FAITH THAT WAITS FOR THE SON

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Key Verse: 1 Th. 1:9b-10

“They tell 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 rescues us from the coming wrath.”

Whenever we study one of the gospels and learn about the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are so moved by Jesus’ compassionate shepherd heart to embrace the most fatalistic and wretched people. Jesus had hope for a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. Jesus had hope for the Samaritan woman who had married 5 times, and was now living with her boyfriend. Jesus had hope for a man born blind from birth, that he could display the work of God in his life. But wicked men took this beautiful Jesus, had him tried for blasphemy and sentenced him to death by crucifixion. Jesus died on the cross as the Lamb of God. He shed his precious, holy blood in obedience to God. But God did not abandon his servant to the grave. God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, as he had promised. God used Jesus as a ransom sacrifice to redeem all who believe in him from slavery to sin, and then raised him from the dead to give us a living hope in the kingdom of God. Jesus’ disciples witnessed Jesus’ death and his resurrection from the dead. They saw that death had no power over Jesus, and they believed that he was the Messiah sent to save his people from their sins. Finally, they saw Jesus ascend into heaven, to take his place at the right hand of God as King of kings and Lord of Lords, and the Judge of the living and the dead. But before Jesus left his disciples, he gave them instructions. Acts 1:7,8 says, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The disciples were in awe as they watched Jesus ascend into heaven. But as they stood watching, two angels from heaven came and stood beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into
heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11) Then the disciples knew that the Risen Jesus had left them on the earth to carry out his messianic ministry until he comes again to rescue his people and to judge the world. And even though they were just fishermen from Galilee, Jesus’ disciples succeeded in being his witnesses to the ends of the earth, so that the whole world marks its history by the birth of Jesus. And the whole world has a sense that Jesus comes again to judge the world, perhaps even very soon.

Among the disciples of Jesus, the greatest evangelist and worker was Paul, a former Pharisee who had participated in the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem. The Risen Jesus came to Paul when he was riding a horse to Damascus in order to arrest the Christians that were there. Paul became blinded by the vision, but his spiritual eyes were opened, and he received Jesus’ calling for him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. After a long period of intensive Bible study, encouraged by his friend Barnabas, and set apart by the Holy Spirit, Paul began to engage in a ministry to the Gentiles. Starting from Antioch in Northern Syria, Paul set out on three missionary journeys in order to plant gospel faith in the Gentiles, people Paul once thought of as dogs. It was on his second missionary journey, together with Silas from the Jerusalem church, and Timothy, his young disciple from Asia Minor, that Paul first took the gospel into the European continent, and directly challenged the prevailing Greek culture of the times. In each city that he preached in, Paul experienced bitter opposition from the Jewish community as well as the godless Greek society. In Phillipi, Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison for healing a demon-possessed girl. In Thessalonica, their friend Jason was arrested, and Paul and his coworkers had to be sneaked out of the city at night. In Corinth, Paul was arrested and brought to court by the conspiracy of the Jews. In the face of such fierce opposition, who could expect that Paul’s labors would bear any fruit? Surely, even those who believed would quickly fall away because of the sufferings they saw Paul endure, and the even greater suffering and death of Paul’s Lord Jesus. Amazingly, however, gospel faith took root in each of the cities where Paul preached, even in Thessalonica, where he could preach for only three weeks before being driven out. It is as mysterious to us as 70 degree weather in
November.

Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonian church a few months after his forced departure from them, just after he arrived in Corinth. He wrote this letter in order to encourage the Thessalonians to continue to grow in their faith in spite of continued persecutions from the Jews. When we study this letter carefully, we can learn the faith of the Thessalonians that enabled them to take root so quickly in the gospel, so that their faith in God became known everywhere. In chapter 1, Paul praises them for their humble imitation of him and of the Lord Jesus in loving one another, preaching the word, and enduring persecution. Most of all, we learn that when the Thessalonians believed, their view of life changed. They stopped worshiping created things, and they started to serve the living God and to wait for the return of his Son, Jesus. May God bless us to learn from this study the faith of the Thessalonians that waits for the Son.

First, He has chosen you (1-5). As we have said, Paul, Silas and Timothy had preached in Thessalonica for 3 Sabbaths in the synagogue, before being driven out by some jealous Jews. It was too short a time to get to know one another and establish a human fellowship. But a fellowship was established nonetheless. Read verse 1b. “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.” The relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians was based on their fellowship in God and in Jesus Christ. This divine relationship was what motivated Paul and the others to pray for the Thessalonians, and to thank God for their victories in Jesus. Read verse 2. “We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.” Because they were in Jesus, the Thessalonians were very dear to Paul, as dear as his own children might be. Here we learn that Christian fellowship is very sincere and very deep, because it is based on our common faith in what Jesus has done for us. When we have Christian fellowship, we can love all people in Jesus like our dearest brothers and sisters.

