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### **The Power to Endure when Everything Falls Apart 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

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. 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, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:1-10).

As I began to dig deeply into 1 Thessalonians 1 over the past couple of weeks, a statement that I might have taken for granted at any other time in my life suddenly became very personal to me. I hope what I say next won't come across as an appeal for pity or sympathy, but the past 8 months have been the most taxing, trying, painful time of my life.

Back in late October and in the months that followed I watched a close friend betray his faith, turn his back on me, and refuse to repent for his obvious sinful actions. Never in a million years could I have anticipated that Mike Bickle could be guilty of the things that are now obvious. Again, I'm not asking for your sympathy, but this was the most devastating betrayal and loss that I had ever experienced in my now 73 plus years on earth. I had stood boldly in defense of Mike's integrity and theological orthodoxy on countless platforms and in articles and on podcasts. To watch him and IHOPKC implode has prompted the cynics and cessationists of the world to criticize, mock, and ridicule me for not seeing through the façade Mike projected. Quite honestly, I deserved their pushback for not having the discernment to see what was obviously beneath the surface of his professed commitment to Christ.

But as bad and disillusioning as the collapse of Mike Bickle and IHOPKC has been, what we all have suffered through since Sunday night, February 18 has been immeasurably worse. I apologize to those of you who perhaps don't have any idea what I'm talking about. But I assume that you know at least something about the events these past four months that have led to our gathering here on Wednesday nights.

Losing Mike's friendship is one thing, but losing my relationship with three friends whom I have known for nearly a half a century is altogether something else. Then, on top of that, I lost my church family, or at least a significant portion of it. I never thought I would feel pain worse than that inflicted on my heart by what happened in Kansas City. But then Sunday night, February 18, happened.

I don't think there is any need for me to go into detail about what led up to that evening or the events that have transpired in its wake. However, I will say this. What I have suffered in these four months is nothing compared to what both Michael and Kendra have endured. That is why, in one sense, what I'm saying to you here tonight I say on their behalf as well. In fact, I say it on behalf of all of you who have walked through this nightmare with us. So many of you have reached out to the three of us asking how we are doing, offering to pray for us, and always pouring your encouragement into our hearts.

But of course the greatest comfort that all of us have is expressed in Psalm 23:4 – "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." It is the constant presence and affirmation and assurance of hope that comes from Jesus that has kept me breathing through a time in life when I feared I would suffocate from sadness.

Now, what does any of this have to do with 1 Thessalonians 1? Good question. My answer tonight is found in one phrase in v. 3. There Paul refers to three things that had happened in the lives of the Thessalonians that account for him giving thanks to God. My concern tonight is largely with the third of these three. The ESV translates it as “steadfastness of hope.” I prefer to render this “the *endurance* of hope.” Of course, “steadfastness” and “endurance” are virtually synonymous, but for our purposes tonight I prefer the word “endurance.”

Paul isn’t saying that hope experiences endurance. His point is that *hope produces endurance. Endurance is the fruit of hope*. How do we survive painful and disconcerting times, such as we’ve all experienced in recent months? *We not only survive but thrive because of the hope that we have in Christ Jesus*.

Just as faith prompts and produces work and love produces labor, so also hope in our Lord Jesus Christ bears the fruit of endurance. Without that hope, we are doomed to complain and gripe and blame others for our sadness and eventually just quit altogether. So, why haven’t I quit? I’ve come close. Ann will bear witness to the times I’ve come to the brink of despair. And if Michael or Kendra were given the microphone tonight, they would likely say the same thing.

But I don’t want the focus to be solely on the three of us, because I know many of you, perhaps most of you, have suffered greatly with the loss of friendships and the pain of betrayal and the agony of losing your local church. You too, no less than the three of us, have been tempted to quit, to walk away, to wonder, as you make your way through the valley of the shadow of what feels like death, if there is anyone beside you to help you make it to the finish line. The answer, of course, is yes. The great shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ, promises to walk alongside us, in front of us, and behind us wherever we go. Knowing that this hope is solid and secure is what alone will account for our endurance.

All of you, undoubtedly, have experienced a time in life when you felt utterly overwhelmed, as if you were sinking beneath the burden of betrayal and loss, or perhaps pressures and problems that seem to crush the very breath from your body. This past week I was reminded of how King David responded to this sort of trial and tribulation. Look with me briefly at Psalm 69.

To The Choirmaster: According To Lilies. Of David (Sam?).

Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies. What I did not steal must I now restore? O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.

Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O Lord GOD of hosts; let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me, O God of Israel. For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother’s sons. For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting, it became my reproach. When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me.

But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness. Deliver me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters. Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me.

Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me. Hide not your face from your servant, for I am in distress; make haste to answer me. Draw near to my soul, redeem me; ransom me because of my enemies! (Psalm 69:1-18).

Does that describe you as I feel it describes me?

