

Remaining Faithful *in Trying Times*

1 Thessalonians 1

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As Hea Woo looked into her husband's cell, she couldn't believe her eyes. The man before her was hardly recognizable from the torture, but she knew it was him. He covertly slipped something into her hand that would change her life forever: his profession of faith. Later, she began to follow Christ and ended up in a cell of her own. Despite being faced with starvation and torture, Hea Woo realized that she had been given an opportunity to share the gospel with those around her.

Before long, a number of women in the camp had placed their faith in Christ, and secret gatherings for fellowship began - in the outhouse. In this, the most unlikely of places, the women silently sang songs of praise, prayed and shared the Bible verses they knew with one another. Amazingly, she was later released from prison, and managed to flee to South Korea.

Imagine starting a church in Chad, Africa (or another place) and only being there a few weeks. Suddenly, a mob forms and you're run out of town in fear of your life by the locals who oppose what you're doing, who don't agree with what you're saying and teaching, going against their long-held customs and beliefs.

How would you feel about those you left behind? Concerned for them? Wondering how they're doing? Anxious for news of how they're doing? Knowing what happened to you, what are the chances that there's a church left anymore? And what about the faith of the people you were forced to leave behind? How are they doing? Are they still holding onto their faith, still following Jesus, still meeting together? Or have they given up and returned to their former way of life?

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Thessalonian church from the city of Corinth, just a short time after having preached in Thessalonica. Upon leaving Thessalonica under duress, Paul, Silas, and Timothy traveled to Athens. While in Athens, Paul constantly thought about the new believers he had left behind back in Thessalonica. How were they doing? Was the new church still intact? How were they handling the persecution, the false teachers trying to lead them astray? Were they still following Jesus, or had they given up under all the pressure and difficulties?

So, he sends Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the new believers there. Timothy soon returns with good news! The church was still standing, still thriving. Their faith was alive and well!

In Paul's day, Thessalonica was a bustling city of perhaps 200,000 people. Because it had an excellent harbor and because it was situated on the main east-west Roman road, this city was a major trading center. Goods heading for Rome passed through its main street or were unloaded at the docks. Traveling merchants might spend a night or two in the city. Roman warships could be seen in the harbor. Roman soldiers were on hand to keep the peace. If you wanted to plant a church anywhere (that would have great influence over a large area) Thessalonica would be as good a place as you could find.

But humanly speaking, there's no reason why the core of Thessalonian believers would remain faithful to Paul's gospel. The Gentiles of that city were major idolators. The worship of false gods was everywhere. The Jews of Thessalonica wanted nothing to do with Paul's Messiah and actively opposed not only Paul but also those who believed his words.

Paul had already been rejected by others. He had come to Thessalonica nursing the wounds received at Philippi. Now he had suddenly been forced to leave Thessalonica after such a short time there. Under such circumstances, why would anyone remain faithful to a crucify Jesus proclaimed by a man like Paul? There's no human reason for them to remain faithful.

But God's power to save is mightier than the devil, the world, and our sinful nature. When Timothy returned from Thessalonica to Corinth, he brought Paul the good news. The Christians were not only remaining faithful to the Lord; they had become a center of missionary activity, their faithfulness had become known throughout the provinces, they had actually become a model for others!

They were 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 writes a letter urging them to keep it up, to continue remaining faithful followers of their savior. (Sermon Studies on the Epistles)

What kept these believers going under such difficult circumstances? Who gets the credit? Who does Paul thank? *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Faith in the Lord Jesus. Love for the Lord Jesus. Hope in the Lord Jesus. All thanks to God and His powerful Word. Faith leading to what? Work. Love leading to labor, passion. Hope leading to steadfastness, holding on and not letting go. Faith, love, hope - all in the Lord Jesus. He's the center of their faith, the center of their hope, the center of their love. His undying love and faithfulness to them, shown on the cross, was what motivated their work, their labor and passion, their steadfastness, their faithfulness.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For 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.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword ... (Heb 12:4) The good news of our Lord Jesus Christ has power to change lives. Before the Gospel came to them, the Gentile Thessalonians worshiped idols. Forsaking idol worship and coming to the true and living God was important evidence of true conversion in the first century.

Humanly speaking everything is against Paul in Thessalonica. But even here, people come to faith in Christ and remain steadfast. The reason had nothing to do with Paul personally. Paul was successful because of the powerful, convincing message that he proclaimed. Paul's gospel message is the word of God. It's the truth. It's the tool which the Holy Spirit uses. It's the power of God for the salvation of all who believe it. Even today, around the world, in human hearts, the Holy Spirit continues to work powerfully wherever God's word is proclaimed. (Sermon Studies on the Epistles)

For 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. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 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. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere ...

News of the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope, rooted in the Gospel, spread far and wide. How do your words and actions spread the good news of Jesus? What are people saying about you as a result of your faith in the Lord Jesus, your hope in the Lord Jesus, your love for the Lord Jesus?

Thessalonica became a great missionary hub for all of southern Europe. And think of what a joyfully suffering church in Thessalonica meant for believers elsewhere, who in most cases also had to face vicious opposition! It meant the world to them. It encouraged their faith, their hope, their love. It strengthened them to persevere and to become models to others.

