

Gratitude for Steadfastness

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[0 : 00] chapter 1, verses 1 through 5. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians, in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the church of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. This is the evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you also are suffering. O.J. Simpson was a running back in the NFL in the 70s, before most of us, but not all of us, were born. In 1995, O.J. Simpson was put on trial for murder. Not just one murder, but a double murder. And this was a big deal. It was very public.

It was very well known. Parts of the trial were televised on TV because he's a famous person on trial. And the primary piece of physical evidence, some of you will remember this, was this. There were two gloves that were found. One glove was found at the crime scene. That was the left-hand glove. And a second matching glove was found at O.J. Simpson's house. Both of the gloves had the blood of both victims and O.J. Simpson on them. This is clear evidence that he ought to be convicted. Clear physical evidence that he ought to be convicted. The prosecution, decided to have O.J. Simpson, try on the glove that was found at the crime scene. And for any number of reasons, it could be that he was, because he was wearing a pair of latex gloves as he tried to put it on. It could be because he stopped taking some medication that he was on and his hands had swelled. It could be that the gloves had deteriorated some because being sitting in evidence and soaked in blood and so on. Who knows? But as he tried to put this glove on, it did not fit.

And his defense attorney, a guy named Johnny Cochran, famously said during the closing argument, The jury then, had reasonable doubt.

[3 : 03] And they acquitted O.J. Simpson despite clear physical evidence that should have led to a guilty verdict.

Hold on to that thought. The church in Thessalonica is suffering. They are despised by the Romans because, as Mike taught us last week, they refuse to follow the Roman cult, the worship of the emperor. They are despised by the Romans. But they are also loathed by the Jews because these Christians in Thessalonica believe that Jesus, the crucified, now risen one, is the Messiah. And the Jews can't have a crucified Messiah. So the Romans hate them, the Jews loathe them, and as a result, they are persecuted and hounded by everyone. They are suffering. Loss of life, loss of relationships, loss of means of making money, life in Thessalonica for these Christians is hard. Persecution, hardship, adversity.

So Paul opens his second letter to Thessalonica with some affirmation and some exhortation for them. He points them to two evidences that their faith really is genuine.

[4 : 29] And then he urges them on towards steadfastness. Why? Because faith that doesn't quit proves to be legit.

Mike took us to Acts 17 last week, and it's so helpful because as we read through the book of Acts, we get kind of Paul's travel itinerary.

That's where we see that Paul and Silvanus and Timothy first go to Thessalonica, Acts chapter 17. Luke records it for us there. This is approximately the year A.D. 49, 12, 13 years after the Lord Jesus has died and been raised from the dead.

Paul stays there in Thessalonica. Some say just a couple of Sundays to go and be in the synagogue, which for them would have been Saturdays. I suspect, based on what we know that

Paul teaches at the end of this letter that we'll look at in several weeks, that he may have been there longer.

Maybe up to six months he spent in Thessalonica. Long enough to gain a reputation with the people for being a hard worker. Long enough for them to know him as a person.

[5 : 39] Perhaps six months, Paul leaves, but after leaving, Paul becomes very concerned about this church. Paul has the real heart of a shepherd, the real heart of a pastor, and he is concerned about this church.

And so he dispatches Timothy to go and check on them. We read about this in the first letter to Thessalonica, chapter 3 and verse 1. This is what Paul says the first time he wrote to them. Therefore, when we could no longer stand it, we thought it was better to be left alone in Athens. And then look down at verse 5. For this reason, when I could no longer stand it, I also sent him, that's Timothy, to find out, notice, about your faith.

Why? Fearing that the tempter had tempted you and that our labor might be for nothing. What is Paul's concern? That though he has planted this church and though this church has begun to grow, that somehow the devil has gotten in there and that these Christians have given up the faith.

We would say that they have apostatized or, a simpler word, they quit. They quit. Timothy goes.

[7 : 02] Timothy finds out the truth. Verse number 6. But now, Timothy has come to us from you. Can you hear? Can you sense Paul's joy? And he has brought us good news about your faith and your love.

He reported that you always have good memories of us and that you long to see us as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and affliction, we were encouraged about you, notice, through your faith.

For now we live if you stand firm in the Lord. What is Paul's concern? That this church would quit. That they would abandon faith.

That they would give up. Paul returns to Paul with good news, perhaps some questions from the church, perhaps his own pastoral observations.

That leads to Paul writing this first letter that we've been looking at, first letter of Thessalonians. Which also, interesting, I just learned this this week, is the first document that we have that has made its way by God's providence into the New Testament.

