



**BELIEVERS CHAPEL**

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

2 Thessalonians 1: 1-5

Lesson 1

Summer 2020

"Faith in the Furnace"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you, Seth. And good morning, and we are starting a new series this morning in 2 Thessalonians, and so our text is 2 Thessalonians, chapter 1, verses 1 through 5. I'll read through it, as we always do on a Sunday morning, and then we'll have a word of prayer,

Paul and Sylvanus and Timothy, (*Sylvanus is Silas*),

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is *only* fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows *ever* greater; therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. *This* is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

2 Thessalonians 1: 1-5

*(When he says, "God's righteous judgment" here, he's speaking of His righteous approval, His assessment and approval and acceptance of them, which is proven by their*

*endurance in the midst of great difficulty. But we'll talk about that as we come to it in the lesson.)*

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word, and bless our time now, together. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

Father, what a privilege it is to be with Your people on a Sunday morning, and Lord, as we gather here, we pray Your protection upon us. We pray that You would bless our health, and we pray this every Sunday as we consider the circumstances, this pandemic, and pray that You would protect us, keep us safe. Keep us wise in our conduct but keep us safe and keep the health of each one of us, preserve it. We live, and we move, and we exist in You, as Paul told the philosophers of Athens. And every breath of life that we take is a gift from You.

And You are in control of everything. Isaiah speaks of how You call out the stars, and You name them each. And as we think about the abundance of the stars, the innumerable number of them, it's a way of saying, You control everything—from the greatest spheres in the universe to the smallest microbes. And so You're in control of everything, everything that enters our space, and enters into our lungs and our bodies. You control it. And so, Lord, we can rest confidently in You. We're to live wisely and responsibly, but we can trust You to bless us. And we pray for that. Bless us physically.

And I think of others, Lord. We've mentioned names throughout the weeks, but pray for those whose health has been compromised through various conditions and procedures. But we think of them and others, Lord, whose names aren't mentioned. There are some in our congregation who have experienced protracted illnesses and have gone through numerous procedures, and still suffer the problems that they have. And I pray that You would bless them with patience, with endurance like these Thessalonians were experiencing and exercising. And may they sense Your presence, and may they experience the patience that only You can give them.

As we consider the text that we are looking at this morning, we are reminded that it is all of You. So Lord, we look to You to bless those who are in particular need, but bless all of us. Bless all of us with perseverance and a good witness. That's certainly what we learn of as our need and our responsibility from our text. So bless us spiritually, Lord, bless us physically, bless us in every way, and we pray that You would bless us in particular now, as we turn our attention to the Scriptures and that You would build us up in the faith.

Bless our nation in this time of crisis. Bless our leaders with wisdom. We pray that You would bless us through all of this. And through all of this, Lord, awaken people to the understanding that the great problems we face are not physical. They're not matters of health. They're matters of the soul. They're spiritual. And I pray that You would bring about an awakening within the hearts of men and women throughout this land, of their need of You, their need of the Savior, and that You might bring them to faith. —And use us to that end, we pray. We pray all of these things in Christ's name. Amen.

One of the most remarkable accounts in the Bible is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, the three young Hebrews who were thrown into a fiery furnace for their faith. It's in Daniel, chapter 3. Every Bible believing Christian knows it is a true story, and so can't help wondering how those three young men were able to do that, where they got the courage? And you can't help but wonder, "Could I do that?" And the answer to the question, "How did they do that?", is given in 2 Thessalonians, chapter 1, verses 1 through 5, where Paul recounts a similar situation and how the saints persevered through persecution and affliction. In a word, the answer is "faith". We "walk by faith, not by sight", Paul wrote, in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 7. And the Christians of Thessaloniki were especially exemplary in doing that.

That's our passage, but since this is the beginning of a new series in 2 Thessalonians, let's begin with a few words of introduction. Paul first visited the city of

Thessaloniki on his second missionary journey. After establishing a church in Philippi, Paul and his companions, Silas, Timothy, and Luke went south to Thessaloniki, the largest city in Macedonia. They visited synagogue, and again the Lord blessed the Gospel, and another small church was established made up of Jews and Greeks from the city.

