

A Time to Encourage - Rev. Calum M Smith

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Preacher: Rev. Calum Murdo Smith

[0 : 00] If you can turn back to your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians, we're looking at this chapter this morning together. Obviously it ties in with our reading in the book of Acts chapter 17 where we see Paul coming to Thessalonica in the first place.

And now he's writing back to them sometime later. And if you just look at the first, well verse 2 there, 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, and so on.

As was mentioned in the intimations earlier, as a congregation you will have a visit in the next few weeks from the POV committee. And you may be wondering what that's all about.

What is a POV committee? It's a pastoral oversight committee of Presbyterian that comes to visit with a congregation meant to be every five years or so. And why will this committee come?

Well, I'll be part of it. I'll be part of the committee that comes to visit. And I hope as we come it is to give a sense of encouragement and a sense of encouragement in the Lord.

[1 : 19] It's not to ask probing questions to find out what's going wrong or where things aren't right. It's more to see what's happening in a good sense and what can be done better, how you can go forward strengthened in the Lord.

That's what it's all about. And so hopefully that's what it will be as the committee comes. That's why I want to reflect on what Paul does here as he writes to the church at Thessalonica.

He writes here to encourage them and to encourage them especially in their faith because we can so often feel discouraged. So how do you feel today in that sense of the gospel?

Do you feel encouraged in the gospel today? Is this congregation a place where you feel encouraged, where you are encouraged to come, and where you are encouraged by being here, and where you go forth from here as an encouragement to others around you?

The church at Thessalonica was a church that very much was an encouragement to others as they were encouraged themselves. We read in the book of Acts, in chapters 16 and 17, you see how the church became established there by the Holy Spirit.

[2 : 37] The church came to be established there by Paul and Silas, but they only stayed, as you see in the book of Acts, three weeks. They weren't there very long at all.

Three weeks, and yet something great happened in that city because the gospel took hold. And when you think of that three-week visit and the gospel being proclaimed, it often reminds me of the kind of visits that we get from the faith mission.

They've come to Barbers on many different occasions in other parts of the island, and they very often come, and they're only there for two or three weeks, and yet there's a sense of encouragement.

There's a sense of gospel renewal. There's a sense of togetherness around the gospel. And although they go away, you want that sense of joy in the Lord to continue.

And that's what we are as a church then. We are a people who are to gather together to encourage and strengthen one another. So in three weeks in Thessalonica, it doesn't sound a long time, but a great impression was left.

[3 : 43] The gospel took hold. Many came to faith. It speaks of Jews and Greeks. And important women of the city are mentioned, those who came to faith.

These little details, they're important details because they remind us that the gospel was for all. So the gospel was proclaimed.

But as is often the case when the gospel is proclaimed, it disturbs people in different ways. It meets with opposition. It disturbs them in a good sense, but also in a bad sense as well.

So the good side of the gospel coming and stirring people up is that they were brought to faith. But the bad is that it brought opposition. And you see, as we read in the book of Acts, that Paul had to leave the city very quickly and continue on his journey to other places.

From Thessalonica, he went on to Berea, to Athens, to Corinth, to all these different places. But what you find is that as he went away, he didn't forget the church at Thessalonica.

[4 : 52] It may be about a year and a half later that he's writing back to them here, but he's still writing to them with a sense of joy in the people.

And he's writing back to them having heard what is going on in Thessalonica. You see it in chapter 3 here, verse 6. So there's this bond that exists between them.

They are being an encouragement to one another. And so he's writing back to them all a year and a half later to encourage them to keep going in the faith.

And Paul's letters in the New Testament, they're always got a variety of different aspects to them. The letter to the Philippians is so rich in what Christ has done.

And there's that sense of joy when he says, Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice.

The letter to the Corinthians, there's a lot of challenges. There's a lot of rebukes as well as encouragements.