[8 : 13] So, Paul's letters and the gospels and John and James and so on. They're not organized according to when they were written. So, this letter of 1 Thessalonians is written just 12 or 13, perhaps, years after Jesus died and was raised from the dead.

And then the second letter to the Thessalonians, very interesting, is only a couple months after the first. So, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are the first glimpses that we have into what was the church like in its infancy.

The second letter begins, like the first, with just a couple of differences, and I want to show them to you. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and verse number 1 begins this way.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace. Now, look in your Bible at verse 1 of 2 Thessalonians and see if you notice a very subtle difference.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you notice the difference?

[9 : 27] It is God our Father. Paul reinforces for them family, community, the faith that you have, Thessalonians.

That faith is a shared faith with Paul and Silvanus and Timothy. How do we know that? Because it is God our Father. There's a second, perhaps less subtle difference.

If you look back in your Bible at 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, verse 1, Paul opens his letter with a standard greeting. It just says, grace to you and peace. Now, I am not in any way disparaging Scripture.

This is a little bit how we would say, I hope this letter finds you well. Right? There's nothing particularly special necessarily about grace and peace. It's a common way that they would introduce themselves and write letters.

But look at what happens in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. He opens with grace and peace. But where is the grace and peace from? It is from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[10:39] Not just a standard greeting of grace and peace, but grace and peace from our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

So now, having greeted the church and reminded them of their shared faith, Paul opens the body of the letter. And he points to two evidences that their faith is genuine.

Two evidences that their faith is genuine. And I think he does this in such an interesting way. He tells them, as Mike shared with us last week, how he prays for them.

That's how he tells them about these two evidences that he sees that their faith is genuine. Look at verse number 3. We ought to thank God always for you, brothers and sisters.

This is not some sort of a duty or an obligation. Paul means this is right. It's the right thing for us to be thankful to God for you, brothers and sisters.

[11:46] And rightly so. Why? Since your faith is flourishing. There's the first evidence. And the love each one of you has for one another is increasing.

There's the second evidence. Two evidences that their faith is genuine. The first, faith is flourishing. Faith is not static.

You don't believe or not believe. Faith is not an on or off switch. The ESV version that Emily read says, Your faith is growing abundantly.

That's helpful also. This is the only usage in the New Testament of this word. And it has the Greek prefix in front of it, hyper. And some of you know what that means.

Hyper, right? This growth in their faith is vigorous kind of growth. It's an abundant kind of growth. Think about the Thanksgiving Day table.

[12:52] You sit down at the table. And it's already loaded up with good food. And then more food keeps coming out. It's just an increasing abundance.

That's the idea behind their faith. Their faith is flourishing. This matters. This matters.

Because in 1 Thessalonians chapter 3 and verse 10, the first time Paul writes to this church, Paul says this. 1 Thessalonians 3 verse 10. We pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith.

It seems as though God has answered their prayer. Their faith is flourishing. And that is the first evidence of genuine faith. An abundant, increasing kind of faith in Jesus.

How is your faith flourishing, brother and sisters? How is your faith flourishing? Has your faith become stagnant?

[14:02] Has your faith landed at a place where it sort of feels plateaued? Perhaps you feel like you're no longer growing, no longer maturing.

We're here for that, aren't we? For one another to grow together and to continue to be this kind of people that have flourishing faith.

I wonder if you realize that that's you and my faith is no longer flourishing, if you would ask the Holy Spirit to renew your faith. What a great request.

Renew my faith. Keep it fresh. Keep it fresh. Keep it growing. Keep it thriving. Keep it abundantly increasing. The second evidence that their faith is genuine.

The love that they have for one another is increasing. They don't just love one another. Their love for one another is abundant.

[15:05] Oh, I messed up my illustrations. What in the world? This was the one I wanted to use with a Thanksgiving day, but perhaps the other one will work just as well. When you think about vigorous growth, you can think about a teenager growing through a growth spurt.

That's the kind of faith that we need to have. Growth spurt type faith. You with me on that? Okay, now back to this one. Their love for one another is increasing.

They don't just love one another. They love one another in an abundant way. Like when that Thanksgiving day table is spread and you just keep bringing more and more food out to it and you're like, whoa, there is so much here.

That's the love that these Christians have for one another. This also matters because in chapter three and verse 12 of his first letter, Paul writes this.

Chapter three, verse 12. May the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another. It seems as though the Lord has answered Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy's prayer.

[16:17] Their love is increasing. This is the second piece of genuine faith. It is increasing love.

Let me ask you, who is hard for you to love? Who do you think of when you think, boy, that person is hard to love? That person is coming towards me and I'm going to have a conversation and I don't

even know what I'm going to say.

