

**Whose We Are:  
Part Three. Faith and Our New Life  
I Thessalonians 1.9-10 and selected verses**

**September 10**

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This morning we are exploring one of the great and wonderful mysteries that lies at the heart of the Christian faith – how God conspires to bring us into his love for us not only by stepping into history as God the Son, but by stepping into our hearts as God the Spirit. And with that inner work he gives us unceasing power, and forms in us confident faith, and fills us with deep joy.

We're a few Sundays into our fall teaching focus, which is a deep dive into the New Testament letter called First Thessalonians.

In this letter, the apostle Paul, his ministry partner Silas, and his protégé Timothy, are writing to a church they planted in a hostile harbor city in northern Greece. But unlike the cool greeting they met with in the surrounding area, the Thessalonians have welcomed them with great warmth and wide open hearts.

Unfortunately, just as they were getting started, others who were hostile to their message caught up with them and began to harshly oppose them, and the three kingdom workers had to move on.

But now from Corinth, much too far away, they write these brothers and sisters who had become so dear to them, writing to thank them for their warm welcome, and to celebrate their remarkable spiritual growth, and to encourage them to continue in their progress in the things of God.

**Faith, Love, and Hope**

Three characteristics of the Christian life – *faith*: a life given over to God in trust, *love*: sacrificial regard for our brothers and sisters and for our neighbors, and *hope*: confidence that God can be trusted to fulfill his purposes in the future – are bedrock for Paul, and he circles back to them again and again.

We'll encounter those three in Romans 5.1-5, I Corinthians 13.13, Galatians 5.5-6, Ephesians 4.1-6, and Colossians 1.2-4.

I Thessalonians is the earliest letter that we have from Paul to any of the churches he planted or pastors he mentored. But even here, in the first of his many letters, he is already looking through the grid of the three graces of faith, love, and hope, as the defining dimensions of the Christian life.

Paul mentions them three times, at the beginning of the book, in chapter 1 verse 3, in the middle, in 3.6-8, and at the end, in 5.8.

Because these themes are obviously so important for Paul, we're taking the first half of this series to unfold each of these three graces, starting with faith.

### **What Paul Has to Say About Faith**

In some ways it's unfortunate that adherents to the Christian faith are often called "believers." It's not wrong – belief is absolutely the foundation of faith, and Jesus calls us to believe in him.

God took on human flesh. He died. And he rose from the dead. The Christian faith stands on belief in these historical realities.

Last Sunday Brently did a great job kicking off this section on faith by focusing on the person and the deed that stand at the center of Christianity and require our belief.

I Thessalonians 5.9-10

For God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever.

I Thessalonians 1.10

[We] are looking forward to the coming of God's Son from heaven—Jesus, whom God raised from the dead. He is the one who has rescued us from the . . . the coming judgment.

Christian faith anchors here, in these three historical events of the *incarnation* – God comes to us in the person of Jesus – the *crucifixion* – Jesus died in our place to reconcile us to the Father – and the *resurrection* – Jesus rose from the dead and is alive and with us now. Those three historical events form the platform on which faith is built and relationship with God is made possible.

But one of the things we'll discover this week and next is that, for the writers of Scripture, faith means something so much wider and deeper than merely believing something is true. It has to do with how we *live* as well.

That being the case, many widen the idea of faith to include not just what we believe about Jesus but also the life we seek to live for Jesus. That takes us much closer to a biblical idea of faith, which has much more to do with the allegiance we give a king than with the assent we give to certain truths, important as that is.

There's so much more to faith than mere belief. Many people trace the renewal of the church's renewed concern for missions after the Reformation to a man named Nicolaus von Zinzendorf.

In the early 1700s, when Nicolaus was eighteen, he visited the art gallery in Dusseldorf, Germany. As he was walking through the rooms he came to a painting by Domenico Feti called *Behold the Man (Ecce Homo)*. It shows Jesus as Pilate presented him to the crowds just after he was beaten by the soldiers, his face a picture of sorrow, his eyes swollen with tears, a thorn crown pressed down on his head, causing drops of blood to trickle down his forehead.

