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# IN THE WAITING

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## True Believers

Have you ever wondered how your faith would hold up under persecution? Across the world, more than 360 million Christians suffer high to extreme levels of persecution for their faith in Jesus. That's one in seven Christians worldwide.

These are sobering statistics and really should drive us to prayer for our brothers and sisters who suffer persecution (1 Corinthians 12:26), but it should also motivate us to make the most of the freedom we have to boldly live out our faith, to declare and demonstrate this Good News of Jesus our Saviour.

### What's With Thessalonica?

In Paul's second mission journey, he travels with Silas and Timothy to Thessalonica where they established the church before being driven out of town by those who didn't receive the message of Jesus (Acts 17:1-15).

Thessalonica was a major capital city located along the highway connecting Rome and the east, only a few hundred kilometres north of Athens.

- + They were *free*, having been granted self-rule by the Romans.
- + They were *wealthy*, with a thriving seaport and other international trade.
- + They were *diverse*, with a melting pot of nationalities, religions and cultures.

Paul is now writing sometime after having been there to encourage the church he helped establish, and reminds them to hang in there through the suffering, to remain faithful to Jesus and keep their lives pure and holy as an example to others. His message of hope was that one-day Jesus is coming back and, in the waiting, they are to stay true to Jesus as a community of believers.

## **Faith, Hope and Love – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3**

Paul's pastoral heart really shines through as he reminisces about his time with them, speaking of how he still prays for them regularly. He's thankful and expresses this thanksgiving in a prayer.

The church in Thessalonica had found true Christian community. Because of what God has done through Jesus, we all have been brought into a community in which we are integrated into Jesus and related to each other. In a spiritual sense we become family, brothers, and sister on a journey of following Jesus together, worshipping our Father God. Looking after one another as we serve Jesus and each other.

This kind of community is marked by faith, love and hope. These are not merely inner virtues but are productive.

- + Their *faith* produced good work.
- + Their *love* became a labour of love for one another and the community.
- + Their *hope* enabled them to endure through continued persecution and difficulties.

## **The Full Gospel – 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5**

Have you heard the phrase, "They found God"? I'm not sure that is the case. We know that the love our heavenly Father has for us is one that sees us and pursues us and is relentless in His nature to find us when we are lost.

When we recognise that it has always been God's initiative, it not only guards us from taking the credit, thinking that we've saved ourselves, but it reminds us that nothing is ever going to separate us from that kind of love. And the amazing news is that if you want to know if God has chosen you, then the clearest answer you can get is by simply receiving it!

When the Gospel Paul preached came to them, it wasn't just words. Something happened in their hearts. The Holy Spirit put strength in their convictions as they received the message. There was a power at work that struck their hearts with truth.

Paul also reminds them that part of how the Gospel was presented to them, had nothing to do with the words but the actions of the Gospel. "You know how we lived among you for your sake."

The authenticity of their message was backed up by their actions. Paul and Silas and Timothy lived out the Gospel among them and it was powerful.

## **Living the Gospel – 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10**

It's much more comfortable to reject the idea of imitating someone, than to accept the responsibility that our lives should embody the Gospel in a way worth imitating.

It's not that Paul, or the Thessalonians, were good in and of themselves to imitate, but that because they had put their trust in Jesus, and received the Holy Spirit, that anything good in them worth imitating, was not of themselves but of God.

And what's particularly astounding about the Thessalonians, is not just that they had become good imitators of Paul, and therefore good imitators of Christ, but that they did so, amidst severe suffering, with joy, that they even became examples to believers all over the place.

How good would it be that this would be how people would refer to us. That the Gospel took such a transformation hold in our lives that people could pick us for followers of Jesus just by the way we conducted ourselves.

Even better that people would start imitating us as we followed Jesus. Not because we're so good, but because God and His Gospel are so good, and is at work, in great power, saving and transforming people, as they receive, embody, and proclaim the Good News.

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had a moment when you wondered if you were really a Christian? How can you know?
2. Why did Paul want the Thessalonians to recall their conversion story? What is your story?
3. How was it abundantly evident that the Thessalonians had received the Gospel?
4. In what ways had the Thessalonians embodied the Gospel? How do you see that as true in Christians that you know?
5. In what situations, or in what ways, do you find it difficult to imitate Christ?
6. What does Paul mean by the Thessalonians imitating him? Should we want our brothers and sisters in Christ to imitate us? Why or why not?
7. What opportunities do you have to declare and demonstrate the Gospel and Christ's Kingdom this week?