Perhaps when the Thessalonians experienced this fellowship for the first time, it must have seemed like a dream, a beautiful and romantic dream. Could human beings really love one another like this, so quickly,
so deeply and so purely? They must have been like the Samaritan woman who left her water jar behind and ran into her village to tell the others that Jesus is the Christ. But Satan did not leave the Thessalonians to enjoy their romantic dream. Immediately, the Thessalonians had to face on their own severe persecutions from the local Jews. They must have wondered whether their beautiful fellowship was really just a dream, after all. So beginning with verse 3, Paul wants to remind the Thessalonians of the evidence of their fellowship with God and with him. Let’s read verse 3 together. “We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” From this verse we can learn several important lessons about the nature of our fellowship with other believers in God.

Firstly, faith produces work. Faith in God is something that we cannot see. It is our personal relationship with God, determined by our inner attitude toward him and his word. Yet Paul does not consider faith to be abstract or intangible. Faith in God leads to work for God. When the Thessalonians believed, the first question they must have asked Paul was, “What must we do, then?” They knew that the beautiful fellowship with God offered to them through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for their sins, was for the sake of God’s mission for them. They did not take God’s sacrifice of his Son Jesus for granted. They were ready to work in the harvest field together with Paul, Silas and Timothy.

Secondly, love prompts labor. There is a saying, “a mother’s work is never done.” In order to care for her children, a mother labors endlessly, washing their clothes, preparing their food, teaching them faith, love and respect for themselves and for others. Such a labor is often wearisome and hard. Yet the mother does not stop in her work, because she loves her children and wants to bless them abundantly. Sinful human beings cannot love one another like this, but the Thessalonian Christians loved one another with a mother’s concern, imitating their shepherd Paul, and their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Here, we are reminded of John’s admonition to the Ephesian church, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 Jn 3:18)
Thirdly, hope inspires endurance. In his gospel preaching to the Thessalonians, Paul planted the promises of God. He taught them that “Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,’ he said.” (Ac 17:3) When the Thessalonians believed the message, they received a living hope that in Jesus they had salvation from their sins and an inheritance in the kingdom of God. That hope inspired in them the strength to endure all of Satan’s attacks that came to them as soon as Paul left for Berea. Like a graduate student endures sleepless nights and pages of homework in the hope of being called, ‘Dr.’, so Christians must be prepared to endure hardship and rejection because of their hope in Jesus and in his kingdom.

Worldly people did not recognize the Thessalonian church. They had no church building. They were small in number, and were branded by worldly people and the Jews as cult members. But Paul affirms to the Thessalonians that they were recognized by God as his chosen people. Look at verses 4 and 5a. “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” Gospel faith is not intellectual faith. Gospel faith is the power of God given to us by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Gospel faith produces change in sinful human beings. Because of sin, all human beings are powerless to do the work of God. But when God chooses us by his grace, revealing his Son and the righteousness of God that comes to those who believe in him, we become mighty powerful servants of God. The best example of this is St. Paul himself. He was a murderer and an enemy of the gospel. But God chose him to be an apostle and a light to the Gentiles. The Risen Jesus came to him in a blinding vision, knocking him off of his horse. In his physical blindness, Paul became helpless to sin anymore. But through hearing the voice of the Risen Jesus, Paul’s spiritual eyes were opened, and he was filled with a spirit of power to proclaim the gospel to the whole world. Like their shepherd Paul, the Thessalonian Christians were eager to use their spiritual gifts from God to advance the gospel message throughout Macedonia and Achaia, and share beautiful fellowship in God with all men.
Second, imitators of God and the saints (5b-7). Still, we wonder how the Thessalonian Christians could have grown so quickly as to become “models of faith” for all Macedonia and Achaia (7). According to Paul, their spiritual growth is directly correlated to their willingness to imitate their shepherds, Paul, Timothy and Silas, and through them, to imitate their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Look at verse 5b-6. “You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.”

