

Faith: A Cord of Three Strands

Sunday, October 18, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

At a glance, the Thessalonian letters do not seem especially exciting or thoughtful. We find Paul speaking warmly of this Church. It appears that he has a particular liking for this group, and is giving them a mere pep talk. There is nothing particularly exciting about this. But the story of the Thessalonians comes alive when we realize the history of their founding which is presented to us in Acts 17, and there we find that this was no ordinary Church! This was a Church with a rough start. After being thrown out of Philippi, bruised and beaten, Paul was undaunted in his mission to plant new Churches. His next stop would be Thessalonica where according to his usual plan, he preached first to the Jews in their synagogue. He began to gather a small congregation of believers, but then many Jews became hostile to his message. They gathered a mob to assault Paul and Silas and came to the house of Jason, a Thessalonian who had become a leader in the Church and was keeping them in his home. The mob did not

find Paul and Silas, but they seized Jason and had him arrested. In a matter of just three or four weeks after Paul had started this new Church, they met tremendous challenge as Paul and Silas had to flee the angry mob under the cover of night while Jason was managing to post bail to get out of jail. The Thessalonian Church was now left with no experienced teachers and leaders, and under persecution. What was to happen to this small band of believers? I would not have held out much hope for these few, but such is my weak faith. Months later Paul was to learn that the Thessalonian Church had indeed survived and was thriving! This is the context of Paul's understandably warm and thoroughly affirming letter.

How did they manage to persevere as believers, and would I have been able to have endured such an ordeal? Paul summarizes this Thessalonian miracle well in verses 9 and 10 of our lesson. Here was the faith that sustained them: *you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.* Here we find three essential elements to their faith, and like “the cord of three strands” of which Solomon spoke (Ecclesiastes 4:12), “it cannot easily be broken.” In just a few weeks they could not learn a lifetime’s worth of faith and teachings, but in just a short while Paul did impress upon them the core of a believer’s creed. Let us consider these three strands of this sturdy cord of faith.

First Paul delighted that they *turned to God from idols*. Their faith began with repentance, just as the Gospels begin with John the Baptist and then Jesus preaching the need to repent. To repent means to turn, or to change directions, and here we find Paul celebrating their repentance *from idols to God*. Our bulletin cover for this day plays upon this notion. On it is printed v. 9, and the picture is of a car’s rear-view mirror and the reflection of a Church building. Actually, the picture seems to have it all backward, as one should see the world in the rearview mirror and the Church should be before us, but the intention of the photograph is appropriately about turning from and to. Repentance need not be an expression of loud emotion as it is commonly portrayed, but only a changing of destinations. Where are you headed in life? What is your destination—worldly success or Christ’s Kingdom? The Thessalonians had the courage to turn away from idols and toward the eternal.

This was a big step for these people, but then again, perhaps it was not. The ancient world was full of idols, and there was an idol for every part of life. There were idols to represent the gods of earth, sky and weather, harvest, health, and on the list goes. While we think of these ancients as idol worshippers, there is another side to this story. By the first century deep belief in idols was weakening and it was becoming a dead tradition. In Acts we read of a riot in Ephesus when the makers of idols in that city were angry at Paul for ruining their business as more and more were turning to Christ and giving up idols. Their complaints were plainly concerned more for their income than for the honor of these silly alleged deities!

But this is a common feeling when one is dealing with idols. Consider the idols of our age. No, we do not bow before silver or gold statues, but we have other kinds of idols. An idol is *any earthly thing which we hold higher than God*, and so you see, we worship many idols! In this election year we are reminded how much faith and trust we put in our earthly governments and human leaders. For many, and perhaps for ourselves at times, we come to put greater hopes in political policy and government programs such as Social Security than we do in God. We can make medicine into an idol with our hopes being more focused upon extending earthly life than in securing eternal life. We believe in finances. We look to science and technology for nearly all our answers. We study human psychology as if this pursuit will lead us to ultimate insight. We take these many good things and turn them into ultimate hopes, with our faith falling to the side. Like the Thessalonians we are surrounded and occasionally polluted by idols, and like the Thessalonians we also know better, even while we are caught up on the worship of these idols.

When the Thessalonians heard the Good News preached, they soon fully realized the foolishness of idols. Idols are illusions and offer no real power or help. Oh, that we would become so disillusioned! The word disillusioned is generally thought of as a negative word as it speaks of losing one's idealism or hope, but in its plainest and most literal sense, being disillusioned is a very good thing. I recall early in my pastoral career when I was learning the hard lessons of a young pastor. Many aspects of ministry were much harder than I had anticipated, and successes did not come easily. Was I becoming disillusioned with ministry? Not in the common sense of the term, for I was not at all sorry or saddened to be a pastor. But I was beginning to dispense with some of the false hopes and misdirected ideas which I had brought into the endeavor. I was, in the most actual sense, becoming disillusioned, and this was a very good thing, for illusions are very bad things. The Thessalonians were becoming disillusioned with idols, and this was wonderful! It was the beginning of their path to life. Good riddance to these silly notions. Oh, that we would be in the regular habit of being disillusioned and disposing of our faith in idols.