His arms are crossed in front of him, and one finger points to an inscription at the base of the painting that says, "All this I have done for you. What will you do for me?"

Is that what scripture intends when it widens the idea of faith to include not just what we believe about Jesus but also the life we seek to live for Jesus? Sort of a *Saving Private Ryan*, "earn this" response to the death of Jesus? God was displeased with us, he sent his son to die for us, now we need to live a life that pleases him?

It would be easy, if you did a quick skim of I Thessalonians, to conclude that that's exactly what Paul has in mind. When he first mentions faith, love, and hope, in 1.3, he doesn't just talk about the Thessalonians' faith – he talks about "the *work* of [their] faith." What we do for Jesus.

And going a bit farther into the book, you come upon these verses.

I Thessalonians 2.12

We pleaded with you, encouraged you, and urged you to live your lives in a way that God would consider worthy.

I Thessalonians 4.1

We urge you in the name of the Lord Jesus to live in a way that pleases God,

But there's another dimension to a life of faith that we haven't touched on yet that is absolutely crucial to a biblically faithful way of understanding it.

Believing in the historical reality and redemptive significance of the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus? Absolutely.

Seeking to live our lives in a way that pleases God? Yes!

But here's the other dimension to a life of faith that we can so often miss. That is the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing us alive to God, and the way He encourages us and empowers us and equips us to live a life that pleases him.

There are two ways of thinking about the Christian life:

What I do for God  
What God does in and through me by His Spirit

My trying to live a life that pleases God out of my own effort is as impossible as it is exhausting. But the Holy Spirit equipping me to live a life that pleases God is as possible as it is joyful.

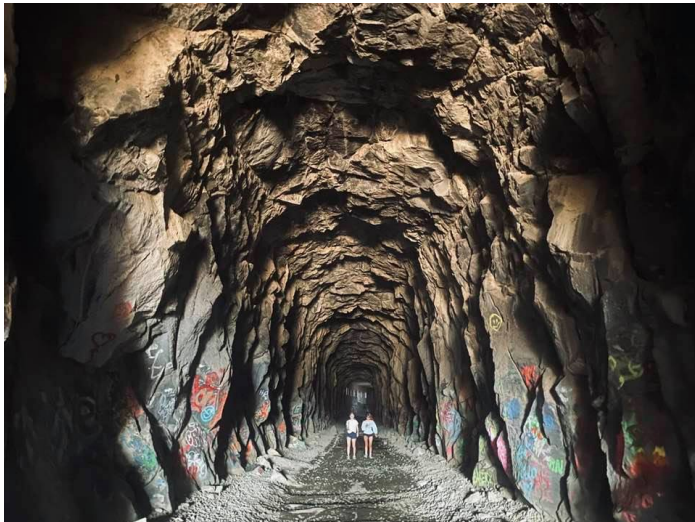
Last summer as I was driving out to Idaho for my pastors covenant group, I listened to Stephen Ambrose's book *Nothing Like It In the World*, which is about the making of the transcontinental railroad.

I was mesmerized listening to what was involved in tunneling through the Sierra Nevada mountains. For two years, fifteen thousand workers, mostly Chinese immigrants, dug 15 tunnels through solid granite. The longest was Tunnel 6, the Dommer Pass Summit tunnel, a third of a mile long.

They didn't have any power tools. To dig the tunnels, the workers used hand drills and hammers and dynamite and nitroglycerin, and they averaged about a foot a day. Can you imagine how daunting it would have been to make those first few hammer strikes against that massive granite block?

But . . . while one crew started on one end, another crew began to dig from the other end, and still another crew dug a shaft down from the summit and began to dig from the inside out. And suddenly an impossible job became doable.

