

I.N.I.

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 11, 2011
I Thessalonians 1:1-10

In Christ Jesus, Our Victorious Lord, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

From our first Scripture reading this morning we get the background to the reason for Paul's writing a letter to the congregation in Thessalonica. It is amazing that there even was a congregation in Thessalonica to write to. As we heard, Paul spent three Saturdays preaching to the Jews, reasoning from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah and that He had to suffer and die and rise again for their redemption. And wonderfully, the Holy Spirit led some to respond. We are told "**a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.**" But not most of the Jews. Because of the Jewish opposition, Paul and his companions were forced to leave under cover of darkness.

Humanly speaking we can see no reason why the nucleus of the Thessalonian believers would remain faithful to Paul's Gospel after Paul left. The Gentiles of the city were gross idolaters. The Jews of Thessalonica wanted nothing to do with Paul and the Messiah he preached, in fact they openly persecuted those who believed his words. Paul had been rejected by others, in Philippi for example he was whipped and jailed. He had been in Thessalonica for perhaps only three weeks. Who would remain faithful to a crucified and risen Jesus proclaimed by a persecuted and rejected man like Paul?

But God's power to save is mightier than the devil's and the world's. While Paul was in Corinth he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to see how things were going with the people and when Timothy returned he brought Paul the good news. The Christians there were not only remaining faithful to the Lord Jesus, they had become a center of mission activity. Their faithfulness had become known throughout the provinces, and they had actually become a model for others. This church was living proof of the power of God's Word and the grace of the Holy Spirit. With a heart filled with joy and thankfulness Paul wrote this letter thanking God and urging the Christians in Thessalonica to remain faithful followers of their Lord and Savior.

Our theme this morning is: **GOD'S WORD PRODUCES FAITHFULNESS!**

This letter to the Thessalonians was probably the first of Paul's letters written around late 51 or early 52 A.D.

He begins this letter in the same manner as he began his letter to the Galatians and Colossians which we studied the past few months. First he states from whom the letter is written, next he indicates to whom the letter is written, and then follows with a greeting. The Apostle Paul is the writer but the feelings, thoughts and greetings also come from his companions Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy.

Notice that Paul's greeting is the same one that we use to open our sermon studies of God's Word--**GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST.** This greeting is really a prayer: asking that the two priceless jewels of God's saving work might always remain with this congregation. **GRACE:** God's undeserved love, the **CAUSE** of our salvation--for it is this undeserved love of God that moved Him to send His Son as our Savior from sin and death. **PEACE:** A oneness with God, the **RESULT** of our salvation--the removal of any hostility between God and us, which came about when Christ Jesus paid the debt for all of our sins by His death and resurrection back to life.

I: THANKSGIVING FOR THE THESSALONIANS' FAITH

Paul continues with his thanksgiving to God, **WE GIVE THANKS TO GOD ALWAYS FOR YOU ALL, MAKING MENTION OF YOU IN OUR PRAYERS, REMEMBERING WITHOUT CEASING YOUR WORK OF FAITH, LABOR OF LOVE, AND PATIENCE OF HOPE IN OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST IN THE SIGHT OF OUR GOD AND FATHER.**

Three outstanding features about these Christians are mentioned by Paul 1) their work of faith 2) their labor of love 3) their patience of hope. These God-given gifts of faith, love and hope produced bountiful fruits in the Thessalonians lives.

Through His Word, God has worked faith in these people's hearts. People who had formerly worshiped gods of mythology, man-made gods of wood and stone were now led to trust in the one true God's promise that for Jesus' sake their sins were forgiven. This faith so filled their hearts that deeds of love followed. They labored hard to proclaim the message of God's love to others, to share the Gospel of God's love in Christ which Paul had traveled so far to share with them. We read in vs. 8 **FOR FROM YOU THE WORD OF THE LORD HAS SOUNDED FORTH, NOT ONLY IN MACEDONIA AND ACHAIA, BUT ALSO IN EVERY PLACE. YOUR FAITH TOWARD GOD HAS GONE OUT...**

Also the Lord had worked in their hearts **HOPE**, a hope that is the certainty that after this short life is ended an eternity of perfect peace and joy awaited them in heaven. Such hope enabled them to endure and persevere even in the face of bitter persecution by the unbelieving Jews. For their patient hope was centered in their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Paul took note of these works produced by faith, of their labor prompted by love and of their patience inspired by hope and gave all thanks to God. For it was God who worked this in them and it is God who takes note of His people's faithfulness. The world doesn't care! It will little note nor long remember what the Christian does but our Lord notices and He cares, He remembers. As the old saying goes: **ONE LIFE TO LIVE, 'T WILL SOON BE PASSED; ONLY WHAT'S DONE FOR CHRIST WILL LAST!**

Paul continues in his letter to remind the Thessalonians that it is:

II: GOD'S WORD THAT WORKS A FIRM FAITH IN THE HEART.

