**Prayer of thanks for believers in Thessalonica**  2/7/23

Read: 1Corinthians 13, 1Thessalonians 1

Text: 1Thessalonians 1:2-3

Psalms: 46b, 4, 23old, 134a

I often begin my letters or emails with the words, ‘Greetings in the Lord’, although some emails are so brief such a greeting is longer than the email itself. Gone are the days when I wrote aerogrammes, filling in every corner with news for loved ones at home. I like to conclude with the words, ‘With prayer’, as I send the email off with prayer. Paul begins his letter by reminding the recipients, the church of Thessalonica, of his prayers for them. He actually tells them the substance of his prayers for them.

Paul gives thanks to God for this church, for each and every member of the church. I sent a card, a paper card in the mail, to a relative the other day, telling him how I thanked God for his love and faithfulness as a husband and father. I hope he was not offended for not thanking him directly. A friend once asked not to be thanked for anything he did, lest he not get thanks from the Lord at the last day! Let us be those who do our work or ministry unto the Lord and not be looking for thanks from others. It is good to appreciate the work of others but we should do this by giving thanks to God.

Paul goes somewhat deeper than I did in my card with his prayer of thanks. He remembers the ‘work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’ of these believers (1:3). In chapter 5 he again refers to faith and love and hope in terms of body armour and salvation (5:8). Faith, love, and hope are marks of a believer. Paul came to this conclusion when teaching about gifts and works in 1Corinthians 13; ‘And now abide faith, hope, and love’. Just as every business wants you to rate their service these days, maybe we could ask the Lord to rate our faith, love, and hope! Out of five how would you be rated? Our first subheading is ‘Faith’, our second, ‘Love’ and our third, ‘Hope’.

**1. Faith**

What is faith? Sometimes religions are referred as faiths, as with Charles wanting to be the ‘defender of the faiths’ before he became king. While Christianity can be called a religion, and many who call themselves Christians know nothing about true faith, we cannot call other religions ‘faiths’ in the same sense as this word is used in the Bible and applied to true Christians, or believers. The word ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ are the same word in the Greek. Faith refers to a firm persuasion and confidence. ‘Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of things we do not see’ (Heb 11:1 NIV). The faith of the Bible is unique in that it is faith in a person, namely Jesus Christ. Lots of people have faith in a principle or a teaching. Many have faith in science, which may extend to ‘faith’ in scientists or in their doctor, but who puts complete confidence in their doctor? Don’t you want a second opinion?

As believers we put our faith in Jesus Christ. What does this mean? It is not blind faith but faith based on knowledge. ‘Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God’ (Rom 10:17). ‘In him you trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise’ (Eph 1:13). To have faith in Jesus one must first hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. We do not put our faith in a person we know nothing about. The Lord sent the apostle Paul to Thessalonica where he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, and some believed or had faith. Not all believed when they heard that Jesus died for their sins and was raised on the third day for their justification. The gospel is preached to all but not all believe because not all are chosen by God.

This knowledge may not be extensive; we do not have to study the Bible all our lives before we believe! The Thessalonians had only three weeks of teaching so their knowledge was limited, but the truths of the gospel are simple; even a child can believe. Jesus said that unless we become like little children we will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3).

Yet faith is more than knowledge, more than intellectual assent to the truths of the Bible or the gospel. The reference to children gives us a clue as to what more is involved in faith. All pride must be ditched and we must see and admit our sin. When we see our sin, and understand that the wages of sin is death, we will seek a way to be saved, seek a mediator and saviour. Tragically, the church before the Reformation pointed people to human mediators or saints, to the church and the sacraments, instead of pointing them to the only mediator and the only person in whom we can confidently put our faith. Faith involves repentance; faith produces repentance. ‘It is impossible to disentangle faith and repentance’. When the gospel was preached by Peter and Paul, the people asked, ‘What must I do to be saved’ and they were told, ‘Repent and believe’ (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 16:31).

Faith is knowledge passing into conviction, and it is conviction passing into confidence. It is head knowledge becoming heart-changing conviction and confidence. Faith is a deep and personal meeting with Christ, and trusting your life and your whole being to him. You see it is not your faith that saves you but Jesus, forgiving your sin through his own precious blood. It is by grace through faith that you are saved, not of yourself, it is the gift of God (Eph 2:8).

