

Intro. Garrison. Pastor. 1 Thessalonians 1.

Kicking off a new series this morning. For us as pastors we want to teach across all the Scriptures, showing how the entire Bible points to Jesus and is applicable to our lives. So sometimes that looks like what we've been doing so far this year, looking across the Scriptures at what we as pastors have felt like the Lord is leading us to teach our church family given where we think everyone is at. And at times we want to get into a book of a Bible and settle in for a while. And that's what we're going to be doing over the next 10 weeks.

We'll be taking a close look at both 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Two letters that the apostle Paul wrote to a church plant in the ancient city of Thessalonica.

Now for today, I just want to get us oriented in the book. Let me give you the backstory of this church.

Famously, the apostle Paul went on multiple missionary journeys. Traveling all around the ancient world preaching the gospel and establishing new churches. When you read the New Testament, specifically Paul's epistles, this is actually why these letters were written. After Paul had passed through and helped establish a church, he would maintain that relationship with the believers by writing letters to them. Usually a couple months or years after Paul's visits. In this case, this first letter was written around 50 AD. Many theologians believe 1 Thessalonians is actually the earliest of Paul's writings we have.

Now Paul's trip to Thessalonica took place on his second missionary journey. Notably, he's traveling with another church leader named Silas, and they've picked up a young believer along the way named Timothy, who goes on to be a pastor in Ephesus who Paul actually writes to as well.



By the time they've come to Thessalonica, they've already traveled through a few different regions—Syria and Cilicia, they plant the church in Galatia and find themselves in a city called Troas, which you'll notice, is on the other side of the sea from Thessalonica.

Paul has a vision of a Macedonian man calling him to come across the Aegean Sea to help the people of Macedonia. So they follow the call and sail to Thessalonica.

Now unlike many ancient cities, Thessalonica is actually still standing today—more commonly called Thessaloniki. It's the second biggest city in Greece. And at the time, it was still a very large and prominent city. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. So if you remember your history, Alexander the Great established Macedonia as its own kingdom. But eventually it's conquered by the Romans. But if a city was very

pro-Roman—if they worship the emperor, abide by Roman law, pay taxes—the Romans would actually allow that city to be self-governed and be non occupied. And Thessalonica was very pro Roman.

There was a massive temple for the emperor as well as statues of the emperor throughout the city—declaring that Caesar was Lord. Idol worship ran rampant, as it did in most of the ancient world.

And Paul and his companions set up shop in this very idolatrous city. We get the full story Acts 17, I'd encourage you to read that this week. Sparknotes version is that Paul is there for a couple months, most scholars think max 3 months. specifically Acts 17 tells us he preaches in the synagogue there for 3 straight weeks and plants a church. Many people come to know Jesus.

But then things get a little shaky. The Jewish leaders are angry and stir up riot in the city. Paul's host as well as some of the other new believers are dragged out of their homes into the city and beaten. And accused of treason. Essentially Paul preached that Jesus is Lord and the city is in an uproar because they believe that Caesar is Lord.

The believers in Thessalonica then send away Paul and his companions in the middle of the night to a new city. They have to get them out of town ASAP.

That's the story of the church at Thessalonica. Now we fast forward a year or so, and Paul's writing to them from Corinth. Along the journey he sends Timothy back to check in on them and to report back. We'll find out in two weeks that apparently at one point he tries to go back but says Satan prevented him—what are we going to with that??

He gets Timothy's report and writes them this letter based on what he's heard. Let's hop in. 1 Thessalonians 1:1

Paul, Silvanus (this is Silas), and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before ^four God and Father ^ayour work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, ¹brothers² loved by God, ⁴that he has chosen you,

Paul opens his letter by reflecting on his time with the believers in Thessalonica. He says he prays for them constantly, remembering their faith, love and steadfast hope in Jesus. Even though his time with them was short and ended painfully, these people bring him joy because of how Jesus got hold of their lives.

Now it's important to note Paul's tone even in these opening verses. He's really encouraging and positive towards this church. And we know why. We know from later in the letter that the report Paul gets from Timothy is very positive. It's a very encouraging report. This church is thriving.

Even in chapter 1 Paul says that they've become a model church. A church that's thriving in such a way they've become examples to many other churches. He's overjoyed about this church. He's encouraged by them.

In case this is lost on you—Maybe a close example would be if after a couple months of Citizens being a church, me and Tim are run out of town. And we're gone for a year! We would constantly be wondering how everyone is doing. Are they making it? Gosh I hope they're okay. And we get a report that you're thriving. We'd be overjoyed!