### *The Power of Grace that comes "To" us through the Scriptures*

I want us to slow down for a moment and address the question of how a passage of Scripture like Psalm 69 or one simple phrase in 1 Thessalonians 1 have the power to sustain and uphold us in the face of heartache. To do that, I want us to back up to v. 1 of 1 Thessalonians chapter one. Many of you will recognize what I'm about to say, because you were present in years past when I pointed this out to you in other sermons.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul closes his opening salutation with the words: "Grace to you and peace." And in the last verse of this epistle, he says "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (1 Thess. 5:28). In some of Paul's letters, such as 2 Thessalonians, he says, "grace to you and peace from" God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. But my point is that in every single one of Paul's letters except Romans, he concludes his letters by saying, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be *with* you" (1 Thess. 5:28). In 1 Timothy, he shortens it and simply says, "Grace be *with* you" (1 Tim. 6:21).

Once again, those of you who have sat under my preaching for the past 14 years know well my love of prepositions. They are rich and deep and glorious and communicate wonderful truths to our hearts. So let me once more point out to you that at the beginning of Paul's letters he says, "grace and peace" be **TO** you, while at the close of his letters he says, "grace be **WITH** you." Why does he shift from the word "to" to the word "with"? Am I making a mountain out of a grammatical molehill? I don't think so.

I must be honest with you when it comes to what I'm about to say. It didn't originate with me. I learned of this from my friend John Piper. Therefore, it seems only fitting that you should listen to how he explains it. John explains the meaning of these two prepositions and why they are crucial for our Christian lives:

"The meaning I would suggest is this: at the beginning of his letters Paul has in mind that the letter itself is a channel of God's grace *to* the readers. Grace is about to flow 'from God' through Paul's writing *to* the Christians. So he says, 'Grace *to* you.' That is, grace is now active and is about to flow from God through my inspired writing *to* you as you read – 'grace [be] *to* you.

What I'm trying to say, what I believe Paul is saying to all of us, is that when we open our Bibles and read them or meditate upon them or hear them explained and applied by a teacher, more is happening than simply the utterance of words and the hearing of those words. More is happening than merely having our minds filled with new ideas or challenging doctrines. As Piper says, "grace is about to flow 'from God' through Paul's writing *to* the Christians." Now, let's return to the quote from Piper.

But as the end of the letter approaches, Paul realizes that the reading is almost finished and the question rises, 'What becomes of the grace that has been flowing to the readers through the reading of the inspired letter?'

Let me once again pause and highlight this point. Whether it is on a Wednesday night or a Sunday morning or a small group gathering in someone's home, when our time together in God's Word comes to a close, God's activity in our hearts doesn't cease. The grace that he quite literally imparts to us by means of the Scriptures abides with us and continues to strengthen and encourage us in whatever we face each day. Now, back again to Piper.

He answers with a blessing at the end of every letter [except Romans]: 'Grace [be] *with* you.' *With* you as you put the letter away and leave the church. *With* you as you go home to deal with a sick child and an unaffectionate spouse. *With* you as you go to work and face the temptations of anger and dishonesty and lust. *With* you as you muster courage to speak up for Christ over lunch.

What then do we learn from Paul's unbroken pattern of beginning and ending his letters in this way ('Grace be *to* you.' 'Grace be *with* you.')? . . . We learn that grace is ready to flow *to* us every time we take up the inspired Scriptures to read them. And we learn that grace will abide *with* us when we lay the Bible down and go about our daily living" (*Future Grace*, 66-67).

The point is that when the Scripture text is read, as it was tonight, and as it is read every Wednesday night, this is not merely some religious ritual that we tag on to our service. Something of a profoundly supernatural nature is happening,

and we would do well to pay heed to it. I decided to highlight this fascinating use of prepositions to remind us all that when Paul wrote “grace to you and peace” he means that when you hear the truth of how hope produces endurance you would realize that this is far more than a collection of words that strikes your ears. It is also the instrument or means or channel or conduit, if you will, by which God’s grace enters into you and transforms mere words into power and strength to persevere when times are tough.

The only thing that will enable each of us to persevere and not grow bitter is our hope in Christ Jesus. The only way to protect your heart from crumbling is your hope in Christ Jesus. Right now, as all of us, to one degree or another, try to process what has happened in the past four months, our prospects for enduring and remaining steadfast without being crushed under the weight of pain and loss are wrapped up in whether or not our hope is fixed on Jesus and all that he has promised to do for us.

Perhaps I should define what Paul means by *hope*. He’s not talking about wishful thinking. Hope is not the same as an educated guess. Hope is not calculating the odds and placing a bet on what you think might happen in the future. Hope is not having a dream and crossing your fingers in the expectation that it will come true. Hope is **rock-solid confidence** that what God has promised to do for us every day until we stand before him at the end, he will in point of fact do. Hope is obviously future oriented. What we hope for in the future is that every syllable of what Scripture says Jesus will do for us, he will do.

So, when Paul says that the Thessalonians were enduring by means of hope, he is saying that every promise of God will be fulfilled. And knowing that this is true is what supplies us with the power to persevere when we are persecuted, and supplies us with the incentive never to quit when times are tough, and supplies us with the strength to maintain a humble and godly posture when faced with betrayal and heartache.