There was a young man who became extremely selfish due to his groundless pride and pleasure-seeking desires. This young man had no idea how to love others, or even that he should. He only knew how to get something. One Christian worker took this young man into her home in order to help him to grow in Jesus. She served him night and day for several months, but it seemed that he was not getting any better. Finally, he had to move out. He moved in with several unbelievers, including a gay man. He knew that he should pray for his roommates, but he didn’t know what to do. But he remembered how his shepherd had cared for him in her home. So he decided to imitate his shepherd’s serving of him. Then a miracle happened. This extremely selfish young man became a shepherd for the gay man, and led him to Bible study and a new life in Christ. Everyone was amazed that such a helpless person who couldn’t wash even one dish could be a good shepherd to his roommate. It happened because he imitated his shepherd’s serving fellowship. In fact, he was imitating the Lord Jesus, who humbled himself and came down to this world to serve sinners.

Imitation seems to be the most foolish thing in our society where innovation is rewarded. But imitation is the foundation of learning. Children learn by imitating their parents. Jesus taught his disciples, saying, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 18:3) In order to imitate our shepherds and our Lord Jesus, we must confess that we don’t have the slightest idea how to love others in God. We must acknowledge that our sinful nature renders us incapable of knowing how to please God.
Like the Thessalonian believers, we must carefully observe the people of God and humbly imitate their faith, love and endurance, until we can grow in faith, love and endurance enough to be an example that others can follow. Imitation does not mean that I should imitate the Korean accent of my pastor in Chicago. Imitation means that I must find the character of Jesus in my shepherds and Bible teachers, and imitate them until the image of Jesus forms in me so that others can see and learn from it.

Third, “Your faith rang out.” (8-9) The Thessalonian Christians were hard pressed on every side as they struggled to imitate St. Paul and their Lord Jesus, and to expand Christian fellowship in the midst of the godlessness of Thessalonica. But an amazing thing happened when the Thessalonian Christians simply struggled to live by faith in Jesus. Their faith in God became known everywhere. Their faith in God became a model for Christians everywhere. Paul found that wherever he went, someone came up to him and told him about the amazing change that had taken place in the Thessalonians. Because they struggled to put their faith into practice by imitating their shepherds, their faith became obvious to everyone. In a selfish and sin-sick world, Christian fellowship is the best witness and testimony to Jesus.

Fourth, Faith that waits for the Son (9-10). Let’s read verses 9b-10 together. “They tell 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 rescues us from the coming wrath.” From these verses we can have a clear picture of the faith that Paul taught, and the faith which the Thessalonian Christians practiced.

Firstly, they turned from idols to God. The Greeks worshiped the gods of Mt. Olympus. Their gods were supposedly very jealous and quarrelsome. So the Greeks feared their gods, and tried their best to make them happy by building huge temples in their honor. We can see a modern parallel in Soviet Russia under Joseph Stalin, and still in North Korea under Jeong Il Kim. But it didn’t work. It was because their ‘gods’ were not gods at all, but natural forces and created objects, all of which are under the control of their Creator. When the Thessalonian Christians believed the
message of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and received the Holy Spirit with power, they knew that there is only one true and living God. He is the Creator of heaven and earth. He is the one who raised Jesus up from the dead, and exalted him above all earthly powers as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Secondly, they served the living and true God. The Thessalonians did not simply give lip service to God. They offered him themselves through their obedience to his commands. Paul clearly taught that faith and obedience are both gifts from God, purchased for us by the blood of Jesus. The grace of God to all believers is that we are no longer slaves of sin. We are free to serve the living God. We are free to love one another in God.

Thirdly, they waited on Jesus' return. This verse clearly reveals the Thessalonians’ changed hope. In the past, they worshiped idols in order to get a little better life for themselves and for their families. In the past, they hoped that they could cheat fate, and live a little longer in order to enjoy sinful pleasures on earth. But they were only disappointed time and again. But when they heard the gospel message, they learned a basic truth about themselves and about the world. Hebrews 9:27a says, “For just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment....” All human beings will live for a time here on earth, and then they must give an account for how they have lived to their Creator and Judge, who is Jesus. All of a sudden, the Thessalonians realized that life on earth is not everything. They learned that life on earth is simply the time to prepare for our eternal destiny. Because their life direction was changed from an earthly destination to a heavenly one, the Thessalonians began to live holy and pure lives in the hope that when Jesus comes again, they will be like him, perfect in love, exalted in glory.

In this passage we learned that faith in God is faith that waits for the Son's return. May God bless us to experience beautiful Christian fellowship when we imitate our shepherds and Bible teachers and teach the Bible one to one to God's thirsty flock. May God give us a glorious hope that one day, Jesus will welcome us into a perfect and heavenly fellowship with himself and all believers in the kingdom of God.