

1 Thessalonians 1:3

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[0 : 00] Let's turn again to 1 Thessalonians and chapter 1 and the words of verse 3.

Chapter 1 and verse 3 of 1 Thessalonians. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor produced by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

This epistle has a very specific address.

The Church of the Thessalonians and God the Father. It's not just the city of Thessalonica, a large and prosperous city, but to a proportion of its population, and a very small proportion of that, the Church of God the Father, this group of believers in this large city.

A minority as we are today in all of our own cities. They played their own part in the life of that city. And they were there in the workplace with their fellow citizens.

[1 : 37] They were sharing in its economic stresses. They spoke its language and its history. But they had also their own peculiar lifestyle as believers.

They had this faith in Christ, this hope in Christ that more than modified the whole of their lives. And they suffered for that faith in many different ways.

And on the Lord's Day, each Lord's Day, they met and gathered to hear about Jesus, to sing his praise, and to remember his death in the Lord's Supper.

And on this particular Lord's Day, they have the special privilege of an epistle that's been sent to them from an distinguished source.

It's from an apostle from their own, Apostle Paul. And one can imagine that excitement on that day when this epistle comes and is read before them in the congregation.

[2 : 50] But it isn't only for them. It's also God's word to us. It's, in a way, it's an open letter from God to the whole Christian world right down the ages.

And therefore, it's God's word still to us. In the first instance, to them, but more broadly, it is God's word to the whole church of Christ down the ages.

And I want to turn to those words I read in verse 3. First of all, a very general point. Notice that here, Paul pays his believers a compliment.

A word, first of all, of congratulation. He thanks God for the virtues and qualities which they manifest in their own Christian lives.

And he remembers those graces in his prayers regularly. Now, Paul is, of course, conscious that all these qualities come from God.

[4 : 00] They're works of God's grace. And yet, they're also their own actions and their activities. And the point I want to make is a very simple one.

That we are so reluctant often to encourage and compliment one another. But in case, as Paul might say, he didn't want to flatter them or make them big-headed, I'm sure.

But yet, he saw they had those qualities. And he wanted to tell them, I see them and I admire what you are. I admire those graces that God gave you, but which are yet your graces with the impress of your personalities upon them.

And so, a recognition of the good qualities we find in our fellow believers. Now, Paul was given to this.

The church at Corinth, for example, he says that they come behind in no gift. Other churches likewise, Paul speaks of their work in the gospel and compliments them on that.

[5 : 15] What the church at Rome, your faith, Paul says, spoken of throughout the whole world. The whole world knows of your faith in the church at Rome.

And so, he tells them, we are so inclined to imagine that it's all about humility and giving God all the glory and keeping ourselves in our place.

And, of course, in many ways, that's true. But this apostle compliments these people on the quality of their own personal lives.

You'll find this in John Knox as well. Knox had many correspondents, many of them women. And he so often is writing to people who are in doubt and discouraged.

But yet, he speaks always a word of encouragement. He says, I know you have God's spirit in you because you pray so earnestly. You have such a devout desire to proceed in the life of holiness.

[6 : 24] And so, I see in you the marks of the work of God's grace. Now, you know Knox as a stern enunciator of human frailty.

But he was also a great encourager. And he would tell his fellow believers and those struggling women, those doubting women, he would tell them, I know you may not see in yourselves those qualities, but I see them in you.

And I thank God for those qualities which I see in you. And he tells them, yes, I know that you have God's spirit. And so, let's try to find a balance between the fear of flattery and inflating egos and this other need to recognize in others God's work in them and the consequent qualities of God's work in them.

And then, Paul goes on to highlight three features of their lives, three outstanding qualities they had as a group of God's people.

And he mentions them as in the text before you. Now, the NIV here is, I venture to say, unnecessarily worthy. It's not at all misleading, I suppose, but Paul simply says that your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope, and that's all the words we need.

[7 : 56] The rest in the NIV is interpretation, but Paul is very economical. And so, he highlights these three points, their work of faith, their labor of love, and their patience of hope.

We'll keep that word patience for the moment. And so, take them in succession for a little. First of all, there is this quality, their work of faith.

Now, faith is not a human achievement. Faith is God's work. It's God's gift. And Paul knows that.

And yet, he compliments them on their faith.

God gave it to them. They received it, and yet, it's their faith. It's an act of obedience. And as such, Paul compliments them on this faith that they have.

And this faith, it says, it works. Their faith works. Its first work is that it receives Christ. It trusts him.

