

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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[0:00] Okay. So for those of you who don't know me, my name's Darren. I'm on the vestry here at St. Silas. And we are in the second week of looking at 1 Thessalonians in the Eden, which is one of the earliest letters we have in the New Testament.

And as we talked about last week, it is this letter of kind of optimism and hope, as Paul has written to this community that is persecuted, and he's really worried about what's going on with them. And he finds out, actually, they're doing really well.

And so this is part of his response. And we looked at last week how two of the themes he starts to introduce is this idea of hope and what is hope. And this idea that this group of people have got a hope on something beyond themselves that allows them to endure what's going on, more than endure, to thrive.

And likewise, we talked about this idea of somehow that involves imitating, not pretending to be something you're not, but imitating and walking in the reality of who you are in Jesus.

And that's a fullness of life, not a diminishing of life. And then he starts talking about this idea that Paul himself was being persecuted also.

[1:09] And he talks about in Philippi, he was treated shamefully. And you can find that in Acts 16, which we're not going to talk about tonight. But it's this place where just before Paul meets the Thessalonians, he's been thrown in jail for freeing some slave girl from being demon-possessed.

And he has all these experiences in jail. But as a Roman citizen, he is treated really poorly. His status in society says, I should be treated like this. But actually, it doesn't really count for anything for how he seeks to defend himself.

It eventually gets him up. But he's shamefully treated. And I think as we go into tonight, briefly, I'm going to try and keep this as brief as I can, you start to see the outworking of what Paul actually looks like when he talks about hope, what the hope actually looks like itself.

And that's why I kind of wanted you to discuss that question right at the start. And sometimes I think we, well, I know when I think of hope before I was a Christian, I think I used to think hope was the kind of thing that weak people needed.

That if you were successful in life and you were strong enough, hope was for like really poor people or people on the fringes of society. And that idea that hope was just a crutch that Christians used to use in order to kind of get through difficult times.

[2:22] And, you know, if you really just relied on your own self, then you could probably do that. I think that's obviously, well, maybe it's not obvious, but standing here, that's not the version of hope we're going to talk about tonight. Could you go on to the next slide?

This is Viktor Frankl. Does anybody know who Viktor Frankl is? Viktor Frankl wrote a book called Man's Search for Meaning. It was a book I hadn't really come across until I started training as a counselor.

And Viktor Frankl was Jewish during the war, and he was also a psychologist. And he went into, was sent to the death camps. And while in the death camps, he continued to operate and work as a psychologist.

And he started, he was fascinated by the way people responded to this situation and how he himself was responding to this situation. And he had these four observations of what happens to man when he's put in a place where he has no control and everything he's had has been taken away from him.

And of the four things he saw, the people, one, started to get brutal. Even the nicest people that he had known, they started to kind of adopt a survival of the fittest mentality.

[3 : 36] And so they would conspire sometimes with the Nazi guards and act out of violence themselves and become like the situation around about themselves. He also talks about how some people would give up.

He has this quote, Many prisoners just lost all hope, and with all hope, they lost their spiritual hold. Usually this happened quite suddenly, the symptoms of which were familiar to us experienced camped inmates.

We all feared for this moment in our friends. Usually it began one morning when the prisoner would refuse to get dressed or washed or go out to the parade grounds for inspection. There was no entreaties, no blows, no threats, had any effect.

They just lay there. They had given up. But nothing bothered them anymore, for they had no hope. One of the examples he gives in his book is of, because he kind of operated as like a pseudo-counselor in amongst the camps, was of a guy who was convinced the war was going to end on the 30th of March, 1944.

And he would go around telling everybody this was going to happen. And the closer that date came and the war clearly didn't end, he slowly started to diminish. And the 29th of March, his fever started to go up, and he had all these symptoms, and he was dead on the 30th of March.

[4 : 50] And Viktor Frankl, looking on as a psychologist, was his hope had started to disappear. He'd put his hope in this date. And the closer that date came, he slowly started to shut down. Then he talked about this third group of people who said, if I can just survive, I can get all my hope back.

So they held on to this idea that if I can get out, I will be able to reclaim all this stuff that I've lost. I'll be able to get back my... And he points at these four things to do with social identity, family, relationships, and your fortunes.