Perhaps your compassion for that person has grown cold. Perhaps your heart for that person has grown hard.

I wonder if you would be willing to ask the Holy Spirit to give you the kind of love that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Love is patient.

Love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrong.

[17 : 23] That is an increasing kind of love that is evidence of genuine faith.

Notice again, Paul's affirmations for this church are not congratulations. He is not so much patting them on the back. He is encouraging the Thessalonians, but without making it about the Thessalonians.

Do you see that? He is directing his gratitude not to them, but to God. This is what I am thankful to God for about you, because you give these two evidences of genuine faith.

He turns their attention off of themselves and on to God, the giver of life, to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, our perfect example of love.

Now, even though Paul is not congratulating the Thessalonians, so to speak, he is definitely talking about them in all the very best ways.

[18 : 39] Look at your Bible and notice the word therefore that begins verse 4. You see that?

Therefore, because of your genuine flourishing faith, because of your love that is increasing, therefore, verse number 4, we ourselves boast about you among God's churches, about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and afflictions that you are enduring.

What is this church well known for? They are known for flourishing faith. They are known for increasing love. And the shocking part of this is the context in which their faith is flourishing and their love is increasing.

What is the context? It's the context of persecution, affliction, hardship, suffering for their faith in Jesus.

It's easy to have flourishing faith, isn't it? When life is good. But what about when circumstances are unfavorable?

What about when your house deal falls through and you don't have a buyer? What about when the hot water heater fails and you don't have hot water?

[20 : 17] It's easy to have flourishing faith when spirituality is accepted. When it's generally accepted that you would go to church and you would be that kind of a person.

It's okay. It's not looked down upon. But what about when having faith is lonely and unpopular? It's easy to have a flourishing kind of faith when you are healthy.

But what about when there's an unexpected medical diagnosis? It's easy to have flourishing faith when your job is secure. But what about when you have lost your job?

Or you're starting over? What about when faith is costly? Similarly, loving others doesn't seem so difficult, does it, when people are nice to me?

But what about when people are mean to me? Hmm? It's easy to have an increasing kind of love when people do what I say.

[21 : 21] But what about when people make choices and decisions that I don't like? Choices that I wouldn't make? Then what? can we love one another then?

It's easy to have this increasing kind of love when friends are reliable. But what about when you feel betrayed? When your friends turn their backs on you?

It's easy to love others when brothers and sisters agree on what matters most. But what about when there's disagreement and disunity?

Isn't it easy to love when others consider your needs at the same time as you are considering their needs? I'm thinking in particular in terms of close relationships.

We love and we serve others because we expect to be loved and served in return. What about when they don't love and serve in return? No one is speaking your love language.

[22 : 24] Then what? I think it's easy to love when sin is quickly followed by confession and by repentance.

But what about when sin is followed by stubbornness and silence? How do you respond when loving is hard?

Under the most difficult circumstances, the Thessalonians faith flourishes and their love increases and Paul describes their perseverance.

Your Bible might say their steadfastness for obvious reasons. I like that. He describes their perseverance, their steadfastness as, look in your Bible, boastworthy.

Do you see it? I'm putting the words together but you see it there in verse number four. What is it that Paul boasts about when he talks about the Thessalonians? You remain steadfast.

[23 : 26] You are persevering. I love that about you. And I have to tell everybody else. Their perseverance, their steadfastness is boastworthy.

Do you know what's typically boastworthy about a church? Butts, bucks, and buildings. That's what's popular typically and boastworthy about a church.

How many seats are you filling? When I say bucks, I'm not talking about the deer with horns. I know some of you were thinking that. I'm talking about your budget. How big is your budget?

How nice is your building? How many amenities does it have? How large? How comfortable? These are the things that are typically boastworthy about a church.

Can you think of any instance in the New Testament where there is a priority placed? Where there is boasting that happens about butts or bucks or buildings?

[24 : 50] Let me ask you this question. Other than when Paul collects the offering for the church in Jerusalem or in the first days of the church when the church is suddenly going viral because the Spirit has come and we see these massive numbers of people coming to faith in Jesus miraculously other than these examples.

Can you think of any other instance where the number of people or the size of the budget or how comfortable the building is are even mentioned in the New Testament?

Brothers and sisters, I am not suggesting that these realities are not important, but I do wonder whether the priorities of the church, especially the church in this country, are disordered.

Paul can't stop talking about this church in Thessalonica. It is not their large membership. It is not their big budget. It is not their sprawling campus.

Those are not the things that Paul boasts about. Paul can't stop talking about their perseverance in faith. He can't stop talking about their steadfastness. Notice how he builds on this argument as he works down to verse number five.

