

CD601 Proclamation and Communication  
Dr. Scott Ream  
A Reum Song  
Spring 2023

### **Sermon on 1 Thess. 1:2-10**

Have you ever been disappointed because you feel that all your hard work came to nothing? Have you ever been discouraged because it seems you had labored in vain?

When I began to serve in my church, I came to realize that doing the ministry is not an easy task because oftentimes I did not get to see the fruit of the work right away, even after I put much effort and time in it. In fact, I experienced, in many cases, the plans for visions getting frustrated and thwarted even before they were implemented. Naturally, such experiences led to great disappointment and sometimes even to fear. They became barriers to trying different things or enduring difficult situations. Am I the only one who experiences such discouraging situations? Certainly not. In the Bible, we clearly see many people go through situations where their expectations were not met, their plans got disrupted or they found themselves facing hostility from everywhere. Paul, who wrote the letter to the Thessalonian church is no stranger to such experiences.

Yet, Paul opened his letter with thanksgiving as we have just read together. He says he, Silas and Timothy always thank God for all the Thessalonians by continually mentioning them in their prayers. Paul also says that, in doing so, he remembers before God the Thessalonians' "work produced by faith," their "labor prompted by love" and their "endurance inspired by hope in Lord Jesus Christ." Does this mean everything Paul had done for the Thessalonians went well and turned out to be successful? Was everyone in Thessalonica so nice to Paul that he thanked God for all of them? As we will see, that was not the case. Then, why would Paul be so thankful? More importantly, how was he able to remain joyful and grateful, continuing the work entrusted

to him even in discouraging moments? How can we stay thankful and continue to be faithful to our calling?

To answer these questions, we need to understand the nature of Paul's grateful heart and affection towards Thessalonians. Here, some historical background will be helpful for us. The Book of Acts records how Paul founded the Thessalonian church and what happened during Paul's stay in Thessalonica in chapter 17. Paul, Silas, and Timothy had traveled from Philippi to Thessalonica in the so-called second missionary journey. Paul first went into the synagogue as was his custom, proclaiming Jesus as Messiah for three Sabbath days. (17:2-3) Some Jews and many Gentiles became converted and so the Thessalonian church began. (17:4) However, Jews who were opposed to Paul started a riot in the city, accusing Paul and his coworkers of disobedience to Roman emperor. (17:5-7) Eventually, Paul and Silas were sent away to Berea by the believers at night.

Can you imagine how Paul might have felt in that situation? The Thessalonian church was barely established when Paul had to escape the city after just few weeks of staying with them. He must have been deeply concerned for a young church separated from its spiritual leader while remaining under social pressure to return to pagan practice of idol worship. He was also worried that they might lose their faith because of the persecution from their opponents. In 1 Thess. 3:5, Paul says he was afraid that "in some way the tempter had tempted" them and that Paul's labors "might have been in vain." He tried hard to go back to Thessalonica, but without success. When it became clear that it was impossible for Paul to visit Thessalonica again, he eventually sent Timothy to find out about their faith. Paul expected Timothy to encourage and strengthen the Thessalonians who must be in great struggle.

However, what Timothy found out when he arrived Thessalonica was quite different from Paul's expectation. Surprisingly, what was happening in Thessalonica was truly unbelievable. Timothy reported to Paul that the Thessalonians were not losing faith at all. Rather, they were growing in faith, laboring in love and enduring in hope. And Paul reveals more in detail what he heard from Timothy about them as written in verses 6-10. They became imitators of Paul and his coworkers and the Lord. Moreover, they became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia as their faith has become known in other places. They not only accepted the Gospel message but the messengers of the message, Paul and his coworkers, with joy. They turned to God and stopped worshipping idols. And now they are eagerly waiting for the coming of the Lord. We can easily imagine how truly Paul got relieved when he heard such report. Not only that, what he realized began to bring unspeakable joy and filled him with gratitude. It was none other than God Himself who brought the change, sustained and kept them to be faithful. Paul's recognition of God's own doing reminds me of a female pastor whom I met more than 10 years ago. She was serving as a youth group pastor and occasionally was teaching the Bible to the women in my church. I joined her Bible study group once a week for slightly more than a year. It was not for a long period of time that she was with us, as she left a year later, but those who gathered together weekly to learn from her could see the change both in perspective and attitude toward life. After couple of years, we coincidentally came to the States at the same time. When we met again, she told me how frustrated she felt when she had to leave us abruptly. She thought she failed to be faithful because nothing special happened in the ministry, nor she recognized any tangible changes in the lives of people she served. Yet, as we visited each other from time to time, talking and sharing our lives more than before, she said she realized God had been working all along in the lives of people that she served once. She said she was seeing

changes in my life and others whom she pastored years ago for just a short period of time. I could clearly see how that encouraged her to continue to be faithful. Just as Paul, she found joy and strength when she recognized God's work behind the scenes. Knowing that truth indeed frees us from staying discouraged when things disappoint us. Paul was greatly encouraged by this. In verse 4, he says he is thankful because he knows that God has chosen the Thessalonians. He realized it was God who was doing the work because God was the one who chose them in the first place.

Yet, in that realization, he also recognized how God works through His people. In verse 5, Paul says the Gospel came to them not only with words but also with power of the Holy Spirit. God was using Paul and his coworkers to bring the Gospel message as God was opening the heart of the Thessalonians who were listening to the message. Not only that, Paul reminds them how they lived among them. The truthful and sincere lifestyle vividly demonstrated the Gospel message they were preaching. The Thessalonians not only heard the good news but also saw how that knowledge is lived out in a daily life. Paul finally saw the big picture of how God was working in the lives of the young church even as He was using Paul, Silas and Timothy powerfully. This is the nature of Paul's gratitude for God and affection towards the Thessalonians. This is why Paul burst out in thanksgiving. And through the letter, he was encouraging the Thessalonians, pointing to God who would unmistakably bring the work to completion. Such confidence in God was what motivated Paul to continue no matter what circumstances he encountered.

Have you ever seen bean sprouts grown at home? When I was in elementary school, we were learning about how to grow bean sprouts at home. The first step to grow bean sprouts is to soak beans in the water for hours. Next is to bring the soaked beans into a bowl with a hole on

the bottom. Then cover the beans with dark cloth. From then on, pour the water to the beans every 3 to 4 hours daily. Of course, the water doesn't stay in the bowl. It all goes down through the hole each time it is poured onto the beans. At first, I wondered, what's the use? Why pour the water if it's all drained? Yet, when I repeatedly poured the water, I began to see the beans sprout. Likewise, when we do the work we are called to but it doesn't seem to bear any fruit, we might wonder, what's the point? It might seem nothing is happening. We might not be able to see the fruit of the work ourselves in our own lifetime. But, if we stay faithful each time we are entrusted with God's work, God brings the work to bear fruit in the right time. Have trust in God's power to fulfill His promise. God's faithfulness is the reason we can be faithful. There is no failure in doing the work entrusted to us because God is the one who completes. Continue to preach the Gospel message regardless of situation and continue to live out the Gospel message you are preaching. Through you, God is working to save and restore those He loves. Are you having challenges and difficulties that keep dragging and discouraging you? It could be that God is about to show you how faithfully He is working behind the scenes. Trust Him to the end.