

The Foundation of a True Church

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

June 5, 2016

As we turn our attention to God's word this morning, I'd like you to open your Bibles to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church, 1 Thessalonians. 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We 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 labor 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

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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."

That passage, it describes the foundation, the true foundation and the true principle of life for every true church of Jesus Christ. I want us here to identify and to then highlight some of those features that are at our core, at our foundation, so that we know who we are, what we are, and even why we are. That's essential as we chart our course for the future. So today and then when I'm back in the pulpit June 26, this is going to be our subject here in 1 Thessalonians 1. Today it's about identifying our foundation, and next time, that's June 26, we're going to identify the principle that enables us to grow. Okay?

First, let's consider, number one, point number one: The production of a true church. The production of a true church. Look at verses 1 to 3 again. "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We 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 labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Stop there for a second.

The letter comes here with the weight of Paul's apostolic authority, but it's written, as you see, addressed from this small, short-term missionary team: Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Silas was Paul's traveling companion on his second missionary journey, and Silvanus is simply the Roman way of saying his name and Silas the Greek way. But Timothy, then, was the convert from Lystra, Paul's young protégé. And these three men came to Thessalonica after leaving Philippi. You can read Acts 16 and 17 to read about the planting of those churches.

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You remember Philippi, they had been unceremoniously dragged before the city magistrates. They'd been beaten with rods. They'd been imprisoned. And then in Thessalonica, more rioting and violence ensued, such that Paul and Silas, they needed to leave the city in the middle of the night, escaping to Berea. The enemies of Paul could and did use this fact of controversy and disruption to discredit his ministry.

You see everywhere this guy goes he causes trouble. He's a trouble-maker. He's causing problems. Why can't he leave well enough alone? It wasn't Paul, though, who was the trouble-maker. "It's not me who is the troubler of Israel, Ahab, you are!" That's exactly right, here, it's the enemies of the Gospel who stirred up trouble, not Paul. They hoped to prevent him from succeeding in his ministry. They hoped to bring disrepute to the Gospel he preached. And yet in spite of all opposition, some of it very physically painful, God planted two churches, one in Philippi, another in Thessalonica.

The church in Philippi started small, with a women's prayer meeting in the household of a suicidal jailer. The church

in Thessalonica started with even stronger core, really.

According to Acts 17:4, there were a few Jews, some God fearers, that is, Jewish proselytes, a large number of Greeks, former pagan background, number of the leading women.

In both cases, as I said, Paul was forced to leave those cities, which was heart-breaking for him. He's a shepherd; he loves these people. But for their sake, him being the lightning rod, bring the attack, he left. He entrusted that church, those little fledgling churches, he entrusted them to God. He entrusted those believers to God, and he had the joy of looking back to see that indeed a church had taken root, and that it continued, and that it not only continued, but it continued to grow strong. His labor had not been in vain.

The churches were growing, they were thriving, they were becoming productive. And that was truly a remarkable thing, unmistakable evidence to him and to anybody else who cared to look of the presence and the power of God. And that's why Paul, here in the beginning of 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, he's so effusive in giving thanks to God for this church. That's why he

begins this letter, verse 2, by describing the fact and the reasons for his constant thanksgiving.

Thessalonian church demonstrated that it was a true church of God because it manifested the signs of true life, and that's a life that only comes from God. The evidence he finds for their, for the existence of a true church and true life comes in verse 3 because Paul, there, remembered the clear evidence of spiritual life because he saw their spiritual productivity.

Look at verse 3 again. He remembered "before our God and Father," he says, "your work of faith, your labor of love and your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Faith, love, and hope, have you ever heard those together before? We've heard those three virtues in close connection in a number of places in Scripture. We find them together in Romans 5, Ephesians 4, Colossians 1, 1 Corinthians 3. We find them in 2 Peter 1. Faith, love, hope, they represent clear, unmistakable evidence of a true work of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. And you know what? Those virtues, faith biblically defined, love

biblically defined, hope biblically defined, you cannot reproduce those through man; only comes from God.