[9 : 08] It takes him as their Savior. And they forsake all. And they follow him. And so, this faith, its first work is to accept the gospel and accept Christ.

But then, having done so, it keeps on working. And the word Paul uses here is one that emphasizes not the actual process of working, but the outcome, the achievement of their effort.

And then, within this faith, it has had certain outcomes. Faith achieves things. Faith achieves things. Faith does certain things.

It achieves certain outcomes. For example, faith prays. Faith. Well, there's no prayer. There is no faith. There is no faith, again, to quote John Knox.

Prayer is the expression of our faith. No prayer. Then, our faith is quite non-existent because faith does express itself through prayer.

[10 : 20] So, faith has this outcome. It prays. And faith worships. It bows the knee before this crucified Savior, this Lord Jesus Christ.

It adores him. At some levels, it's an awe of him. At others, it is enthralled by him, by his beauty, and by his gentleness, and by his generosity, and his graciousness.

And so, faith worships, and faith witnesses. It goes and tells. It shares itself with the world around.

We hold fast our confession. We have our testimony. And some of you will know that, from my perspective, that's not my personal story.

Of how I came to know the Lord. Or, I mean, I began as a Christian. It's not that. That's not my testimony. I'm not bearing witness to myself, or my experience, but to Christ.

[11 : 34] We have a great high priest. That's our witness. That's what faith does. It bears witness not to my conversion.

It doesn't say, I am a Christian, but it says, Christ is a great Savior. And so, it prays, and it worships, and it witnesses.

But then, take it further. Faith ventures forth. Take Samalek Abraham. There in Iran.

And God calls him. And God says to him, come out, go out. He doesn't tell him where. But he says, come.

And so, Abraham follows him. And that great journey begins. A journey, in many ways, still unfinished, which you as a children are still walking.

[12:35] So, he ventured forth. I look back at more recent history, even Scottish history, perhaps.

Those who left those shores and ventured forth in the 19th century to become missionaries and witness overseas to the gospel of our Lord and Savior.

Think of Alexander Duff from Moulin in the 1830s. And he's heard of India and its fever problems, its religions, its idolatry, its corruption, its poverty.

And off he goes. And ventures forth. And on that journey, he's shipped right two times. Loses all his possessions. And still goes into that foreign land.

No study of the language. Little of its culture. But off he goes, venturing forth. Take again, William Chalmers Burns.

[13:45] Several of the same era. And off he goes to China. He's there in Dundee, the heart of a great revival. Crowded churches.

Hundreds of converts. Excitement. Acclamation for his great preaching. He leaves it all. And off he goes off to China.

A great, unknown, mysterious, inscrutable country. And then he toils for years with so little fruit.

He goes completely native. The language, the rest, the food, habitation. It is all accommodated.

Because this man has such faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And one day meets up with Hudson Taylor. And the two enrich each other's lives. And that story is still being told.

[14:52] Still unfolding. And so that's what faith does. It ventures. It doesn't always know what's over the hill.

Or beyond the horizon. But still it goes forth. And faith makes sacrifices. It denies itself.

Maybe things we prize and cherish. But God says, let go. There may be some great career.

But it stands in the way of God's purpose for us. I speak as one who gave up nothing.

But I've known people who have given up much. Remember Nathan Martin Lloyd-Jones. A great physician. With a great career before him.

[15:53] God called him to preach. And someone asked him one day. How do you know you can't preach?

And he said, I don't. But I know. I have a great message. And that message laid hold of him.

And so off he went. And you know I'm sure of this. That he wasn't conscious. Of making any sacrifice at all.

I've heard him say. I gave up nothing. It was all done for me. And so faith ventures forth.

And faith makes sacrifices. And faith takes risks. Remember the story of the Exodus.

[16:56] And those Hebrew midwives. And the risks they took. When they told that story. They were told. Kill all these male Hebrew babies.

They don't do it. They listen to this piece of ethics. They tell a story that covers up. Why? They said. We were too late. Those Hebrew mothers. Give birth so quickly. We weren't there in time. That's a great risk. Because they're covering up.

A defiance. Of the law. Of the Pharaohs. You think of Rahab. You think of Moses' mother.

Interesting how many of these people are women. Moses' parents hide them.

They take a risk. The danger in all I'm saying here. Is that we all think. Well. I'm not a hero. And not all believers are heroes.

[18:02] They were heroes. Duff and others. These women were heroes. Great heroes. As was one offer. who goes again. And the Lord Jesus Christ. And the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But we in our ordinary ham drum situations.

In the minutiae. And the routine of life. There to exercise faith. The faith even at this level. To believe that here.