We read vs. 4-5 **KNOWING, BELOVED BRETHERN, YOUR ELECTION BY GOD. FOR OUR GOSPEL DID NOT COME TO YOU IN WORD ONLY, BUT ALSO IN POWER, AND IN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND IN MUCH ASSURANCE...**

Paul has just praised these Christians for their faithfulness, he has spoken in glowing terms about their faith, love and hope, but now he quickly reminds them who is really responsible for all that they have accomplished. It is God. Even before the world was created God chose them to be His very own children, His sons and daughters. The noun form of the word **ELECTION** occurs seven times in the New Testament and in each case God is the One who does the choosing. The motive for the choosing is His **GRACE**, His **AGAPE LOVE**. The motive **IS NOT** the works of the individual whom He has chosen. God's election for the believer in Christ means, "God loves you. He loved you before you were born. In love He chose you to be His child before you even existed. He continues to love you now. He promises that He will love and keep you as His own to eternity."

The effect the Gospel produced in this people was proof of their election, even as it is of ours. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not just simply words, spoken or read, but it is the power of God unto salvation! This Gospel shattered dead unbelieving hearts leading to repentance and created a living active faith in the One true God. The Holy Spirit worked through that message of Jesus' perfect life, suffering, death and resurrection a deep conviction and assurance in their hearts. This was not Paul's doing. It was the working of the Holy Spirit through Paul's message which was God's Word.

Finally Paul tells us this morning that:

III: THE THESSALONIANS' FAITHFULNESS IS A MODEL FOR US AND OTHERS.

We read in vs. 6-7 **AND YOU BECAME FOLLOWERS OF US AND OF THE LORD, HAVING**

RECEIVED THE WORD IN MUCH AFFLICTION, WITH JOY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, SO THAT YOU BECAME EXAMPLES TO ALL IN MACEDONIA AND ACHAIA WHO BELIEVE. How could anyone be joyful in the midst of persecution, of affliction and suffering? Scripture answers that question for us. Paul writes in Romans 5:3,4 **WE REJOICE IN OUR SUFFERINGS, BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT SUFFERING PRODUCES PERSEVERANCE; PERSEVERANCE, CHARACTER; AND CHARACTER, HOPE.** James writes **MY BRETHREN, COUNT IT ALL JOY WHEN YOU FALL INTO VARIOUS TRIALS, KNOWING THAT THE TESTING OF YOUR FAITH PRODUCES PATIENCE, BUT LET PATIENCE HAVE ITS PERFECT WORK, THAT YOU MAY BE PERFECT AND COMPLETE, LACKING NOTHING.**

As a people who believe in Jesus alone for forgiveness and eternal life we also know that God uses everything in our lives to bring us closer to Himself. As a result we can even rejoice in our sufferings, in our cross-bearing, in our persecution for Jesus' sake, because we know that they too serve God's saving purpose in our lives.

Paul says **YOU BECAME FOLLOWERS OF US AND OF THE LORD.** Literally the word means **IMITATORS.** The Greek is the root word for "mimic" or "mime." What an awesome thought. We sinful, weak children are to imitate, mimic Christ? **YES!** God has made us His children so that our lives are a reflection of His Son, our Savior. The Christians in Thessalonica were imitating the Lord in their lives--suffering as Christ suffered--without anger and reprisals but in humility accepting it as God's will and in joy and rejoicing knowing that it will serve for their well being and for those who heard about them.

Paul says that the Word of the Lord sounded forth from them not only in the northern and southern halves of Greece but **IN EVERY PLACE.** Like a bell loudly ringing over the valley their faith was made known to others by their actions and in their words.

Christians are to serve as models for one another, imitating Christ. You and I are to be examples as Christ works in us with His powerful Word. Are we bells which loudly and clearly ring out the message of the Savior's love for all people in our neighborhood, in our city, in our state and in our world? Are we models after whom our neighbors, fellow workers, classmates or visitors to our congregation would want to pattern themselves? Do we imitate, mimic Christ in our daily lives?

Paul concludes by beautifully summarizing what a believer's life is--**SERVING THE LIVING AND TRUE GOD, AND TO WAIT FOR HIS SON FROM HEAVEN, WHOM HE RAISED FROM THE DEAD, EVEN JESUS WHO DELIVERS US FROM THE WRATH TO COME.**

So many people live with little or no purpose in their lives, feel their lives are useless or they are bored with their lives. That should never be with the child of God. With the power of His Word and the Holy Spirit living in our hearts, our living on earth will not be an empty, useless, going through the motions or an unfulfilled purposelessness. For our faith is based upon the truth of God's Word which declares that Jesus lived and died **FOR ME,** He rose again and now through faith lives **IN ME.** The guilt of our sins has been removed, the power of sin has been destroyed and the punishment of our sins has already been paid in full. We are free from eternal damnation and secure in Christ.

So that now motivated by His loving sacrifice for us we will serve Him, the living and true God, by living for and serving others, while we eagerly wait for our Savior's return to take us to be with Him forever. May the Holy Spirit make all of us, young or old, male or female, newly converted Christian or life-long believer examples and models to others as He works in us to imitate Christ. Amen.