

I'm not great at reading books and so it takes me a while to get through a book. But the book I'm working through just now is this book by Cameron Cole.

On November 11<sup>th</sup> 2013, Cameron's worst happened. He was a youth pastor. And one morning, after an overnight camp he got a phone call from his wife. She told him the worst news imaginable. His 3 year-old son had suddenly died. For no apparent reason, this little boy had just stopped breathing in his sleep.

And in this book, Cameron is very honest about the overwhelming sadness, grief and emotional struggles that he and his wife experienced as a result of this tragedy. But this book is not one of hopelessness and despair. In fact it is called, *Therefore I Have Hope*.

In the intro, Cameron writes: "My intent is that God's Word will offer you the most essential thing that you need in the face of your Worst – hope. Hope is difficult to define until you are starving for it.

Hope is the substance that assures you that life is worth living when you simply cannot find a reason to make it to the next day. Hope is the expectation that maybe things will be better down the road. Hope is what tells you that – no matter how bad it seems – redemption is possible. Hope is that little light at the end of the tunnel that suggests that all of this misery is temporary when you're desperate for patience...

In reality, all hope flows out of the person of Jesus Christ...

To the person for whom life's buzz saw has not yet come, I intend this book to prepare you for the dark night, which no human being can elude. To the person dwelling in the gutter of misery, I hope this book grants you comfort and companionship. To the non-Christian, I pray you can see the unrivalled hope that Christianity offers.

Regardless of who you are, this book has been written for one purpose: that you may have hope."

This is the power of the good news of Jesus. It can give us a real and secure hope, even in the most difficult and challenging of circumstances.

And this is what the church in Thessalonica needed. When Paul wrote his first letter to them, they were a young church going through an incredibly difficult time. And so he wrote to them about faith, love and hope.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3: "Paul, Silas and Timothy,  
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:  
Grace and peace to you.

<sup>2</sup>We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup>We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Like in all of his New Testament letters, Paul started here by following the convention of his day. He wrote the names of the writer, the names of those who he was writing to, a word of greeting and an expression of thanks.

But, this opening also introduces many of the truths that we're going to see in this amazing letter.

v3 contains one of Paul's favourite trilogies - faith, love and hope. And because this is one of the earliest of his letters, written around 50 AD, this is one of the earliest uses of what many have seen as a summary of what Christianity is all about.

## 1. Faith

Firstly, in his prayers for this church, Paul remembered their "Work produced by faith." 1 Thessalonians 1:3 Faith is at the heart of Christianity because it is only through faith that we can be saved.

Paul was writing this letter "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Thessalonians 1:1 The word church here is the word *ekklesia*. It's a word that was used in many contexts and meant an assembly, or a gathering of people who have been called out to meet together.

But what made the church that Paul was writing to so special was that this gathering of people were in God the Father and in God the Son! This was a group who were in a vital, organic union with God, experiencing new life in him, rooted in him, living in him. They were a community who were living in a close, personal, intimate relationship with God.

### a) We are Saved By Faith Not Works

But how did this happen? How did they become this church? Well this was not because of who they were or what they'd done.

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he preached the gospel in the synagogue for 3 Sabbaths. And Luke records that **"Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women."** Acts 17:4

That means that some in this church were Jews. They had been committed to obeying the Old Testament law. But that wasn't what connected them to God. Paul wrote in Romans 3:20 that **"No-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law."** We can't be united with God through our family heritage, good living or through keeping religious rules and rituals.

Others in this church were Gentiles. They used to be pagans and involved in the idolatry and the immorality in this city. But this past history didn't stop them from being able to connect with God. **"You turned from idols to serve the living and true God."** 1 Thessalonians 1:9

Good living didn't bring them into a relationship with God and bad living didn't prevent it. Instead, all of these people, both Jew and Gentile, were called together into this relationship with God by grace.