That's the example we set too, as we live in our world as joyfully suffering people ourselves. Joyful in the Lord Jesus. Joyful in what He's done for us at the cross. Pierced for our transgressions. Suffering in our place. Forgiving us. Giving His life in exchange for ours. Joyful in the Lord Jesus. Holding on to Him, looking to Him, above all else, no matter what!

A few weeks ago, we heard the amazing impact of this good news about Jesus in the life of Corrie ten Boom as she forgave her former captor. Forgiving, for she had been forgiven the bigger debt of sin by God. We meet Corrie again, this time with her sister Betsie, as they're imprisoned by the Nazis for hiding Jews in their home in Holland.

Corrie writes, "The move to permanent quarters came the second week in October. ... 'Fleas!' I cried. 'Betsie, the place is swarming with them!' ... 'Betsie, how can we live in such a place!' 'Show us. Show us how.' It was said so matter of factly, it took me a second to realize Betsie was praying. 'Corrie!' she said excitedly. 'He's given us the answer! In the Bible this morning. Where was it? Read that part again!' ... 'Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.' (1 Thess 5)

'That's it, Corrie! That's His answer. 'Give thanks in all circumstances!' That's what we can do. We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this new barracks!' I stared at her; then around me at the dark, foul-aired room.

'Such as?' I said. 'Such as being assigned here together.' I bit my lip. 'Oh yes, Lord Jesus!' 'Such as what you're holding in your hands.' I looked down at the Bible. 'Yes! Thank You, dear Lord, that there was no inspection when we entered here! Thank You for all these women, here in this room, who will meet You in these pages.'

'Yes,' said Betsie, 'Thank You for the very crowding here. Since we're packed so close, that many more will hear!' She looked at me expectantly. 'Corrie!' she prodded. 'Oh, all right. Thank You for the jammed, crammed, stuffed, packed suffocating crowds.'

'Thank You,' Betsie went on serenely, 'for the fleas and for -- ' The fleas! This was too much. 'Betsie, there's no way even God can make me grateful for a flea.' 'Give thanks in all circumstances,' she quoted. It doesn't say, 'in pleasant circumstances.' Fleas are part of this place where God has put us. And so we gave thanks for fleas. But this time I was sure Betsie was wrong.

... as quickly as we could Betsie and I made our way to the rear of the dormitory room where we held our worship 'service.' ... an ever-larger group of women gathered. They were services like no others, these times in Barracks 28. At first Betsie and I called these meetings with great timidity. But as night after night went by and no guard ever came near us, we grew bolder. So many now wanted to join us that we held a second service after evening roll call.

We were under rigid surveillance, guards in their warm wool capes marching constantly up and down. It was the same in the center room of the barracks: half a dozen guards or camp police always present. Yet in the large dormitory room there was almost no supervision at all. We did not understand it.

One evening I got back to the barracks ... and Betsie was waiting for me ... 'You know, we've never understood why we had so much freedom in the big room,' she said. 'Well, I've found out.' "That afternoon", she said, 'there'd been confusion in her knitting group about sock sizes and they'd asked the supervisor to come and settle it. But she wouldn't. She wouldn't step through the door and neither would the guards. And you know why? Because of the fleas! That's what she said, "That place is crawling with fleas!"'

... It grew harder and harder. There was too much misery, too much seemingly pointless suffering. ... But as the rest of the world grew stranger, one thing became increasingly clear. And that was the reason the two of us were here. From morning until lights-out, whenever we were not in ranks for roll call, our Bible was the center of an ever-widening circle of health and hope. ... The blacker the night around us grew, the brighter and truer and more beautiful burned the Word of God."

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess. 5:16-18)*

That's what the believers living in Thessalonica did. That's what Hea Woo did in a North Korean prison. That's what we do in our fallen, broken, messed up world, filled with false idols, false saviors. Holding on to a crucified and risen Savior as we eagerly await His coming. Standing out in faith in the Lord Jesus. Standing out in hope in our Lord Jesus. Standing out in love of our Lord Jesus, in love of our neighbor. The Word of God having such a powerful impact on our hearts and in our lives, that we make news wherever we go. People standing up and taking notice of something different about us. Something other-worldly. Something from above.

As Hea Woo from North Korea knew, as Corrie and Betsie knew, as Paul, Silas, and Timothy knew, as the new church plant in Thessalonica knew, as you and I may learn ... faith in the Lord Jesus endures in the midst of trying times because of God's power and faithfulness, producing fruit in faith, hope, and love.

Philippians 2 *Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life ...*

James 1 *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

The Christians in Thessalonica, in a Nazi concentration camp, in North Korea, in Somalia, in Iran, in Afghanistan, in China, around the world, are showing us the way. Joyfully remaining faithful to Jesus, even unto death. Setting an example to follow. Following in the footsteps of our Savior.

1 Peter 4 *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and*

be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame. And I love that old cross where the Dearest and Best for a world of lost sinners was slain. In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine, a wondrous beauty I see. For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died to pardon and sanctify me.