Where there is nothing heroic. And nothing but the mundane. And the ham drum. That here is God's place for me.

That is my faith. God put me. In this ham drum routine situation. God wants me in. That situation.

Thomas Chalmers spoke long ago.

[19:02] Of the power of littles. And we said to God. Lord. We want great advancements. And God says. No. Millimeters. And faith believes.

That by those millimeters. God's kingdom. Can come. And then secondly. There is what. Paul calls. The labor.

Of love. And he's saying to us here. That. Love is what. Sustains us. In the. Life of toil. Which is so often. Our Christian lot. And here the word is different. Because it focuses on. Not on the outcome.

But on the labor. Itself. On the effort. And. On the toil. That's involved. And. Paul is saying to us at one level.

[20 : 01] That that's what life. Very very often. It's. And it's sustained. By this love. That God has. Given to us. And again.

Reflect on our own lives. And how often it is. A life. Of labor. And toil. Paul speaks. Of those who. Labor.

In the world. And the doctrine. And. I think. Of so many. That we know. Who labor. In insignificant. And apparently.

Unproductive. Situations. But. They're asked by God. To keep on toiling away. And you see. We will say. Ah. But.

But love. Makes things easy. And with us love. It's all. Effortless. And spontaneous. The overflow. Of powerful feelings.

[20 : 57] And sometimes. That is indeed. What it is like. And yet. We have this combination. Of toil. And labor.

We are beavering away. Maybe in some. Small rural parish. In some small rural school. In some. Rural. Medical practice. Or some obscure situation. Some missionary. In some remote outpost. Years pass.

No apparent blessing. But. Keep on. Laboring. And toiling. Because. We are sustained. By this love. By.

Love for God. And love. For those we serve. And those we care for. Caring itself. Is a labor. And it's a labor.

[21 : 57] Is it not of love. The toil. Of love. Of the routine. The toil. The toil. The slug. Of love. Which is often. Our.

Our. Our. Our. Sometimes. This life is glamorous. Sometimes. The Christian life. Is glamorous. Us. But often. It's not. Whatever. Our. Calling. It's to a large extent. Composed.

Of. Labor. And slug. And toil. And. What irradiates it. Thomas. Boston. Was called.

After years. Of waiting. As an. Unwanted. Student. Minister. To a Thai. Congregation. Called. Simpron.

[22 : 50] In the borders. And he said. His friends. Put it to him. Being called. To such. A small. Charge. But he said.

It's a small. Charge. But it's. My. Charge. Charge. And that's. What matters. It's not. So easy. To know. This is what. God. Wants. Me to do. But. Where God. Has put me. Where I am. Where I stand. In the here. And now. Not looking.

Back. To where I was. Or. Forward. To where I want. To be. But the. Road. To glory. Starts. At my feet.

Even when that. Is a position. Of blood. Toil. Tears. And sweat. Sustained. By love.

[23 : 50] For God. And love. For those. We serve. Very often. It's not. New techniques. We need our training.

It's this. Change. In our. Emotional. And affective. Lives. The joy. Of the Lord. Is our strength. The love. Of God. That's what makes us. Strong. To know. The love of Christ. That passes.

Knowledge. So. Love. Labours.

And in this case. Love's. Labour. Is not. Lost. Because. It's labour. That is. In God's. Own service. Love. And then. There's the patience. Of hope. Or the stamina. That hope. Gives. And again.

[24 : 46] You come back. To such. Fundamental. Realities. Remember. The words. Of Hebrews. 12. Run with patience. The same word. As we have here.

The race. Set. Before us. The race. And. That course. That race. Is prescribed. By God. For you. And me. We don't always.

Recognize. And not always. Assured. It's the right one. For us. The race. Set. Before us. The race. That starts.

At my feet. My feet. Are always. At the starting line. Is that. Too simple. To be useful. On this course.

It's. An obstacle course. It's maybe. A marathon. It's maybe. A steeplechase. It's got all kinds. [25 : 45] Of challenges. And all kinds. Of distractions. There's maybe. A jeering mob. There's maybe.

An inherent. Disadvantages. Limitations. But. We run it. With endurance. We keep on going. Because. Like Christ. We are sustained. By hope. Remember. For the joy. Set. Before him. He endured. The cross. That hope.

That hope. Keeps him going. And I think. It is so. Unfashionable. Today. This whole. Hope. Business.

This. Pie in the sky. Or this. Mercenary. Attitude. That we're. Living this life. To avoid. Hell. And to gain.