### **Dommer Pass Summit Tunnel**



That's what the Christian life is like. It is a life we think we are living for God, carving out a life that pleases him, only to discover that it is actually a work that God is doing, a life that *God* is living, from within, with which he invites us to cooperate.

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That brings us to the theme of both this Sunday and next Sunday's messages: which is what Paul says about the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of faith.

Let me step back with you and notice two crucial and connected truths that come together in Paul's letter to his friends in Thessalonica.

First, the Christian faith teaches that God is one being, one essence, but in a way that is beyond our human understanding, he exists eternally in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This mystery of God's nature we call the Trinity, the tri-unity, of God.

Second, and of great importance to what Paul writes in his letter to the Thessalonians, the Christian faith teaches us that the Triune God conspires together to pour out God's love on us.

In love the Father chooses us.

That's where we started this series. Chapter 1 verse 4: we are dearly loved by God the Father and chosen to be his.

In love the Son redeems us.

That's what Brently focused on last Sunday, in the verses in chapter 5 that we just reread. Because he loves us so much Jesus laid down his life to reconcile us to God and to ensure that we could be together with him forever.

In love the Spirit brings us to life.

That's what we're focusing on today and next Sunday.

This morning we'll look at the way the Spirit brings us alive to God. And next Sunday we'll focus on how, after bringing us to life, the Spirit empowers us to live a life that pleases God, growing and deepening our spiritual maturity and forming the likeness of Jesus in us more and more over time.

So let's turn to the verses we're focusing on this morning: I Thessalonians 1.5-6, which explore how faith starts and spiritual life begins.

I Thessalonians 1.5

Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

Some translations render this in a way that has these words describing how Paul and Silas and Timothy communicated their message.

But Paul is describing not the message that he and his team brought, but how that message “came to them.” The word Paul uses here implies more than just the way the words got delivered. It implies that a change is taking place in the hearers. Literally it says not “it came to you” but “it became for you” more than simply words.

Something happened on the inside of them that allowed them to hear Paul’s message as an invitation from God and not just wishful thinking on the part of a human being.

Paul elaborates on this a bit later in the letter when he writes in

I Thessalonians 2.13

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

When Paul and Silas and Timothy talked about Jesus, something happened in the hearts of the Thessalonians. And Paul tells them and us who was ultimately responsible: the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, given by the Father, carving out their stony interiors from within, making a way for God, bringing the words to life and bringing their souls to life at the same time, breathing them to life in an act of new creation that mirrors the very first one, when God breathed life into Adam and Eve.

Jesus describes that miraculous giving of new life when he talks with Nicodemus about how the Spirit is like a wind that blows, like a breath that breathes, in the soul of a man or woman or child, wherever God wills.

John 3.5

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”

Paul echoes this idea of the Christian faith as becoming a new creation in his second letter to the Corinthians.

II Corinthians 5:17

So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.

According to Paul, there are three things he can point to as evidence that this is the miraculous work of God in the Thessalonians and in us, not just a passing feeling or something we muster up in ourselves. Look again at I Thessalonians 1.5:

Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

Here's how you can tell the Spirit was at work, bringing us alive to himself.

First, the invitation for us to be reconciled to God through the door that Jesus opened by his death on the cross was a message that came with *power*.

For the Thessalonians, and maybe for some of you, that power may have manifested itself externally. It was often the case in the era of the apostles and the early church, and it is still often the case today, that when the gospel first comes to a new region or a new people group, it is accompanied by miraculous displays of healing that serve as proof of its supernatural legitimacy.

When I led a Seminary in a Suitcase in Nepal, where the gospel was just coming for the first time to some areas, some of the pastors from those areas told me about walking into hospitals and praying for healing for terminally ill patients, and the patients being cured. It doesn't always happen, but it often does, when the gospel first comes to a place.

But whether or not there are external demonstrations of the Spirit's power, it is *always* the case that when the gospel first comes to an individual, it is accompanied by miraculous works on the *inside* of the person, works of power that are proof of its legitimacy.