According to Acts 17, Paul was there "for three Sabbaths". So, a little over two weeks, maybe three weeks. Not long. But in that time, Paul and Silas taught them basic Bible doctrine before being driven out of town by the men of the synagogue. So again, they went south, first to Berea, where again they established a church before the Jews of Thessaloniki arrived and forced them to leave there. Silas and Timothy went back to Thessaloniki to check on the church while Paul went down to Athens and then to Corinth, where later they were all reunited.

But it was there in Corinth that Paul learned from Silas and Timothy that some in the young church in Thessaloniki had died and others were facing some hard opposition for their faith. So he wrote a letter to the church, the book of 1 Thessalonians, to console them in their grief and encourage them in their struggle. In chapter 4, he reminded them that death is temporary. Christ is coming for us. And when He does, the dead will be raised, and the living will be raptured, and so we will always be with the Lord.

What is clear from both 1 and 2 Thessalonians is that during the two or three weeks that Paul was with them, he taught the Thessalonian Christians a lot of eschatology—prophetic events. In chapter 5, he wrote that they knew about "the times and epochs", future events, and "the day of the Lord" —what it was and how it would occur. It is a day of judgment and it will happen suddenly. These are some of the doctrines Paul taught them.

Still, in just three weeks, the apostle could only have given them a general outline of the subjects that he taught. And so when the messenger returned from delivering the letter, (1 Thessalonians to them), maybe it was Timothy, (probably it was Timothy), he told Paul of the present problems that the church was having. They were

still suffering persecution and were dealing with some doctrinal confusion. A teacher had come there or maybe a letter had been sent to them saying that they were already in “the day of the Lord”. Well, it affected their behavior, “The end was near, so why work?” So Paul quickly wrote a second letter, explaining in some detail “the day of the Lord” —that it had not come and what the signs of it would be.

That's a big part of 2 Thessalonians, but not all of the book. Paul also comforted them in their persecution and corrected some of them for an undisciplined and lazy life. “...if anyone is not willing to work”, he wrote, “then he is not to eat, either.” (2Thes 3:10). So there is a lot of “down to earth”, practical instruction here as well as some of the most fascinating, prophetic revelation in the Bible. And that, too, is completely practical.

2 Thessalonians begins in almost the identical way his first letter to them began and follows the basic form of most of Paul's letters, with an introduction and thanksgiving. Basically, all of his letters follow the conventional form of correspondence in the first century, but it wasn't just a standard form of writing. It was always meaningful when Paul wrote an introduction and a greeting.

We see that in the first verse, “Paul and Sylvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The word “our”, in “our Father”, is not in the greeting of 1 Thessalonians. Paul put it here for a reason. The persecution had continued, and the Thessalonians needed this reminder: God the Father, the eternal Father of the eternal Son, is also “our” Father. Father of Paul, Father of the Thessalonians, Father of us. He cared for them in that very difficult and trying time as a father cares for his children. They would not be able to make it through the trial, (as we will not make it through life's hardships), without fixing our minds on that very fact: That God the Father is our Father—personally.

Every one of us will have what the old Scottish minister Thomas Boston called “a crook in the lot”. A *crook* being an unforeseen trouble or trial, and *the lot* being one's life; or “one's lot in life.” We will have some difficulty in life. May not be persecution,

like these Thessalonians were experiencing. It may be an issue of our health, or a financial setback. But we will have a “Crook in the lot.”

Thomas Boston did. When he was a child his father was in prison for his faith. Later, as a minister, Boston's wife suffered physical and mental problems. And he and she buried six of their ten children. So he knew of what he wrote and preached. And his first step, or what he calls, “the remedy for affliction, hardship, so that we will endure it well and not be crushed by it, is to consider the Lord.” He is the one who put the “crook” in the life. —And it is never without purpose. We may not see the reason, but we are to look to Him. We are to consider Him well and know the trouble is there for our good.

