

Weak Christianity does not equal fake Christianity

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[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon and welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime talk. Let me just start by praying.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. Thank you that we have this chance to read it. Help us by your spirit to understand it. Help us to listen to you, to love you more, and to grow in our desire to obey you today.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, over the next couple of weeks, we're going to spend a bit of time in the first chapter of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

If you've got one of the Bibles, you can find that on page 986. So please do turn with me now to that passage, and we'll read it together.

So 1 Thessalonians, chapter 1. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

[1 : 06] 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 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 turn 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.

[2 : 30] Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. As a young child, I visited many historical sites.

And in particular, I visited the gift shop of historical sites. And so as a connoisseur of history themed tat, I was particularly fond of the replica Roman coin.

Now, at the same time as this, my mother, being an archaeologist, had plenty of the real thing lying around the house, real Roman coins. But to my mind, the real thing wasn't nearly as shiny as the replicas I could buy with my pocket money.

After all, they'd been sat in the ground for almost two millennia. They were in pretty rough shape. But to my young mind, the shiny, good looking fake was vastly superior to the real thing.

I didn't understand that the real thing looked unimpressive and the fake thing looked good. In my mind, real and impressive were tied closely together and fake and shabby were tied together as well.

- [3 : 44] Now, I wonder if you've ever looked at your Christian life and you've thought this faith is too shabby to be the real thing. I struggle with too much and I face too much difficulty.
- Is my faith the real thing? Or perhaps you've had similar thoughts about the church that you go to. Now, there's no shortage of churches out there that do things differently.
- Some make a huge effort to be shiny as they try and attract people. And if we think genuine is good looking, then they look like the real thing, unlike us.
- But in reality, they skimp on the message of Christianity and often they abandon it altogether. Perhaps you're fairly certain that you're on the right side of things, but that doesn't always stop that niggling doubt.
- After all, these others seem to be quite effective. For now, lots of other people flock to them. And it seems like the world loves them as well. And so you find yourself asking the same question.
- [5 : 00] Is my church the real thing? Is this actually true Christianity? Or does the difficulty we face mean that we've lost our way somewhere?
- You may have had doubts like that. I'm sure many of us have had doubts like that. Well, for those who have asked such questions, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is deeply encouraging.
- This week and the next, we're going to spend some time just in the first chapter of this letter. And here, Paul spends some time assuring the Thessalonian Christians that they are the real thing.
- They are real believers, even though their church life and their Christian life feels like the weakest thing going. It's real despite the persecution that's happening to them.
- Now, as is almost always true with Paul's letters, a good starting point in understanding the letter is understanding the people it's written to and the situation that they're facing.
- [6 : 05] Paul's writing for a reason. So what is that reason? Thankfully, we don't have to speculate here. The chapter, chapter 17 of the book of Acts gives us all the detail we need, along with little details in the letter itself.
- As soon as Paul came to Thessalonica, he did what he always did. He went to the synagogue and he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ there. But from a simply human perspective, the results looked decidedly mixed.
- There were some Jews who believed the gospel, but many of them didn't. And in fact, it was mainly the Greeks in the city who believed in the message of Jesus Christ, and particularly many of the city's important women.
- In fact, very soon after Paul arrived, the Jews became jealous of the fruit the gospel was producing in the Greeks in the city, and they stirred up a mob.
- They dragged some Christians before the authorities, and they accused them of sedition, of trying to undermine the Roman Empire. And because of the danger, Paul and his companions were sent away secretly at night to carry on their journey.
- [7 : 19] All of this took place within about three weeks. It's a very short stretch of time. I can't imagine as much happening in my last three weeks.
- And Paul hasn't been able to get back to them since that time. He's writing a letter perhaps about a year later. So what would the church that's experienced this be like?
- They're newborn, but they're immediately facing persecution. They've trusted Paul and the message he brought. But now Paul has gone. He's left them.
- And he's not come back since. It's easy to imagine Paul's concern for a church like that. He knows that Satan is hard at work trying to tear down Christ's work.

The lion is prowling around the church. I don't know if you've watched many nature programs, but the Thessalonian church is a bit like that newborn antelope we see.

[8 : 24] It's barely had time to find its feet. But its mother is gone. And now the lions are circling. A church that's faced this is in real danger.

It's a young, young church plunged immediately into persecution. They've believed in the gospel. And they've heard the gospel is the gospel of a victorious and powerful king.

A king powerful enough to conquer death. And yet death still seems very close at hand. Fear and persecution are right there immediately.

Perhaps you can sense the tension, the mismatch between the glorious gospel that they've believed and what it feels like on the ground. I think many of our struggles living the Christian life stem from that tension.

For the Thessalonians, doubts have set in. Is this the real thing? Is this message bearing the right fruit in our experience? And so crucially, leading on from that, is it worth persevering?

[9 : 34] Is it worth going through this difficulty? If this is not the real thing, if we don't have the real faith, then is it worth suffering for that faith?