And they thought, well, when we get out, once we are liberated, we can go back to the life we had. And some of them did get liberated, and some of them did even be able to reclaim what they had. But he quotes at the end, although they got this thing on the day that they wanted, many went into a deep depression for the rest of their lives.

After their liberation, some even committed suicide. So many of us said to ourselves in the camp, to one another, that no earthly happiness could compensate us for what we had suffered.

Yet afterwards, we were not prepared for the actual disillusionment of what that meant. But he observed this fourth group of people, and he would say it was a small group of people, who somehow, in the midst of the suffering and not in denial of what was happening, managed to keep their inner liberty and maintained an inward strength.

[6 : 15] And he asked this question, naturally, why? And this was his observation. Life in the concentration camp tears open the human soul and exposes its depths and its foundations.

And what is that foundation? What I would tell people, because he comes with people in the camps, is that life only has meaning if we have a hope and a meaning that suffering and even death cannot destroy.

So he was saying that their hope, their foundation of their personality, is the thing that they're living for. And in the bleakest of moments, the only thing that gave hope that survived, was this kind of thing that even death itself could not destroy.

I know it's quite a bleak picture, and we obviously don't live in concentration camps. This idea and picture he paints of suffering as the stripping away of family, of resources, of social identity, and of money, is a thing that we all can and will experience.

It's something that we go through from time to time. I know there's certain things that I can wake up in panics at two in the morning, not every morning, that I'm not having enough money to get through the month. Or somebody hates me this week.

[7 : 29] And although it's clearly not the same as what we've just looked at there, this suffering of this, things that we can put our hope in being teared away, bit by bit, can leave us in a very horrible place.

Now, Paul, Paul himself, was at the top of his game before he became a Christian. He was one of the leading Pharisees. He was a young upstart. He was starting to fire through the ranks. And he is now in a place where you see the words he uses to describe his situation. Like, you know what my motivation is here. You know what it's like.

Because when suffering happens, it exposes the things we have hope in. And Paul has lost it all. And as you see Paul walk through the language he uses with this group of people, you see not a

kind of bitterness.

You don't see an anger. You don't see Paul lash out. You see this overflow of love for this group of people. Now, for me, that doesn't make a lot of sense on one level. If hope is purely just, I want my circumstances to be good and be the way I want them to be, then Paul has a lot of things not going well for him.

[8 : 35] He's constantly on the run. He's constantly going sent into jail and things. People are constantly turning against him. He's lost his social position. Yet, he uses this language of really deep intimacy with this group of people.

In verses 3 to 6, Paul says, For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive.

But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with the pretext for greed. Indeed, God is our witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

So, Paul goes on to talk about this defense of his conduct and this idea that he's assured by God. And this is one of the hopes that he holds on to in the midst of his situation.

[9 : 35] He says, I do what I do. I have got nothing to hide anymore. I could make these demands on you if I wanted. But actually, the only thing I really hold is this assurance that God has given me.

And that assurance of God propels him into being absolutely sold out for this group of people. And I think when we look at this idea of being sold out for a group of people, we sometimes, could you go on to the next slide, please?

We use this term discipleship. Discipleship, again, is another word that we would use quite a lot in Christian circles. And I'm not sure what you think about it, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer thinks this.

Because Christianity without discipleship is Christianity without Christ.

Now, again, I think he introduces this theme in chapter 1 of this idea of imitate me as I imitate Christ. That's what he said earlier in the letter. This idea that when we imitate Christ, we see a group of people around us who are starting to live and walk in the reality of who they were designed to be.

In the freedom of what Jesus offers in his death and resurrection. There's something about a fullness of life that when we walk in it and we help each other walk in it, we are not just making up a new life system, but we're following Jesus himself.

[10 : 52] The original disciples were themselves followers of Christ. He called to himself and said, walk with me. Walk with me in life and I will show you what true reality is.

I will show you that you cannot do this all by yourself. I don't just mean as in you don't have enough resources and Jesus adds some extra stuff in, but that you're actually lost without him.

Lost in the sense of not that we have absolutely no idea of what we're doing in our lives, but in the sense of hope that brings meaning when the things that we look to to give our hope start to fall away.