Now that is faith. It is knowing that God is good, that God is wise and loves us like a father loves his child. Only He can remove the crook in that lot, so we're to look to Him, and look to Him as the one who cares for us. Paul was saying the same thing here in verse 1, with that little word “*our*”; He will recount their persecution. But here he is reminding the Thessalonians that through it all, God is their loving Father.

All of that to say that the introductions to Paul's letters were not formal or thoughtless—they were meaningful. And we see that in the next verse, where Paul wishes or prays for them to have “grace and peace”. That's the blessing that enables us to persevere in faith and do so through the most difficult trials of life. And Paul makes it clear that it doesn't come from us. —Not something that we “gin up” within ourselves. The origin of both grace and peace is divine. It's from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Both, along with the Holy Spirit, Who's mentioned later in chapter 2, are the source of this life transforming grace, and the peace that it produces in the midst of trials.

Every word in this two-verse greeting is meaningful. It gives the basis and reason for the lives of the Thessalonians that Paul goes on to praise in the next verses. The fact that God is the Father of each of the Thessalonian believers also indicates that they are all children in the same family and should care for one another as children of the same family—members of the same household.

And they did. Paul gives thanks for that in verse 3. "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is *only* fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows *ever* greater."

Paul's use of "*ought*" here suggests that he felt an obligation to give thanks for their growth in faith and their love for the saints. Their response and behavior in such hard times made it right to do that. There were problems in the church. That's why Paul wrote the letter, (and he would get to that later—the problem of idleness as I have already mentioned). But typical of Paul, he begins with encouragement, not correction. And there was a lot to be encouraged about. Their faith was "greatly enlarged". In fact that can be translated, "growing wonderfully". It's a present tense, so it's in the process of doing that. It is in the process of continually increasing.

Faith is Godward. It is in the Lord and in His promises. So, Paul's greeting only confirmed what they already knew and had been taught by the apostle—that God is their Father. This wasn't a new thing that they were learning. They trusted in Him. They trusted in His word. And, of course, that's the reason their faith increased. They were men and women of the Word of God. They studied Scripture, and they believed it. That's the primary way that faith grows in the child of God.

And as faith enlarges, love grows. I think that you see that suggested here from the order of the words as Paul places them together. First faith and then he mentions love. And here it's love for fellow believers. It was growing ever greater because of their faith. All of this encouraged the apostle. The work that he had hastily left when he and the others were forced to leave Thessaloniki, had not floundered—but flourished. Their love for the saints was greater than ever. Their faith was expanding. He was encouraged by that, and he wanted them to be encouraged by that. It was an evidence of the work of God in their lives.

But there was more. In verse 4, he added to their love and faith, praise for their perseverance. And again, he speaks of their faith, which they practiced in very hard times very challenging circumstances. In fact, Paul said that he and those with him boasted about them among the other churches for their perseverance and faith in the

midst of all their persecutions and afflictions. In the midst of all of that, they endured, he says.

Perseverance is enduring. Perseverance is steadfastness. Leon Morris commented on this, describing it as an active, manly quality, rather than a passive resignation. Well it is active. It's not passive. And it may be manly, but it included females among them, because there were many in that church. Luke wrote in Acts 17 in verse 4, that a number of the leading women of the city joined Paul and the others. And the point is, all the believers, men and women alike, were actively engaged in perseverance—striving to remain true to the Lord, to be obedient, to be a witness in the midst of that city, and in the midst of all that turmoil. They put out effort in the midst of great trials. —And that was due to their faith.

That's indicated by the close connection Paul makes between perseverance and faith. There is a cause/effect relationship. Their perseverance is the fruit of their faith. Faith is believing. It is trust. It is relying on the Lord's faithfulness to us in everything, and that enables us to persevere in the midst of hard times.

