

1 THESSALONIANS 1:2-10 ONE YEAR LATER

“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 labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became 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 Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”¹

Wne year ago, we held our first service as a congregation of believers seeking to serve the Risen Son of God. We did not know precisely what the future might hold, but we were confident that God was blessing us as we sought to fill a void in the religious life of the communities about us. It was not then, nor is it now, our intention to condemn the state of religion in our communities; however, there remains a great work before us.

We have much in common with the Thessalonian Christians. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul spoke of their character and how they were viewed throughout the world. Reviewing that letter, I see much of what characterises our own congregation reflected in Paul’s assessment of the Thessalonians. Consequently, the Apostle was moved to thanksgiving upon reflection of what God had accomplished among these early believers. Similarly, I am moved to thanksgiving by what I witness in the work God has performed among us.

WHAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED — In our text, Paul gave thanks to God for the Thessalonians. In particular, he writes of their “work of faith,” of their “labour of love,” and of “the steadfastness of hope” that he saw evidenced in their congregation life. He writes that these saints had received the Gospel in word, in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction. Believing the Word, they became imitators of what they saw lived out by the apostolic band. Thus, they were commended for standing firm in the face of opposition and expressing joy despite the hardship they endured. The Apostle speaks with pride of how they aggressively evangelised throughout Macedonia and Achaia, even serving as a source of encouragement to fellow believers found throughout the entire world.

When Paul would later write the Corinthian Christians, he would teach them that the hallmarks of the Christian life were “faith, hope and love” [see **1 CORINTHIANS 13:13**]. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the Apostle anticipated what he would teach the Corinthians because he had witnessed these sterling qualities in the Thessalonian congregation. Faith, hope and love are evidence that a congregation gets it! These graces are evidence that the people truly understand who they are and that they are aware of the power that is at work among them.

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Before looking at what God has done among us, focus on what the Apostle has said concerning these Thessalonian Christians. First, their lives were characterised by faith, love and hope. Paul knew they were people of faith because they worked. We are not saved by faith plus works, but we are saved by a faith that works. People who continue to live as they once did, with a mere pious nod to Christian service, effectively deny that they are saved regardless of what they may profess. Faith results in work. The individual who fails to serve, or who serves only when it is convenient, effectively reveals his or her lack of faith. One of the hard sayings of Jesus that is frequently ignored within modern evangelical Christendom is that which baldly states, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” [JOHN 14:15].

Many Christian memorise **EPHESIANS 2:8, 9** soon after being born from above. That passage testifies, “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” However, we fail to fully instruct those who profess Christ if we fail to insist that they must also memorise the tenth verse: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” [EPHESIANS 2:10]. An old saying among the saints instructs the faithful, “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone.” Real faith results in work for the cause of Christ.

It was not only that the Thessalonian Christians had faith demonstrated through work, but they demonstrated their love through labour. To our ears, work and labour sound suspiciously similar. However, while work speaks of the individual deeds an individual might perform, labour speaks of the unhesitating and unceasing hardship experienced and toil performed because of love. A true love for Christ or for people leads to labour; otherwise it is mere sentimentality.

Though imperfect, the following situation illustrates the difference between these two terms. A child running into our presence with a shoe untied may elicit our compassion and even our help if that child should request that we tie her shoe. It is a deed performed once and then we are free of responsibility for the child. That same child will elicit virtual slavery from another adult—her mother or her father—because of a different relationship based on love. The child for whom we may tie a shoe, or briefly comfort, or for whom we may momentarily provide care will receive undivided attention from her father or mother. A parent will sit up all night to stroke her fevered brow. A mother will wipe her runny nose and bathe her besmeared face. A father will sacrifice to provide for her welfare and for her future. These are responses growing out of love. By the same token, faith will prompt us to do deeds as required by the circumstances, but love will impel us to continue working even to the point of personal sacrifice.

The Thessalonians were also marked by hope, which was demonstrated through steadfastness. Hope, in Christian theology, is neither an expression of wistfulness nor of wistful longing, nor even optimism (a matter of temperament, not theology); hope speaks rather of anticipation or expectation. When the Christian says, for example, that he lives in hope of the resurrection, he speaks not of some nebulous, undefined event which may or may not occur in the future, but rather that Christian speaks of an event as certain as his own salvation. Having been saved by the Risen Christ, the believer expects to see that Lord coming in great glory.

