

1 Thessalonians

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[0:00] Thank you so much, Kristen, for reading.

It's a long passage for an epistle, but I think it will hang together well.! But there are other times we hear stories that make us sad.

And I think one of the saddest that I often sometimes hear is how maybe some Christian leader who has fallen. I mean, we know some famous examples like Ravi Zacharias, right?

He was this great apologist and so many people really helped in their faith. And then after his death, people discovered a big pattern of deceit and adultery and other things.

And it's very doubtful that this guy was a Christian. And there have been other famous leaders like that. And the worst thing about it is just the impact on ordinary Christians, right?

[1:05] People who have, wow, this was such a great leader and now actually I have doubts about my faith. Because, you know, I looked up to this guy, but he was a fraud.

How about the things he taught? Isn't that also now maybe not true? Right? That's very sad. I mean, you can imagine that, right? Maybe you're here, you come from another church, maybe you've been hurt by leaders and it makes you doubt your faith.

It makes you doubt the church. Now, I know what Christians often say, don't look at leaders, look to Jesus, right? Jesus is perfect and he won't let you down. That is true, of course.

It's wonderful that Jesus doesn't let us down. Ultimately, our faith should be based on what Jesus did, right? How he died and rose again. And yet that is not really what the Bible says. It doesn't say, don't look at leaders.

The Bible says, no, leaders are very important. So you need really, really good ones. That is, I think, what God wants to say today, right?

[2:03] Because, yeah, maybe you've been, if you think about your journey, how important have certain people been in your life? How important has a certain church and the leaders there, the preachers been for your faith?

It matters. So if you're a Christian, I hope when Paul says, hey, leaders are important and here's why and this is what you need, we want to listen. Maybe you're here, you're not a Christian, you wouldn't think it's that important.

Well, you're exploring Christianity, how are you going to do that, you know, on your own? You probably need to be part of a, come to a church, right? Because that's why you're here and that means that, yeah, churches have leaders.

I think this is relevant for you too. But I think that's where Paul is going because as you heard the reading, maybe it's a bit of an unusual passage, right? If you read Paul's letters, how does he start? Well, he starts with some thanksgiving and prayer and then he, well, he explains something about the gospel, he explains something about Jesus and then he tells you to live in the light of it, right? That's most of the letters in the New Testament.

[3:05] Except as you read these two chapters, he talks a lot about himself. He spends all his time talking, hey, this is what I'm like, what we were like when we were with you. Spends so much time talking about himself and then he talks about what happened, right?

I mean, we heard last week, Paul came to Thessalonica, preached the gospel, started a church, but then persecution arose and after three weeks he had to leave.

And so he explains kind of what happened and how he felt and what he did. I mean, it's very useful background information, right? I mean, we know a lot about this letter just because of what he just explains, how, you know, hey, we didn't stop caring for you, right?

Verse 17, hey, we were torn away from you brothers for a short time, but we endeavored to more eagerly with great desire to see you. But yeah, Satan got in the way, right?

So 3 verse 1, we sent Timothy to you to find out about you. And verse 6, now he's come back and he says, he's preached the good news of your faith and your love and wow, right?

[4:08] So we know a lot about the historical circumstances, that's helpful. But still, presumably Timothy said the same thing. Why do we have this big section about him telling us, hey, this is, you know, this is what we were like as leaders?

And then explaining all this, this journey. There's always a question, right? Why is the author including this? Why does he spend so much time talking about himself? Some people think Paul is kind of defending himself.

Maybe the Thessalonians, they had their doubts about Paul, right? This guy, he started the church, but then after three weeks he was gone and he hasn't been back. As we heard last week, can we trust this guy?

I mean, can we trust his message? If you can't trust a guy, can you trust the message? Although I don't think he's really, he doesn't sound very defensive though, right? And in 3 verse 6 he says, hey, Timothy said that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you, right?

It's a warm and friendly letter. It's not like Galatians or Corinthians. It's not that he's really having to prove himself. And yet he still thinks it's important for the Thessalonians to know what, you know, what good authentic gospel leaders are like.