But to do that we need to know Him. Calvin paraphrased Paul's words in this way, "We glory in your patience which arises from faith. And we bear witness that it is prominent in you." He then goes on to explain that there is nothing that sustains us in tribulation as faith does. That is clear from the fact that, "When we stop being aware of God's promises," Calvin says, "we completely fail." Faith always has an object. —It is "in" something. It is in the Lord, and it is in His Word. So it is vitally important that we know and understand Him: His person and work; His attributes; His character; and His promises.

That is what accounts for the courage of the three Hebrews in Daniel, chapter 3. They knew the Lord. And that gave them the faith to refuse to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's gold image and suffer the consequences as a result. And you hear that in their response to the king. He was willing to give them a second chance, which seems magnanimous for Nebuchadnezzar. Everyone bowed at the sound of the trumpet, except these three. And yet, he gave them a second chance. But they answered in effect, "don't bother". "...our

God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But *even* if *He does* not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the gold image that you have set up."

They knew there's only one God. In an age of many gods, they knew that it was the Lord God who was God. The God of Israel is the only God. He is sovereign over all of life and its circumstances, and He is able to deliver His people from any situation. Nothing is too difficult for Him.

But we can't know what His decreative will is. We can't know His secret will. He may not stop an execution. He may not prevent them from being cast into a fiery furnace. He may not prevent a martyrdom. He knows best. His will is never frustrated. And sometimes it is difficult for us. But it's always wise. His will is always right. All of that, the knowledge of that, the conviction of that, gave them courage.

John Calvin put it well, "Faith sustains us." But faith is in God's promises. It is in Him, Who is able to keep His promises, and it's in His promises. We must be aware of them or, as Calving put it, "we completely fail".

Some month ago there was an interview in the paper with Andrew Brunson; some of you will remember him. He was the Presbyterian missionary who was arrested by Turkish authorities and put in jail, (Oct. 2016). He was accused of being in cahoots with terrorists and rebels. Everyone knew it was false, but still, he languished in a squalid Turkish jail for months. He lost weight, and soon began to lose hope. The real crisis came, he said, when he had the feeling of being abandoned by God. He said, "I expected a supernatural sense of God's presence. And when I didn't get that it really shook me."

Things only turned around for him when he thought, "Wait. I need to fight for my faith." Those are his words. And so he began to focus on enduring and being faithful to God. He was finally released, (Oct. 2018), but only after the American government put strong pressure on Turkey. But I thought it was telling that his crisis came when he didn't get a supernatural sense of God's presence.

Now we would all want that if we were in that kind of circumstance, which is hard to imagine how difficult that must have been. We would want some kind of sense of God's presence. We would want this reassurance of this "feeling". And maybe we would even expect it. We'd certainly hope for it. But the fact is, that is not promised. What is promised is, "He will never abandon us". Hebrews 13, verse 5, "...He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.'" And that is true, whether we have a sense of it or not.

The question is, are we going to believe it? Are we going to believe God's Word, His promises, and act on His promises? Are we going to rely on His faithfulness? We need to ask ourselves, "What do we know about Him?" The Holy Spirit is the permanent seal on our hearts. Permanent, unto the day of redemption. Christ is the good shepherd who doesn't flee but lays down His life for the sheep. And God is our Father. The triune God never abandons His children.

We know this because the Scriptures reveal it. And we understand it, we know it to be true by faith. That's how we live, by faith. We walk by faith—not by sight, not by feelings or signs. Sometimes the test comes when God's Word and promises are before us, but "the sense" of it isn't. —The feelings aren't in us. Are we still going to trust in the Lord as the one who is faithful? That's what will enable us to persevere, to be steadfast in hard times, when it is dark and mundane, faith in God's promises.

It was by faith that Pastor Brunson began to endure and remain faithful. It was the same for these ancient Christians in Thessaloniki. They lived by faith in the person and promises of the triune God and did so in very hard times. Paul wrote that they "endured all persecutions and afflictions". Now we can only guess what that involved. Ostracism, certainly. They were cut off from former friends. Imprisonment, perhaps, in a gloomy, fetid jail. Maybe death—martyrdom.

