

Paul's Love, Hope and Faith

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 March 2017

Preacher: Michael Reader-Harris

[0 : 00] Paul's longing to see the Thessalonians. But brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time, in person, not in thought, out of our intense longing, we made every effort to see you.

For we wanted to come to you, certainly I, Paul, did again and again, but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in, in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?

Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. So when we could not stand it any longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who was our brother and co-worker in God's service, in spreading the gospel of Christ's faith, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.

For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted, and it turned out that way, as well you know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith.

I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you, and that our labors might have been in vain. Well, isn't it exciting? We've got to the fourth session on 1 Thessalonians.

[1 : 10] Now, you may have missed some. Actually, I've missed some. So we're going to start with an introduction, and we're going to look about how it all comes together. We're going to go very quickly through a geographical introduction that I hope you'll find exciting.

Some of you may know it really well, and you may find it unexciting. But the map will come up now. Oh, it's come up behind me. That's great. So, if we go back a little bit, you probably know about Philippi.

It'll be circled there. And Paul and Silas were definitely there. And then they move to Thessalonica. I'm using a blue thing to indicate Paul's movements.

A brown line indicates Silas' movements. And later on, you'll find a green line, which indicates Timothy's movements. I think Timothy was in Thessalonica too, but there's no actual mention in the story in Acts.

So it's exciting in Thessalonica. People respond. But after three Sabbaths, perhaps four weeks in Thessalonica, they're chased out of town, and they go down the road to Berea, which isn't very far away, sometimes spelt without an O.

[2 : 19] And people in Berea are even more enthusiastic about the gospel than the Thessalonians are. So it's really exciting, but the people from Thessalonica turn up and cause trouble there too.

So at that point, we find that Paul, again shown in blue, he goes to Athens, and the others are going to follow on afterwards. When Paul gets to Athens, you'll know the story.

He preaches the gospel there, the exciting sermon on the Areopagus and all that. And then the other two turn up. You'll see them in brown and green.

There we are. So now we see Timothy in action, and they arrive in Athens. Now, Paul's very concerned. I mean, he'd preached the gospel to people, and they'd only had four weeks to hear the story and to respond.

And they indeed had responded, but he wasn't sure how they were getting on. Remember, there's no mobile phones, no internet. He doesn't know how they're getting on. So he sends Timothy back to find out how it's going on.

[3 : 30] And at some point, it's less clear, Silas goes off to Macedonia. And I don't know where in Macedonia. Maybe Berea, in fact. Maybe he goes before Timothy.

Maybe he goes afterwards. It doesn't really matter very much. And then Paul moves across from Athens to Corinth. There he is. Corinth is also quite a stressful place to minister.

Although, indeed, a church comes into being in Corinth, as you well know. And then, here comes Timothy, coming back from Thessalonica to Corinth. And he brings exciting news that all's going well.

So that's actually next week's sermon, not this one. And then we also find, finally, that there's our friend Silas. He turns up as well.

So, that's the sort of background to the whole story that I hope we'll find helpful. Now, Paul had always known that Thessalonica was a real church.

[4 : 37] I mean, when he first preached the gospel there, he saw this response. He says in verse 1, verse 3, we 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.

He'd seen a church come into being. He knew they were real because they showed faith, love, and hope. And, in fact, next week, trailer for my sermon next week, when Timothy comes back, he says that he reports that they are, he reports good news about your faith and love, verse 6.

But the striking thing, as we look at tonight's passage, the way I want to look at it, is to see that it's also about faith, and hope, and love.

Or I think it's actually, most naturally in the order, love, hope, and faith. Because the striking thing is that those same three things are characteristic of baby Christians, like the ones in Thessalonica, or the most knowledgeable, deepest Christians, like Paul himself.

So let's have a look at those different bits. So verse 17 and 18 are about love, verses 19 and 20, I think are about hope, and three, verses 1 to 5, are about faith.

[6 : 15] Paul's faith and Timothy's faith, leading to building up the Thessalonians' faith. But we'll start with love. We'll go through them in turn. But brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated you for a short time, in person, not in thought, out of our intense longing, we made every effort to see you.