[5:28] Yeah, because, yeah, I guess they're still vulnerable. They're having a hard time, as we heard last week, right? They were facing persecution. And it's very easy for people to sow doubts.

Hey, that guy Paul, I'm not sure if you can trust him, right? He's only been here, he was only there for three weeks and he hasn't been back. You can't trust him. Or maybe some other guys come in, right? And they stay for six months.

They have a bit of a weird message, you know, that Jesus is not enough and that you should get circumcised. But, I mean, they've been here so much longer than Paul, right? Maybe these are the, these are much better leaders.

Now, Paul just thinks it's good. Hey, I want you to recognize good leaders. I want you to know who is trustworthy, who you can trust, whose message you can trust. That will protect you.

That will help you. So, I think that's why, well, he's giving this big description of what they were like. And why, why that's important, we're going to come to that in the second point.

[6:27] But, yeah, let's go through verses 1 to 12. Let's go through, yeah, I think that's the main section about, yeah, and I think the point is, yeah, we need authentic Christian leaders.

We need good Christian leaders. And, yeah, he's giving a great model. So, they trust him and know who else to trust. And it's a beautiful passage. It's a famous passage about leadership. There's quite a lot in verses 1 to 12.

The best way, I think, to organize it, Paul has some kind of structure, right? Maybe you heard the word four a couple of times. So, it's in four sections and all of them are a contrast, right?

So, verse 1, 4. Verse 2, but. Verse 3, 4. Verse 4, but. Verse 5, 4. Verse 7, but. These four contrasts. So, four characteristics.

And, in a way, verse 1 is like a kind of headline, right? You yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. That sounds like it wasn't a failure.

[7:27] The word in isn't there. Our coming to you wasn't vain. It wasn't empty. It wasn't a fake. It was real. It was genuine. Well, in what ways? Well, first of all, you know, why were we such good leaders?

We were willing to suffer. Paul and his team, they were willing to suffer. And verse 2, but. Though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated in Philippi, as you know.

We had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God. I mean, they just came from Philippi. And the nice thing about having the book of Acts is that we know what happened, right? So, this was Paul's experience in Philippi.

So, he started a church. And then, Acts 16, verse 19. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, These men are Jews and they're disturbing our city.

And then, the crowds joined in attacking them. And the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.

[8:38] So, that's kind of Paul's experience in Philippi, right? And then, he gets to Thessalonica. Now, I don't know what you would do. I would be, keep quiet, okay? I don't want to have that again.

Well, not Paul, right? Even though we were shamefully treated in Philippi, we had boldness to declare, right? To declare the gospel, right? He boldly preached it.

These guys were not fakes. They really believed this, right? If people are willing to suffer for something, no one likes suffering, right? So, if these guys are willing to do that, that shows they must be pretty genuine, right?

In what they believe. They must be really real. They're not into it for themselves, right? It's still the same today. If someone is willing to preach something, that gets them vilified.

That gets them arrested. That's a sign you can really trust them, right? In some way. Or the disciples. Why can't we trust the disciples that they really believed in Jesus' resurrection?

[9:33] Well, because they suffered for it, and they didn't stop preaching it, right? What else? Well, verses 3 and 4. They were faithful with God's truth.

So, they preached the message, but they were also very faithful with it, right? Verse 3. For our appeal, our message, does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak.

Not to please man, but to please God. Right? So, you know, we've been entrusted by God with the gospel, and so, yeah, that's what we speak.

And so, we don't preach from deceit. We don't preach from error. We don't preach from wrong motives. We don't want to change the message. I mean, it would be good to change the message, right?

Make it more popular. Get more people. Get less persecution. But no, we're not going to change the message, right? Because we've been entrusted by God with this, and so we don't try to please people.

[10:34] We try to please God, he says, right? Even though it's very tempting. That's what Christians should do. Just, yeah, tell the truth. Even if it's not very popular.