A hope that is eternal. A hope that is secure. And I think what Bonhoeffer is saying here is that we miss, we have a Christianity, some of it misses a reliance on the central place of Jesus and a living out in a community with one another.

You kind of missed the whole point of what it means to be a Christian. If it's just a place you come and hang out on a Sunday as a fun social exercise, well, I can, no offense, think of better social exercises to do on a Sunday, but it can have these benefits, but it has to spring from a place of intimacy of walking with Christ.

[12 : 05] It isn't just about copying his actions, but becoming more and more like him, which we talked about last week is actually becoming more and more the fullness of who you are created to be.

Discipleship is the living out of the central truth of the gospel. Than becoming more like Christ and accepting him as a savior, we are transformed into his likeness and have our relationship with God reestablished.

And God invites us to continue working that out with the whole of life. That was a quote by Tim Keller. I forgot to put it in the slide. And then he starts to move into this kind of really intimate language.

And he says this quite interesting verse, which I'm not sure what you think about, and we're not going to go into huge detail tonight, because it would take quite a while. But he says, So being affectionately desirous of you, we are ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our entire lives, our own selves, because you've become very dear to us.

And I think that is, for me, that is hugely profound, the idea that for Paul, the message of the gospel is intimately tied together with the giving of himself.

[13 : 16] It is not simply he comes and says a message to a group of people, then disappears. The message is intrinsically worked out in who he is as a human being. And who he is as a human being, positive and negative, is being transformed.

In the hard and horrible parts where he is being shunted from door to door and chased by people who used to be his friends. And in the places where he sees whole groups of communities starting to transform and becoming people of, as he talked about in chapter one, faith, love, and hope. It's the whole of who he is. And again, I think, I know I can be guilty, we can be guilty of a lessening of that, that the gospel is just, here's two points.

I go away and learn them and come back in a week and told me how well you have learned them and behaved in this way. As opposed to, again, a central place of walking in union with Jesus himself together, not just in isolation, that brings that out and brings it out into everybody around about us.

And so he uses this very family-based language, uses these three different types of relationships. Firstly, a mother, secondly, a brother, and thirdly, a father. Now, again, I know I definitely can have very, we all have a default understanding of what those words mean. So if I was to put, as much as I love my parents, my actual mother and my actual father, as the example of what I think Paul's talking here, that is obviously a lacking, because they are in the manner of themselves a human. But he's indicating there's something about these roles that God has given us in life, that we, at times, are to one another. And so he starts with a mother. I don't know what you think about being mothers to other people, but Paul says, again, the heroic apostle Paul, who's firing through the Middle East, being thrown in prison, says, but we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. The things that sprung to mind for me is that it's not some sort of, I don't think it's some sort of wishy-washy parody of somebody who just says everything's okay at the time. And I think I talked about this before. But there's like a protectiveness, there's a care and a dedication of a mother to this group of people. It is such a furnace for this group of people that it doesn't just give up. I don't know if you've seen, I absolutely love Planet Earth too.

[15 : 50] Like, it makes my heart sing on some level. I mean, you see mothers defend their children, there is some sort of, there's like a raw power to it. And it is a caring role as well.

And I think we definitely all need it. I know in definitely in the most weakest moments of my faith, what I've needed is a body of believers who have been at times, I don't know if I'd used that phrase to their face because the bulk of them have been guys, but like a nursing mother.

And I think, you know, it's like, I was around my brothers recently and, sorry, my sisters, and she's a toddler. I don't know if you've ever seen a room full of adults when a toddler is learning to walk. A toddler takes a few steps and falls. Like, what does a room full of adults do?

Well, I don't know what you lot do, but they all cheered because they're like, oh, the kids learning to walk. Hooray! My picture of faith sometimes is the opposite. I think sometimes I take a few steps and fall, and like, God is this condemning parent who stands at the side going, get up, move faster. Could you imagine if you said that to a one-and-a-half-year-old? How would they develop skills to learn to walk? Yeah, there's times where we as a community need to come alongside each other like that as a way of encouragement and nursing one another into health. Then he talks about being a brother in verse 9. For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil. We work night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you while we proclaim to you the gospel of God. And this is this idea that Paul continued to work. Like, whilst Paul had a direct calling from God to a group of people, he continued to work. He didn't want to get in the, like, become a burden to a persecuted, poor group of people. And he, as he worked alongside them in life as a brother, he continued to tell them the gospel. He continued to display it. And I think, again, for me, that's a very direct principle. As we go through life, as you go through work, as you go through who you are, how do you continue to be brothers and sisters to one and each other? Calling one another into that hope, into that hope that he's starting to present that is unshakable and for eternity. And then lastly, a father.