Let me just stop to emphasize that point. A true work of God, it's not about numbers. It's not about popularity. As you read in Scripture, the majority is most often wrong. The majority is under judgment. The majority is the one that gets God's condemnation. "Many are called, but few are chosen. Broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there be that go that way. Few are those who enter through the narrow gate" and travel that narrow, compressed, confined road, a hard road. It's a difficult road, but those few find life.

A true work of God is not about popularity. It's not about political influence. It's not even about legislative change. Rather, a true work of God is known by the presence and the growth of these three virtues: faith, love, and hope. And those three virtues take time to grow. They take time to see. It's like when you plant a seed into the ground. Farmers, you understand this. You plant something into the soil, and you don't expect when you turn around the next moment that you're

going to see the full grown plant, bearing fruit. You expect it's going to take time. You expect it's going to take watering and fertilizing. But then something pokes through the soil eventually, and then it grows into strength, and then it grows into productivity.

It's the same thing with us. It's the same thing with these virtues. And you have to look closely, carefully, to see them. You have to know what you're looking for. By their very nature, faith, love, and hope, they don't parade themselves. They don't boast and brag. They don't broadcast themselves. But for those who care to notice, for those who have "ears to hear and eyes to see," for those who are looking for the true evidence of a true work of God; faith, love, and hope are impossible to miss. And as I said, they are unexplainable by any human means.

Every true Christian possesses faith, love, and hope in some measure and every true Christian believes and loves and hopes. With regard to time, these three virtues are interesting. With regard to time, faith looks to the past; it trusts God for what he has done and looks to his faithfulness. Regarding time,



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love looks to the present, manifesting sacrifice for the good of others. In the present, hope always looks to the future; it's always reaching out for God's promises. And we could say that with regard to direction, with regard to focus, faith looks upward toward God, love looks outward toward others, hope looks onward toward Christ.

Regarding the source, we could say that faith is centered on the power of God, love comes from God, our hope is in God. Those three virtues, they are the heart of every true believer. They're at the heart of every true church because they're at the heart of every true Christian, and churches are made up, true churches are made up of true Christians. When a group of people who possess faith and love and hope, when they practice and produce and increase in these virtues, when they assemble together under the instruction of the Scripture, under the organization of the Scripture, a church is formed.

A church is planted, provided that assembly continues in faith and love and hope. Christ will continue to abide with them. He'll continue to cause them to grow strong and increase.

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Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church." "I will build my church, the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The mark of the church that he builds, though, are marked by these three virtues: faith, love, and hope. He promises those kinds of churches, Matthew 28:20, "Behold, I am with you always." Who's you? Believers, churches, his people.

Any church that departs from those three virtues Jesus calls them to repent in Revelation 2 and 3. And if they will not repent of their faithless work, their loveless labors, their false hopes, Jesus departs. He leaves them to themselves. He removes their candlestick, and in the end he tells them, if they don't repent, he says "I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

So since these three virtues are so vital as the distinguishing marks of every true believer and therefore of every true church, we need to take a few minutes to understand these things better, don't you think? Let's start with the work of faith. That's the first reason that Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy thank God, because they remembered the Thessalonians'

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“work of faith.” That word, work, our English word, energy comes from this Greek word for work. It’s *ergon*. And we’re talking here about action, about deeds, about works. This isn’t something invisible. It’s visible, it’s active, it’s energetic, it’s productive.

That is exactly what James was confronting in James 2:14-26, that “faith without works is dead.” Plenty of people sitting in church pews or maybe church chairs, as is the case, but they’re sitting around, and they claim to be Christians, but you see no good works coming out of their lives; I don’t mean nice moral things, I mean biblically defined works that are generated by faith. Some people seem very indifferent to that concern.

They seem very flippant about the lack of that thing in their life. May be relatively moral people, may be nice people, may be very good neighbors. But there’s no faith energized works in their lives at all. And that’s the essence, there, of self-deception, for someone to believe he’s fine with God but to demonstrate no evidence of saving faith, which ought to be of grave concern.