[26 : 40] Heaven. And sustained. By the hope. Of reward. And it's in that. So. Very. Very. Mercenary. And certainly.

If you're asked. Why are you doing this? You said. You say. I want to go to heaven. I guess you'd feel. Very awkward. Saying that. But you know. This. Theme.

Of reward. Is written. Into the whole. Of scripture. And runs like a thread. Through the whole fabric. Of the word of God. Well done. Good and faithful servant. It isn't a question. Of some financial reward. Or celebrity.

Or power. Or comfort. Or affluence. It's the thought. Of going home. To our father in heaven.

[27 : 39] It's the thought. Of rest. From our labors. And that sustained. Our savior. And sustained. The apostle Paul.

And sustained. Such as God's children. Right down. Through the ages. Hope. So much. Stress on faith. And quite rightly so.

But where. Is our hope. And what's the role. What part does hope play. In your personal life. And you know.

It comes down to this. Do you really. Believe it. The hope. Our Lord spoke. Some amazing words. That. Lazarus is to. More around. On that occasion. He. Believes in me. Will never die. He.

[28 : 38] She. Believes in me. Though she dies. Yet. Shall he live. Shall she live. And he said.

To Martha. In the old version. Believest thou this. Or his own. Gentle voice.

Do you believe that. And that in many ways. Is. A great. Contemporary challenge. Our belief. In life. After death. C.S. Lewis said. If there is. Snow life. After death. Then.

Jesus Christ. Doesn't matter. But if there is. Then it matters. A great. Great. Deal. And what.

[29 : 38] Life is it. What. Hope. Gives me. Patience. Gives me. Stamina. Gives me. Powers of endurance.

The hope. That one day. Our father. Our father. In heaven. Will wipe. All the tears. From our eyes. The hope.

Of the. Be attack. Beatific vision. That one day. We shall see God. Face to face. See him. As he is. The hope.

Of bodily. Resurrection. I have come across. Recently. An idea. From John.

Paul. Gingham. Which fascinates me. How can God. Give. Resurrection. Bodies. To each. Particular.

[30 : 38] Person. Corresponding. To her. Own. Identity. And John. Paul. Paul. Paul. Paul. Paul. Paul. An eminent. Physicist. Of some. 20 years. Ago.

He said. Simply this. Remember. It's God. And he knows. The DNA. Of every human.

Who has ever lived. Or will live. And he will make. A perfect match. Between body. And soul. Believe us.

Though this. Your dead. Survives. And beyond. That. I knew. Heaven.

And a new. Earth. In which. My body. Our bodies. Wisten. Glorified. Will function. And. I say.

[31 : 35] Again. I get this. From so many. Other people. That. Heaven. We look forward to. It's not. Simply. A place.

Of constant. Worship. Services. And constant. Prayer meetings. And constant. Spiritual.

Conferences. Because. God. Doesn't give us. Bodies. For nothing. He doesn't. Give us. Hands. For nothing.

That. That. That. New. Universe. Is going to be. Gloriously. Physical. Visual. Splendor. Music.
In the air. Astonishing. Fertility. And. God. Says. You have. Hands. A new. Guard.

[32 : 29] And you. Keep it. Believe us. Though this. I saw. A new. Heaven. And a new.

Earth. Let's. Drop. The discipline. That puts. Heaven. Out of mind. Jesus.

Was sustained. With a prospect. I am going. To my father. That. And that alone. Can sustain us.

In the moment. Of extremity. May God. Grant us. Faith. In the past. Faith. In our recent. Savior. In
an empty tomb.

And built on that. Hope. For the future. And so. Let's go. And grace. This world. With this.

[33 : 27] Work of faith. With this. Labor of love. With this. Patience. This endurance. Of hope. And.

Let's. Tell. Those. Around us. I admire. You. For this. For what you are. For what you have.

I love. The way you toil. I love. What you achieve. I love. Your stamina. I love.

I love. I love. And by. God's grace. It would. Make them big headed. Let's join in prayer. Lord.

Go with us. We pray. And help us. To live. What the world has set. Before us. We grasp it. Oh Lord.

So inadequately.

[34 : 22] and sometimes with such minimal faith. A mercy upon us, Lord. Give us a strong grasp.

Lay us in a firm foundation and give us a clear hope for our Savior's sake.

Now, I'm sorry being up here. I didn't intend to be here up so high in the pulpit, but I lost my way on
the way, so that's why I'm not intentionally at all, but because I did land here instinctively.

I know that normally the preacher is downstairs, and I'm sorry if I have broken any protocols. I don't
think I have too severely, but forgive me for my being up here and not down below.