

We start this morning a new series looking at Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica. Thessalonica is in Greece and we read in Acts 17 of how Paul went there with Silas and Timothy. Paul preached in the synagogue there and some Jews came to believe in Jesus along with a large number of gentiles. However trouble was stirred up and Paul and Silas were urged to leave Thessalonica. However a start had been made. The gospel had been preached. People had come to faith and a church, a group of Christians started.

Moving forward perhaps a year, Paul sent this letter to this young church. As we can see from Chap 3 at some point Timothy had been sent to them and his report back to Paul was encouraging. So Paul, Silas and Timothy wrote this letter to them. It is I think the first of all of Paul's letters that we have in Scripture.

In this opening chapter we read about the church of God and the gospel of God and understand that the first was there because of the second. As we see from v2 the overall note of the letter is positive. Paul was thankful because the news that Timothy had brought him about that church was good.

1. The Church of God

The opening verses give us some of the marks of this church.

a. it lives in God, v1, "Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". Their origin was in God as we can see from v4. It was God who had taken the initiative sending Paul and his team to Thessalonica but also in love choosing them to come and follow Christ. However, what Paul was also saying was that this church lived in God he was their strength, stability and security. It was to God they looked not to Paul or any other minister, not to the Church Council or Administrator and not to their own reputation. They were the church of God in Thessalonica.

I hope for all of us we recognise this for ourselves in Chineham. We are the church of God. I say that not to exclude others like our friends in the community church or to suggest we have everything right but simply to remind us where our strength, security and unity lies. Ministers and members come and go but the church continues because it is the church of God. We must ensure that continues and one of the main ways we do that is through prayer isn't it? As we pray we ensure God is at the heart of our thinking and planning. As we pray we recognise we are dependent upon God for everything. As we pray we in humility submit to God as sovereign over all.

b. its distinguishing marks. I wonder what you think are the marks of Christ Church? Is it worship, care, friendship, faithfulness, love? It would be interesting to ask some who have been members here and moved away what they remember as the marks of Christ Church. Paul and the others as they prayed for this church remembered, v3, "remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." I know that reads slightly differently from your Bibles there but it is a better translation with no words added in as the NIV has. Note those three words which come over and again in Paul's writing faith hope and love. Three key characteristics of the Christian and they were evident in this church.

These Christians had come to faith and that faith had been shown in action as indeed real faith always will. Each day all that they did stemmed out of what they believed – faith in action.

Their love for Jesus had led them to not just work but to labour, to toil to expend all the energy they had. Paul knew and it seems that this church knew that labour in the cause of Christ was not pointless and they rolled up their sleeves and got on with it.

Then their hope of the return of Christ and of heaven enabled them to persevere, to keep on going despite all that was against them. As we have just seen the church came to being in a difficult situation and that continued so in v6 Paul spoke of their "severe suffering". But their hope of what God had in store in the future gave them the strength to carry on – they lived in God and their hope carried them on through the worst of times.

Faith, love and hope were the marks of this young church and Paul, and his team gave thanks for these things in that church. I wonder whether he would see the same marks in us?

Faith shown in action – is that us as individuals and as a church?

In other words does the way we live stem out of what we believe, out of our faith? It wasn't long ago that we were thinking about being a Christian in the work situation and recognising that that is our main ministry and that when we go to work we go as servants of Christ so that through us he is honoured. We serve him not ourselves. That is one example of faith in action. This church was showing it are we?

Love shown in labour. As I think about this I'm drawn back to Luke 5 and where Jesus called Peter to follow him. Jesus had been teaching and then he said to Simon Peter, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

There is I think an example of a labour out of love – because you say so! Can you see what I mean he did it out of love for Jesus.

That attitude reminds me of a man named Pete. He was a Christian and had his own building firm. He didn't make much money because he was always helping friends out with this and that. He was a church warden for the best part of 20 years willingly giving time and energy in the most practical of ways – he toiled out of love. Is that us?

Perseverance because of hope – this is part of the Christian life. We persevere be it in serving in the church or outside, be it in sharing our faith, be it through difficulties seeming lack of results or whatever because ultimately what we are doing is of real value. I have spent plenty of hours on beaches building large mounds of sand for my children and others to stand on as the tide comes in. It was hard work but I always realised that it was ultimately pointless, in a short time there would be nothing left. Our hope tells us that our labour of love is worth it because it is for Christ and his kingdom which is eternal and so we persevere.