The phrase, work of faith, it refers to work that is prompted by faith, that is directed by faith, that flows out of faith. And that is to say that not all works, not all activity that you can see, is faith generated. You see this all the time, people who are active in the church, they do a lot of things, they do a lot of things in their community, but they're driven by other motivations. They have this sense of needing to give back to the community. They have a sense of desire for friendship. They want to avoid loneliness.

They, sometimes they, it's a matter of tradition. For some, they think religious activity is a way to maintain favor with God. So Paul here, he commends the Thessalonians not for just work and activity; anybody does that; the world does that. But specifically, for the work, the activity of faith, a work that is generated by what they believe. And that is to say that the Thessalonians, they believed God, they took him at his word, and therefore, they acted. They trusted him, and that produced pious activity in their lives.

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Listen, faith is the most foundational virtue of the Christian life. It is the most foundational, and I mean by that, it is a foundation out of which every other virtue grows. It is the most foundational virtue of the Christian life. We are saved by God's grace through what? Faith. Faith. Put simply, faith is taking God at his Word. It's trusting God. It's embracing what he said. Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Faith requires the intellect; it requires comprehension and understanding. Faith affects the emotions; it produces holy affections in us. We love what God loves; we hate what God hates. And then faith fires up the will. It drives the motivation to produce good works in our lives. Biblical saving faith, it's never static, it's never just at rest, always dynamic, always living, always resulting in action. As we like to say, we are justified by God's grace through faith alone, but it's not through a faith that *is* alone. It's through a faith that's active.

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Paul identified faith as really the foundational, driving force in his own apostolic ministry. His entire apostolic ministry was a ministry generated driven, a work of faith. In one of his most autobiographical letters, 2 Corinthians, Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 4, I'm just kinda putting 13, verses 13 to 18 together, he says, "since we have this spirit of faith according to what's been written, 'I believed, and therefore I spoke,' we also believe and therefore we also speak."

You see? "I believe; therefore, I speak." As we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. But the things that are seen are transient. That is, temporal, temporary, passing. "But the things that are unseen are eternal." They stay. Believing God is what drove Paul's apostolic ministry. "I believed, and therefore I spoke." Paul believed God. He trusted him. He became a slave to God's authority, his Word. And what he saw before his eyes did not matter as much as the unseen things revealed in God's Word.

So to believe God, to read his Holy Word, to trust it, to obey it, that is an issue, beloved, of authority. Whose

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authority are you following? You've lined yourself up underneath the authority of the one and only God. You acknowledge that he alone is the authority. His Word is law and his will is your will. By holding fast to God's Word, you come to know the truth. You come to know the God of the truth. You develop deep-seated convictions about him, about his works, about his ways. You learn to appreciate God, worship God, which leads to more deeply rooted, clearly defined set of convictions in your life. From those convictions grow good works.

Over in Peter's second epistle, you can over there is you'd like, in 2 Peter in chapter 1 verses 5 to 7, there's a chain of Christian virtues listed in 2 Peter 1:5-7, and that entire chain is anchored in faith, in believing God, in taking him at his Word. Peter writes, "Since God has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness," verse 3, "therefore," verses 5-7, "make every effort," that is work hard at it, "to supplement your faith with virtue, and your virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love."

Did you notice, there, the other two virtues in our text in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, steadfastness and love, there? They're also links in Peter's chain of virtues. But faith is the anchor, that's the starting point; faith, then virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and finally love. Faith is the first one, makes sense, right? We enter into a relationship with God by faith. It's the anchor point.

And those are the virtues that undergird what Paul calls "the work of faith." You can turn back to 1 Thessalonians. They undergird what Paul calls, the work of faith. Every true Christian, every true church not only possesses those virtues, but practices its faith in genuine works of faith. That is the first product. It's activity, energy, work that's prompted, directly connected, to what we believe from God's Word.