And he summarizes that joy with verse 4—⁴For (he's grounded this joy in a reason. This is why) **we know, ¹brothers² loved by God, ^kthat he has chosen you,**

Because they are chosen. What he's grounding that joy in is in their election. That God has chosen them for salvation. Now pause. I know that language can make us a little nervous. That's okay. It is what we believe as a church. As pastors. And we don't think that's something we're making up. We see it right here in the text. He says it—He has chosen you. God set you specifically apart for salvation. Notice how clear it is. God chose you. Not, you chose God.

Which isn't just theologically impactful here, it's pragmatic. Because with his absence there would have been possible doubt of whether or not they truly understood and believed the Gospel. And so he encourages them, you don't need to have any doubts. You can be confident because it's God who saved you.

God has saved you Truly. And that's why we're so thankful. So overjoyed by you. Keep going

⁴For we know, ¹brothers² loved by God, ^kthat he has chosen you, ⁵because

Pause. Paul says we know God has truly saved you, and we're overjoyed by it. But in verse 5, he's going to unpack it. It's not that he just has insider information into who God has chosen for salvation. That's not how it works. But he is going to say this is how we know God has actually saved you.

There are markers of a person saved by God. It was vital to them to know what they were, and it's vital to us to know what they are.

And he's going to give 4 of them. Which is what we'll hone in on for the rest of our time this morning. 4 evidences that God has saved you.

⁴For we know, ¹brothers² loved by God, ^kthat he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and ^min the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

1. Full Conviction

Paul says the first reason we know that He has chosen them is because of the power they experienced under his ministry. The Gospel came to them and they experienced its power. We don't know exactly what happened, but we do know that the Spirit moved in them and in a very evident way.

The Holy Spirit gives them what he calls, full conviction. The word conviction is the Greek **plērophoria**. It actually is less about the classical conviction that we talk about with sin. It means assurance. It's used one other time in NT, in Hebrews 10:22: *Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

It's about confidence. To know and truly believe. In other words what Paul is saying is that he didn't have to talk the Thessalonians into anything, nor did they have to make themselves believe. The Holy Spirit gave them assurance and certainty that what was preached was true. They had no doubts.

Simply, Paul starts by saying I know the Gospel has truly taken hold because of your assurance in its truth, which can only really happen by a powerful work of God. I love Pastor Ray Ortland puts it:

But what sets the elect (true Christians) apart is the power of God making the gospel not just a message but an experience that brings God's eternally electing love into their hearts as the blazing new center of their existence. As the non-elect hear merely an idea, even a moving idea, the elect are acted upon by a power from beyond this world.

The reality for all of us is there's something like a belief light switch in our hearts. Flip that switch, the lights come on, and everything changes. The problem is that the switch is too deep within us for us to reach. No one but God can. And He does it through His word. God makes the truth of Christ so clear and real that it takes its rightful place, as the authoritative, guiding reality for the believers life.

What true Christianity is, is an encounter with God. It's not just a set of beliefs we assign to. Sure we, believe certain things, but if you boil it down, our stories have to intersect with THE story, the person in the story-Jesus for this to come alive.

I did not grow up in the church. I did not like Christians. I thought they were lame and annoying. But 4 weeks before I moved into my freshman year dorm, I met Jesus. It was great timing. I'd been reading the Bible casually for a couple months after prompting from friends. It didn't make sense. It was fairly irrelevant. But then one night the lights came on. The word came alive. And He powerfully moved and changed me. A few weeks before I met Jesus I had bought a fake ID and drug paraphernalia, ready to cut loose in college. And just a couple weeks later I remember throwing those things into a dumpster with my first ever small group. The Gospel came in power and the Holy Spirit brought assurance. It made sense. And I was changed.

At some point in our stories, that switch must be flipped. God must move in our hearts to bring us full conviction.

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And ⁶you became imitators of us ⁵and of the Lord, for ⁴you received the word in much affliction, ³with the ¹joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

2. Joy in Suffering

Paul says that even in the midst of affliction and suffering they came to follow Jesus with joy. Their faith sounded forth. There's imagery of the fruit of the spirit just exploding out of this church. I'd love to define it in the words of Theologian Dallas Willard:

Joy is a pervasive sense of well-being that is infused with hope because of the goodness of God."

Joy is a feeling, but it's more than just a feeling. It's sense that all is well, because God is with me, knows me, loves me, and is good to me.

Joy isn't something that is inactive. Not something that just happens. It's one of the fruits of the Spirit. Which means it's both something the Spirit brings into our lives and it's also something that we must cultivate. **It is a decision and gift.**

And it's not dependent on the circumstances. The circumstances, by all worldly measures, should have resulted in this church never getting started. But counter to the conditions, this church is thriving, full of joy in the midst of suffering. Full of faith in the face of affliction.

And he says why this is possible. It's because of when they received the word, the Spirit moved in them.

