories about their churches, I just quietly smile and say nothing. And thank the Lord for His kindness to me.

Paul writes the Thessalonians here and he does for me what I want to do. So I'm just going to borrow his words. Go back to chapter 1 for a moment. After introducing himself and his two companions, Silas and Timothy, he says to the church of the Thessalonians, "In God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace." And then this, this is the tone of these opening chapters. "We give thanks to God always for all of you." You see it again in verse 13 of chapter 2, "For this reason we also constantly thank God." He just starts out with gratitude and just stays thankful through the opening two chapters.

The first two chapters are commendation for a faithful church. And the next we're going to look at the second two chapters and we'll just call them exhortation to a faithful church. There's no condemnation. Just commendation and exhortation.

And he says there in verse 2, "We give thanks to God always for all of you." And it's as if there's never been anything wrong or anybody who was a problem. All of you all ways…that's pretty comprehensive, isn't it? We give thanks to God always for all of you.

I so much identify with that, making mention of you in our prayers. And always the prayers rise up. Thank You, Lord. Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, Thank You for the church. Thank You for the people. Thank You for all of the people, all of the time. And what a profound blessing it was to an otherwise beleaguered and hounded Apostle whose life was on the line every day and what a rich, blessing this beloved little congregation in Thessalonica was to him.

And what was it about them that sent them apart? There are three things in verse 3, we'll just use those as kind of a starting point. And kind of launch off from there for just a few minutes. When he says that he is thankful for them and that he raises his prayers of thanks to God always for them, he then identifies three specific realities for which he is thankful. "Your work of faith, verse 3, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope." Those are very well thought out. Those are not in any sense random, they're not just pulled out of the air. They're very well thought out and they're in the right order…faith, love and hope. We're familiar with those, aren't we? Those are that great triumvirate of spiritual realities. Your work of faith, your labor of love, and steadfastness of hope, if we can just draw those down to words that you can remember, he is always, always thankful for salvation, service, steadfastness. Okay? Salvation, service, steadfastness. And this is real simple, it's just from my heart to yours. Those are the things that when I think about Grace Church come immediately to mind just as they came to mind in Paul's case. That's what he says in verse 3, "Constantly bearing in mind."

First of all, salvation. What made this church a church that produced joy for him and gratitude for him was that it was saved. You might say, "Well that's a strange thing to say." Oh, not really.

There are so many churches that are full of unconverted people, more and more all the time, in this kind of this new way to do church today. I actually heard a pastor say the other day on one of his web casts that if you have come to Christ, get out, this church is not for you. And he said it that blatantly and that boldly. Get out, you're done here, we have nothing to say to you. If you've come to Christ, get out of here.

So that would be the church of the unconverted, and nobody would really like if they had any understanding of what it was to be a shepherd to try to shepherd the unconverted. Paul's heart was grateful to the Lord because the faith of his people was real and the evidence of its reality was the work of faith. That's an objective genitive…your work of faith. This reminds us of James chapter 2 verses 14 to 20, we don't have time to go through all of that. James says, "Faith without works is…what?...is dead." And he makes that point all through that passage. So you say you have faith? Show me your works. I'll show you my faith by my works.

I can't see your faith. I don't know that you're belief is real, saving belief. I can't tell by your words, I can only tell by your works what your life looks like. Faith without works is dead, James says. This is back to Matthew chapter 7, "Many will say this to me, 'Lord, Lord, we did this, we did that,' I say, 'Depart from Me, I never knew you.'" It's not the sayers, it's the doers, right? You build your house on the rock, on the foundation. You're a doer. James chapter 1, "Be not hearers of the Word only, but doers." If you're a hearer only, you deceive yourself about your spiritual condition.