Or should we perhaps take the easy way out? Go after something that feels better? Maybe that would be the wise path. So with this sort of thinking crouching at the edge of their minds, the Thessalonian church is in real danger.

It could so easily crumble away. And so that explains Paul's urgency to reach them, to get to them in time. Now, he did manage at long last to send Timothy back to them, aiming to establish them in their faith and to exhort them to keep growing.

And he's now received a hopeful report from Timothy. They're still alive, despite the danger. But Paul knows that the danger has not passed. Paul still needs to establish them, make them firm, strengthen them to stand against persecution.

And so with all of this in mind, we come to the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Today, we'll look particularly at the first four verses, and then we'll move on to the rest of the chapter next week.

[10 : 48] So let's just dive into those verses. With the doubts of the Thessalonian church in mind that undermine their faith, it's not surprising then to find in these first verses that Paul's first step is to encourage them.

Now, he's going to spend a good chunk of the letter later on, exhorting them, challenging them to live a godly life. But the first port of call has to be to strengthen them, to assure them, to set them on solid ground.

So are they genuine believers? Are they the real thing? Are they a real church? Should they bother standing firm or should they look for an easy way out?

Well, Paul wastes little time in bolstering their assurance. They don't need to be afraid. They are a real church. It's right there in verse one. Paul addresses them as the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's just the knowledge they need to stand firm. They're concerned that their persecution isn't normal, that it's not the right experience. But, Paul says, they are the real thing.

[12 : 15] It's a relief for them. It's a warm word of comfort. But perhaps you've known a similar feeling of relief. You're struggling at work. It's hard.

There's not much fruit to your labor. And your colleagues pick up on your faults all the time. And so you start to wonder, am I good at this job? Or should I give up on it all?

And then your boss comes over and says, well done. You're doing a good job. And we're very glad to have you with us. An encouraging word like that keeps you going.

A warm word strengthens you to carry on. And so Paul here immediately gives the Thessalonians warm words of encouragement, which is very nice of him.

But it begs the question, is he just being nice to them? Is there anything to these words or is it empty words? Now we've all received empty platitudes, I'm sure.

[13 : 15] And they're usually much more useless than saying nothing at all. For Paul's words to actually help the Thessalonians, they've got to be substantial. Paul is thankful for them.

He says that clearly. But why? Well, as we read through the passage earlier, you might have noticed a familiar trio. Paul's thanksgiving and warm words stem from the Thessalonians work of faith, their labor of love and their steadfastness of hope.

So what does Paul mean by these things? The first is their work of faith or their work produced by faith. The Thessalonians have let their faith affect how they live and work.

They don't just believe, but they are overt about their faith. There are things they do because they now have faith in God. It's hard to know exactly what it is Paul has in mind.

He might be talking generally about the good works they do now that they're Christians. Or perhaps he's talking more specifically about explicitly Christian things. It seems the church is involved in evangelism.

[14 : 27] He might have that in mind. Or it might be the fact that they now meet together to worship God. But whatever he means, Paul thanks God because their faith has produced work.

It's not idle and fruitless. The second of that trio is their labor of love. They work hard to love one another. Their love for their brothers and sisters is evident.

The third is their steadfastness of hope. They've not been drawn to despair over what they're facing. They haven't given up. Instead, they look forward to a day of hope and fulfillment when Jesus returns.

Faith, hope, and love. Paul thanks God that they have these three things. And it's in this way that Paul summarizes the whole Christian life.

And then says they have it. They have Christian life. Their faith wasn't a flash in the pan. It's full-blooded. It's real. Paul's effusive, overflowing, comforting thankfulness comes because the Christians display the real signs of genuine Christian life.

[15 : 43] His warm words are much more than an empty platitude. His comfort is substantial. Despite things looking weak, looking feeble, and feeling very difficult at the moment, they are really, really alive.

That knowledge tackles that tension. They feel frail, but God is working in them.

That's the knowledge that brings them comfort. The Thessalonians feel the rough and scuffed Christian life. They might not have the real thing. That's what they think.

They're at least tempted to think that way. But despite feeling like their faith isn't much compared to the other more powerful things around them, they display signs of real Christian life, real spiritual life.

Perhaps we experience some of the same tension that the Thessalonian Christians are facing at the moment. We've given our lives to Christ and to his work. It's hard.

[16 : 50] People don't like us. And so it's hard to marry the gospel of a victorious Christ with a distinctly defeat-like experience at the moment. And there do seem to be other options that are more popular, more attractive to people.

Perhaps the parish church down the road that offers a fun, light message, but a license to live as you please. Or the prosperity church that runs from this tension and says the Christian not experienced victory, is the fake one.

They claim to be better at bringing people to spiritual life. Well, listen to Paul's encouragement. The weak thing that we've believed is the real thing.

The faithful, hard Christian life. God uses this to bring full-blooded Christian life to people. What strength that gives to stand firm when trouble comes.

The conviction that we are the real thing despite looking less than shiny. If you're not a Christian, then hear Paul's words as well. Perhaps you've written off the church because it doesn't look very good.