You want some examples? Let give you some examples, concrete examples. We believe that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ," right? Therefore, what do we



proclaim when we share the Gospel with people? Our own experience? Or the word about Christ, an accurate message of the Gospel. That's an example. We believe that the Gospel is a message of salvation from sin, rescue from the just and holy wrath of God. Well therefore, we correct people's false expectations about what God intends to do for them. We help them to see what salvation is from. It's not from their sense of dissatisfaction. It's not from an unhappy life. It's not from bad decisions. It's not from the mistakes that they've made. It's from their sin, and it's from the wrath of God. And salvation means a relationship with him. We believe that God himself is the reward of the Gospel. As Jesus said in John 17:3, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Therefore, we don't allow people to self-define salvation as happiness, of feelings of peace and well-being, of any other kind of health, wealth, and prosperity message. We proclaim the Gospel of God, the salvation of God, in God's terms. So we come to people and we say, Do you want to be forgiven of your sin? Oh, I don't have sin. Oh, actually, let me proclaim the law of God to you and help you to understand that you *have* fallen short

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of it, like I have and like everybody else has, and you're in danger. You're in danger of hell, eternal hell. And if you want salvation, God will take away your sin, and he'll also give you forever a relationship with him. That's the reward.

Do you want God, or do you want your sin? That's the decision to make, right? We believe that all have sinned, "the wages of sin is death." Therefore, we help people define what sin is by explaining God's law to them, by showing how they violate it, by warning them of the consequences of sin, eternal torment in hell. We believe repentance is a significant aspect of the Gospel message; therefore, we call people to repent of their sins and turn to Christ.

We define the terms for them. We don't let them self-define terms like believe and salvation and sin. We don't let them do that because they're unbelievers. They need truth revealed to them just as we've needed truth revealed to us. Paul said, "I believe; therefore, I speak." That's what we do, too, beloved. That's what we do.

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Those are concrete examples. There are many other examples we could bring up. But those are examples of what the work of faith involves. If it's faith-generated, it's going to be faith-consistent, not popular but faithful. Isn't it? Faithful. Not always to pleasing to sinners, not always making them feel comfortable, but wholly pleasing to God, and I'll say, by the way, wholly pleasing to God's elect. Listen, I want you to tell me the truth. Don't mess around with lies. Don't mess around with half-truths. Don't try to make me feel comfortable. Tell me the truth, and let me reckon with God.

Secondly, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, they thank God not just because of the work of faith they saw in the Thessalonian church, but also because they remember the Thessalonians' labor of love. Labor of love. The phrase, labor of love, it's similar to the work of faith. It's a labor that's prompted by or energized by love. But the labor, the word, labor, is more intense than the word, work. As one commentator, this is what he said, quote "The stress in the word labor, *kopos*, is on the cost, exertion, fatigue, and exhaustion that it entails. Work, *ergon*, may be pleasant and stimulating, but labor implies a toil

that is strenuous and sweat-producing.” End quote. That’s labor. Labor.

Do you labor in love? Does your love cost you? Is it causing you to sweat, toil, exert yourself? Does it hurt? We could illustrate labor of love by that mother who labors at home with little ones, by herself most of the day, stuck with these kiddos and she feeds these kids, dresses them in the morning. She does endless loads of laundry, and then she shops for the things she needs to do more work for her family: cook, teach, wash, stitch, clean, bathe, fix. She does all this all day long without any recognition, no rewards. Nobody’s putting her up for Employee of the Month. Nobody’s giving her bonuses. She does all this all day long; end of the day when she’s dead tired, she gets back in the kitchen to make some special treat for her family because she loves them. It’s a labor of love.

We could illustrate labor of love by the loving father, who works hard all day. He’s got a demanding boss, he’s got endless projects, he’s got performance reviews, he’s got pressure, scrutiny, even unfair, unjust scrutiny. He’s got difficult co-

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workers, niggling details, unrelenting pressure, budgets and money problems, and bottom-line issues, and always in the red, and always trying to dig out. Many men these days are doing twice the work for half the pay.