In Lystra, on his first missionary journey, Paul was dragged outside the city, stoned, and left for dead. The next day he told the young church, in Acts, chapter 14, verse 22, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Paul had written something similar to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 3,

"...that we have been destined for this." —For these afflictions. And while that is the very thing that we want to avoid ... pain, suffering, sorrow, the crook in the lot ... still it comes our way, and it is used by God for our good, whether we understand how it is used or not.

What is clear here is “afflictions”. Tribulations for the Christian are not unusual in a fallen world. So our faith is to be lived out in what Leon Morris described as, "The fires of trouble and in the furnace of affliction. And often it is in such hard places that our faith is fashioned and matured."

So, there's a purpose in it. That doesn't make affliction easy, and that doesn't guarantee that we will respond well to our afflictions. But knowing that it is in God's hands, as we understand that, as we believe that, will help us to endure it.

And Paul gives the purpose of it for the Thessalonians in verse 5. Their perseverance was a “plain indication” that it was evidence “of God's righteous judgment”, that He considered them “worthy” of His kingdom, “the kingdom of God.” Nothing happens by chance. Certainly not their persecutions and afflictions. And by their brave endurance and faithfulness in them, they demonstrated their justification. They demonstrated their adoption into God's family. And for the Thessalonians, that was very practical. It gave assurance of salvation and not reason to doubt it. That would only encourage greater faith and endurance. No wonder the apostle Paul boasted about them.

But ... and this is important ... none of this suggests they merited approval by their own ability. Not at all. Their steadfastness was proof God was working in them. That's the reason for encouragement to them. And He was giving to them every good thing. —That explains what they were doing. They had love for the saints, a growing faith, and perseverance in persecution. But nowhere in this passage did Paul give thanks to them for that. He thanked the Lord. Verse 3, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren..." He is altogether the source of all that they were experiencing, all of their blessings. That's the reason the apostle thanked God and not the Thessalonians.

Salvation is all His work, not ours. And when we think of that, we think of justification—being saved. But also in the Christian life, sanctification is all of God. Growing in faith and love and perseverance is just as much God's sovereign work as bringing us out of death into life. We cannot take credit for any of it and must always look to Him for it—for “everything in our life.”

The author of Hebrews talks about “running the race” in chapter 12, and “keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.” That's how we live our life, “looking to Him”. What this passage does is bring out our responsibility to love one another, increase in faith, and persevere through hard times. But we can only do that by God's sovereign, powerful grace.

That's what Paul would write later to the Thessalonians' neighbors in Philippi, when he told them in Philippians, chapter 2, verses 12 and 13, "...work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure." So work. Bring out into the open the new life that God has given you. Let it flourish. And you can do that because God is at work in you to cause it to happen.

This is a statement of God's sovereign grace. God is the initiator in it and the energizer of it. It has to be that way. We were all, by nature, dead in our trespasses and sins—read Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 1 and 2, read the whole chapter. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, unwilling to obey, unable to obey. We were like a dead tree. But the Lord made the tree good, so that the tree could bear fruit, and the fruit will be good.

That is the saint. That is the Christian, because that is the power of God's creative grace. It is a work within each of us through the Holy Spirit. He enables us. He energizes us so that we work. We want to work as new creatures in Christ. That's our new, God given desire, to be fruitful people, to be active people in obedience. And He gives the impetus for that, the push and energy so that we respond with effort and obedience toward righteousness. Now that involves effort on our part, as Philippians 2 indicates. And the Ephesians put forth a lot of effort. That's what Paul commended here.

But the effort is a struggle. That's the Christian life, moment by moment struggle. There is no "Super Christian" who lives on a higher plane, where the spiritual life is easy, and victory effortless. That's not the Christian life. It is a war, it is a battle, and it has setbacks.

