

Acts 17:1-9
Church 201: Practicing Faith, Hope, and Love
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By a nod of the head, how many of you, when you were younger, would at this time of summer begin to get anxious about school? How many of you would get excited for school? Turn to your neighbor and I want you to tell them what it was you most looked forward to each new school year.

This Sunday, we are beginning a new series of messages that will take us through the month of August up until the first Sunday of September. This series is going to focus on a short letter written by a man named Paul the Apostle, and it was written to a small church in a city called Thessalonica, it's called...1 Thessalonians.

During these next 7 weeks, we are going to look at this letter for one purpose: how it will help us grow in the areas of faith, hope, and love. In each of his letters to new groups of believers, Paul recognizes that if they can do these three, the rest is mostly just details. These three are Faith, Hope, and Love.

Now, you'll notice that the title of this morning's message is Church 201. Two hundred level classes are those you take after the introductory courses. What we will deal with in 1 Thessalonians is, what I believe, the second primary stage in our development as a community of faith. Stage one, believing that what the Bible says to and about me is true and has authority. Stage two, living as though those we read in the Bible are true. And the way Paul, time and again, addresses the church, in its life together is by calling her to three things. Can you guess what they are? Faith, Hope, and Love.

Church is meant to be a dynamic event. When people gather to hear Jesus through the Spirit, one of the things they see in this man is his constant movement. In other religious expressions, there is a destination that you can reach if you become enlightened enough or holy enough or smart enough. Not Christianity; followers of Jesus are constantly learning and discovering new things, but not for the sake of enlightenment. We grow in knowledge so that our lives will be changed. As a result, our actions will be different.

Jesus is not stagnant. Sometimes his church is, the church can be stagnant. Church can be a place that is petty and can argue over the most trifling and insignificant things. How many of you are aware of this fact, that church is a place where people can get all bent out of shape over trifling, meaningless stuff?

The community that we are going to look at in 1 Thessalonians is one that Paul is really quite happy with. They are a strong bunch—in some ways, I believe they are similar to this one. But like us, the church in Thessalonica is being encouraged by Paul to continue to grow by practicing what they believe.

Our goal as a church is to be a people who are ambassadors of Faith, Hope, and Love in Wabash. I think our study of this letter will be helpful to all of us. Some are relatively new to our faith, and their faith is growing in strength. This series will be helpful for you, because we are going to look at this letter closely. We're going to teach our way through and, in the process, help you to understand the Bible better. And for those of you who have been at this thing of faith, this letter will hopefully show you something that will help shape your faith and mold your behavior. All of this, hopefully, will help us be people who are better equipped to practice lives of Faith, Love, and Hope.

So as we begin together our study of 1 Thessalonians, we are actually not going to begin there. We need to look at a passage from the Book of Acts, where Paul and Silas and Timothy travel to this great city in Greece.

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

Now, in case you are not familiar with this guy I've been talking about, Paul was a man who—very simply—didn't know Jesus. He had an encounter with Jesus, after which his life was changed because he met Jesus; he became a person who wanted others to know Jesus. He wanted them to know the good news. And the way he would communicate this is by traveling around the Mediterranean and by writing letters.

Paul and his friends are traveling around sharing the gospel (the good news) and encouraging fellow believers when they come to a city in Greece called Thessalonica. Thessalonica is a fascinating city; it was one of the biggest metropolises of its day and it is on an ancient trade route that connected Rome with the Far East. So that means there was lots of commerce and activity, religions and philosophers and teachers—and as a result, lots of coffee shops, too.

Paul came to this community and he did what he always did whenever he visited a new city. He went into the synagogue and opened the Scriptures and began to proclaim how Jesus Christ was the Messiah, about how Jesus died and rose again. And when he did, there were a group of people whose lives were totally changed because they heard about Jesus.

Now I know for a fact, because I have seen it among people in this room, that when they heard the message of Jesus, their lives were changed in some very important ways. There are people here among us, maybe you are one of them, who have had your life turned around because of hearing about Jesus. The same was true in Thessalonica; there were Jews in the synagogue who, when they heard Paul, followed him out and wanted to hear more.

Now the message that Paul preached to them is not in Acts 17; it's a few chapters earlier in Acts 13.

When the Holy Spirit came to the people in Acts 2, people were in Jerusalem, and what they did from there was spread out. Some of them went up to Antioch, and from Antioch Paul and his pals traveled to a city called Pisidia, and while he was in the synagogue in Pisidia he was asked to stand up and give a word of encouragement for the people. So he stood up and said:

Men of Israel and you who fear God listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with a strong arm led them out of it. And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.