It's the reality that God supernaturally ignited the words of Paul and company to make the Gospel come to life. That's the power of the Holy Spirit. And it brought joy. Deep unmovable joy even when facing an angry mob. Even when they're accused of treason. Even when they're beaten and persecuted for their faith.

I don't want to miss this. This is both the life altering wonder of the Gospel that makes us see life differently. So life's difficulties get put in perspective in light of the reality of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. If the Gospel is true, It doesn't matter what's happening. Jesus has died for me, made me right with God, brought me into the fold. That was enough for them to have joy and increase their faith in the midst of trials and suffering.

Now, I know this one is really hard for many of us. Especially for those of us struggling with depression. But I don't want us to caveat our way out of it. The reality is when the Gospel gets to us, we are marked by joy. And sometimes our experience of that joy may be fuzzy, or clouded, or more difficult to see. But over time and the long haul are we becoming a person of joy? More and more grounded in the life altering joy of the Gospel?

⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord ^usounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth ^veverywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of ^wreception we had among you, and how ^xyou turned to God ^yfrom idols to serve the living and ^ztrue God.

3. A Transformed Life

Thessalonica was a city where idolatry ran rampant. Statues and temples to false gods everywhere. What it looked like to be Thessalonian was to be an idol worshiper.

In this city and culture where idolatry ran rampant, this group of Christians turning from idols was a big deal. It causes a stir. So much that people are talking about it throughout this entire region.

God has changed these people. They no longer serve idols—false gods. They serve the living and true god. When the gospel comes, lives are transformed.

Now I get that we don't live in a city that has temples dedicated to named gods or statues all around that you have to bow down to. So it may be hard to see how transformation could even look. But I think if you were honest with yourself, you could pick where the idols are in our city and in your life pretty quickly.

Because all an idol is anything that we put in the place of God. Anything that becomes ultimate or more pressing than the things of God. A sign of an idol is anyone or anything that you must have to be okay. And in our city, they're everywhere.

- The idol of money.
- The idol of work.
- The idol of the family.
- The idol of status
- The idol of success.

The list could go on and on. Do you see it? And if I can pastor us for a bit, I'd love to show us something just as dangerous. And I'll let our member check ups from this past do the work for me.

Consider these answers, which are just a sampling, to the question we asked this past November – **“What are your current barriers to spiritual practices?”**

“Busyness and lack of intentionality.”	Grad school	Time
Long commute, demanding job	Hurry	Demands of school on my time
Exhaustion	Busy	I overextended my schedule
Time/Fatigue	Too busy	No schedule
Time management and commitments	Busyness	I feel overwhelmed
	Physical and spiritual tiredness	Work schedule
	Two kids under two	Kids/Schedule

Time

Screen Time

Busyness – I am more and more convinced, for our generation, in a city like Charlotte, is the greatest barrier to a robust life with God.

What happens is between our idols and our schedules, we look a whole lot like our city. Prioritizing what our world prioritizes. We live very filled lives. Schedules filled to the brim.

And oftentimes, our busyness shows us where our idols actually are. Because you make time for what you love most. And if your schedule is packed to the brim with no room for God and no desire to change that, it is because you love other stuff more than Him.

So we don't need temples to see where the idols are. We just need a google calendar.

But when God saves you, things change. Lives are transformed.

Transformation in our city would look something like your work is no longer our lives. It'd be the means by which God provides for us right now, which He can and will do with or without that job. It would mean that when work is hard, it's work, and Jesus is still in charge of the world and we have peace and joy.

I think it looks like communion with Jesus being the priority in our life. Not just how to check the box in the morning, but how we can get more and more time with Him. I think our prayer life would be expanding and our love for God and people would be growing.

Time with God's people wouldn't be something we do because it's the right thing to do, but rather something essential. Because Jesus' heart is for His church, so we just want to be more like Jesus by loving the people He loves. We wouldn't view CG or time with another Christian as a damper in our schedule but a blessing, because not every Christian in the world has access to other believers, let alone a church family. We'd be humbled by the Gospel so much so that we'd desire confession so that we could fight our sin and be known in community.

We'd desire to serve and give away more of our time, energy and resources for the glory of God, rather than be defensive and cautious to give away space in our calendars.

That's what a life looks like when it turns from idols to serve the living God. A beautiful counter intuitive and counter cultural life given to God.

¹⁰ and ^ato wait for his Son ^bfrom heaven, ^cwhom he raised from the dead, Jesus ^dwho delivers us from ^ethe wrath to come.

4. Live in light of the end

Paul says you've turned from idols to serve the living God and now you wait. We wait for Jesus to return. This is actually going to be one the major themes of this series that comes up a good bit.

The return of Jesus is actually one of the most prominent topics in the entire New Testament.