That father comes home exhausted from work and all its challenges. He's denying temptations when he gets home for self-indulgence, to unplug his brain and turn off, instead of responding to the needs of his wife and family. And instead of turning on the TV or surfing the Internet, he allows his wife to have the time for adult interaction, just one person with whom she can rationally, at her level, kinda communicate and unpack her day and he loves her, and he gives himself to her. He wrestles with his boys even though his body is tired because they haven't spent all their energy. He talks with his girls, who haven't yet used up all their words. Fathers, that's a labor of love. It's a labor of love.

The images that are evoked, there, of a loving mother and a loving father, they're not merely for the sake of sentimentality. Rather, they're very intentional because we as

Christians are to love one another like that, as family members. The relationships here in the church of Jesus Christ, they're family relationships, often going deeper than the relationships we have with blood and kin. That's what we just read from Peter, right? Faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, and then this, brotherly affection. Brotherly affection.

We add to our brotherly affection the virtue of sacrificial love. The love of God, which according to Romans 5:5, "has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us," that love of God. It's a self-sacrificing love, always giving of self for the spiritual and practical benefit of other people. It's *agapé* love. It's not a matter of religious sentiment. It's not a matter of sincere devotional feeling. You can't summarize it well on a Hallmark® card or in a Precious Moments® figurine. That kind of love involves effort, cost, exertion, fatigue, and exhaustion.

As we said earlier, true *agapé* love involves labor, which implies a toil that is strenuous and sweat-producing. It's a

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labor that's targeted toward other people. It's practical, intentional, sacrificial. As John writes, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and yet," he "hates his brother." And hatred doesn't mean to be an outright persecution of your brother, it can just be an indifference toward him, that's hatred; it says, I love God, but is indifferent toward his brother, he's a liar. It's John, that's strong, isn't it? It's John's word. It's God's Word. It's the Holy Spirit who wrote that. "He's a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot not love God whom he has not seen." I get that logic. It's the work of faith, the labor of love, those are produced by true Christians in a true church, and beloved, I see it here. I see it here.

Thirdly, these guys, Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, they're giving thanks to God always and continually because they remember the Thessalonians' steadfastness of hope. Steadfastness of hope. The word, steadfastness, is the word *hupomoné*, which can also be translated with the word, perseverance or even endurance. This steadfastness of hope, it's a hope inspired endurance, and it's centered, verse 3, "in our Lord Jesus Christ." Our hope is fixed on a person, the only person who lived this life, walked this earth, died our death, rose from

the dead and ascended into heaven. And Jesus Christ gives us every reason and the only reason, by the way, for hope in the future. Because he lives, we also will live if our hope is in him.

But it's also his authority that's in view, here. Paul refers to him not just as Jesus Christ, but as our what? Lord Jesus Christ, right? Lord, that is to say it's because he is Lord that we persevere by responding to his rightful authority over us, by obeying what he tells us to do, that is precisely how we endure. That's how he keeps us safe because he keeps us faithful to his Word. He keeps us standing firm to the end. Obedience is safe, beloved, when we're obeying God.

Now as we think about, steadfastness of hope and endurance and perseverance, we should not forget the context of the Thessalonians, here, because it's a context of trial. It's a context of persecution and of suffering. Paul was writing, here, to a church that was birthed amid conflict and in the heat of turmoil; there was social unrest, there was false accusation, even violent suffering and the church held fast in this climate



of intense suffering and didn't just hold fast, but it thrived. It strengthened.

You can read about the birth of the Thessalonian church in Acts 17:1-10. You can read about it there later. But Paul alludes to that planting foundation of the church here in verses 6 to 8. Look at it there, he says, "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." He says in verse 8, your faith has gone forth everywhere.

The productivity of this church, it was a Gospel productivity. There were vocal, energetic, fearless witnesses of Christ in a hostile world. And their work of faith, their labor of love, their steadfastness of hope, all of this was conducted amid social and cultural antipathy; hostility, anger came out of people. Severe trials are in view, here. Paul calls it "much affliction." It's the word, *thlipsis*, severe persecution, suffering, tribulation.