Hope insures that the believer exhibits endurance in both work and labour. If Christ is coming again, and if the presence of the Holy Spirit is the divine deposit for the redemption of my body, and if Christ has promised that I shall reign with Him, then I can stay at each task assigned however difficult it may prove and whatever opposition may be faced. If my hope, if my expectation, extends beyond this life, then I anticipate that the final accounting is not yet available. It matters little how others judge me; I live in hope of Christ the Righteous Judge.

Also, the Thessalonian Christians had received the Gospel in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction. Paul wrote, “We know . . . that our Gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction.” He was confident that God loved the Thessalonians and that He had chosen them because the Good News the missionaries had preached impacted the listeners with evident *power*, with demonstration of the blessing of *the Holy Spirit*, and with *full conviction*. In short, Paul saw the impact of the Gospel in the lives of these men and women as they heard that Good News. Underscore in your mind that the Gospel reveals *GOD'S POWER*, demonstrates the presence of *THE HOLY SPIRIT*, and is received with *DEEP CONVICTION*. In this way we see God at work in listeners.

As an aside of no small consequence: what is the impact of the Good News of Jesus Christ in your life? If there is no change in your life, it is likely because there is no Good News in your life. The great tragedy of the twenty-first century is that the message of Christ in this day is not presented in demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. We find our way to a modern profession of faith as though we were making a routine business transaction. In modern church life, there is no repentance over sin. The plough does not run deep enough; the soil is left undisturbed. Where the Gospel is presented in power, lives are changed and those who experience its power need not prove they possess new life through appeal to an analytical lexicon. The evidence of divine transformation is plain to all who know them.

Perhaps that is the reason many Christians today question their salvation and many churches are driven to seek dramatic signs as evidence that God is among them. Were we convinced that we are great sinners we would acknowledge that we require a great God. But having convinced ourselves that we are but little sinners, we need only a little God. We seem to have adopted the position that we have aberrant behaviours, character flaws, personality quirks—anything but sin ruling over us and ruining our lives. Thus we join the church instead of being placed within the church by Him to whom we claim allegiance as Lord.

One of the great criticisms of the preaching of this day is that so many seem able to listen without giving evidence of any impact resulting from what is preached. When did we last witness deep conviction resulting from the preaching of the Word? When did we last see religious sinners convicted of sin? Churches are filled with religious people who are obdurate, refusing to permit the Word to do its perfect work. Convinced that we are just fine living as we have always lived, we refuse to change even in the face of the preached Word. Because the pews are filled with unconverted people who think they are just fine as they are, few coming into the Faith are converted to Christ, being converted instead to a church or to a philosophical position.

Paul spoke on behalf of the missionary band concerning the faith, love and hope of the Thessalonians. Beginning with verse 6, he becomes quite deliberate in detailing how that faith, love and hope were expressed. In particular, the Thessalonians embraced the Word of God, determining that would fulfil the Gospel demands. Therefore, they exemplified what it means to be Christians rather than merely adopting Christianity as a cultural adjunct to the lives they were then living. They were truly transformed and eager to let others witness their transformed lives

The Christians of Thessalonica chose to model their lives after those of the Apostles. Note Paul's emphasis, “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.” These saints saw the way the missionaries lived and they determined that they would imitate their lives. Consequently, they turned from idolatry, even though the transition invited great affliction. They endeavoured to live holy lives in fear of God rather than continuing in the arrogance that had previously marked their way. They were convinced that morality and righteousness were superior to worldliness. All this was accompanied by great joy.

It must have especially heartened the Apostle to learn that the Thessalonians had proven aggressive in evangelism. Paul praised the Thessalonians because “the Word of the Lord sounded forth from [them] in Macedonia and Achaia,” and their “faith in God [had] gone forth everywhere” [VERSE 8]. In short, the Thessalonian Christians were not content to live as many of the professed saints in this day who claim to be saved, but fail to reach out to anyone else. They refused to treat salvation as a sort of celestial fire insurance policy, treating their redemption instead as an obligation to save as many others as possible.

So, what can we say of the Thessalonians? They were a transformed people who glorified the Saviour through the manner of life they now lived. They worked and laboured, standing firm in the face of severe opposition. They were energised by the Word of God, choosing to permit that Word to transform their own lives and the community of faith to which they belonged. As a model for their lives following salvation, they chose to live as the Apostles lived. Above all else, they evangelised according to the command that the Master had given.