[26 : 20] It. Little difficult to know here. There is some disagreement what this it refers to. I think it's best, but you are free to disagree about this.

I think it's best to see it as referring to their perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and afflictions that they are enduring.

It, your perseverance, your faith, is clear evidence of God's righteous judgment.

Clear evidence of God's righteous judgment. Stick with me that you will be counted worthy of God's kingdom for which you are also suffering.

Now there's a little bit of work that we have to do here and as I mentioned you can disagree about what the it is, but I do think that this is the best interpretation is to see this it as being their perseverance, their steadfastness in faith.

[27 : 23] And if that's true, then we need to think about this word judgment because when we think about judgment we think about punishment. That's what comes to mind I think when we think the word judgment.

There's another way to understand the word judgment and that is in terms of a verdict or you might say a judgment call like if you're calling pass interference in the NFL.

It's a judgment call. It's a verdict. Somebody has to make a decision and decide something. Do you see how that's another way that we can understand that English word judgment?

I suspect that may be how Paul is using it here. It, your perseverance, your faith, your steadfastness is clear evidence of God's righteous verdict.

His righteous verdict about you. His righteous judgment call about you. What judgment call does God make about his people?

[28 : 34] He declares us righteous on the basis of the Lord Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. salvation. Think about that.

When followers of Jesus persevere in faith, that steadfastness proves God's judgment call on their lives is right.

You following me on this? I get that it's a little technical. When followers of Jesus persevere in faith, that steadfastness proves that God's judgment call on their lives is right.

Why? Why does it prove it? Because if your faith was not genuine, you would quit. You would quit. When the going gets tough, you would just say it's not worth it to follow Jesus.

Jesus. You would apostatize. You would quit. Why do you think Paul is so concerned about this between the first and second letter to the Thessalonians? Why is it their faith that he is concerned about?

[29 : 49] Because he says, I want to tell you right now, God's call on your life, I can tell his call, his verdict about you, his judgment about you is righteous.

Your faith is genuine because if it wasn't, you would have quit a long time ago. You would have given up the faith. You would have stopped loving each other and turned on one another. Persevering in love is proof of real faith. And persevering in faith is proof that Jesus has truly saved you.

Hear this carefully. A one time profession of faith without perseverance will not save you.

Think about that carefully. A one time profession of faith without perseverance in that faith will not save you.

[30 : 57] Are you trying to say that my perseverance is necessary for my salvation? Yes, let me illustrate.

Suppose you purchase a ticket for a concert or a sporting event or I suppose to hunt a deer if I'm going to broaden out my illustration a little bit.

I don't think in terms of that but we already mentioned bucks so here we are. You purchase a ticket for a concert or a sporting event or a hunting outing.

I guess that would be a license. What happens if you show up to the event and you don't have your ticket? Now you can say to the person at the door I paid for this ticket.

I paid for this ticket. I bought my ticket. I can show you my credit card. I can show you my receipt.

And the person at the door is going to say you cannot come in.

[32 : 03] You do not have your ticket. The ticket becomes evidence that you have actually paid the price to get in. Now is the ticket the price that was paid?

No, of course not. There's no value in that sense in the ticket but the ticket represents price that the price has been paid.

Similarly, Jesus paid it all. Jesus paid it all. There is not one more thing for you to pay and you are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

Did I say that clearly? this is how we are saved by faith alone, by grace alone, by faith alone, by grace alone in Jesus Christ alone.

And yet, perseverance in that faith is evidence that Jesus has truly paid the price for you.

[33 : 11] and if you do not persevere, that is proof that you have not truly been born again. This is why Paul is so concerned about the faith of the Thessalonians and why he mentions it back and forth between these two letters, just a couple of months apart.

follower of Jesus, your Savior paid the full penalty for your sin.

There is nothing left for you to pay. So listen, when you suffer, when you are persecuted, when you deal with affliction and hardship, please don't fear that your God is absent.

And please don't fear that your God is angry with you. Instead, take comfort and be encouraged because your steadfastness in the midst of the worst circumstances is proof that you belong to Jesus, that God really is our Father, that you have a shared faith with Paul and Silvanus and Timothy.

much like if it doesn't fit, you must acquit.

[34 : 41] Gave the jurors in the Simpson trial reasonable doubt. Faith that doesn't quit will prove to be legit.

it. And that faith gives you, dear beloved child of God, every reason to hope. So how do we remain steadfast in suffering?

thing. The Martinsons recently purchased a lawn de-thatcher.

And last Saturday, the Martinsons removed from our average size yard, right? We removed from our yard 18 large lawn bags full of dead grass.