So the first thing that struck Paul that made him grateful for this church is its salvation. This is a saved church. There are all kinds of components here that point to this. Back to verse 1, "The Thessalonians in God the Father." And also that, "in" preposition goes with the next, "In the Lord Jesus Christ." You are in God. You are in Christ. That speaks of an intimate relationship. That's like you are one with God, you are one with Christ. Your life is hid with Christ in God. That great expression of being "in Christ" is distinctively Paul's way of speaking of one who is genuinely joined to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a church that heard the truth savingly.

Verse 5, "The gospel didn't come in Word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." In other words, it came, it convicted them of sin and righteousness and judgment. They saw their sin for what it was. They believed the gospel, they embraced the gospel. It came in power and in the Holy Spirit who is the agent of conversion, regeneration, transformation.

Furthermore, in verse 4, he says, "We know, brethren, beloved by God, His choice of you." You're elect. You are an elect people. How do we know that? Because of the way you received the gospel. It came to you not in Word only, but in power, in the Holy Spirit, with conviction. He says the same thing over in chapter 2 verse 13, "We constantly thank God that when you received the Word of God," meaning the gospel, "which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the Word of God which also performs its work in you who believe." And how do we know you

really believe? “You , brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus.”

Back in verse 6, chapter 1, how do we know your faith is real? “You became imitators of us and of the Lord.” In other words, he’s saying your salvation is real, this is a truly redeemed congregation.

And somebody might ask, “Why are you so relentless in preaching the true gospel? Why is it so important to you to define the gospel in all its fullness, in all its truth?” In order that you might be redeemed and that we might have a genuinely saved church. Another way that he emphasizes their salvation, and this is a wonderful one, at the end of verse 9 he says, “You turned to God from idols.” You turned to God from idols. And the Greek verb there is a once-for-all turning. There was a moment in time when you turned away from your idols and you turned to God. A deliberate choice by faith, you chose the true God over all other gods in all other forms. And there were many of them in the Greek world where Thessalonica was located. You turned from idols to God. You are now in God. You are now in Christ. You are in union with the living God. You are elect, verse 4, chosen by God to be in Christ. “Therefore, brethren, you are beloved of God.”

Verse 6 gives another insight. Only truly converted people become imitators of the Lord…imitators of the Lord. And follow the rest of the verse, “Having received the Word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”

You need to understand the context here. When the Word of God came, first of all, to the city of Thessalonica in Acts 17, I won’t take time to go to it. But in Acts 17 the Apostles arrive in Thessalonica and they preached the gospel in the Jewish synagogue. And some of the Jews believed. And then they preached the gospel to the Gentiles, and some of the Gentiles believed, including some of the leading women in the city. And then the Jews began to ramp up the hostility and the persecution and the tribulation.

In fact, if you go to chapter 2 for a minute, you get this picture. Verse 14, “You became imitators not only of us and of the Lord, but of the other believers in the churches of God in Christ Jesus,” here we are in Christ again, “that are in Judea for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews.”

In other words, what the Jews did to the believers in Israel and Jerusalem, the Jews did to you Jewish believers in Thessalonica. They became your avowed enemies. “These Jews,” verse 15, very important verse, “who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out, they are not pleasing to God but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.” Wow.

The Jews were trying to stop any gospel preaching…this is what Paul had once done, trying to stop any gospel preaching…so that people would not hear and be saved. So if you came to Christ, you

came to Christ against the hatred and venom and hostility and anger and persecution of your own people, the Jews. And even the Gentiles were treated with great hatred, for they had abandoned their gods.

The point being here is that there was a price to become a believer. There was a serious price and it could be that you would be in prison. They dragged Jason in Thessalonica out of his own house, threatened his life and wanted to go after all these people who believed. The persecution was always imminent and even death was a reality and a possibility. Taking up your crosses, Jesus said, could be an experience that people would actually have.

So Paul says you're a saved church. I know it, I know it because in the midst of making that decision, you had to face the hostility and the hatred and the wrath of Jews and Gentiles.

