

Living out your faith * 1 Thessalonians 1

April 14, 2024 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

One of the things that I've been thinking about a lot lately as a pastor is how to help you to live out your faith in real life.

I think it's very easy for us to think about faith as what we do on Sundays, what we do at church, but the way that the Bible talks about faith, the relationship that God invites us into by faith, is much larger than just Sunday. It's much more intimate and everyday than an hour or two on Sunday mornings. God invites us into this everyday experience, this everyday mission really, of walking with Him and seeing Him work in our lives. And I want you to be able to experience that for yourself and to live out your faith in the everyday details of life.

And to help with that, I want to spend the next little while looking with you at a portion of Scripture that teaches us how to apply our faith in our lives. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians) is really Jesus inviting us into 'Real Life Faith' – faith that is lived out in the real experience of everyday life.

Now I acknowledge that 1 Thessalonians is not one of the most popular or well-known books in the Bible – frankly, I've never heard anyone preach on it - but every time I read it devotionally, I think 'I can't wait to share this with Langford,' because it is such a rich and insightful letter. It helps us to see faith as the everyday experience God intends it to be, it helps us to think about what we do together as the church, it helps us to think about what happens when loved ones pass away and it helps us to think about what happens when Jesus comes again. 1 Thessalonians is way more important than people give it credit for and so I'm excited to dig into it with you and soak it in for awhile.

So starting today, we are going to be using 1 Thessalonians to think about 'Real life faith' and I hope that this series will help you to live out your faith in very tangible, everyday ways.

So turn with me to 1 Thessalonians, the first letter to the Thessalonians really, 1 Thessalonians chapter one. Pro tip as you're looking for it in your Bible – it's after the more popular letters, like Romans and Galatians and Philipppians – but right before the Timothy and Titus – it's really the first of the T's – Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus and there you are.

So first Thessalonians 1, verse 1 opens:

NIV 1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you (1Th 1:1 NIV).

Now right away, we need to pause and remember the very real circumstances that led Paul to write this letter in the first place. If you think back to last week, Acts 17, Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica and began to tell people about the crucified and risen Saviour Jesus who died and rose for them. A number of people believed them and began to follow Jesus and the church in Thessalonica was born.

And what a church it was. Again, if you think back to last week – there were Jewish people there, there were Gentile people there, there were influential women there, there were probably slaves and masters sitting side by side – there was a guy named Jason there (they probably met at his house), there was another person named Aristarchus (let's call him 'Ricky'), another named Secundus, like I said last week,

there was probably a Thessalonian Bert who had a new joke every time they met and a Thessalonian Val who was just about the sweetest lady you can imagine. They had no building, they had no Sunday school, they had no property or pews, but they had each other and they had Jesus and that was more than enough.

And good thing too because when the authorities caught wind of what they were doing, they faced some serious trouble. The religious elite stirred up a mob against the church and Jason had to put up cash as a promise of good behaviour while Paul and Silas had to go on to the next town to share the Gospel there.

Think about what that meant though for the new church in Thessalonica. Jason, 'Ricky,' Secundus, Thessalonian Bert, Thessalonian Val, they were brand new Christians. They were just months old in the faith. Think about what you were like two months into your life as a Christian; how mature were you?

These people were like babies in the faith with so much to learn and I can imagine that many of them longed to know if God was still in control, if they were progressing in their faith and how they could continue to walk with the God who had freely saved them.

Well, as it turned out, Paul was thinking about those things too and so he decided to reach out to the Thessalonians to help them. He didn't want to stir up trouble for them though by showing up again in Thessalonica and so he sent one of his protégés, Timothy, to go and see how they were and report back to him and then Paul sent Timothy back with the letter that you're holding in your Bible. And look at what it says:

NIV 1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. 2 We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.

Can you imagine what an impression that must have made on the Thessalonian Christians? They were all newborns in the faith and here the super-apostle himself, Paul, was writing to them to say 'I thank God for you – ALL of you – EVERYDAY – every time I pray.' Paul hadn't forgotten them; God certainly hadn't forgotten them. They were IN God the Father, safe in His hands and Paul himself was giving thanks for them every time he prayed.

And the rest of the chapter tells us WHY Paul was so thankful for the Thessalonians. Paul lays out for us here four reasons WHY he thanks God for the Thessalonians and they all have to do with their faith.

First, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians because they have productive faith. Then he thanks God because they have spiritually empowered faith. Then he thanks God because they have exemplary faith. And then finally he thanks God because they have saving faith. They have productive faith, they have spiritually empower faith, they have exemplary faith and they have saving faith. Let's go through and unpack those one at a time.

First, the Thessalonians have productive faith.