Turning from idols was only half the work of repentance. Then came the positive part of the transaction as they turned *to serve a living and true God*. Note the two descriptive words which are added to explain the power that their faith would have. They turned to the *living* God. We would do well to speak more frequently of the living God. Too often we speak of God as though God were a concept which Christians are to then defend against criticism. Our understanding of faith often becomes like a mere discussion of philosophy, but the Thessalonians knew that they were connected to more than an idea! They were now adopted children of the living God, and that God was giving them power to live changed lives. Their lives of faith started in a very difficult time, but the power of the living God sustained them. Most of us become shy

or doubtful when we speak of the power of God in our lives, especially as we are probably feeling tired at the moment, but consider the power that has sustained you through your life and walk of faith thus far. Ours is a living and empowering God! One of the compelling arguments made for the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the number of lives that it has changed and the positive transformations which it has made to whole societies. Ours is a living and active God!

God is also called the *true* God. I believe the Bible because it makes more sense than anything else I have read. Only in the Bible do we find a completely accurate description of the human spirit and the human tragedy. Other religions may speak of hopes of humanity meditating or training their way to perfection, but we know that this is foolishness. The Bible accurately summarizes the complete brokenness of the human race, and it wonderfully explains Christ's redemption of a once lost human race. It also accurately tells of our ongoing struggle with sin which will not end until Christ's return. And this is a truth which far outshines the obvious foolishness of idols. Occasionally the prophets of the Old Testament would write mockingly of the idol makers, carving a log into an idol, and then using the remaining wood to start a fire to cook his lunch! He would laugh at the thought of this silly human creation being able to save us or bring us hope. We worship our God, not out of wishful thinking, but because God is the God of truth.

This power and truth is made alive in us by the Holy Spirit. We may not feel the Spirit's presence, as we seldom do, but this work is often seen more clearly in retrospect. I look to difficult times in my life and wonder how I got through. As we look back at those times, we are looking at the power of the Holy Spirit! We may have trouble seeing the work of the Spirit in our own lives, but we can more clearly see God's power at work in other believers all around us. (Perhaps we should get into the habit of telling people of the power of God that we see in them!)

The final strand in this cord of faith is usually the weakest in our modern lives. This is our call *to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.* The Thessalonian Church was a fellowship of bold hope. They looked to the future with confidence knowing that the best was yet to come. It is easy to imagine an ancient peasant's hope. These new believers were recently freed from bondage to idols and their false hopes. Idolatry, like most false religions, is full of guilt, doubt and the ongoing fear that bad things were about to happen because some kindness or payment to the gods had been missed. Now they were free from such a burden and were living in fellowship with a forgiving and loving Father in heaven. Life for the peasant was hard and full of pain, but they looked ahead to eternal life in the Father's House in the New Jerusalem. Theirs was a bold and joyful hope, and we find the Thessalonian letters are full of teachings on Christ's return and the end times.

We modern Westerners do not do as well in the matter of hope. Hope is a looking ahead to a better future, and while this came naturally to a poor peasant, it comes much harder to wealthy people like ourselves who are quite content with the present arrangement, and do a lot of worrying that these present comforts might be taken away! We think little of the future, heaven and eternity because we are so comfortable in the present. Dare I mention that we can even be given to mocking those traditions of faith which spend much time celebrating and anticipating heaven. We easily look down upon such religion as too other-worldly, or a poor man's religion. Perhaps Christianity is more of a poor man's religion than we care to ponder! Our heavenly destiny is real, and hope, the assurance of that glorious place, should be a bigger part of our faith. Have you thought about heaven lately? If not, then please do so!

How we need to learn hope from the Thessalonians. In this often dismal and discouraging year may we find the central lesson that this world is not perfectible, nor is it meant to be our permanent home. When this life discourages us let us remember that discouragement should lead us to hope. Let us think more of Jesus, the Kingdom and the New Jerusalem. When I was running marathons, I often found the mile 23 mark to be the hardest, and while the finish line was just a few miles away it was often tempting to give up at that point. It was then that I learned to set my mind on the party at the end, and to announce to runners around me, "In half an hour we will be at a party!" This was the hope that helped me put a good finish on races, and even find new joy and strength during that ongoing foot race. It works in foot races, and it works in this human journey. This hope does not cause us to shut out the present battle, but it adds a new joy and appreciation for the present struggle. The Thessalonians understood mile 23. They lived it, and so should we.

This is the strong three stranded cord of faith: turning from idols, turning to God, and awaiting our great hope. It is a faith which we reenact each Sunday as we enter the sanctuary, turning our back to the world and its idols, as we look ahead to the Cross and see proof of the loving and living God, and as we look up to this tall Cross, knowing that soon we will look up to see Christ's return in power! May the bold witness of these young Thessalonian believers keep our faith strong.