[6 : 07] But the letter he's writing here to the Thessalonians, it's very much a letter of encouragement. And they are encouraged. And as a result of this encouragement that they receive, they go on in the strength of the Lord in two different ways, you could say.

They go on in the strength of the Lord in the sense of loving, being part of the church, the people of God who worship the Lord. They're encouraged in that.

And they're encouraged as this love that they have for the Lord goes out in service to others around them. So there's these two aspects of this encouragement.

They're encouraged to be a people of worship and encouraged to be a people of service to the Lord. So I want us just to focus for a short time on elements of this encouragement and how they were encouraged and what this encouragement meant to them.

So the first thing is the elements of encouragement. When you look at the church here, as you read of this church in Thessalonians, they're a clear example of what the witness of every church should be.

[7 : 24] It was a church that made an impact in their day, a church that made an impact in the city, but also a church that made an impact far and wide because people were speaking about them in many different places.

And when we speak about the church, we are speaking about the people, the people who make up the church. It's not a building, it's the people. And they're a witness to all around them.

And so when we see the example of the church here in Thessalonica, we ask ourselves what is our example to others around us, whether it's ourselves in our homes and families, whether it's our example in the community, whether it's our example further afield.

What are people saying of the church here? What example are we giving to those around us?

Because people will see. People will see how we conduct ourselves.

People will see and form opinions about us and about the Lord based on what they see of us. And so the church of Thessalonica is a good example to us because they were people who were spoken of in a positive way, far and wide.

[8 : 46] And what were they speaking about? And what should they see in ourselves as a church today? Well, we speak of marks of the church, preaching, the sacraments, discipline.

These are marks of the church. But alongside these, there are other elements that flow from that. So out of all these marks, the preaching of the word, the sacraments and discipline, out of that flows other things.

And that's what we see as Paul is writing to the church of Thessalonica here. And especially what we read there in verse 3. Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The marks of the elements are there for us. Your work of faith. Faith was such a big thing in this church. People had come to faith.

Faith is the key to salvation. Faith is the key to our hope, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't just gather together here to be an example to others by our good works or good conduct.

[10:01] But it's through faith that all of these things are to come. We are to see the Lord working in that way. When you look at Hebrews 11, that great chapter of faith, it says, by faith first, and then it goes on to say, they did.

So, Noah, by faith, he built the ark. It wasn't, he built the ark and then saw later on what faith was. It was by faith, not seeing what was going to happen, but believing the Lord and what he had said to him that he did.

And so we are to be a church of faith. That's what the church at Thessalonica was. And for ourselves today, it's to be a people of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do we have faith? Do we have that faith in the Lord? There was a farming community once experiencing a serious drought, and the crops were going to fail if no rain came, because the ground was so dry, it was starting to crack.

And concern was turning to panic. And in the community, the church called a day of prayer, to pray that rain might come.

[11:16] And as they were making their way up to the church for this time of prayer, some people saw a little girl carrying with her an umbrella. And they asked her, where are you going with that?

And her reply was this, we're going to pray for rain, aren't we? She had that faith that if we were to pray, the rain would come. I want an example to others.

If you're going to ask God for something and you don't expect it, what kind of prayer is that? So we are to be a people of faith.

It says there, too, that they were doing a labor of love. Another element of the example that they were a labor of love. This involves sweat and effort and probably tears as well, a labor of love. It's a toil, and yet it's a labor of love for the Lord. And that's what we are to see in a church as well, a people who are laboring together, serving together, seeking the Lord's blessing together in that labor of love.

[12:25] We serve others. We serve those around us because we are to love all around us, not just the ones we have here in our church, but also the ones who are around us.

Thessalonica was a place where they labored in love for the Lord to all around them. But there were also encouragement in that this was a sustaining faith.

It was a patient faith, your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. So they were waiting on the Lord in that sense.

They had hope in the Lord. And that's what we have as well as we look to the Lord. There are these elements of encouragement for ourselves to be a people of faith, a people who labor in love, and a people who have that steadfastness of hope.