You can see that in verse 3 –

3 We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1Th 1:3 NIV).

Now, if you know Paul, you'll know that this triad of ideas is really important to him – faith, hope and love, faith, hope and love – he writes about faith, hope and love at least half a dozen times in the New Testament, twice in this letter alone (1 Thessalonians 5:8). Faith, hope and love were clearly important ideas for Paul.

But what's important to realize here is that they were not just ideas. They are not just concepts. For Paul and for the Christians in Thessalonica, for us, faith, hope and love are the fire that inspires real action in the real world. The experience of faith, hope and love motivates believers to do something about it in the world.

And you can see how that worked in the Thessalonian church.

The Thessalonian Christians had faith and that faith in Jesus motivated them to do good works. Their trust in Jesus moved them to work for His Kingdom.

The Thessalonian Christians had experienced God's love and that experience of love motivated them to love others.

The Thessalonian Christians had hope in the Lord Jesus and that hope prompted them to stand firm and to stay faithful, knowing that Jesus would be back to make all things right.

These people literally put their faith into action: faith producing work, labour prompting love and hope causing endurance. They had productive faith. They knew what God had done for them and they were eager to do something about it.

That's why I love missions like Friendship House and the Raw Carrot and Why not. That's why I love when you do stuff like make care packages for our homebound people and take meals to people who are having a rough time. I don't think you're simply doing it because it's a nice thing to do. I think you're doing it because you realize what a blessing it is to be loved by God and that motivates you to extend that love for others.

I remember listening to the lady from Raw Carrot awhile back saying that they sat there in church thinking 'how can we put our faith into action?' and they ended up establishing a faith-based group that employees people on ODSP to make soup. Certainly Friendship House gets it – their motto is literally 'God's love in action.'ⁱ They labour because God loved them first.

Paul gave thanks for the Thessalonians' productive faith and invites us to have productive faith too.

So, first, the Thessalonians had productive faith; the Thessalonians also had spiritually empowered faith. You can see that in verse 4 -

4 For we know, brothers [and sisters] loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

This is such an important insight because it explains the difference between casual faith and real faith. For years, I had casual faith. I went to church, I had a vague sense of God in my life, but I didn't really take it seriously. I didn't take my faith seriously, I didn't take the Bible seriously; the words of the Gospel were simply 'words' with no more what than the Saturday paper.

But then, later on in life, I heard those words again, and this time, they were divine arrows fired from the bow of a master archer – straight and true into my heart. They came with power, they came with conviction. They gripped my heart with absolute certainty. All of a sudden, these words meant something to me – my eyes were opened, my mind was opened and I could see how the Bible applied to me, how God was real and really for me.

And you know what made the difference – it was the Holy Spirit, coming, making Jesus real to me, making my sin real to me, making Jesus' sacrifice real to me, enabling me to take that first step of faith to walk with Him.

And that's what happened in Thessalonica too. Paul is thinking back to those three Sabbath days he spent with the Thessalonians, teaching them from the Old Testament and realizing that the Holy Spirit had been at work in their hearts. He knew that God had been at work because people were taking this seriously; they were receiving God's Word with deep conviction and commitment. He could sense the Holy Spirit driving the point home and inviting people into a brand new life.

This was not a religious high that would fade away after a few days or a grudging agreement to come to church every once in a while; people were being changed because God Himself was changing them from the inside out. Their faith was not simply an exercise of the mind or the heart; God Himself was empowering their faith.

They had spiritually empowered faith.

And this I think is one of my deepest prayers for this church. A little church like ours, with deep family roots, long-standing traditions, it can be really easy for churches like ours to operate on a strictly human basis without leaning on the power of God for direction.

I pray every week that my words, as they come from Scripture, would not just be words, but that the Holy Spirit would pick them up and deliver them into your hearts the way that He knows you need them. I pray that God would speak powerfully into your life to move you to greater faithfulness and greater fulfillment. I pray that God would bring people to us who have lived for years with a casual faith or no faith at all even and that He would incisively tear down the walls that have kept people from Him and enable them to live by the power of the Holy Spirit in them.

Paul gave thanks for the spiritually empowered faith of the Thessalonians and he invites us to have spiritually empowered faith too.ⁱⁱ

Paul gives thanks for their productive faith and their spiritually empowered faith; he also gives thanks for their exemplary faith. Look at verse 6 –

6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere (1Th 1:5-8 NIV).

Their faith became exemplary.

When the Thessalonian became Christians, they had no idea what a Christian looked like. They had no idea what it meant to follow Jesus because they had never seen anybody follow Jesus in their life before.