A father who exhorts and charges and encourages. Now, again, my default understanding of a father is some sort of, like, harsh guy who is never really that impressed in case, well, not to go too much into my own relationship stuff again, in case it might trump his own experiences of life.

[18 : 31] Again, this is not this kind of disciplinarian father, but a father who kind of cares so much for their children that he is going to exhort, charge, and encourage to have times in life where somebody comes alongside us and says, are you sure that's the wisest course of action?

I've definitely needed tons and tons of times before that's happened, and probably in the past week, let alone in my life. And there's times where I've refused to listen to that. And there's times where I have then dealt with the consequences of that. And God, as Father, my brothers and sisters, as Father, continue to exhort and encourage. Now, to do this, to do this kind of way of life, you might think they need some sort of group or group of perfect people who have managed to be so self-aware emotionally and so nailed on with every single decision in life that you think, well, where am I going to find a community like that? Where am I going to find a group of people who are this perfect who can at the same time be my mother, my father, and my brother? And that's the point. Like, Paul himself is a work in progress. We're all a work in progress, and we have to look to Christ because he is the ultimate example of all this. He is the ultimate example of God the Father incarnate who walks among us and shows you, this is what it's like, this is what I am like. You see in the Scriptures a God who describes himself as Father, one that doesn't just cast away every time you feel you get something wrong, but one more like in the prodigal son calls us home. And it's for all of life. Like, I gave you the whole of my life. Now, Paul is either just the most amazing human being in the world, or he's living out of his experience of the hope of Christ who gives his entire life. He gives his entire life. And there's something about dwelling on the reality of that for Paul that enables him to go, I've got such a firm foundation in who I am, that when suffering comes, yes, it is painful, and yes, it is horrible, but these are not the things that define me anymore. There's something else that defines me.

Called into glory. He ends this little section with, off the back of talking about what a father does, a father who encourages and a father who exhorts. To walk in a manner worthy of God who calls you, God calls us, into his own kingdom and into his own glory. Because actually that's ultimately what the hope is. It is not a hope that one day everything will be okay. That was the hope the third group of people that Frankl had. That is a definite, a truth of the Scriptures. That is a truth that one day all things will be okay. But it is a calling in to God's glory. It is an imperishable inheritance, something that is kept so safe, so indestructible, it doesn't, doesn't, doesn't matter what life throws at you, or even on your best or worst day, it is kept, it is hidden. In John 17, Jesus prays that God would love us even as God loves Jesus himself. I don't know, there's a verse later on in this chapter, which I'm not going to talk about, but I'll briefly talk about now, where Paul talks about what is my hope, what is my reward, what is my crown, and what is my glory?

Now, I remember the first time I read that, I was like, well, it's probably going to be Jesus or something. And he says, is it not you? Is it not you and your faith? There's something about what Paul sees happening in his life and in the lives of others that will stand for eternity and will be caught up in this glory that God has, that somehow it becomes a celebration of God's honor. 2 Corinthians 5.21 says, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Praise and glory and honor for Jesus, but given to us at the same time and that God celebrates that. Now, I know in some respects that is kind of basic Christianity 101.

[22 : 54] Maybe it's not. Maybe it's the first time you've heard it. I'm not sure. But this idea that God's love has a direction is an expression of who he is. And the transformation of people's lives isn't just a nice idea that we all have a better time down here in the hope that if you don't, it'll all be okay anyway, but it's an expression of his glory and that it will be celebrated because it has already been given. This idea that Jesus, everything that was due to him as the son of God has been given to God's people. And it will be celebrated for all eternity. It will be a place and a time that actually the reality of which starts now. It's not just, again, an idea for the future.