But the Christians in Thessalonica, they could continue to endure patiently. They could endure expectantly, even joyfully because all their hope was centered in Christ. They looked to him. They looked back in faith at his life and death and resurrection, his ascension. They believed and they worked. They were motivated by his love, a sacrificial love that had saved them, an energetic love that was in them, strengthening them in sacrificial labor. And all of that gave them hope, especially as they looked ahead to his soon return. It says in the end of verse 10 there, Paul says they were waiting eagerly and expectantly for Christ to return from heaven, this Jesus, “who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

This is the same thing Paul wrote, right, in Romans 5:1-5, which once again connects these three virtues: faith, love, and hope. These virtues are always marking the productivity of every true Christian and every true church. And these virtues always protect the church in the midst of suffering. Romans 5, if you want to turn there, you can look at it Romans 5:1-5. I’m going to read it quickly.

He says this, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in," what? "our sufferings." Rejoicing in sufferings does not make sense to Americans. We do everything we can to alleviate suffering. We make drugs to alleviate suffering. We plan vacations and spend a lot of money to avoid suffering. We hate suffering. We don't like pain. In some ways, we're the most wimpy culture that's ever existed, aren't we? That's kind of embarrassing to admit right here. But we are. We don't like it.

No, we as Christians are different. We rejoice in our sufferings. Why? Because we "know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Our eyes are on the prize of Jesus Christ, and we know it takes endurance to get there. And in order to endure, we need to have character and in order to build that character, we've got to have hope. Hope has to be before

us. So why are we going to endure suffering? Why are we going to quit medicating and distracting ourselves with all the world's stuff? Because we want to grow in character, because we want to endure, because our hope is in Jesus Christ.

That passage, there, Romans 5:1-5, it explains why the Thessalonians didn't cower under social opposition and aggression. Much rather, instead, they were obedient in hope to take the Gospel to their city and to their entire region. They understood that suffering, *thlipsis*, produces endurance, *hupomoné*, and endurance produces character, character produces hope. That is the productivity of every true church. It grows strong in suffering, and it continues to work in faith, to labor in love, and to endure in hope.

That kind of spiritual productivity, what explains that? Nothing in man. That's other worldly, isn't it? It's from another world. We could even call it miraculous, because it's not explained by anything natural that we observe in the normal course of life. That's because the only explanation for a true church is a supernatural explanation.

God is the one who caused it. That's our second point, look at it there, the explanation for a true church. What explains a true church? God. God explains a true church. Look at verse 4, "For we know brothers loved by God that," what? "he has chosen you." He's chosen you, that is a simple explanation for a true church. It is not a work of man, it is a sovereign work of God; God has chosen them, God has set his love on them, and that is the reason that they work in faith, labor out of love, and endure steadfastly in hope.

Paul says here, we know. We know. They knew the Thessalonians had been chosen. They knew the Thessalonians were loved by God. Paul's not talking about the more general love of God, a manifestation of his common grace by which God demonstrates his love to all mankind. He's talking about a particular love, here. It's the word there, beloved. It comes from the verb *agapaó*, and it's abundantly clear in the context, accompanied by that particularizing term, chosen, Paul is talking about God's specific love for his elect, for his people.

Paul is claiming to know, here, for certain, that they are *eklogé*, chosen by God, selected by God. And Paul is so confident, here, that he referred to these Thessalonians, a few of them Greeks, some of them God fearers, a few Jews, some of the leading women, people he'd only met, by the way, recently, among whom he had ministered for just a short while, and yet he was confident enough to call these people brothers. Brothers. They're in the family. He claims to know God's choice of the Thessalonians.

He claims to know God's, God's particular love, his particular saving grace has been poured out on all of them. How did he know? How was he so certain about something so intimate, so hidden within the secret counsels of God? Was this revealed to him prophetically? Did Paul have special apostolic vision to see the "E" for elect tattooed on their foreheads in invisible ink? No.