And so what did they do? They looked to the example that they had on hand. They looked to Paul and Silas as examples. They looked to Jesus as an example. They took what they knew about Jesus and how their leaders lived and applied that to shape their own life as Christians. That's verse 6 – 'You became imitators of us and of the Lord.' Paul lived out his faith so that he would be an example of the faith to the Thessalonians – which, Paul says, made them into examples for other believers.

That's what I mean by exemplary – verse 7 – they became a model – these brand new spiritually empowered believers – became an example to all the other believers living in the regions around them. People knew the Thessalonians for their faith and made an effort to follow their example. Their faith was exemplary.

Now this too is really important for a church like us. Do you realize that you are setting an example of faith for other believers here at the church? Do you realize that Ben and Anna and Hannah and Emma and Cohen and Finley and Weston and Owen and Jodi and Brooke are learning from you what faith looks like?

For better or for worse, they are following in our footsteps of faith; let's make our faith exemplary. Let's follow the Thessalonians' lead and imitate Paul. Imitate Jesus. Let's follow the lead of the Holy Spirit so closely that people are going to start writing letters to the editor of the Brantford Expositor saying 'What are they putting in the water in Langford? Those people are so full of love, so motivated by their God that they are pouring out their hearts to serve and bless others. How can I get in on that?'

Paul gave thanks for the exemplary faith of the Thessalonians and he invites us to have exemplary faith too.

So, the Thessalonians had productive faith, they had spiritually empowered faith, they had exemplary faith and finally they had transformative faith. Look at verse 8 -

8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it,

9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (1Th 1:8-10 NIV).

As the Big 'C' church, we have a lot of ways of talking about becoming a follower of Jesus. I mean, biblically, there's the language of denying yourself, taking up your cross and following Jesus; there's the language of being born again; more popularly, we talk about saying the sinner's prayer, believing in Jesus, coming to faith in Jesus, inviting Jesus into your heart.

Frankly, I think that this passage in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 deserves to be on this that. Look at how Paul describes coming to faith in Jesus: 'You turned TO God, from idols, to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven... who rescues us from the coming wrath.'

Without God, we tend to worship idols. Various theologians will say 'we all worship something' and if we're not God we're worshipping God, then it's idols. For some in Thessalonica, it was literally idols, wooden or stone statues of Zeus or Apollo or other household gods. For the ethnic Jews in Thessalonica, it might have been the Law itself as something to save you, self-righteousness and pride. For us, it's probably the idol of self-sufficiency that we wrestle with most – the idea that 'I myself am enough and I have no need for God.' Do you see what happens though when we do that? We make ourselves into idols that we then give our allegiance to, rather than the God who made us. We are all idol worshipers and idol worshippers face wrath.

That's a difficult reality that the Bible teaches, but it's true; when we turn from God to worship created things (like ourselves), we face the wrath of our gracious but just Creator. You can't just commit treason and think you'll be welcomed back; justice must be done.

The wonder of the Gospel is that the Creator Himself came to see that sins were paid for and justice was done. In the person of His Son Jesus, God Himself came to redeem us from idol worship and to rescue us from the coming wrath. Jesus died in our place then was raised to life again, so that we could be forgiven and transfer our allegiance from our idols to our God. That's at the heart of the Thessalonian's faith – they turned from idols to serve the living and true God – they had transformative faith.

Just in the last couple of weeks, I got a brand new car and it was a weird experience handing over the keys to my old car. I felt kind of sad, kind of nostalgic. I loved that car. I spent fifteen years driving that car. It was important to me. But in buying a new car, I was committing to the new one and turning my back on the old. It couldn't be any other way.

That's what faith is like. We turn from idols to serve the living God.

I think that it would be helpful for us to think about 'what is the experience at the heart of our faith?' If you had to define your experience as a Christian, what would you say? If you say 'I grew up in the church' or 'I go to church on Sunday,' that's a good start but that's only a fraction of what the Bible describes as transformative faith. Simply going to church doesn't make you a Christian; turning from idols to serve the living and true God makes us Christians, who go to church as just one of many important expressions of being beloved servants and children of God.

Paul gave thanks for the transformative faith of the Thessalonians and he invites us to have transformative faith too.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Thessalonians' faith was productive, it was spiritually empowered, it was exemplary and it was transformative and God invites us to have that kind of faith too.

If I were to pull this all together into a take home idea, I would say this: Be like a Thessalonian and put your faith into action. Be like a Thessalonian and put your faith into action.

Let me unpack that.

First – ‘Be like a Thessalonian.’ In Paul’s own words, the Thessalonians WERE a model for other believers and we can learn a lot from them. The old advertisement said ‘Be like Mike;’ do the things Michael Jordan did (like drink Gatorade), but in this case, do the things the Thessalonians did.

What did the Thessalonians do?