Friends here is a little glimpse at this church of God as it was in Thessalonica and in a moment we will see another hallmark of the church as a gospel church built on the gospel and sharing the gospel.

But first I just want here to interject some other voices and thoughts and want to get our wardens to share their view of our church.

2. The gospel of God

a. heard

As I said this church was living in God because he had brought them to faith and he had done so through the gospel. v5, "our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord". Clearly Paul had lived in the short time among them as a Christian witness but it was not that he put the stress on in their conversion but upon the gospel which was preached with deep conviction and the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul would not at all agree with the expression I have often heard "preach the gospel and use words if you have to". These Christians came to faith because Paul preached the word of God. He preached the gospel with a deep conviction that "it is the power of God for salvation" (Ro 1:16) and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

b. received

They heard it through the power of the Holy Spirit and received it with deep conviction – the word burnt into their hearts and minds and turned them v9 away from their idols to the living God. The gospel message was received and it brought change in the lives of those who heard it as they repented of their earlier idolatry and changed to serving God as we have seen their faith in action and in loving labour.

This was a gospel church because the gospel as Paul preached it had brought many to faith. How did you come to faith? For many it was through growing up in the faith but for some of us myself included it was in the way the gospel preached which by the power of the Holy Spirit found a home in my heart and brought me to faith.

Can I ask have you heard and received that gospel?

What is the gospel? It is the message of the love of God.

It tells us that God made us human and loves us. However we have gone away from him living our lives our own way and that is sin. But God still loves us and he sent his Son Jesus into our world. He came to die on a cross taking on him the punishment of death that we deserve because of our sin. As a result of his sacrifice in our place we are declared justified by God the father and restored as his children. That is the gospel that this church heard and received and which many of us here have heard and received.

c. modelled

But then it was modelled by these Christians. We see that in v6-8, "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. ⁷And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia".

I think what Paul was saying here was their imitation was in terms of faith, they became believers like Paul Silas and Timothy by accepting and believing the gospel message despite the adverse situation and in so doing they became a model to other churches of faith under fire.

They modelled it through their faith, love and hope. Those things showed the gospel was real in their lives and the same is true for us.

d. shared

But more than models v8 the gospel message rang out or sounded forth from them. They became a centre from which the gospel was made known. Some of this was due to their geographic position with a main highway going through the city as well as being a trading port. But more it seems to have been a commitment to sharing and passing on what they had received. For them it wasn't a matter of coming to faith and holding onto the gospel but of hearing and passing it on.

As we saw earlier in the service the gospel is good news to share. Just as I quickly shared the fact that a parcel I thought was lost has been found so we pass on the story of being found by God and saved through the gospel.

I know many of us find it hard, even Paul when he came to Corinth did so "in weakness and in fear and trembling" (1 Cor 2:3). Yet there as in Thessalonica he came in the power of the Holy Spirit and the same is true for us. The church and the Christian who live in God will depend upon God in this as in every area. But then in faith trusting in that power of God if we love God and those around us we will labour to see the gospel shared and lives changed and in hope we will persevere perhaps over many years.

This morning we look at this ancient church of Thessalonica. We see with Paul that there was much to commend it and in that commendation we see from the Apostle a little of how the church of Jesus Christ should be. It was the church of the living God. He had brought it into being through the gospel and as a church they revealed those hallmarks of faith, which led to action, love, which moved them to hard work, hope which led to perseverance and the gospel which they received, modelled and shared.

Friends as we look at our church in the light of this it is easy to be down on ourselves. However, we need to recognise what God is doing amongst us and give him thanks. Thanks for faith which we see growing in children and young people. We will see more of that next week as Re:fill lead our 10.30 service and share what God has been doing in their lives. Thanks for what God is doing amongst adults.

We rejoice at the love shown by many as they labour for the Lord here.

We thank God for the hope which is ours and which we see producing perseverance especially in those who are going through tough times.

I thank God for the gospel, for the opportunity to preach it last Sunday and indeed each Sunday. I know many of you invited friends last Sunday and while some of you were disappointed that your friends were not able to make it I would simply encourage all of us to continue, to persevere in seeking to share the gospel which is the power of God to salvation.

In a moment we are going to come to God in prayer and we will as always pray for the world and its needs but I also want us to thank God for our church and for what God is doing and to pray for us in these four areas of faith, love, hope and the gospel that God would by his Spirit make us the church he wants us to be, which reflects his nature and honours his name.