If you are wondering why Paul found it necessary to say this to the Thessalonians, it is because they, like most other churches in the first century, were being subjected to harsh persecution and slander and opposition at every turn. Look with me at Acts 17:1-9.

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go (Acts 17:1-9).

As you undoubtedly will recall, Acts 16 is the story of Paul’s ministry in Philippi and the conversion of Lydia. It was in her home that the new church was to meet. But before that, Paul and Silas had been savagely beaten and thrown into prison. Upon their release, they made the arduous journey of 100 miles from Philippi to Thessalonica. Amphipolis was 33 miles southwest of Philippi and Apollonia was 27 miles west southwest of Amphipolis. Thessalonica was another 40 miles beyond that. And let’s not forget that there were no Ubers or airplanes to help them make the journey. They made their way to Thessalonica on foot.

Thessalonica was the capital of the province of Macedonia, a harbor town and flourishing commercial center of 200,000 people. Upon his arrival there, Paul made three declarations, each of which was certain to arouse anger and put him and Silas in jeopardy.

*First*, he explained to them that Jesus suffered and rose from the dead. The message of a crucified Messiah was utterly abhorrent to the Jews. As far as they were concerned, the Messiah would never be subjected to such public humiliation and pain. Any suggestion otherwise was utter blasphemy. *Second*, he declared, as v. 3 makes clear, that “this Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ,” the Messiah. This is the main point Paul made each time he encountered the

Jewish people during his missionary journeys. *Third*, we read in v. 7 that Paul obviously declared Jesus to be king, not Caesar. This was more than a theological statement. It was politically revolutionary. Rome didn't care much if a person chose to worship Jesus as God. But the minute you suggested that Jesus was king and that even Caesar was subject to his rule and authority, you put yourself in great jeopardy. We see this played out in the final two verses of Acts 17.

Each of these three points made by Paul would have enraged the Jewish population in Thessalonica and led to persecution and slander. So, we now see why Paul said what he did in v. 3 about endurance. The Thessalonians were no different from other Christians then or from us today. How did Paul go about helping them endure? Quite simply, he spoke of their "hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

What sort of promises from God are the focus or object of our hope? Here are a few of them.

If you are weary of your constant struggle with indwelling sin, fix your hope on what Paul said in Romans 7:24-25a – "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

If your suffering, whatever form it might take, has tempted you to quit, to abandon faith and walk away from Jesus and the church, fix your hope on the promise in Romans 8:18 – "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

If you have begun to question your salvation and live in constant fear that God has abandoned you, or will at some point in the future simply give up on you, fix your hope on the truth of Romans 8:31-39 –

"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:31-39).

If you live in constant dread that a day is coming when God will lose his patience with you and cast you aside for more faithful Christians, fix your hope on the truth of what Paul said in Philippians 1:6 – "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

If you are physically exhausted and in constant pain and wonder if you can carry on much longer in a body that is wasting away, fix your hope on the truth of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 – "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed."

If you are plagued with doubts about whether your life will ever be pleasing to the Lord, wondering if anything you do might bring him glory, fix your hope on Paul's words in Ephesians 1:11-12 – "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory."

Are you beginning to see how hope produces endurance? If not, let me continue.

Perhaps you envision your future in eternity as one of dark, drab, boredom, that will differ little if at all from what you experience now, fix your hope on Colossians 3:4 where Paul confidently declares that “when Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

If you constantly fret and worry about whether God will come through for you and remove from you every last vestige of sin and corruption, fix your hope on the promise of 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 – “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”

Or if you wonder whether God’s promises to you will erode and decay once you arrive in heaven, fix your hope on what Peter says in 1 Peter 1:3-4 – “According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

If you are burdened each day, fearful that what you are today you will be the same forever, frightened by the thought that this is as good as it will ever get for you, listen to the apostle John and fix your hope on this glorious promise – “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

And the best thing of all, the most glorious promise from God to you and me, the one thing that must be the driving force in all of our hope, is that we “will see his face” (Rev. 22:4a).

### *Conclusion*

So, once again, the question I’m asking all of us tonight is this: What keeps your feet on the path of obedience to Jesus Christ when each day brings yet another disappointment? How does your heart remain faithful to the Lord when your life is characterized by constant frustration, broken relationships, the loss of a job, financial challenges, the gradual dissolution of a marriage, and all manner of hardship that comes to you day after day? What keeps you going when the normal sources of comfort and encouragement disappear, and you feel utterly abandoned and all alone?

We know from countless texts in Scripture that God calls on us to endure, to persevere, to maintain our faith and commitment to holiness no matter what comes our way. But how? Where does endurance come from? Paul clearly says here in 1 Thessalonians 1 that it comes from hope! And where does hope come from? Listen to Paul’s answer in Romans 15:13 – “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

“But Sam, how can I be assured that if I turn each day to God and his promises that he will sustain me in hope and holiness?” You can be assured because it is God who makes the promise.

“I *will* make with them an everlasting covenant, that I *will* not turn away from doing good to them; and I *will* put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (Jer. 32:40).

This is the same as Ezekiel’s saying in 36:27.

“I *will* put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezek. 36:27).