What do you suppose the Apostle might have said about us? He could truthfully commend our work of faith. When asked, almost all of us are willing to share the work of the church. Perhaps we are hesitant to tackle some tasks because we do not believe ourselves qualified, but we are willing to attempt whatever needs to be done. This is commendable.

Were he asked to address this congregation, I am confident that the Apostle would speak of the labour of love witnessed by some. They have invested themselves in this work, often at considerable expense to themselves. They have not been swayed by opposition or discouraged by the stumbling blocks that have been intermittently erected by some who are angered by our presence in the community. These saints labour in prayer for the advance of the Faith and for the cause of Christ as promoted by this church. This also is commendable and would undoubtedly attract the attention of the Apostle were he to write us a letter.

I believe that the Apostle would also speak of the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ that is demonstrated by most among us. He would note that we had received Christ as Lord and that His presence in our lives was changing us. He would note that we were standing steady in the workplace and among our friends as we seek to live in the light of Christ’s return. This, also, would undoubtedly be praiseworthy in the estimate of the Apostle.

Beyond these things, the Apostle could praise us for our generosity and for our desire to receive the truth and to live by the truth as delivered by the Word of God. He would take note of our desire to be salt and light within our community, just as he would be aware of our willingness to refuse to compromise with evil for the sake of personal comfort. These positions are commendable and worthy of praise. Nevertheless, there remains much that needs to be done.

WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE — Despite praising the Thessalonians, Paul found it necessary to encourage them by addressing several other areas that were liable to be neglected. He was concerned lest they succumb to error. Throughout the second chapter he warned them against growing weary and against forgetting where they had begun their journey. He wanted them to know that their labour was not in vain, but that God took cognizance of all that they did.

He also expressed a concern that they might seek accommodation with the world in which they lived, growing morally and ethically lax. The pagan world in which they lived emphasised immediate gratification of every desire, not unlike the world in which we live. Paul knew that if they began to live as their neighbours lived, there would be no power left in their message. Should they cease to be productive, meriting the respect of their neighbours, they would have no opportunity to present the truth to those who were lost.

These Thessalonian Christians were becoming discouraged. Life was hard as Christians. It seemed to them that their neighbours had lives of ease, while they were compelled to toil away at endless tasks for which there were never any thanks. The promised coming of the Master sometimes seemed like a dream, and they were uncertain what to make of it. Thus, that promise was receding into a mere memory of some distant sermon, the theme of which was occasionally recalled without remembering the details.

Consequently, one letter was insufficient to allay their fears and to stimulate them to address these areas of concern. Paul was compelled to write a second letter addressing some of the same themes. Though they had been commended for steadfast hope, the Apostle found it necessary to remind them of all that God has promised; and despite having been commended for labouring at the work which the Master had assigned, Paul was compelled to again urge them to stay at the work without growing negligent because they were spiritually fatigued.

In a similar manner, despite commending the congregation for all that has been accomplished in the first year of existence, it is necessary to remind you that much remains to be done. A church is not built in a year. It requires a lifetime of labour to erect a house to the Living God, and when the generation that laid the foundation has passed on it will be necessary for succeeding generations to take up the task of building the church. Sin will always plague our world and trials will continue to afflict the people of God and the need to advance the Faith will not cease until the Master has returned. Therefore, there are some broad concerns that need to be addressed, but in particular there are some specific needs that must be addressed.

Our neighbourhoods and communities have yet to be evangelised. The vast majority of those living in our communities are not living by the Faith of Christ the Lord. Perhaps they had some religious training back in Newfoundland, in the Maritimes, in Central Canada, or somewhere on the prairies. Upon arriving in our area, they found they were making too much money and life was too good to be bothered with playing church. What religious veneer that may have been provided by past Sunday School attendance has quickly worn away leaving a life marked with a patina of worldly ambition. There is no church in the communities about us that is growing through evangelising the lost; neither are we evangelising as we are commanded.

We have adopted a *laissez faire* accommodation with sinners. We will not bother them, making them uncomfortable with the knowledge that their attitudes and actions displease God, and we hope that they will not bother us. Whether we are willing to admit it or not, many Christians have adopted a pagan attitude that denies the need for salvation. We would rather see our family and friends go to hell than risk our tenuous relationship by intervening to warn them of the consequences of a life without Christ. Because the thought arising from the consequences of sin is so awful, many professing Christians have become tacit Universalists, believing that God would never condemn anyone—especially those whom we know and love.