Even though, you know, maybe some people don't like it. If you are willing to not be liked by preaching something, that's a good sign that someone is trustworthy, right? That they really, again, that they really believe, that they really have conviction in God, in the truth.

Of course, these two points sound like someone who's just very brash and doesn't care about people. Of course, Paul was more than that, right? Because that's what he goes on to in 5 to 8. His selfless, loving care. You can hear the contrast. Verse 5, we were never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed.

God is witness, nor did we see glory from people. That's someone who's self-serving, who wants your money, who wants your praise, who wants all kinds of things from you.

[11:39] But Paul says we didn't want any of that. We were selfless. Instead, verse 7, we were gentle among you. Like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

We didn't do ministry to get something from you. We were selfless, like a nursing mother. And we've had quite a few new babies here at Watermark. Can you think of anyone more selfless than a nursing mother?

When you get nothing out of it, right? The baby doesn't give you any money. It doesn't give you any praise. You know, babies don't give anything. They just poop and cry. And yet, you serve them day after day.

That's really selfless care. And so Paul says, yeah, we didn't make any demands. We were just selfless. And we loved you. And we cared for you. And we shared our life with you.

That's what they were like. And verses 9 to 12, look at our exemplary conduct. It's interesting. He says we were like a mother.

[12:39] And then verse 11, we were like a father. Now, we have his children. Of course, as a father, hey, you instruct your children, right? That's what he says. We were like a father. Verse 12, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God.

But I don't think it's just that we were telling you what to do because, you know, the worst leaders also tell you what to do. What is the thing? He emphasizes our example, how we did ourselves what we told you, right?

In chapter 5, he's going to tell them, hey, work hard and don't be a burden to people. Well, we ourselves, hey, we worked hard and we were not a burden to you, right? He says, hey, we want you to live a life worthy of God.

But verse 10, you are witnesses and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct towards you believers. Right? You know, someone who practices what they preach. They don't just tell you to be holy, but they themselves, they apply it to themselves. They live it out themselves. That's really important. Jesus, he talks about the Pharisees as those who, they lay heavy burdens on people, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger.

[13:55] So people who tell you, do this, do that, and they themselves don't do it. Now, here are, Paul says, hey, we were great examples to you. Right?

We live this out ourselves. We told you how to live, but we did it ourselves as well. Exemplary conduct. By the way, this is a good thing for parents. You know, it's not just what you tell your children to do.

You need to do it yourself, right? If you're a bad example, your children are not going to listen to you. I think that's very helpful to know. But there you have it. Paul's reminder of, yeah, how they lived, how they were when they were with them those weeks.

And he says, look, Thessalonians, look at us. You can trust us. Right? Don't let anyone sow any doubt in your mind. Right? This is what good leaders look like. In a way, you know, it's just being like Jesus, right?

It's all these things. Of course, you can say that Jesus was willing to suffer. Jesus was faithful with God's truth. Jesus was the most selfless person ever. It's just like Jesus.

[14:57] Of course, Jesus is the true shepherd, but he's not here. That's why he gives under shepherds. But yeah, here's a great model of what it's like to, well, what leaders should be like.

Now, that's an easy way to apply. Now, there's quite a lot of people here, but I think about 70 or 80 leaders among us, right? If you add the kids leaders and the youth leaders and the CG leaders and ministry leaders.

Last week, if you were here, you saw all those kids leaders. There's quite a lot of people here. Well, here is a bit of the bar that Paul sets. For me as an elder, well, okay, this is what leaders should be like.

It's a high bar, but it's good. It's beautiful, right? So yeah, how do we measure up? Am I willing to teach the truth, no matter the cost? Do I really selflessly love people?

And am I in this just out of love and not for what I can get out of it? Do I live out in my own life what I teach others? They're really great questions, a great challenge.

[16:00] Though again, I think we're a wonderful church. We have wonderful people leading CG and leading kids and youth. We're a great church. So many people giving their time selflessly, caring for others.