For we wanted to come to you. Certainly I, Paul, did again and again. I want to pick some of those words out and enjoy them this evening.

Paul says that they were orphaned. Now either that's a really complicated, mixed metaphor, because it's really, I mean, the orphans are really the Thessalonians, not Paul.

or the word means bereft and can be equally well used of parents as it can be of children. And I think that's probably true.

I mean, Paul was spiritually father to the Thessalonians. If you take, for example, 2 verse 11, for you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging.

[7 : 32] He had a fatherly ministry of leading onwards. And he had a motherly ministry, chapter 2 verse 7b, just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you.

There's a ministry of teaching and training and caring. Paul was father and mother to these people. And then they're split up. The Thessalonians are in Thessalonica and Paul is in Athens, orphaned or at least bereft.

And he says, we're longing for you. We shouldn't underestimate the power of these words. He was separated from his children, little children, baby children, in person, but not in thought or heart.

This longing that he speaks about is the longing of a parent for an absent child. It's parental love.

Now as I started thinking about this, at first I wondered whether I was supposed to somehow work this feeling up in myself.

[8 : 51] That actually, it was something I was supposed to feel for all of you. And I realized it's not. It's actually about the specific, the particular story here is about a very specific type of love.

A love for those who have come to faith through you. And particularly, the particular intensity is for those who probably come to faith quite recently.

I mean, there is a chap who came to faith through me years ago. And when I see him, it's really exciting. And I do want to build him up and we encourage each other. But, well, he's not a baby Christian.

He's been an SU camp leader. You know, it's all a long time ago. But I still, he's still special to me. If I want, but I think camp's where I go to find my picture of what's happening here.

I mean, if a child in your tent comes to faith, at camp, well, you do all in your power to establish the child in the faith. You give him Bible reading notes.

[10:01] You point him to his SU group. You explain about prayer. You encourage him to find some other Christians when he goes home. And then, he gets on the bus and he goes away.

And you're not supposed to follow him up in many ways. When I was a tent leader, you were allowed to send a postcard. I think there are probably slightly more modern rules now. But, basically, you could pray. And you could wait. And you could do a little bit. And then, you get really excited because the reunion's coming.

And you write to him and urge him to come to the reunion. And you make jolly sure you get there. That's the labor of love. You want to be there because you want to see this person again who had a week at camp with you.

Like those Thessalonians had three weeks of Paul. And now, you're going to see him again or her again and encourage them. That's the best picture I could find as I thought about that sense of separation but also of parental longing to encourage other people.

[11:21] people. And you know, it's Mothering Sunday today. And I'm not going to speak about Mothering Sunday in the conventional way. But I think it's a day when it's good to give thanks for those who are our parents in the faith.

And to pray for any in whose lives we have been spiritual parents. And to think what type of labor of love might still be appropriate.

whether that person's a baby Christian requiring lots of care and concern or someone very much into adulthood for whom we can pray or perhaps give them a ring and encourage them in the faith.

And that moves us on to 19 and 20. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory? Literally, the crown of boasting. In the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes.

Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and our joy. Paul moves from the present to the future.

[12:34] He looks forward to the Lord Jesus coming back. And he says to these little baby Christians in Thessalonica that they're his hope and his joy and his crown on that day.

Now elsewhere in Galatians, Paul says that he won't boast of anything other than the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I guess here, where he does use the word boasting in the original, he's boasting of the fruit of the cross.

He's boasting of these blood-bought brothers and sisters, his hope, his joy, his crown. Paul's joy in this world and his glory in the next is tied up with these baby Christians in Thessalonica.

And I think that sets, that's challenging to me as a priority because that sets evangelism and building up our brothers and sisters at the heart of our Christian lives.

what we most of all want is that our labor should not be in vain, to use a phrase that Paul uses at the very end of the passage that Ula read to us.