Now this reference to the wilderness and Egypt is a reference to their ancestors, but it is also a reference to each of us. Because every one of us has also been in a captive place. Maybe that is right now, or maybe it was at some time in the past where you felt trapped in something and wanted God to deliver you. And Paul says, God did that for Israel and he does that for you. But then he says that God led them through a wilderness, putting up with them in the desert.

He's talking about Israel, but he's also talking about you and me. There was a time when we all were in our own wilderness of sin and God led us out and delivered us, and we fussed and moaned, but God also put up with us.

Paul continues, telling them about how God gave them Judges, then Kings Saul and David to rule over them because they didn't trust God enough. Then he says, out of King David's line comes another, a Savior, and he starts telling them about Jesus. Paul tells them what they have been longing to hear. All these Jews have been looking for a Messiah, and now Paul announces to them that the Messiah is this man Jesus, who rescues them, cares for them, heals them, and forgives their sins. And what Paul does next is tell them about the sins, the things they had hoped to hide from God. He tells them about their bankruptcy, their lostness, their shame and regret, and he looks at them and says very clearly, "In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."

The source of all great misery and hurt in the world is sin. And the message that Paul brought to Pisidia and Thessalonica and to all the other cities is that Jesus Christ does what the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments cannot. Their way of thinking was that if they could just follow the Law of Moses better that they would be justified. Paul comes to them and says that's not how it works. Jesus Christ has come and it's only through him that that happens.

Now, I want to make an important distinction for you: when I said earlier that our goal in this series was to grow in faith, hope, and love, the trap that is set before us is that this will be just one more thing that we try and do. What I don't want to do is add another

thing to our lives, another task that if we can just get this right, then we'll be free from sin. That's not how this works.

What Paul is communicating to these churches is that Jesus Christ has already rescued us from sin and shame, and that when we place our lives and our trust in him that by the Holy Spirit he grows in us faith, hope, and love. That's what Jesus does. He says you are going to be the instrument through which I spread my good news, and how does he do this? By forgiving sins. Paul says, come with me and receive everything, come with me and have your life transformed, come with me and become the person you were created on this earth to be.

But that message was met with resistance. It always was. The message of grace, not clean yourself up and then be loveable by God, but God coming into your life and freely rescuing you from your sin and offering that message to the most unexpected and wretched lives, is always scandalous. But this is what Paul did.

So then, when he leaves Pisidia, he makes his way back to Antioch and down to Jerusalem. Eventually, he makes his way to Troas and gets on a ship to Philippi, and from there he makes his way over to Thessalonica, where he finds himself standing before the leaders of the synagogue saying things that some people are drawn to, but others are up in arms over. Let's continue with Acts 17 verse 4.

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also."

Jesus turns the world upside down. He takes our misery, our loneliness, our constant attempts to make ourselves lovable by others and he gives us something better instead. Jesus gives us a community who will love us in our insecurities, our fears, will encourage us when we're lonely, will give us confidence to not be so concerned what everybody else thinks of us, and will remind us what God thinks of us. This is what Jesus does, this is what Paul tells the people in the synagogue, and what do they do? Some follow him, but others are outraged, others gather a mob to come after Paul—going to Jason's house to apprehend him.

Paul is challenging what is being said in the synagogue by saying this Jesus is not just a cool guy, but he's the king. And that incensed people, so the other Christians said, "Paul, for your own safety, you've got to leave." And that's what he did. Paul went to Berea and then to Athens—where he would write this letter to the church in Thessalonica not long afterward. And now we are at the point where our letter begins. This was a series of real life events that happened between Paul and his friend Silas and a real group of people; it's not just some made up story floating around in space, this really happened.

When Paul arrived in Athens, it wasn't long before he began to worry about his friends in Thessalonica. And what he worried about with them was their faith.

Do you remember how I asked you a little earlier if you had ever been witness to a church who worried about trifling, petty things? This is not one of them. What Paul worries about for the Thessalonians is their faith. This is an important thing. If there is anything we should try to focus on and worry about in one another is growing together in faith, hope, and love, to become strong in our trust in Jesus and encouraging others to trust in him, as well.

This is the gospel, the word that is used in these letters by Paul is the word *Euangelion*; it means good news. The thing that Paul is desperately wanting to nurture in Thessalonica and everywhere else he travels is this good news. He's not worried about a program, he's not concerned about a building or a place where ministry happens, Paul is concerned that the people in Thessalonica are hearing and knowing and trusting in the good news of Jesus Christ who forgives sinners and invites broken, worn out, left out, bugged out people to walk with him and experience what he calls the Kingdom of God. Christ's mission here on earth is to make known things as they are in heaven.

This letter that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians is also for us. This is good news. It's encouragement, it's direction for us as well. And I hope that with me, you will take seriously these wonderfully important words of Paul for us in our lives together as followers of Jesus. Pray with me.