It was a little embarrassing. It was a lot of work. We should have done this four years ago, at least. All this dead grass, all this mossy stuff that's down in our grass, all this thatch, it is preventing the

sun from getting where it needs to be and preventing the water, the rain, and the sprinklers from doing what they need to do and getting that rain down to the roots.

[36 : 11] It's all just running off our yard and pooling up in our sidewalk. Lois and Chloe and Lydia and I are dealing with this lawn and all of these piles of thatch that are in our lawn yesterday afternoon.

And I said to myself, because I was trying to break the ice a little bit, because it was a lot of work, I said to myself, there must be a sermon illustration here somewhere. And it turns out there is. How do we persevere in faith? How do we endure persecution? How do we remain steadfast in suffering? What will encourage you to press on when you want to quit?

Hebrews chapter 12, verse 1. Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, here it is, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer, your Bible might say author, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

[37 : 49] The hindrances, the sin that so easily ensnares us. These are like those 18 bags of dead grass.

They had to come out of our lawn. If this lawn is going to flourish, it has to be removed. All that dead stuff has to come out.

It can't stay there if the lawn is going to flourish. The lawn won't thrive. How do we remain steadfast? How do we persevere in faith?

Ask the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit, please show me the distractions. Please show me the diversions. Please show me the ways that I am wasting time.

Show me the things that are hindrances, as the author of Hebrews writes, the things that are hindrances to my flourishing.

[38 : 47] Show them to me. faith. And if you're brave and bold and courageous enough, ask someone near you who loves you to show you what those things are. That would take some courage.

Maybe we'll have to do that at small group this week. Ask someone, what are the hindrances that you see in my life? To me, having a flourishing kind of faith.

faith that is built for the long haul, for steadfastness, even in persecution. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you those things and then set them aside.

Set them aside. Purge them. Scarify them out. Dethatch it out of your heart by grace and by the Spirit's power. Then ask the Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit, show me my sin.

Show me the sin that so easily ensnares me. The sin that is keeping me from having this flourishing kind of faith. Show me my sin.

[39 : 56] And then repent and confess and make amends. And ask God for the grace and the strength to truly repent of that sin.

If you want a flourishing kind of faith, the kind of faith that is built for the long haul of the Christian life, then commit yourself to the means of grace.

Commit yourself to the apostles' teaching. Read the word. Study the word. Meditate on the word. Memorize the word. Commit yourself to God's word.

Commit yourself to fellowship. Be part of the church. Be there when the church gathers together. I feel like I'm preaching to the choir. Be there when the church gathers together.

Commit yourself to that means of grace. Commit yourself to the breaking of bread. And truly ask the Holy Spirit to show you your sin. And when we take moments to be quiet before the Lord, do it.

[41 : 01] Do it consistently. Do it regularly. We need that. commit yourself to that means of grace. And commit yourself to the means of grace of prayer.

Oh, brothers and sisters, we need to be that kind of people. If we are going to have gratitude to God for one another's steadfastness.

And finally, above all else, as Hebrews chapter 12 tells us, keep your eyes on Jesus.

Don't ever take your eyes off Jesus. He is our goal. He is our purpose. He is our reason for persevering in the faith.

Keep your eyes on Jesus, brothers and sisters. Let's pray. Good Father, we are grateful to be here to find ourselves under the preaching of your word.

[42 : 08] Father, would you take now and by your Holy Spirit settle into our hearts the things that have been said that are helpful, that are true, that are noteworthy, that are worth holding on to.

Settle those things down deep into our hearts. And all of the things that were just of me, all of the things that were unhelpful or distracting, please take them away.

Cause our hearts to latch on to your word and the things that we have heard you say to us by the power of your Holy Spirit. Father, as we gather and we worship and we pray and we call one another to worship, as we lift our voices and our hands and our hearts to you in song, as we sit under the preaching of the word, we don't just need this time in the word, we need all of it.

We need all of it. It's good for us to be together. It's good for us to remember one another and to remember one another's faith.

And so, Father, as we come before you, we ask that you would prepare our hearts to receive the Lord's Supper.

[43 : 36] Show us where our faith has plateaued. Show us our sin that is ensnaring us. Give us courage to repent.

Give us renewed faith. faith. So that, as we gather together and look around the circle at one another and look in each one another's eyes, we can say, I give testimony to your faith, just like Paul did for the Thessalonians.

You are steadfast. You are persevering in faith. I know it. I see it in your life. Holy Spirit, would you help us right now as we take a few moments to be quiet before you.

Show us our sin. Comfort and encourage us by your grace. Thank you, Lord, for your kindness to us.

Help us as we continue to worship. It is in Jesus' name that we pray and ask and give thanks. Amen.