[13:57] We don't want it to be in vain because on the last day we come to our hope in the presence of the Lord Jesus when he comes. Now I don't want to discourage anybody because actually we all have different ministries and this passage talks about something rather specific which will happen much more often if your ministry is that of an evangelist than if your ministry is a support ministry in the kitchen or who helps other people to be on the front line and you may say well this particular excitement, glory, joy has never happened to me but you've provided that chance for someone else to share Jesus and that's really important.

We'll all be there together on the last day. All believers will be there on the last day but I don't want to underestimate the importance of this parental ministry.

That's what he's talking about. and Paul was desperate that these believers should keep going.

That was the labor he was putting in. He tried again and again. We don't know what he tried. We don't know what he tried. Were there boats that wouldn't sail? Was there some issue?

I don't know what actually prevented him from going? We don't know. We know Satan prevented him but I imagine Satan operated through a transport strike or through some issue that made it impossible or there may be there was also this problem in Thessalonica that when they left when Paul and Silas left there was some sort of bail that stopped them going back.

[15:45] Maybe Jason and the other believers would have to pay a lot if Paul turned up so he wasn't allowed to go back. That we don't really know exactly what it is. but we do know that Paul loved and that he hoped just as the Thessalonians loved and hoped.

So let's move on to the second half and we'll look at chapter 3. So when we could stand it no longer we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. Isn't that a great verse?

It's a bit uncertain as to exactly the details of what it means. I mean where's Silas? That's a really good question for a St. Silas church member to ask.

Is Paul literally on his own? But he does he says we to be left by ourselves does he actually mean he and Silas are left and Timothy's gone or is we the sort of I hate to say the royal we the apostolic we and he means that actually they've both gone he's journeyed on his own.

I mean one of the funny things about Paul is that when you read for example to Timothy he says come now come Timothy only Luke's with me I'm virtually on my own and then when you get to the end of the letter he says Eubulus Paulus Linus Claudia sorry Eubulus Pudens Linus Claudia and all the brethren send greetings.

[17:19] There seems to be a whole crowd of them but the one he really wanted wasn't there so being all alone may mean he had Silas but he didn't have Timothy that was the problem I think we don't know what doesn't I'm perhaps getting distracted on something that doesn't matter terribly much but what I do want to stress is that sense of teamwork that comes over in the passage we're looking at a joint effort I mean it's possible to read Acts and get the impression almost entirely of Paul moving around the ancient world doing this and this and this but if you read it slightly more carefully you find that actually Silas is sometimes there Timothy is sometimes there Luke himself is there in the passages where he says we Luke is telling us Paul's story and that's fine there's nothing wrong with that but here it's clear that Timothy goes where Paul can't

I mean maybe Timothy it's because Timothy is a Greek when he turns up in Thessalonica you don't spot him he doesn't look in any way different maybe when Paul and Silas turn up people know they're foreigners maybe that's an advantage of sending Timothy maybe it really was only Paul and Silas who were in Thessalonica the first time so only they was his promise made about so Timothy's the one to send no problem we really don't know but Timothy was the one to send but it's interesting that Paul sends the best he sends the one he really wanted to have with him he doesn't think well I can easily spare him we'll send him off to Thessalonica you know as we start we've been talking tonight about mission and we talk about who goes we pray that God will raise up ordinands who go out from here to serve somewhere else well we have to let God take the best we can't say oh really great if he was ordained and he would move off not of course that I would say that about anybody but you know what I mean we can't we want we have to accept that

God should take the best to ordination or whatever for Timothy is God's co-worker the NIV is a bit wet here if you take the most likely or most difficult Greek text it doesn't say our brother and co-worker in God's service it says literally God's co-worker someone who works with God and I think one view is that the scribes thought that was a bit much and toned it down and the NIV translated the toned down version it doesn't really matter terribly much but I do want to stress this idea not first of sending the best but also of teamwork I mean the letters from Paul Silas and Timothy I've never actually heard anyone in church say you know the reading tonight is from the second chapter of the epistle of St.