The vast majority of evangelical Christians have never led a single soul to Christ despite the general knowledge that we are responsible to be witnesses to His grace and for His glory. The people of God do not spend so much as ten minutes per week pleading for the salvation of the lost through their witness or through the work of the congregation to which they belong. Despite going to church, hearing sermons and singing songs, no one is saved and even our children grow to adulthood and reject the Faith we thought we had inculcated in them.

When in a town of eleven to twelve thousand people a large church is considered to consist of a few hundred members, and when all the evangelical churches together cannot account for ten percent of the population, there remains a great work of evangelisation to be done. Until everyone has heard the Gospel once in our community, our task is unfinished.

The Faith must be reinvigorated. Teenagers and twenty-somethings whine that the Faith is boring. Small wonder that they are bored when church is allowed to consist of what religious people do rather than being the Body of Christ. Rather than being the dynamic Bride of the Living Lord of Glory, the church today is simply a tired organisation that we join and use when convenient and forget on every other occasion.

I am not blaming those who are bored. We Christians have failed to realise who we are. We are the Body of Christ. Here, the sick should be healed, and when they are whole sent forth to tell others of Christ who is able to give hope and health. Here, the discouraged are to be encouraged, and when they are again filled with joy sent out to encourage others. Here, the weak are to be made strong, and their newfound strength is to be lent to others who may be weak. Here, the fallen warriors are to be given new strength and sent again into the conflict of the ages. Here, the weary are to be given rest, and when they are refreshed sent out to refresh others who are struggling to continue toward the goal of honouring the Risen Son of God.

Instead of focusing on the power of God, we attempt to generate false excitement. We are convinced that the Gospel must be repackaged to appeal to a new generation, and so we install worship teams to sing the latest choruses and create a band to rival anything that ever played the hits in Nebuchadnezzar's palace. We provide interpretive dance and tell funny stories because we are convinced that such entertainment will fill the church. However, we have never understood that a steady diet of entertainment soon becomes boring as the entertained seek a new diet of leeks and onions at the exciting church just down the street.

I am not condemning music, nor am I saying that we should not seek to communicate. I am, however, saying that if in all our searching we fail to bring worshippers into the presence of the True and Living God, there will be no genuine joy. One demonstration of the power of God will accomplish more than a thousand exciting songs or a hundred dynamic sermons. What is lacking in our church is the power of God as evidenced by souls saved and lives transformed. The world soon takes notice when people are saved. The bored crowd soon begins to look for the source of power witnessed in the life of a transformed saint.

We must again live in anticipation of Christ's return. While we confess our hope that Christ the Lord is coming again, the knowledge that He may come momentarily makes little impact in our lives. Honestly, at what point in the week past did you pause to think that Christ is coming again? When you last considered His return, how did that knowledge change your life? Do you find the urgency that attends His return impelling you to tell the lost of life in the Beloved Son? Does the fact that the Master has promised to come again change the way you live? Knowing that you must momentarily stand in His presence, has your speech changed or have your entertainment choices changed?

John urged believers to "abide in [Christ], so that when He appears we may have confidence and not shrink from Him in shame at His coming" [1 JOHN 2:28]. Would believers continually choose to absent themselves from worship if they truly believed Jesus was coming again? Would they repeatedly choose to find something to do at the time of worship other than unite with their own people to glorify the Son of God if they believed they must soon give an answer to Him for what they have accomplished in His Name? Would we make the choices we make if we were certain that He is coming again? Paul reminds Christians that "We must all appear before the Judgement Seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:10]. He continued by saying, "Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others [2 CORINTHIANS 5:11]. The Apostle understood that Christ the Lord is coming soon, and he laboured to prepare believers for the inevitable.

When I first came to faith, it was during an era of great excitement surrounding eschatology. Books were being published that pointed to the fulfilment of prophecy, and especially pointing to the promise of Christ's return. Sermons on the Second Coming of the Master were standard fare among evangelical churches. Today, it is rare to hear an eschatological message concerning the return of the Lord or reminding us that we will be gathered to Him. Should someone deliver such a message, it will likely prove to be an apology for why we should not be overly excited. Consequently, Christians today are uncertain why they are saved and fail to recognise the urgency of the hour. They drift toward eternity without concern for the brevity of time given them or for the peril of their friends and loved ones.