They had faith. They had true, spiritually empowered faith and they had transformative faith and you can too.

If the words of the Gospel are just words to you, they’ve never gripped your heart with power and conviction and the Holy Spirit, ask God to bring those words home to your heart with power. If you’ve been walking with Jesus is never really thought about that, invite the Spirit to stir in you so that it’s not just you convincing yourself to believe but God Himself enabling you to

Don’t settle for a casual faith that floats on the edges of relationship with Jesus, dive in and walk with Him. Turn from idols – whatever they are in your life – to serve the living God. Exercise spiritual and transformative faith...

...And then put that faith into action! Be productive in your faith and be an example to other believers. Realize just how deeply you are loved by God and let that overflow into love for others. It’s good to do good things for others because you’re nice; it’s even better do things for people because you’re loved!

And think about the example of faith that you are setting for your family, your co-workers, your church. What’s the message that’s ringing out through your heart and your action? Make Jesus your example so that you can set an example for others.

Make like a Thessalonian and put your faith into action.

ⁱ Now I thought for a while about telling you about someone like George Mueller, a Christian leader who founded a number of orphanages in 19th century England, depending on God entirely through prayer. It wasn't enough for him to say 'I have faith;' his faith moved him to be productive and to serve others...

But then I got to thinking, we don't have to go back in time to find examples of that. Friendship House's mission statement is literally 'God's love in action;' they're all about getting faith, hope and love into their work clothes and serving others tangibly as a result. Their efforts to provide food for people, clothing, a warm space, a sense of belonging; that's faith hope and love in the flesh and that's the kind of faith that Paul thanks God for in the Thessalonian church.

They have productive faith.

ⁱⁱ Does that mean that if you haven't had some kind of moving experience, your faith is not spiritually empowered? I don't think so because I know we all come to faith in different ways but I would say this: if your faith is spiritually empowered, you are going to want to spend time with Jesus, you are going to take Him and His Word seriously and build your life around Him. You are going to live with the conviction that the Holy Spirit truly is at work in you, 24/7, 7 days a week, and you're going to want to partner with Him in everything you do. So pray for that. Invest in that.

The Thessalonians had productive faith, they had spiritually empowered faith and they also had exemplary faith.

ⁱⁱⁱ Now if I was Paul, I think I would have put this part of the letter at the very top of the letter because frankly, this is where it all begins.

When Paul opened up the Old Testament to the people of Thessalonica, he revealed some difficult truths. God made us (that's good) but we rejected Him (that's bad). When you reject your Creator to serve other things, you reject life (that's also bad), and that rejection means that wrath is on the way (that's really bad).

But this is the Good News, the news we celebrated two weeks ago at Easter, the news Paul shared with the Thessalonians – Jesus came and died for the forgiveness of sins and in so doing, rescued us who trust Him from the coming wrath.

And look at how Paul describes the Thessalonian response to that news. Verse 9 – 'they turned from idols to serve the living and true God.'

Now that I think is such a powerful and concise picture of what it means to believe. 'They turned from idols to serve the living and true God.'

For some of the people in Thessalonica, that was literally true. The Gentile people, the pagan people who would believe through Paul's daily ministry in the marketplace; they probably did have idols that they turned to for help. They probably did have household gods that they threw out in the trash when they realized how helpless Zeus and Hades and Dionysus were to save them. They turned from those things to serve the triune God.

But what about the Jewish people in Thessalonica? Acts 17 tells us that the nucleus of the church here *was* Jewish after all. Two possibilities here: one is that the church had grown so much because of the example that the Christians set in Thessalonica that the ethnically Jewish Christians had been overwhelmed by the ethnically Gentile ones. Gentile people just kept coming to faith and so Paul is speaking to the majority here when he says ‘you turned from idols.’

But there’s another possibility and one that I think is more likely – even Jewish people had trouble with idols, but their idols weren’t things you could point out. They were pride, self-righteousness, status, even their idea of the Law as something that could save you. When Paul over in Philippians said ‘I was the poster-boy for salvation by works,’ he’s acknowledging that he had an idol problem and it was himself.

At its core, I think that verse 9 means that by coming to faith, you are turning from your own confidence in yourself to be good enough for God, you are turning away from pride and self-centredness in order to depend fully on the true and living God, who loved us enough to save us. That kind of faith transforms us so that we no longer live for ourselves, but for God, who saved us.

And not only that, we wait for and look forward to the day when Jesus comes again, exercising wrath against evil, cleansing the world of sin and sorrow so that things can be the model of perfection that God intended when He created in the first place. We live for that day, serving the living God instead of ourselves. That’s transformative faith.

Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians for their faith that is productive, spiritually empowered, exemplary and transforming.