So there was these elements of encouragement. But there was also encouragement received.

Encouragement received. As Paul was writing to them, after all this time has passed, he receives great encouragement from them, from hearing about them, that there are people who are not just plodding on in the faith, but that they are growing in the faith, going from strength to strength in the faith.

[13:55] And as Paul hears of this healthy and vibrant church, church that's flourishing, he wants to encourage them to go on in that sense, to go on in that way.

There are so many positives here, so many good things happening, but it was to be encouraged again and again.

And hopefully as we come to visit, in that sense of a POV visit, it will be an encouragement to keep going, an encouragement to go on from strength to strength.

And again, it's grounded in these words of verse 3 as well. The work of faith, the labor of love, the steadfastness of hope. Paul is here encouraging them in that.

A faith that had a past. A work of faith. And you see that from the moment of believing, this faith is active. This faith is an ongoing faith, an increasing faith.

[15:00] A faith that through encouragement flourishes. And that's what you want to do in faith, to encourage in that faith. Because discouragement has the opposite effect.

Discouragement can put us back, but encouragement can build us up. I'm sure we've all known it in our own life experience. The difference that a word of encouragement makes to the word of rebuke or discouragement.

There's a famous artist in the 18th century who's called Benjamin West. When he was just a young boy, something happened in his life that he could look back on and say that this is what made the

difference in my life.

It was one day he was trying to be a good babysitter to his little sister. His mother had gone out for a short time and Benjamin was left looking after his little sister.

And he found some bottles of colored ink. And he decided what he would do, that he would make a painting of his little sister, a portrait of his little sister.

[16:04] And he did this. But it also brought a mess. And you can imagine the scene. Maybe you've had the scene yourself if you've got children. You've come home and you find there's a mess everywhere.

And if you're like me, the initial reaction would always be, what have you done? What's this mess? But Benjamin West could remember his mother coming home and quietly just looking around and seeing the mess that had been made.

But then her eyes caught, her attention was caught by the painting that he had done of his little sister. And instead of losing the plot over the mess, what she said was, what a beautiful picture of your sister.

And she leaned down and kissed her son. And he got such great. Great encouragement in that. And that's, he says, the moment that kept him going. Because of that encouragement, had he been discouraged that day, it could have been a very different story.

But he said, my mother's kiss made me a painter. So he got encouragement. And that's a past experience for him that led him to keep going. And that's what faith does for us.

[17:16] It keeps us going. When our faith, we look to Jesus. We look to Jesus in the past and we see what he has done for us. We keep looking to him and it keeps us going now.

Faith isn't just for a moment of conversion, but it's for all your days. So there is great encouragement received when we look back in faith.

But it's also got a present. Faith has a present. That labor of love is an ongoing aspect of the church here at Thessalonica. We love, as the scripture says, because he first loved us.

Jesus first loved us. But it's a faith that has a present. And we are to be a people who labor in love in the present as well, recognizing what Jesus has done for us.

And that keeps us going now. But then it's a faith that has a future as well, because it's based on the steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[18:22] What is that hope? Well, it's not just a hope for today. It's a hope for the future. It's a hope for all eternity. That hope of the resurrection.

That hope of the day when the Lord will return. We have our eyes fixed on Jesus. That steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, you could look at this verse and say, this is what the church at Thessalonica would be remembered for. These great words. Could you have anything better than to be remembered for our work of faith, our labor and love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Everybody wants to be remembered for something. What do you want to be remembered for? How do you want to be spoken about riches, prizes, a life lived well, good deeds?

Many of these things are worthwhile and worth being remembered for. But nothing is greater than being remembered by a people who had this work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[19:43] So Paul encouraged them. He gave this encouragement in their faith to look back, to look to the present, and look to the future as well, and to keep going in that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The third and final thing we see here is the encouragement they were. As they were encouraged by Paul, so they also were encouragers.

When you look at verse 7, it says, so that you may become 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 in Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything.

