

The Foundation of a True Church, Part 2

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

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.

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-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, *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 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 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." It's the work of faith, the labor of love, those are produced by true Christians in a true church,

And 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, "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?

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 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 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. It's not up to man; it's up to God. God is the explanation for every true church.

Now, 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 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.

We'll never be disappointed in our hope because God is faithful. It depends on him. It depends on his character. It's

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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?