Now, that's a good application. But I don't think that's the main point. Paul is not saying, hey, elders of Thessalonica, this is what I want you to do. Although I hope they listen and learn. Well, here's a question, though.

Why is having good leaders so important? Why does Paul make such a point of this? And for that, I want to kind of look at the rest of the passage.

Because in a way, there's no direct teaching. He's just talking about, you know, what happened. What, you know. And of course, there's things we can learn, right? Sometimes Satan gets in the way. It's good to send a young co-worker if you can't go yourself.

But that's not, I think, the kind of things we're supposed to learn. Clearly, though, you can see Paul's incredible concern for these people, right? You can see how much he cares for them.

[17:04] How anxious he was when, you know, he was torn away and couldn't care for them. And how happy he was when they were doing well, right? It shows his heart, right? You know, that's part of being a good leader.

You really care about people long-term. It's a great characteristic. But actually, I want to look at the underlying point. Why is Paul so concerned? Not just because he...

Why is this something to be really concerned about? Why is this something that is so important?

And I think if you read this passage, if you read the New Testament, one big thing that comes through underlying it all, well, because Christians need to endure to the end.

Christians need to endure to the end. Christians need to keep trusting Jesus all the way to the end, until they die or until Jesus returns. But we need to endure to the end.

It's vitally, eternally important. And I mean both parts of that phrase, right? Christians need to endure. The Christian life is not cruising to the end.

[18:12] It's not smooth sailing to the end. It's going to be hard. And Paul makes it so clear throughout this passage, right? I mean, already last week, he said, hey, 1 verse 6, you received the word in much affliction.

But then, yeah, 2 verse 14, hey, you became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. How did you become imitators? Well, you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews.

3 verse 2, I sent Timothy to encourage you. Why? Verse 3, 3 verse 3, so that no one may move by these afflictions.

For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction. Just as it has come to pass and just as you know, right?

He has been telling them, we're going to suffer. We're going to face these things. I mean, what? It's all through this passage. And of course, Paul himself, right? He has been in Philippi, in Thessalonica.

[19:14] That's why he had to leave. 3 verse 7, in all our distress and affliction, and affliction, we've been comforted. The whole picture you get of the Christian life here is that it's, well, it's enduring affliction, right?

It's not easy. And it's not just for a little bit, right? It is all the way to the end. But Thessalonians has such a big focus on Jesus' return.

Every chapter ends with Jesus' return. Because, of course, Jesus' return is the most important thing, right? What is this whole Christianity about? It's about how this world is, you know, is a mess. It's cursed because of sin. But God is going to come and judge and save his people and judge the world and make everything right. That's why we need to believe in Jesus, so that, you know, we'll be safe in the judgment.

That's the whole point of being a Christian, right? If you're here, you're not a Christian, you may wonder what's the big thing about being a Christian. Well, that one day you'll be saved. At the end of chapter 1, we heard it last week, right?

[20:17] Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come because he paid for our sins so that we can stand in the judgment. But every chapter ends with that, and that is Paul's big concern, right?

2 verse 19 and 20. What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus had his coming? Is it not you? For you are glory and joy.

And what brings Paul the greatest joy? Well, he's thinking about Jesus' return. It's not that I've planted a church. It's not that some people came to faith. But that one day before Jesus, that's where they are, right?

When we're before Jesus, then that is my great joy. And 3 verse 13, right? And he prays for them at the end. What does he ask God to do?

Well, 3 verse 13. So that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. What does he pray? Is that they are there at the end, blameless before Jesus.

[21:18] That is what he wants. That's the goal. That is Paul's concern. Why was he so worried about them? It's not, yeah. Why was he worried? Well, 3 verse 5.

I was sent to learn about your faith for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. He was worried that they would give up. He was worried that they wouldn't make it.

And 3 verse 8. The positive. For now we live if you are standing fast in the Lord. Why is he so happy? Well, because they're still going. They're still standing fast.