When you think of a committee coming to report, and this is Paul looking at the Church of Thessalonica, and this is his conclusion, we need not say anything.

That would be a great report for us to give to presbytery. We need not say anything, because what you are doing says it all. What you are doing is what counts.

[21:01] That you are a people who have a work of faith, a labor of love, and steadfastness of hope, an example to others. And so that's what we look for, to be a people like this, to be a people

who are encouraged and who are an encouragement to others.

What kind of example was the church at Thessalonica? I'm sure if you had asked the people there, what kind of example are you for Christ? It would be the same kind of response that we would give today when we look to ourselves and say, I'm just a poor witness.

I'm just a poor example of what a Christian should be. But what was true of them? Well, when you look at verse 6, it says, You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the Word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

They received the Word, and they were imitators, not just, as he says there, of us, but more importantly, of the Lord.

And that's the example that any Christian would want to be. An example, an imitator of the Lord. Receiving the Word, sometimes in much affliction, as it says there, but yet with joy of the Holy Spirit.

[22 : 32] The joy that comes through knowing the Lord and the Holy Spirit at work. So they were examples. examples. And that was a great encouragement to others.

And that is what you are to be as well, an example to others by being imitators of the Lord. Not copying what other churches are doing or what other people are doing, but you being examples of the Lord, faithful to Him, seeking to proclaim the Word, to have faith in that Word, and to share that Word with others around you.

So they received the Word. And that's a great sign of a positive nature in the church, a positive example in the church, being imitators of the Lord.

So there were examples in that way, but they also led by example. They led by example in verse 7. So you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

The way they lived, the way they served, the way they loved, it was an example to all around them. And others heard about it. And that's why Paul says, there's nothing more for us to say.

[23 : 54] We need not say anything. The example speaks louder than words. God had a plan in Thessalonica just like he does in Barvis.

And you maybe look ahead and you're wondering, what is God's plan? What is God's way? What is God's opportunities here? Well, he has a plan for the gospel and that the gospel would spread and bear fruit.

What we are to do is to live a life of faith, believing in him, trusting in him, praying to him, the one who is able to do far much more than we ask or imagine.

So these people became an example and an influence. May that be your desire through the gospel spreading here, through faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.

May you be an example to those around you. The church grew as the people were faithful. They were faithful because they were encouraged and they were encouraged because Jesus had taken hold of them.

[25 : 06] So may Jesus take hold of you all and may you be an example and an encouragement to others. Somebody once said, Flatter me and I may not believe you.

Criticize me and I may not like you. Ignore me and I may not forgive you. encourage me and I will not forget you.

There's a great thing in encouragement. And so may you come to be encouraged today and in all the days ahead through the word of God that you would continue in your work of faith, your labor of love and your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord, gracious God, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the way it teaches, the way it helps us, the way it rebukes us, but also the way it encourages.

And we pray, Lord, to know that encouragement in our hearts today, to have our focus on what we have through faith and the labor of love that we are to give and the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 21] may you strengthen these things in all of our hearts today as we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to conclude by singing to God's praise in Psalm 37.

Psalm 37 we'll sing from verse 3 to verse 6. A psalm that speaks of setting our trust in the Lord and continuing in the good works that he has given us.

Set thou thy trust upon the Lord and be thou doing good and so thou in the land shalt dwell and verily have food. Delight thyself in God, he'll give thine heart's desire to thee.

Thy way to God commit him trust it bring to pass shall he. We'll sing from verse 3 to 6 to God's praise. Amen. Set thou thy trust upon the Lord and fear thou doing good and so thou in The love shall dwell And readily offered Delight thyself And good he'll give Thine heart's desire to thee Thy way to God Commit him thrusted Preacher past shall he And like unto the light He shall thy righteousness Display And he thy judgment Shall bring forth life Newtide of the day Now may grace, mercy and peace From God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
[29 : 09] Rest upon and abide with you all Now and forevermore Amen.