My reference earlier to Mr. Brunson wasn't a criticism of him. I don't think I would have fared any better in a Turkish jail than he did. Nevertheless, while we fail, we do go forward in the faith, believing the Lord is sovereign. That He has designed life's difficulties to work for us, while He is always with us, never abandoning us, and will always supply us all that we need—maybe even a supernatural sense of His presence. Maybe He'll give us that feeling.

Someday it will all end triumphantly in the kingdom of God, where the Lord will reward our faithfulness, even though it will be faithfulness that He produced in us by His sovereign grace. He rewards it.

That's the goal. That is what our lives in Christ are moving toward. Christ has obtained our access to the kingdom of God. He has obtained our right to be there. And through faith in Him, and being joined to Him, we do have the absolute right to be there. We are His children, His heirs. And now in the meantime, we are striving for that kingdom, we are fighting on behalf of it.

The very mention of the kingdom here, in verse 5, gives incentive to fight and live well—to persevere in the difficulties of life. Whatever we sacrifice today can't compare to what we will be given and what we will gain tomorrow, and what we will have forever. God is no man's debtor. And whatever we give up for Him, whatever is taken from us through our faithfulness, He will more than make up for—and make up for with something infinitely greater than we lost and something that we will have forever.

So, to do that, to be faithful by God's grace, we need to enlarge our faith, so that we will endure when our faith is in the furnace of affliction. And we do that by learning of the Lord, by learning about Him, and praying for His grace. This is what equips us for

the challenges today, and those that may be coming. Since there will be challenges coming for all of us. It's important to know how we can prepare for them.

May the Lord help us to do that and to see the urgency of grounding our lives in the knowledge of the Lord God. Nothing will get us through the trials of life like knowing the Lord and His promises and His faithfulness and resting in them. But that's for the Christian.

If anyone is here or watching who has not believed in Christ as Lord of the universe and Savior of the world, then you are lost and not headed for the kingdom of God, but for eternal judgment. Realize that's true. Turn from unbelief. Trust in Christ and His sacrifice for sinners. He bore the penalty for all who believe in Him, and who by faith lay hold of that payment that He made in His own blood on the cross. At that moment, the very moment, He forgives the believer and counts him or her righteous—justified—He gives eternal life now, and life that is in the glorious kingdom to come forever.

May God help you to do that and help all of us. And I trust all of you have done that. I hope so, and will continue to persevere, by placing your faith constantly in Him, and resting in His promises. May God help us to do that.

Let's close in a word of prayer. And as we do, I'm going to ask the Lord to prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper, which we will take in just a moment. Let's pray.

Father, we do thank you for this brief introduction to 2 Thessalonians that the apostle gave and all that's contained in it. The encouragement that they give us, as we look at their life lived out in the crucible of affliction, persecution, and affliction. The great trials, and yet they remained faithful to You, increased in their faith toward You, and their love for one another.

So often it's during times of trial that we are joined together in a closer relationship to one another in Your family. And we're given opportunities to help one

another. —And they did that. They're a great example to us. And we pray that we would emulate their example. What we learned here, even more basically is You are the source of all of that. You're the source of grace and peace, and You give it to Your people. And we are to walk by faith. And as we walk by faith, we will experience that and it will take us through difficulties. But we will experience Your faithfulness. You will not abandon us. We thank you and praise You for that.

And we turn in our thoughts now to the cross and remembering what the Lord did to gain all of that for us. We can have the assurance of our salvation, and our place in the kingdom of God, of the eternal, glorious future that we have, as we understand firmly what Christ did in purchasing us at Calvary and gaining for us eternal life. Suffering in our place, He saved us at the cross, and the Spirit of God applied all of that to us in our time. We thank you for that.

Now help us, Father, as we come to this very important moment of remembering Christ in the taking of the Lord's Supper to do that, to remember Him, and be encouraged and built up in the faith. We thank you for Him. We thank you for Your Son whom You sent into the world to die for us, and for His willingness to come for us. And it's in His name we pray. Amen.

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