They're still trusting Jesus. They're still being Christians. Right? What does he pray for that they're established? I hope you see that. The big thing about being a Christian is it's hard, but you need to make it all the way to the end.

Yes. I mean, if the Christian life was easy, Paul didn't need to worry. Right? He planted a church. People became Christians. Well, now they are blessed. And they're going to be prosperous and

healthy and wealthy.

[22 : 17] Because I know the plans I have for you. Plans for good and not for evil. Right? You know, God has a wonderful plan for their life. They're going to be fine. Let me go to the next town. Then Paul wouldn't be anxious.

Except he is very anxious. He's very worried about them because there are very young Christians who haven't had much help. And he's just worried that they give up under all the persecution they're facing.

Right? Right? That's why Paul just really cares that they make it. That's why he, maybe you wondered why he's so angry with the Jews in 2 verse 15 and 16.

Well, because they stop people being saved. Right? It's not that he is anti-Semitic. He himself is a Jew. You can ask me more later about that. But, you know, there's people who stop the preaching of the gospel.

Who stop people being saved. Who get people to give up their faith. That makes him angry because he's just so concerned. That people make it to the end. I hope you get the point. Right? We need to endure to the end.

[23 : 18] That's the underlying thing here. Why Paul cares so much about them. Well, are you aware of that? Are we ready for that?

Okay, you're a Christian. Do you know that Christian life is going to be tough and you need to make it to the end? Is that what you believe? Are you ready for that? Is that how you see the church?

That it's nice to come here together. But the main thing God brings us together is to help us make it to the end. Right? Someone doesn't come to your CG for a few weeks.

Ah, they're probably busy. They probably have better things to do. Or do you think, well, I want to make sure they make it to the end. Let me... Are you concerned about them? And, you know, give them a text.

Hey, how are you doing? Right? I mean, if we really believe this, we want to care for each other.

Right? We care for ourselves and care for others that we all make it. Of course, it varies from time to time and from place to place.

[24 : 17] Hong Kong is a relatively easy place to be a Christian. Right? There's plenty of places in the world where it's really hard. Where, yeah, your life is at risk. Here, it's different.

Of course, it doesn't mean that it's fully easy here. Satan has lots of tools that he can use. Right?

He can seduce us with money. He can keep us so busy and so focused on our careers that we just keep quiet and no one hears the gospel.

Satan has other tools. But still, things might change in the future. We need to be ready for, yeah, for a race. For a...

Not a walk. Not a stroll. A race. Right? A fight. That's all the kind of metaphors Paul uses. A race. A race. And yeah, if you put those two things together, there's one reason why you need good leaders.

Right? Christians need to endure to the end. And so, yeah, if you have a leader who falls and a lot of people get their faith destroyed, you don't want that. Right? You want leaders who help you, who are trustworthy, who tell you the truth that you can rely on, who care for you selflessly, who do anything to help you endure to the end.

[25 : 29] Because that is what we need. Right? Right? That those two things go together. And if anyone doesn't fit the profile, if he falls short in a big way, well, beware. Right?

They might lead you away from Christ. They might take advantage of you. Destroy your faith. You don't want that. Right? If leaders really help in your Christian life, and it's so important to make it to the end, yeah, you want good leaders.

And if they're the foundation of your faith, you need a good foundation. So let me make a few applications along those lines. Maybe you're here as a newcomer. We have quite a few visitors. I think last week was our biggest Sunday yet. Maybe you're looking for a church. Why would you choose a certain church? Maybe because it's got great music, very convenient parking, and lots of young adults who could be your friends.

They're all very good things. But what's actually far more important? I mean, we heard last week, you know, that the gospel is preached, God's word is preached, and that it's producing fruit in people's lives.

[26 : 32] And then from today, well, what are the leaders like? Are they people who are a godly example? Right? People who selflessly serve, who preach the truth no matter the cost.

Right? Because those things really matter. I'm not saying you should join Watermark. There's lots of good churches in Hong Kong. But it's a real consideration. Right? It's more important than some other things.