Ask anyone who calls themselves a Christian, and if their faith is legitimate, they will be able to point to places in their inner life where they have experienced the power of God at work. It might show up in a new outlook. It might show up in a new ability to love and forgive. It might show up in being healed from an inner wound or being set free from an addiction. But always, it will begin to show up in a changed life.

Apart from Christ, every one of us is bent in upon ourselves, self-concerned, self-serving. And we are fundamentally incapable of changing ourselves.

Then along comes the Spirit of God, and we begin to experience change in areas of our lives where we are utterly incapable of changing ourselves. In a miracle that is replicated in the life of every single follower of Jesus, our lives, until that point bent in upon ourselves, begin to open up toward God and out toward others – the surest sign of the new life of the Spirit. There's no accounting for it – except the miraculous work of the Spirit of God raising us from death to life.

We don't really begin to see or understand God, nor do we begin to really see and care for others, whether they be in the house next door to us or recovering from an earthquake an ocean away, until the Spirit of God brings us to life.

When the Spirit of God begins to waken us to himself, we begin to change immediately. Something in us comes alive toward God, and we cannot help but begin to change when that happens.

I remember a number of years ago leading a man to Christ a week before he died. Up to that point his family would have described him as a hard and self-centered man. In the last days of his life they found a different man in that hospital bed: he started to show qualities they had never seen in him before: glimpses of things like kindness, patience, thoughtfulness, asking forgiveness.

As we'll explore more next week, when the Spirit of God brings us alive to God, the miracles don't stop. From that point on he begins the incredible work of shaping us more and more into the likeness of Jesus, a work he won't let up on until we go to be with him. This room is full of evidence of that transforming power.

I Thessalonians 1.5

Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

Paul says: Our message became for you more than simply words. It came with power. It also came with *conviction*.

When you stop and think about it, the Christian faith makes all kinds of absolutely incredible claims. There is an invisible being called God who is everywhere. Even though we can't see him or hear him, he walks with us and talks with us. But we pushed our creator out of our lives and took his place in an act that offended our creator. Nonetheless He pursued us. He inspired a book written by human beings that is both their word and his word to us. Some took him at his word, others didn't. Eventually He became a human being in a miraculous way and came and lived with us.

Some people recognized him but some didn't. He was put to death by some who didn't. They thought that was the end of it, and still think that. But when he died he was not having his life taken from him. He was actually offering his life as a sacrifice in place of ours, He offered it in our place to make us right with God. And then after he died he rose from the dead. And if we believe in him we will be reconciled to God and we will spend eternity with him in an invisible place called heaven. Well, at least to start with. At some point he will return to earth and make everything new and those of us who believe in him will be given new bodies and there will be a new heaven and a new earth and we will be with him forever.

Sounds ludicrous. But it's true. And it is the Holy Spirit who takes what seems like nonsense and persuades us of the truth of it. Who lets us receive the word with conviction.

I still remember the first and last time I tried to read the Bible as a kid. I was a ten year old at church camp, and I opened my brand new Bible with the pages still stuck together, and I started reading at the beginning, in the Book of Genesis, and within just a few pages I gave up, persuaded it was all incomprehensible nonsense.



The second time I opened a Bible I was a senior in college, sitting in Mickey Maudlin's apartment, reading the opening words of John's gospel, and they leapt to life as I read them, and resonated so profoundly with my waking soul. I knew them instantly to be God's Words, and true.

Paul's message was received with power and conviction. And here's the third way in which we see evidence of the awakening work of the Holy Spirit at the time of our conversion. It was received with *joy*.

I Thessalonians 1.6

You received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you.

At first it seems jarring that Paul would talk of joy and suffering in the same sentence.

Wait. Isn't joy the *opposite* of suffering? No, that's happiness. And happiness is about as lasting and reliable as the wind.

Corrie and I recently enjoyed our annual father daughter kayak trip, paddling down the Fox River in Illinois. At one point the wind was at our backs, giving us a gentle push. At other times it blew straight into our faces. But the whole time, the current of the river carried us along. Happiness is the wind. Joy is the current.