Back to verse 6. All of that hostility described in 14, 15, 16 couldn't take away the joy of the Holy Spirit. Now this was a remarkable thing about a church. A church born in this kind of persecution is going to have true believers because people aren't going to join if they're not real, the price is too high. So I just piggyback on what the Apostle Paul said here that the joy of the Holy Spirit has been evident in your life, you have become imitators of Jesus Christ. It is clear by the faith that produces spiritual works of righteousness that you are a true church. What a blessing. What a profound, profound blessing.

Second element for which he is thankful and grateful is their serving…their serving. They're characterized back in verse 3 by the labor of love. That is love which produces wearisome toil, hard work prompted by love, unceasing effort because of love. They not only loved the Lord but the emphasis here is they love each other. They serve out of love. That they serve needs to be brought down to the end of verse 9, were we were a minute ago, how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God. It starts with serving God and then it comes to serving others. And by the way, the word serve in verse 9 is *douloo* which means to be a slave. You turn to God from idols to be enslaved to the true and living God. You became slaves of God and you became servants to each other. We owe our primary allegiance to our Lord, we are His slaves. And we render service to others out of love. This is characteristic of our church through the years. It's characteristic…it has always been characteristic. This is the most aggressively serving church and that's how you measure love, thousands of people serve in this church in every way that we know, and even many ways we don't know. Serving every kind of person, every kind of situation from the newborns all the way to the seniors and everything in between, people in prisons, and people in hospitals and on and on it goes. People with disabilities, every conceivable way to express the love of Christ is expressed in this church as you follow the Lord and you labor out of love to serve.

Consequently, he says about them, "You became…verse 7…an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. You became a model church, a pattern for other churches to follow. And here

you were setting the standard for all who believe because of your generous, loving service.

It went even further than that. “The Word of the Lord” verse 8, “sounded forth from you.” So not only are you a serving church and exemplary because of the way you serve inside the church, but you’re an evangelistic church, your service extends evangelistically. The Word of the Lord sounds forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth so that we have no need to say anything.” I don’t need to say anything. Your reputation has gone everywhere.

Here is a church, the Thessalonian church, that is a pattern for other churches to follow. It is an exemplary church that echoes its loving, faithful service to its master and Lord Jesus Christ and echoes it all over the world, surrounding it. Certainly that has happened here at Grace Church. You are every bit of this kind of church. You have sent the Word by your service and your love to the ends of the earth. And you have also sent the gospel as part of your testimony.

There’s a final commendation in verse 3. First of all, he is thankful that this is a saved church and a serving church, and, thirdly, a steadfast church. We’ll just keep our “S’s” there, steadfast church, steadfastness of hope. It’s characterized by steadfastness of hope, endurance…endurance. This is a great, great mark of a church. You’re not looking for change. You’re not looking for the latest fad, you never have. You’re not looking for the latest update, what’s most contemporary. You’re not looking for a different life style. You’re not trying to find more money. You’re not looking for the prosperity tricks. We don’t tell you how to make more money. We don’t tell you how to get a bigger house. We don’t tell you how to get a bigger car, be more successful, move higher up the corporate ladder. You’re not interested in that. If you were trying to go after that, you’d be home watching TV, sending your money to some quack, that’s what you’d be doing. You don’t do that. You’re here. Why? Because your far-less interested in what’s going to come here than you are what’s going to come in the next life. You understand that. In fact, some of you probably have less money now, you’re less healthy now, you’re not nearly as good looking as you used to be. We haven’t done anything…we haven’t done anything to help you with any of that. We never promised to do that. We can’t do that. That’s not on the agenda here.