Or maybe you're a member and you need to move. Because we have, you know, we're an international church. We have people who get jobs overseas or who go back to family.

Or, you know, maybe you move to a different part of Hong Kong and Wong Tuk Hang is just too far. You know, what kind of church are you going to look for? Well, look at the teaching and look at the leaders and look at the fruit in the people's lives.

They're more important than lots of other things. Right? Again, it's great for people who are committed to stay here. But, you know, the reality of life is that sometimes you move.

[27 : 28] You want to have a good church with good leaders. Here's another one. I think that's helpful. Accountability. Right?

If leaders are so important, I hope you pray for them. I hope you pray for us. Right? For the elders. For the pastors. If you're in a CG, do you pray for your CG leader? That would be a great thing to do.

Right? That we would not go astray. Because the sad thing is that we're human. We're sinners. We can go astray. And if we do, please do something.

Right? If you see us go away, you know, please meet up. Please tell us what you see. And hopefully the spirit will grant repentance.

Right? We need, you know, we need to make it to the end. We can go wrong. We'd love you to speak to us if you see something go wrong. That's really important. And if we don't listen, you know, maybe you should go to another church.

[28 : 26] Or get us to resign. Maybe that would be a great, good for the other watermarkers too. But, you know, this is very, yeah, leaders are really important. And Paul wants, he shows you this is what a good leader is like.

This is the kind of leaders you should have. That's important. But this can all sound quite negative.

Right? This is a warm and positive passage. You know, there are high stakes, absolutely.

But, you know, I hope if you have good Christ-like leaders that you can be really thankful. Please encourage them. Maybe that's a nice thing. Right? Let's be positive. That they, but pray for them that they will stay on track.

That they will help you stay on track. Because eternity matters. Right? Making it to the end is what matters. And even if things, you know, and even though that's all true, remember there's also a bigger reality.

Now, I put a lot of emphasis on leaders. This passage talks a lot about human responsibility. Right? It talks a lot about our need to, you know, to make it to the end.

[29 : 31] On leaders helping you make it to the end. And yet, if your salvation was on my shoulders, I couldn't handle that. So, you know, I said that every chapter ends with Jesus' return.

Let's go to the end of chapter five. Actually, I've put it on the screen. These are some famous words. This is how Paul finishes. Yes, he exhorts them. Yes, he encourages them. Yes, he tells them to keep going.

But now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. 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. And it talks about making it to the end. Standing before Jesus. But ultimately, you know, there's someone who wants you to be there.

Someone who is gracious and powerful. And so even though we need to press on, we need good leaders. Ultimately, you're not going to be there because of God, because of faithful leaders, but because of a faithful God.

[30 : 34] Right? Yes, as we press on, let's keep our hope and our trust ultimately in the God who works through these things. Right? Who gives us leaders. Who gives us the church.

Gives us what we need to make it to the end. And that's why in a moment we're going to sing, he will hold me fast. Because that is our ultimate confidence. But yeah, I think a lot of us for us to think about.

A lot of us for us to think about, you know, how we press on, how we help each other. And yeah, what do we need in leaders? Why don't I pray? And then after that we'll pray together. So we will pray in groups. Father, thank you for Paul and his great example of selfless care, of faithfulness to you, of his example.

Paul, we, yeah, that was so encouraging for the Thessalonians to remember. And man, they could trust him. Would we have trustworthy leaders? Would we ourselves be trustworthy people?

[31 : 32] Of course, we all, in a way, we're a church, we're there for each other. We want to live up to this, but especially those who you've put in charge. Would you make them the people they need to be?

Help us to support and encourage. Help us to discern. Help us to be willing to step up and hold accountable when needed. But say, yeah, we want to endure to the end. Thank you for that end. Thank you for that Jesus will come. He'll make everything right. Everything will be wonderful. But we need to get there. We need to make it. And so please help us with that. Work through our church.

Work through our leaders to get us there. Get us home. In Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.