Paul St. Silas and St. Timothy to the Thessalonians or the first epistle would be better but perhaps it would be fun if they did I've even got a visual aid for this one it's been provided for me by somebody I don't know who it was but I want to look at the statues on the pulpit I don't know whether you can see them but if you look at the statues on the pulpit you'll find the one on the left is Paul he's a bit broken unfortunately but you can tell it's Paul because he's got a sword the sword of the spirit on this side it's Silas well you can see he's actually got his chains from Philippi around his ankles because he also like Paul was set free and he's got a scroll well he's got a bit of a scroll because unfortunately he's broken too but he's got a scroll because Silas has a very interesting and rather surprising property which is that A he helped Paul write letters and

B he helped Peter he carried Peter's first letter so he must have been somebody who could work with people I think Paul and Peter were pretty different but Silas seemed to manage to work with them both he worked well I think there's I see I'm seeing a story tonight about teamwork here there's always been the question why Silas is our patron we never solved that when we did our 150th birthday I think the most exotic and exciting and almost certainly untrue theory is that he's because Silvanus is the other name and silver in Latin means wood so he's sort of woody for woodlands but I think this is unlikely because Silvanus doesn't really mean woody it's not actually the proper name for woody but never mind it's a great idea anyway the point I wanted to get to was that teamwork is key today too Martin was saying that the video course is all about finding our ministries and doing what we're called to

[22 : 51] I'm not saying that Silas Timothy and Paul are interchangeable they went Paul had a very specific apostolic ministry but actually Timothy had something that he could do our task isn't to cheer Martin on in his ministry our task is to work with Martin we're not all called to preach but we're all called to have a particular ministry and work in that we're called to find colleagues for Martin we started the process of advertisement and we're looking for two people to join the staff team and then we ourselves have a ministry and in passing note one more thing note how Paul either was completely alone or he felt alone in Athens Paul found that the idolatry in Athens was oppressive he wasn't just a tourist we need to support our leaders they're not supermen they need to be supported so

I got rather carried away on that one but Timothy goes to Thessalonica and what he does he does two things he goes to strengthen and encourage in verse two them in their faith strengthen and encourage I think that to me suggests both teaching from a pulpit as it were and also getting alongside it's about truth and it's about relationships that's what we're about and as that's done then those who are unsettled become strengthened and encouraged that's what Timothy went to do and we'll see next week that that's what he achieved and that encouraging involved standing alongside those in affliction we thought about that this evening a bit we thought about

Mike Parker he goes and travels around the Middle East and he encourages people who are in difficult situations and we play our part by contributing financially and by prayer to enable him to do just that now we know about the opposition our brothers and sisters face in the Middle East and we're glad to support Mike but it's not easy to be a Christian teenager either I'm hardly the expert on this subject but there are very strong pressures on young people if you're at my age it was less I think the different when I was young that's why we need to support scripture union indeed we do through Jenny Chung and we support the Weal Trust locally in their work of strengthening and encouraging in fighting peer pressure by building up a community of peers to strengthen and encourage because there is a tempter for two references here to the devil first Satan blocked our way as I said we don't know how he blocked it we the word means something like to cut into maybe it could be used of cutting a road up so it couldn't be used or an athlete cutting in during a race the Bible never makes too much of the devil he's not equal and opposite to God the Lord is always king but he isn't insignificant either in the letter that Silas carried 1 Peter be alert and of sober mind your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour resist him standing firm in the faith that's just what Timothy was doing isn't it strengthening and encouraging that's enabling people to stand firm in the faith and therefore resist the devil so what does the Christian life look like well it's love and hope and faith it's that for young Christians baby Christians in Thessalonica it's that for the most senior Christian on the planet and love issues in labour for those we love hope leads to endurance and faith is worked out by sending the best in teamwork in strengthening and encouraging it's worked out in looking after and helping the afflicted let's pray father we thank you for the story of the

Thessalonians we thank you for their love and faith and hope we thank you that that was true of Paul too we want it to be true of us give us this week more love we look to your return and we thank you for that glorious hope and help us to do the work of faith especially with those who are in any difficulties help us to strengthen and encourage people for we ask it in Jesus name Amen