Jesus alone mentions his second coming over 20 unique times and the second coming is mentioned in total over 300 times in the NT. If you break it down, it's actually 1 out of every 25 verses mention the return of Jesus. To the early church, this was not an afterthought. In the words of 19th century Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren:

The primitive church thought a great deal more about the coming of Jesus Christ than about death; thought a great deal more about His coming than about Heaven."

And before we think, well back then they didn't really know. Now it's been 2000 years, it's a lot harder to believe in all that. The call to wait has never been about the time. It's always been about being prepared for the time. See how Jesus himself said it.

Matthew 24:44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Waiting for the Lord to return is a call to preparation. To be prepared for Jesus' return. To fix our eyes on Jesus, who is coming back. It's a calling to reorient how we view reality—to remember we're living in God's story, not our own. And what's coming for us is His return. No, we don't know when, we just know we're 30 minutes closer than when we walked in that door this morning. It's a call towards hope in the future and intentionality in the present.

So what does that look like? Well have you ever met a couple about to have a baby? Stick with me.

Baby. When you find out you're having a baby, you're basically told your whole life is about to change in 9 months. But you don't do nothing before then. You don't just say cool, I'll think about that on the due date and not a minute sooner. No, everything changes the day you find out about the pregnancy. You're excited. You have something to look forward to, something you're hoping in. You're thinking about baby names, child care plans, who's coming into town to help, is our house good to go? Do we need to move? What do we need to baby proof? How about us? Are we ready? Got to look at the budget, cut back on the amazon spending. Am I ready to be a father? Let me get a podcast, let me get the book. Do I even know how to sleep train? Where are they going to sleep at all? What hospital are we going to go to? We got the bag ready?? But not just that. You also start thinking, how do i do this basic thing that I'm already doing, with a baby? How do i work? How do I have friends? How do I spend time with JEsus? **Because you're living in light of what's about to happen.**

You don't just change in 9 months. You change now. And the same is true with Jesus' return.

So it looks like being faithful now. Often when Jesus talks about His return, He's doing so in reference to His people obeying Him. So He's saying, you following Me in this life truly matters. Because I'm

coming back. You don't want to be asleep at the wheel when we meet face to face. Our actions will be different when we believe that Christ is returning to judge the living and dead.

As a Christian we don't do things out of fear, because ultimately we're God's beloved people. And everything we do should first and foremost be rooted in His love for us. But the second coming can and should be a great spurring reality, especially in the face of apathy. What we do now matters.

It looks like Faithfulness. And it looks like hope. When we suffer, we know there's a future that is bright for a believer. When we feel like we can't even see past today because it's so hard. Jesus is coming back. So that we who are in Christ get to live with Him in glory forever.

The invitation to faithfulness and hope is summed up perfectly in the words of reformer Martin Luther.

“Live as if Jesus was crucified yesterday, rose from the dead today, and is returning tomorrow.”
Martin Luther

How do we know if God has saved us? Full Conviction Joy in Suffering. A transformed life. Living in the light of the end. So as we move towards closing I'll just ask.

Do you see the evidence?

Now I just want to address how that question could hit you. Because basically what I asked was, are you Christian? — it can potentially be really discouraging. And I get that. Here's how I would encourage as a Christian to prayerfully think about this.

Look at these markers. Is the Holy Spirit within you giving you conviction? Is your faith and joy anchored in Christ? Have you seen transformation? Are you looking forward to Christ's return?

And don't just think about those things right now. Hard seasons happen, I get all that. Have you seen them in your walk with Christ at any point? Do you see them now?

To the non believer, these markers show that there is such a thing as true Christianity. We're in the south, so there's a church on every corner and anyone can claim to be a Christian. But the Scriptures are so clear that it is not that you just grew up in the church. And it's not that you can live your life however you want. And certainly not claiming Christ and living completely contrary to what He values and says. And that's a really good thing. Because Christianity wouldn't be worth much if our savior wasn't alive, ruling in power and able to change your life.

For those of us in Christ, these markers in the context of chapter 1 are things meant to be celebrated. They're not to condemn you in any way. They're meant to be encouragement to you and to those around you. Remember what Paul's saying. This is how you can know. What joy in that! You don't have to wonder.

So for Christians in the room, the point of this is not for you to doubt your salvation because of these things. It's to help you. To spur you on. To give confidence. And to point you back to Jesus. To see what He's done in your life and to see what you may need to ask Him for. Don't just say, I guess I'm doing bad and I'm maybe not a Christian.

No! Ask Him for assurance, to flip the light switch in your soul. To give you Holy Spirit-fueled joy that doesn't make sense. To help you turn from idols and to be sure of His return.

Let's go to Him in joy and thanksgiving.

Pray.