[18 : 06] Perhaps you've thought that too many people hate it for it to be the real thing. It faces too much suffering. Perhaps you look at the state of a beleaguered church and think, even if I was looking for something to bring me to real spiritual life, then I wouldn't look there.

But to think that would be to miss the truth. Even though real Christianity looks unshiny, if you want life-giving truth, if you want to hear and know God, if you want to come to life, then this, real Christianity, is the place to come to.

These weak-looking people are the ones who are coming alive by the power of God. It's on the back of this comfort, the confirmation that the Thessalonians have real life, that Paul strengthens them even further with his claim in verse 4.

Let's look at verse 4 together. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you. Now, perhaps for you, this sentence raises something of a difficult topic.

What does it mean that God has chosen us? Where does that leave human responsibility, free will, and a whole host of other things? Well, that's a very complicated topic, and I think the details of that discussion are probably for another time.

[19 : 26] And I think that because here, Paul uses the language in a slightly different sense. Rather than asking the question of how choice, sovereignty, free will interact, it's the question of who has God's favor.

Which group are God's people now? Is it the church? Or is it the Jews in Thessalonica? Or is it actually someone else, completely for that matter?

Well, says Paul, God has chosen these Thessalonians to be his people. He's loved them, and chosen them to come to life, not anyone else. Christians, like the Thessalonians, are the people God has chosen.

Paul knows it. He's sure of it. It's the same language that the Old Testament uses about Israel. God's loved, rescued, chosen people.

The ones who have the promises of God's love, the real thing. If we think once again about the circumstances surrounding the birth of the Thessalonian church, then perhaps this line of assurance starts to make a bit more sense.

[20 : 34] The Jews in the synagogue responded badly to the gospel, as they did in many places. And they were the first ones to bring suffering and persecution to the Christians.

So in that scenario, you can understand doubting whether God has really chosen you. Or are those who oppose you the ones who are chosen by God?

Are you on the right side? After all, the Jews in particular boasted of their historical privilege from God. And they did still seem to have power and influence.

It looked like they were blessed. But now you, as a new Christian, claim that through the gospel, you've received the privilege they had. You claim that the church is the chosen people of God now.

But perhaps you've started to doubt whether that really is the case. After all, if you were God's and he was yours, would you have faced so much persecution? Especially from the people who were once in your position, who claim to be on God's side.

[21 : 44] Or Paul reassures them, Christians, the church, really are the people of God now. No other group, no matter what they look like, no matter how powerful or blessed they look, no other people are God's chosen people.

Only Christians are the people of God. Now the age that the Thessalonians lived in was a pluralist age. Everyone in the Roman Empire claimed that they were the people.

The people on the right side, the ones who had the secret to real life. And many of those claims hit quite close to home for the Thessalonian Christians. I mean, the Jews claimed to be the real people of the same God, as did many other teachers who came along from odd sects and new cults.

Now is the culture we live in today any different from that? We're surrounded by other people who say they have the secret, that they are the real chosen people.

Even if you walk out to the door today of this building, turned left, and kept walking until you reached our Kelvin Grove building. You'd pass the Unitarians, you'd pass the Christian scientists, the spiritualists, and of course, the Sikh Gurdwara that you can't miss.

[23 : 03] But instead of turning left, if you turned right and walked down Buchanan Street, the central station, then you'd probably see some Mormons, and you'd almost certainly see Jehovah's Witnesses. Not to mention many so-called churches that have abandoned the truth.

And when so many claim the truth, claim to be the people, or even the people of our God, it can be easy for doubts to set in.

Especially if we are suffering and they look successful. But there's no antidote to the doubts of a pluralist society like Paul's words here.

Christians, real Christians who follow Christ and his pattern of suffering before glory, they are the only ones who are God's people. We are the real thing.

God has chosen us Christians. He's called us to real life and he's taken us to be his people. Our churches that look diminished and frail at times are the real thing.

[24 : 09] Our gospel that's despised by the world is the real thing. Now once again, you might be someone who's written off the church because of the persecution it faces.

You might have looked at all these other groups who claim the same thing, who claim to be the real chosen people of God and they look more successful. They're often loved by more people and you think, well, the truth must be with them instead.

Well, listen to Paul's words. The church, no matter how weak and battered it looks, is where God's chosen people really are. And so if you want the real thing, it's here.

Paul is concerned for the Thessalonian church. They are young and in danger. Thinking they aren't the real thing is the path to them giving up. But they are the real thing.

They have the real thing. They're the genuine article. And that knowledge strengthens them to stand firm. Real Christian faith is like the real Roman coins from my childhood.

[25 : 21] Rough looking, much less shiny than the fake. But it is the real thing. Real Christians have real life and they are the real people of God.

Should we suffer persecution for it? Should we go through hardship and difficulty for it? Well, yes. And knowing that we are the real thing helps us to stand confidently, established in our faith, enduring everything that comes until the day when Christ returns.

may the grace of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Amen.