There's no evidence for special apostolic insight into the particular electing grace of God on individuals. Scripture always points us to the evidence that we can see on the outside

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because we're men. Men look on the outward appearance; God looks at what? The heart. That means that we can't look at the heart. God can. We can look at the outward appearance. There is evidence there.

Paul knew the choice of God. He knew the divine determination. Paul knew the particular love of God, which is his divine favor, by looking at outward evidence. What evidence? Well, simply this, the Thessalonians responded to the Gospel. They responded to the Gospel in faith manifest in their works. They demonstrated the Gospel in love manifest in hard, sacrificial labor. They held fast to the Gospel in hope manifest in perseverance through much suffering. That's proof positive, here, that the Thessalonian Christians were indeed a true church, chosen of God, loved by God. They're true spiritual siblings also with Paul, Silvanus, Timothy. These people are family.

The New Testament always locates the explanation for a true church, for true Christians, squarely in the eternal counsels of a holy God. They are the elect, they are the chosen, those upon

whom God has set his redeeming grace. There are many, many passages that identify the sovereign grace of God in electing his church, and I'm not going to go through all of them with you although I am tempted, supremely tempted. But there's one passage in particular that combines so many of the important terms, and I want you to turn there. It's Romans 8, your familiar with this, Romans 8:29-30. I just want you to see these terms for yourself, very quickly. Paul provides, here in Romans 8, the greatest assurance for the believer by revealing to them, by telling them about God's choice and activity. Why does he do that? Because he just rejoices in nit-picking doctrines? No! It's because our very assurance depends on it.

Look at what it says, Romans 8:29, "For those whom he foreknew." You say, what's foreknew? He looked down the corridors of time and saw how wonderful those people were, and so he said, yeah, they're on my team? No! This word is *proginóskó*. It's to know relationally from past time. It's to set affection upon and know in an intimate way from past time, eternity past. "So to those whom he foreknew he also predestined." That is, *proorizó*, to decide upon beforehand. He marked them out beforehand. He predestined them, what? "To be



conformed to the image of his Son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." That is to say, God set his love on his people from eternity past. He predestined them from eternity past and for the purpose of conformity to Christ. Their good works were planned as part and parcel of their predestined status. It was a result of their predestination, not the cause of it, not the reason for it.

And the first of those good works is the responsibility to have faith, to believe the Gospel. Sinners believe because they've been chosen to believe. As it says in Ephesians 1:4, "God chose us in him before the foundation of the world in order that we should be holy and blameless before him in love." He didn't choose us because we believed. He chose us in order that we would believe, in order that we would be holy and blameless.

And Romans 8 continues, verse 30, "those whom he predestined he also called, those whom he called he also justified, those whom he justified he also glorified." That verse describes what happened in time and space as a result of what God determined in eternity past. The predestined respond to

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the call of God that comes in the Gospel. That's how you know that they're predestined. Those who respond to the Gospel call by faith, they are justified by faith, declared righteous by faith, they have peace with God, no longer at enmity, now in friendship. Those who are justified, those people are also glorified, again, a past-tense verb used of a future event to emphasize absolute certainty.

So from start to finish, and everything in between, from God's perspective this is all one done deal. From eternity past to eternity future, it's all about God and the outworking of his sovereign will. God has set his electing grace on every true believer and thus on every true church. That was just as true of the Thessalonian church as it is for this Greeley church. It's not up to man; it's up to God. God is the explanation for every true church.

Now, I cannot for the life of me understand why anyone would want to argue against such a clear and emphatic assurance of a believer's salvation as we find here. But for anyone so inclined, I'd just ask you to deal with the text. God wrote

that, I didn't. But I want to give full disclosure, I'm 100% supportive of this, okay?

The sovereign grace of God, it means that the faith, the love, the hope all come from God. Like all holy virtues, they, they find their source, they find their foundation in the Godhead itself. And that's point three, point three: the production of a true church, the explanation for a true church, also the foundation of a true church. Foundation. Verses 4-5, "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."