That's why Paul's greeting here is **"Grace and peace to you."** 1 Thessalonians 1:1. It is through grace, God's undeserved gift, that we can experience true peace – reconciliation with God, unity with others and harmony within ourselves. That's because God has paid the price of our salvation in full through the sacrificial death of his Son on the cross.

But we only receive this gift of God's grace if we put our faith in Jesus. **"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no-one can boast."** Ephesians 2:8–9

This church was a community of people, from all different backgrounds and behaviours, who'd simply believed in Jesus – and as a result, they were completely forgiven, declared righteous in God's sight, brought into a new life with God. They had been saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

### b) We are Saved By Faith That Works

But Paul here wasn't just celebrating their faith. He was celebrating their **"work produced by faith."** 1 Thessalonians 1:3 Their faith in Jesus had changed their lives.

In the original Greek, this word 'work' here has the sense of vocation, or career or calling. Paul was celebrating that their faith had become their vocation, their calling, their lifestyle. For these believers, faith in Jesus wasn't just something they believed, it was something that they lived out in every aspect of their lives.

And this is so crucial in our lives too. We are saved by faith in Jesus, and not by our works. But real saving faith in Jesus always works. As James wrote: **"Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."** James 2:17

If we claim to come to faith in Jesus, but our lives are exactly the same, that's not living faith. Real faith will always impact what we do. It will alter our attitudes, re-organise our priorities and gradually transform our lives. So, how we live is the test of the vitality of our faith. It is the evidence of what we are convinced of.

Of course this doesn't mean that if we are a Christian we should live perfectly obedient lives. This is a life-long process of transformation.

But it does mean that if our faith in Jesus is real, then we should be seeking to live this out more and more each day. This is God's plan and purpose for us that **"We... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory."** 2 Corinthians 3:18

In fact this was one of Paul's reasons for writing this letter. Yes, he rejoiced that these believers were living out their faith in Jesus. But he desperately wanted to teach and encourage them to do this more and more. In 1 Thessalonians 4:1, he wrote: **"We instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more."**

## 2. Love

And one of the key things that Paul longed to see grow in these Christians' lives was love. In his prayers for this church, Paul remembered their ["Labour prompted by love."](#) 1 Thessalonians 1:3

We'll see this love expressed throughout this letter. Paul and this church loved each other.

Maybe that is why he introduced himself so simply here. At the start of his other letters, Paul introduced himself as an apostle, a servant or a prisoner. But here, and in his second letter to this church, he just simply gave his name, and the names of his partners in the gospel: ["Paul, Silas and Timothy."](#) 1 Thessalonians 1:1

I think this shows that his apostleship was not being challenged here. But it also shows the level of mutual love and respect that existed between Paul and this church.

It is expressed here in this introduction in how he prayed for them: ["We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers."](#) 1 Thessalonians 1:2

And later, we see how Paul heard from Timothy that ["You always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you."](#) 1 Thessalonians 3:6

### a) A Crucial Love

And this kind of love is a key evidence of real faith in Jesus. Love is the summary of God's law. It is the first aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. And it is the way that Jesus said that his disciples will be recognised in this world: ["By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."](#) John 13:35

### b) A Challenging Love

But this love is not easy. The kind of love that Paul talked about here is a challenging love.

- It is not primarily about feeling attraction or closeness with people that we like or whom we naturally care about or connect with.
- It is not restricted to those who are nice, or kind and considerate to us.
- And it is not limited to just being pleasant or polite or saying nice things to others.

This is a love that is unrestricted, unconditional and unlimited. This is a love that is hard work. That's why Paul celebrated their ["Labour prompted by love."](#) 1 Thessalonians 1:3 It was an active, undeserved, sacrificial kind of love.

### c) A Supernatural Love

And so this wasn't something that they could produce in themselves. Like us they were far too selfish, self-centred and sinful to love in this way in their own strength.

But instead this love was the result of the supernatural power of the Spirit living in them. Paul will say later, ["You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other."](#) 1 Thessalonians 4:9

This church was living in life-changing union with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. They were trusting in God and being changed by God. And as a result they were characterised by love.