What should our church look like were we to move toward completing our assigned tasks? If we adopt these opening verses of this first Thessalonian letter as our standard for life as a congregation, we would evangelise using every available means to see as many people saved as possible. Radio and television would be employed, as would the Internet and published media. However, the primary emphasis for our evangelistic efforts would be the witness of each one who is a part of this Body. Each of us would take seriously our responsibility to rescue our families and friends and associates from hell.

When we have decided that we will move toward fulfilling our divinely assigned tasks, we will prepare ourselves for worship by praying for the power of God to be evident each time we meet. We will give ourselves to equipping each member of the Body to fulfil the ministry the Master has assigned. We will dedicate ourselves to reading the Word and meditating on what He has revealed through His Word so that we will be prepared to meet the Living Saviour in our assembly. We will think on His coming, and we will permit the knowledge that He is shortly returning for His people to have its perfect work in our lives.

WHAT MUST BE DONE TO ACCOMPLISH THE GOAL — Remember, the need is to evangelise, to reinvigorate the Faith, and to live in the certainty of Christ's return. The question arises, how shall we accomplish this goal of moving the church forward? That is the question that shall occupy our closing moments in this message. I see a threefold answer to the question revolving around evangelising, preparing to meet the Saviour, and anticipating His return.

First, we must *prepare ourselves to evangelise*. I will shortly be offering a class designed to equip believers to share their faith. When that study is provided, it would benefit each member of the assembly to participate with the goal of becoming proficient in telling others of what God has done in his or her life. Surely each of us wants to honour God through obedience to His command, and He has commissioned His people: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" [MATTHEW 28:19, 20].

Pray each day, asking God to give you one soul for His glory. Then, when He answers, ask that He give you another. Refuse to be content until that soul comes to faith. I am not saying that you should pray in general, asking God to help you to win *someone* to faith; rather, I am urging to you name the name of one someone whom you know to be lost or whom you know to not be walking with the Saviour. Ask God to give you that one soul to the praise of His glory, asking that He make you an instrument of His grace to tell that someone of the love of God.

I know that we cannot demand of God that He let us bring someone to faith, but it never ceases to amaze me that when we ask, God graciously gives us what we ask. Those who ask seem to be particularly blessed to bring many souls to glory; and that must be the aspiration of each member of the community of faith.

Seek to win the lost, and some will be saved. Invite your family to faith in the Son of God. Ask your friends to consider Christ Jesus as Saviour of their life. Witness to those with whom you work. Tell those whom you meet day-by-day of this great salvation. If we ask, God will give us what we ask as we seek His glory. God has promised:

“Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.”

[PSALM 126:5, 6]

Surely, God has included this verse to encourage us to seek the lost. It is a promise that we may anticipate a harvest if we but seek to bring the lost to Him. Begin now to pray for specific individuals whom you believe need God’s salvation. Prepare a prayer journal that lists the names of these individuals and ask God daily for them to be saved.

Prepare to meet God as you worship week-by-week. As the week passes, prepare yourself for worship. Don’t wait until Saturday evening or Sunday morning to prepare your heart, but begin to ready yourself for worship on Sunday afternoon. Set aside time each day to read the Word and to think of what God would have you do in order to prepare to meet Him on the Lord’s Day. Pray, asking that God reveal His presence among us whenever we meet. Pray, asking that God will give me the words to build His people and to glorify His Name. Pray, asking that His power will be revealed when we meet.

Meditate daily on the return of the Saviour. We have a desperate need to recapture our love for the Saviour. Preparing ourselves to meet Him in worship will go a long way toward addressing this deficit. Meditating on His return will fill in any gaps that remain after we have considered what it means to appear before Him. Take time to begin each day to ask the Master to make you ready for His coming. Lift your eyes toward the eastern sky and ask if this could be the day when He will return. Do this daily for thirty days and see if your zeal for the Master has not changed. See if your anticipation of His return will not increase significantly after this period of time invested in thinking on His return. See that your walk with Him will grow more powerful as you live in anticipation of His Coming.

Of course, you will find any of these efforts futile until you know the Saviour. Jesus, the Son of God, died because of your sin and was raised so that you could be declared right with God. Now, He calls on you to believe this truth, submitting your life to His rule so that you can receive the forgiveness of sin and adoption into the Family of God. God’s Word declares, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The passage concludes with the promise that, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

And that is our prayer for you. Believing the message of life, receive Jesus as Master of your life. Believing that He died because of your sin and believing that He was raised to life in order that you may be declared right with God, come into this most holy Faith through asking Him to reign over your life. Do it now. May God receive glory through your life. Amen.