As Paul gives thanks to God for the beloved brethren or believers at Thessalonica his focus is on God; he is giving thanks to God for their faith and love and hope. He gives thanks for ‘your work of faith’ (1:3). Why does he refer to ‘your work of faith’ and not just ‘your faith’? Elsewhere Paul declares that works have no part in salvation because salvation is by faith alone (Eph 2:9). James makes the point that faith must be shown by works (James 2:18, 19), and Paul would agree. Many think that Paul saw or heard about the works of faith in the lives of the believers in the church at Thessalonica, and gave thanks to God. But he says ‘work’ not ‘works’.

In answer to the question, ‘What must we do to do the works of God?’ Jesus said, ‘The work of God is to believe in him whom he sent’ (John 6:29). Paul similarly puts work and faith in the same sentence. Later in this chapter he remarks on how these believers ‘turned to God from idols’; their most important work was to cast all idols out of their homes and out of their lives! You may not have any idols hanging in your home, but what about in your heart? Paul refers to sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and covetousness as idolatry (Col 3:5).

Faith is something that comes from us, although ultimately it is a saving grace (Shorter Catechism Q86). While those whom God calls, effectually calls, he also justifies (Rom 8:30), our justification is by faith (Rom 5:1). We are not robots; for all the talk and fears about AI and smart computers, machines will never be able to love. God sets his love on us and wants us to love him in a relationship of faith, forgiveness, and love. Faith understands that God is love. Faith working through love is a distinctive mark of a believer.

**2. Love**

‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16). ‘If God so loved us, we also should love one another’ (1John 4:11). ‘Love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God’ (1John 7:7). John’s letters are about love, just as these letters to the Thessalonians are about the second coming of Jesus. Paul notes the love of the believers at Thessalonica because he heard about their labour of love, exactly as noted by John; ‘Whoever loves is born of God’.

This Christ-like love is not selfish love, but self-giving, self-sacrificing love- *agape* in Greek. It is ‘willed-love’ rather than ‘feeling-love’; not that this love is devoid of feeling, but it does not run hot and cold as feelings do. The ‘labour’ Paul refers to is different to ‘work’; it involves hardship, toil, even sweat and tears, not a random good deed. It is love for the unlovely, for people who will never repay you, just like Christ’s love for you that led him to the cross. Has your life been transformed by the grace and love of Jesus Christ? This letter is about the second coming of Christ, but let no one say believers are too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good. We are to care for bodies as we all souls, as Jesus did.

**3. Patience of hope**

The NIV translates, ‘Your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord’. The Thessalonians faith, love, and hope were all based on, and focussed on Jesus Christ. Their whole life was focused on Christ because they were born again by the Spirit of God to become one with Christ. ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2:20). An unbeliever would not understand what Paul is talking about. What about you? Do ponder these words and ask yourself if Christ is living in you. Paul saw that this was true of the Thessalonian believers because he saw their faith, their love, and their hope in action. Hope, ‘hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’, is seen in patience or endurance.

If love is the greatest virtue, hope is a close second; in fact, hope seems to be the greatest need of our day, especially among young people. Millions are without God and without hope in this world. Hope produces patience- is this why we see so little patience or endurance these days? We see physical endurance with people breaking records in marathons and the like, but when it comes to matters of the heart, many fail; endurance in marriage is neither attempted nor achieved.

People are running here and there looking for something new and satisfying, but sinful souls are never satisfied. Jesus saw helpless and hopeless people all around (Mat 9:36), so this hopelessness is nothing new to the world. And just as Jesus gave hope to the people of Galilee and Judea, so he gives hope to us today, because hope is found in Jesus Christ. Christian hope is a certain hope because it is based in the person of Jesus Christ and his return. It is based in his death and resurrection, a resurrection that we will share in. Our hope is the hope of the resurrection, the main topic of this letter.

In the face of death Paul writes, ‘I do not want you to be ignorant brethren concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope’ (4:13). If you want to see the hopelessness of this world just go to the funeral of an unbeliever. Only the grace of Jesus Christ, and the hope of the resurrection, can satisfy hopeless souls? Do you have this hope? If so, does it affect the way you live? Paul saw the changed lives of the believers at Thessalonica and gave thanks to God for the power of the gospel and God’s amazing grace.