That's because ["God is love."](#) 1 John 4:8. This is who he is. This is his essential character. He is love.

And his love is unrestricted, unconditional and unlimited. It is active, undeserved and sacrificial. It is supremely expressed at the cross. ["God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."](#) Romans 5:8

And so if we are living in him and he is living in us, then this will be an increasing characteristic of our lives. We will love others because we are loved by God.

Of course, again, none of us do this perfectly. But as we'll see in this letter, through trusting in Jesus, God wants our love for others to grow more and more each day.

## 3. Hope

And the Thessalonians were committed to keep on doing this. Thirdly, in his prayers for this church, Paul remembered their ["Endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."](#) 1 Thessalonians 1:3 This church had shown great endurance in the middle of intense suffering.

Thessalonica was one of the most important cities of its time. It was a large Greek city of possibly 200,000 people. And its situation on one of the main Roman roads and its major seaport meant it was an ideal place to establish a centre from which the gospel could spread.

And so Paul, Silas and Timothy had all travelled there during Paul's second missionary journey. This was after their successful, but painful mission in Philippi. In Philippi, they'd been flogged and imprisoned. But God set them free through a miraculous earthquake which led to the even more miraculous conversion of the jailor and his family.

And so this mission team came to Thessalonica, with a fresh reminder of the power of the gospel but also the cost of sharing it. But this didn't weaken their commitment to preach the gospel.

#### a) In The Middle Of Suffering

But when people started to listen to Paul and believe in Jesus, some of the Jews in Thessalonica became intensely jealous. They stirred up a riot in the city and had some of the believers to be arrested. The charge was "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here... They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." Acts 17:6-7

The situation was so dangerous, that "As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea." Acts 17:10, where they continued their mission.

But their opponents in Thessalonica wouldn't give up that easily. When they heard that Paul was preaching the gospel in Berea, they stirred up the crowds there so that again Paul had to leave.

And so this was the circumstance that this church was living in.

- They were all new Christians, who'd very recently trusted in Jesus.
- But the apostle who'd led them to Christ, had had to leave them on their own.
- And so now they were living in a large pagan city, surrounded by immorality and idolatry.
- They were under attack from vicious opponents of the gospel.
- And, in addition, some of their church had died and they weren't sure what that meant for them.

But the amazing thing was, they hadn't given up. Paul here could celebrate their endurance. They were keeping on going. They were still committed to following Jesus "In spite of severe suffering." 1 Thessalonians 1:6

#### b) In The Coming Of Christ

How was that possible? How did these new believers find such patience, perseverance, and longsuffering in the face of such difficult circumstances?

Well it was because they had "Hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Thessalonians 1:3

Yes, their circumstances were extremely difficult. Their knowledge was incomplete. Their support from other believers was limited. Their temptations were great. Their enemies were fierce. Their suffering was real.

But their hope was unshakeable. It was sure and it was certain. That's because it wasn't self-confidence. It wasn't wishful thinking. It wasn't blind optimism. Rather it was based on their faith in Jesus.

They knew that one day, their Lord and Saviour would return for them. And Paul wrote this letter to teach them more about this wonderful truth and to encourage them to live more and more in the reality of that coming day.

And this is why we can have hope today. However challenging our circumstances, however difficult the people are around us, however intense our suffering, however weak and feeble we feel – we can stand in this sure and certain hope. If we've trusted in Jesus, then one day, Jesus is coming back for us, "And so we will be with the Lord for ever." 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

And as we'll see in this letter, this unshakeable hope will not just comfort and encourage us in times of suffering. It will also inspire us to live out our faith in Christ each day, and empower us to keep on loving God and loving others until Jesus returns.

#### Conclusion

So my prayer is that as we study this letter over the next couple of months, that like these Thessalonians, we will grow in

our

- Our work produced by our faith in Jesus.
- Our labour prompted by the love of Jesus.
- And our endurance inspired by our hope in Jesus.

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