It's something that Paul is saying. This hope that you have that will one day be full is true now. And so when you have that hope, it gives a hope that allows us, and I think a hope that allows us to engage fully with what's happening in life in suffering. See, the living hope that Christianity has has all the qualities Frankl talked about earlier, I think, but kind of goes, not just kind of, it goes beyond that. It brings hope to the present, even if that present suffering is grief and hardship.

This is not an absence of emotion. Like, look how Jesus responds at the cross. He isn't just, like, skipping along and thinking, this will all be fine. You see his grief, you see his anguish, you see it in a movement towards what God has going to work out for him. You see it in Job.

The start of Job is this story of this guy who loses everything, and he rages, yet somehow he does not sin. There's this thing, this hope, and this joy that sometimes is another word we might use. It isn't just, like, escapist happiness. It's an engagement with reality that somehow brings the two together. The more that suffering tears away, the more it kind of mysteriously pushes us into the reality of who Jesus is. It pushes me, at times, either into those feelings, into that reality, where I do question, what is this all about? Because otherwise, what are the options? It's just a shutting down. The only example I could think of at the top of my head was, like, when you split up with somebody. And you can either react in anger. Well, it's all their fault.

[25 : 29] They're an idiot. Or you can act in denial. Didn't even like them anyway. Don't care. I'll just carry on with my life. Both are a shutting down and a denying of what's happening. I deny the reality. And I harden my heart. We can all do that. And it's a safe place to be. Instead, we get a sorrow in the suffering of what's happening. Paul is not in denial of what's happening. That actually brings us into engagement with life. And that can only happen, I don't know of any other way that can happen without a firm foundation and eternal hope that has not got anything to do with anything I can do in the present moment. God's love is intentional. We seek to love people this way.

When we seek to bring the gospel, we seek to be people who live an act of love as mothers and fathers and brothers at different times and different seasons to one another. There's an intentionality and a direction to it because we believe in a God who is intentional and direct with His love.

He's so intentional and direct that He comes to show you. That's the whole...that's one of the most beautiful things about Christianity that I can think of is a truth about a God who walks among us and says, this is what I'm like. Look, here I am. I can't think of any other world system, whether it be a faith or anything else, that doesn't kind of make you work for it. It doesn't kind of go, you need to do this, you need to do this, you need to do this. And then when you get all this right, you will eventually find me, maybe. As opposed to a God who comes before His people in the person and says, I have done this for you. How do you respond to that? How do I respond to that in each day? This idea of being imitators of this, of living in this reality, is difficult.

It can be brilliant and it can be difficult. But I know for me, some of the most developmental times and most growth I've ever had is when people have imitated this to me. When they have walked in the reality of who they are, not as perfect people, but as people who have sought to come alongside and make disciples. Now, that can sound like quite a mechanical term that you just go out there and convert lots of people into the way that you think. As opposed to an engagement with a reality that says, this is the place we have firm hope. This is the future hope that we have. It's held, it's been given to you by God, and it says the things about us that we believe are actually replaced by the identity of Christ Himself. Walk in the hope of that. We need to remind each other how to walk in the hope of that. We need to remind the world how to walk in the hope of that. Not in a kind of preachy way, even though I'm preaching at you, in a way that kind of comes alongside, as Greg said at the start of one of the songs, and says, we only know because we've seen this as well. Walk with us in it.

I'm going to end because it's 5 to 8. Sorry. I'll pray, and then Greg, are you going to come up? Yeah. Father, we thank you that your love is constant and kept.

[28 : 53] Father, I pray that you would help us to see that this gift that you give us, which is ultimately a gift, is a gift of yourself, is a gift that leads us into life, not away from it. It's a gift that leads us into something new, and something that we couldn't even hope to create for ourselves, and it's something that is kept in you. When we engage in that, that you would help us to respond appropriately. Help us to celebrate and worship the goodness of that, and help us to reorientate and return to you in places where we sought to make that about something else. Even when we sought to make that about really good things, that we start to elevate to be in a place where only you should dwell.

I pray that you would help us to be brothers and mothers and fathers to one another in a way that encourages us to live in the reality of this hope, not as a mechanical idea, but as an expression of the actual love that you have for us. I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.