Why do you keep coming back? For the Word of God. Why do you keep coming back for 43 years to hear the New Testament? You’re not any richer, you’re not any better looking, you’re not any healthier, you don’t have a bigger house, you don’t have more cars, you don’t have more success. Why are you here? Why do you endure this? Why do you keep taking this in? And you’ve gone through so many traumas and trials and physical things in life and you’ve watched your nation collapse, you’ve watched your culture collapse, you’ve watched the school system collapse, you’ve watched the media corrupt this generation, and all you can imagine is it’s getting worse and worse, what’s it going to be like for your children, your grandchildren? You’ve endured things that have disappointed you in the education system, in the political system, the social system. The whole world

is falling apart underneath you and nothing seems to be getting fixed and you keep coming here because you have been given by the Spirit of God endurance, *hupomone,* that means to stay under. And what keeps you there? Your hope is not in Washington, and your hope is not in a real estate revival. Your hope is not in the solvency of your bank. Your hope is in the Lord.

It didn't matter to the Thessalonicans what went wrong. This kind of endurance, John Cyrysostom said, "Is the root of all the good, the mother of piety, the fruit that never withers, the fortress that is never taken, the harbor that never knows a storm." Endurance is the mother of all virtues, the queen of all character, the foundation of right action, the source of peace and calm, patience.

We have a tenacious hope here and so did the Thessalonicans. In the midst of all the suffering and trials and all the issues in that time in the world, verse 10 says, "They were waiting for His Son from heaven." They were waiting for His Son from heaven…that's hope. That's hope.

I think churches that don't want to talk about the Second Coming cheat their people…cheat their people. We live in the light of the Second Coming. We're waiting for His Son. We're not waiting for the tribulation. We're not storing up food supplies to try to be survivors. We're not waiting for the Antichrist, we're waiting for Christ. Later on in chapter 4, verses 13 to 18, Paul describes the Rapture and the time when Jesus will come and call us into His presence. We're waiting for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come. This is a steadfast church because its hope is anchored in the future. What God has prepared for them that love Him, which eye doesn't see and ear doesn't hear and it doesn't enter into the heart of man. You can't know it empirically, you can't know it rationally, it's hidden. But we wait for that which we have not seen.

And who has this hope in him? First John says, "Purifies himself." Paul said to the Corinthians, "You could use a dose of this." Chapter 15, "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." What did he mean? In the midst of all that you're going through, stay faithful, keep enduring, keep serving, keep loving, because your labor is not in vain. Some day you will receive a full reward.

This is characteristic of a true church. This church has never chased fads. It's never chased success. This has been a humble church. You are a humble people, a gracious people, a thankful people, an enduring people, a patient people. And one day in the presence of your Savior, you will receive your full reward.

So we've been blessed here without a Paul, or a Silas, or a Timothy, or anybody else of that category, we've been blessed. And I can say to you what Paul said at the end of chapter 2, "Who is our hope or joy or crown of exaltation? Who's my joy? Who's my hope, crown of exaltation? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming, for you are our glory and joy?" I can say

that for sure. You are my joy. You are my glory and joy. And someday we'll all be gathered together in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And there won't be any confusion, 'cause I've only pastored one church. It will just be us and we'll be all there and we'll all be perfect. And you might not know me now, but you'll know me then and I might not know you well now, but I'll know you then and we'll all thank the Lord together that He was kind enough to put us in the Thessalonian church in Southern California.

Father, we thank You for our time this morning in Your Word and just to think about these things for which we're so deeply thankful is a joy for all that You have accomplished through Your Word here. And we know that's the key to it all because the power is in the Word. We give You praise and thanks, and thank You that we can live as a people, shaped by the Spirit through the Word. What a privilege, what a joy. I thank You for this church. I thank You for giving me a life of unmingled joy. Even in challenges and difficult times, the joy never ceased and the joy was always attached to this church and what You are doing here. Thank You for Your kindness to us all. And Your great kindness to me, placing me here, giving me the privilege of studying through the whole New Testament from my own soul's sake, that I might know You and that I might rejoice in that knowledge and in the people who share that knowledge with me. We believe, Lord, that You have yet more for us and we look forward to all of that with grateful hearts. Amen.

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