Joy is a settled confidence in the goodness of God no matter what. It is knowing that God is to be trusted, and that God is working, and that the purposes of God will prevail, in all things, even in this thing.

Joy is knowing the deepest reality of things – that God is, and you are his, and all things work toward his good and loving ends – it is knowing those truths and delighting in them and resting in them.

Joy is the wonder and delight that is forever welling up in the newborn soul that is still trying to take in – still trying to find words to express our gratitude for – the love and the grace with which we have been blanketed by God.

In love the Father chose us.  
 In love the Son redeems us.  
 And in love the Spirit brings us alive to God.

And the evidence of that new life is seen in the power, the conviction, and the joy that are beginning to be manifest in your life as your life is turned out from yourself and up toward God and out toward others.

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So Paul's question for us this morning: is this your experience? Have you experienced God bringing you alive to himself? Or does it still feel like you're in the realm of thinking of the Christian life as merely something you believe, or something you try to do for God?

The Spirit of God offers to bring us alive to the things of God. If you've experienced it you know exactly what I'm talking about. Some new dimension at the core of you awakens and begins to respond to the things of God.

Every one of us is in one of three places related to this

1. Either I am outside of this experience, in which case the most important thing I can do is explore it and learn more about it.
2. Or I am an insider to this experience, in which case the most important thing I can do is give God thanks for it and invite others into it.
3. Or I am experiencing it happening right now, I find myself in the midst of it, in which case the most important thing I can do is to give my life over to it.

Which describes you?

When you look at your life, do you see *power* at work in you, changing you from the inside out?

Do you find yourself with a growing *confidence* in the claims of Scripture about the Jesus and the things of God?

And do you find *joy*, and her sisters delight and rest, showing up unexpectedly in your soul?

Depending on your answer, I'd like to encourage you to consider taking one of three steps this week.

**If your answer is no**, if that's not your experience, if you find yourself standing outside the Christian faith and looking in, and you have questions or objections or there are things standing in the way of faith, then I want to invite you to join me in The Hub this Wednesday night from 7 to 9, or the second Wednesday night of any month, for *Conversations about Christianity*.

I remember so well what it was like as an atheist to begin to take the Christian claims seriously, and all the doubts and questions I had, and how much I wished there was a safe place to just talk those through. Well, there is.

Conversations is a small gathering specifically for those who are exploring the Christian faith and find themselves with unanswered questions. It's also for those who are their

friends who want to come with them as a way of encouraging them and helping them feel comfortable. This Wednesday night at 7 in the Hub.

I'd also encourage you to talk to the person who invited you to church. And if you don't have a bible, feel free to take the one that's in the chairs. We also have other versions back in The Landing if English isn't your first language.

**If your answer is yes**, if you can look back in your life and see clear evidence of that new birth, that new creation in Christ, then I want to encourage you to be obedient to the admonition in I Thessalonians 5.16-18, and come before the Triune God who has conspired to pour out his love on you, and rejoice and give him thanks, because God is good, and his faithful love endures forever. And then pray for opportunity to share with others what it might mean for them to have the same new birth that you have.

**And finally for those of you who find yourselves right in the middle of your soul coming to life**, if what Paul talks about to the Thessalonians of the power of God stirring in you and convictions about the things of God growing in you and the joy of God taking hold of you, and if you find yourself in a place of new faith in Christ, then we want to give you a chance to publicly express your faith next Sunday morning. And if you've never been baptized, you'll have the opportunity. If you find yourself coming alive to God right now, come talk to me after the service or give me a call at the church and we can talk.

### **Closing Prayer**

How do you respond to God's invitation to you this morning?

Lord, we open our hearts to you and say yes.

### **Benediction**

Taken from I Thessalonians 1.4 and 3.12:

Brothers and sisters, you are chosen by God and dearly loved.

May your love for Him, for one another, and for all others grow and overflow.