The electing grace of God, it's manifest in time and space, planting true churches, and the foundation of every true church it's revealed there in verse 5. Paul says, "Our gospel came to you not in word only." The gospel didn't come without words. It came with words. He's not advocating a word-less Gospel, or to set words in contrast with power and the Holy Spirit. There have always been those who've been ready to dismiss the need to proclaim words and an accurate Gospel. You've heard that saying,

"Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words."

Not true.

There's also a popular preacher in our times who said the same thing. She goes by the stage name Madonna, and she's expressed a similar post-modern sentiment, "Words are useless, especially sentences." Maybe to her they are, but what's so ironic about that is that to express her idea, Madonna needed to use not only words, but also a sentence. Ideas will always be expressed through words and sentences, and that's how the Gospel has come to us. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How will they call on him of whom they've not believed, and how are they to believe in him of whom they've never heard?" The words, right? "How are they to hear without someone preaching?" Preaching what? Preaching words. So verse 17, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." Words are necessary to proclaim the Gospel, as well as sentences.

But God, through Paul, he comes proclaiming words accompanied by power, by the Holy Spirit, with full conviction.

And this points to the foundation, here, of every true church and every true church has as its foundation the Gospel itself. The foundation is set in the transforming power of the Gospel by the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit through the full conviction of a Gospel preacher proclaiming that very truth.

When Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica preaching the Gospel, they came in the same manner that's described in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. They didn't rely on themselves, their cleverness, their ability to turn a phrase, their ability to hold everybody's attention. They didn't rely on themselves at all. They relied instead on the power that was inherent in the message of the Gospel itself, and on the unseen work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:1, "I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I was with you in weakness and fear and much trembling. My speech and my message were not in plausible words of human wisdom, but in

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demonstration of," who, "the Spirit. Demonstration of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." It's not about me. It's about God. It's about you placing all your hope and your faith in him.

By proclaiming the Gospel to the Thessalonians, by trusting God to apply his words effectually to his chosen people, by trusting his Holy Spirit to accomplish his work of regeneration, awakening faith, energizing true repentance, that is how Paul and his companions laid the foundation of the Thessalonian church. That's the same foundation in every true church, ours as well.

That same foundation has been laid here at Grace church for many years. God has gathered his people here, regenerating them by his Holy Spirit, causing them to repent and believe the Gospel. And it is exciting to be here, a part of what he is doing in our midst, isn't it? God has chosen us. He's laid a foundation for the Gospel, a true, transforming, spiritual power by his Holy Spirit. He's forgiven all of our sins through Jesus Christ. He's united us to him in resurrection life. He's imputed

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or reckoned to us the perfection of Christ's righteousness, and that makes us rejoicing people. What can trouble us? We're indestructible because we're in Christ, right? We praise God for God saving us through the Gospel.

God has caused us to engage in these works of faith, to endure and persevere in these labors of love, to persevere through some measure of trial and difficulty. Our church has certainly been through its difficult times, hasn't it? But look what God has done. Look what he's done! God has used these trials to produce endurance and character, to strengthen our hold on the hope of the Gospel. We're a people that are truly united in that one hope, and we as united people, a rejoicing church body, hold out that hope to a lost and dying world.

We'll never be disappointed in our hope because God is faithful. It depends on him. It depends on his character. It's his love that's been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us, and that's what comes out. That's what energizes and empowers and strengthens us for all that we do and will do in the future. Amen?

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Let's pray. Heavenly father we just want to thank you for such a blessed time in your word and seeing ourselves reflected in the Thessalonian Church and we hope rightly so, if there is any way that we need to repent and make sure that we are aligned with you and the truth of your word, we ask that you would bring it to mind so that we may repent.

Our hearts are soft because of you to respond to you in faith and repentance and we always want to do that. The Christian life is a life of repentance and change and growth. But we do see so many signs so much evidence in this church, in this beloved body, of the work of faith, the labor of love, and the endurance of hope. We just ask that you would strengthen that evermore and help it to bear fruit, here in our midst and throughout this entire community we love you, give thanks to you for, for you. For Jesus Christ whom you sent. For the Gospel that saved us.