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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“HOPE FOR SALVATION”**  
**First Thessalonians 1:1-10**

The other morning at Cardinal Fitness I noticed two women engaged in a lively conversation as they worked out on adjacent elliptical machines.

Twenty minutes later I climbed on a Stairmaster. The ladies were still on the ellipticals, chatting up a storm, not panting for breath, no visible sweat. Ten minutes later they started talking about fitness.

“I don’t get it!” said one. “We’ve been doing this for years. All of our fat should be gone by now!”

“I know,” replied the other. “I wonder why it isn’t?”

They listed several possibilities without a hint of breathlessness. Finally, they settled on a cause beyond their control: “It must be our age. Our metabolism has slowed down.” “Yeah, we’ll never burn it off.” They agreed that they are forever cursed with the extra fat, changed topics, and continued doing the elliptical at the same pace.

It got me thinking about what happens when hope erodes. If those women meant what they said, they hold out no hope for improvement. That may explain their failure to push harder. Should they continue on that course, their words will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Of course, the erosion of hope frequently inflicts far worse damage:

Without hope we give up, give out, and give in. We are easy prey for apathy, self-pity, and self-destruction. We are inclined to victimize others, too, for despair is one step

away from desperation – and desperate people do desperate things.

How many students start cheating or stop trying because they believe they cannot excel?

How many marriages die because the couple loses hope?

How many people obliterate themselves with booze and drugs because they see no other escape?

How many Christians go through the motions and surrender to immorality or materialism or a critical spirit because they have no hope for transformation?

The Thessalonian disciples are struggling with the question of hope: *Is there hope for us?* Please turn with me to First Thessalonians.

□ Paul, Silas, and Timothy first brought the Gospel to Thessalonica less than a year ago, in about 50 A.D. They began in the local synagogue. For three Sabbaths Paul {Ac 17:2-3} **“reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,’ he said.”**

Many received the Good News. Their lives are being transformed. But not everyone appreciates those changes.

➤ As Jesus warns, {Mt 10:34} **“I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”** By no means is this a call to arms. It does not rationalize violence! Jesus is the {Isa 9:6} **“Prince of Peace”** {2 Co 5:19} by whom God reconciles us to himself and {Eph 2:14} others. {2 Co 5:19}

**“And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”**

➤ Even so, the message of Christ crucified, risen, and coming again {1 Co 1:23} **“is a stumbling block to”** unbelieving **“Jews and foolishness to”** unbelieving “[Gentiles].” It often triggers hostility and resistance.

➤ Here in Thessalonica, the synagogue authorities have resented the Jesus movement from the start. Within a month of Paul’s arrival {Ac 17:5} **“they rounded up some [street thugs], formed a mob, and”** {Guthrie, *N.T. Intro.*} attacked the **“house where Paul and his companions were staying.”** They were out, so the mob seized some of the new Christians and hauled them before the city officials. That night some converts smuggled Paul and his team out of the city

Fast forward to the present. It is getting harder to follow Jesus in Thessalonica. From the contents of Paul’s letter we can deduce three main difficulties.

① Enemies of the cross are slandering Paul’s character in order to undermine his ministry.

“Paul abandoned you at the first sign of trouble!” they are sneering. “He’s only in this for what he can get.” To be sure, there are many traveling hucksters who peddle false religions to anyone gullible enough to give them money, sex, or power.

Paul is no charlatan. Still, his uninvited arrival and sudden departure lend the false accusations a degree of plausibility. Some in the church might be questioning Paul’s integrity – and if the messenger cannot be trusted, what about the message?

② Anti-Christian hostility is spreading from the synagogue into the pagan community. The new Christians are being targeted for ongoing rejection, pressure and harassment from all sides.

Paul never said that God would protect them from danger. Just the opposite, before they left Thessalonica, he and his team repeatedly warned that they **“would be persecuted. And it [has indeed] turned out that way”** (1 Thessalonians 3:4).

Praise God, they are strong. However, Paul rightly foresees that the persecution will only get worse. Their confidence in the Lord might waver.

③ They are surrounded by sexual immorality, which is rife in the pagan culture.

The missionaries taught the Thessalonians that God calls us to {1 Th 4:3-4} **“be sanctified, [avoiding] sexual immorality and [controlling our bodies] in a way that is holy.”** They have remained pure.

Yet they are confronted with non-stop, in-your-face lewdness, fornication, adultery, and prostitution, bombarded with the idea that depravity is normal. It would be easy for them to let down their guard and rationalize compromise.

God forgives the sexual sinner as freely as anyone else. Having said that, backsliding would dishonor Christ, undermine their witness, and cause them to doubt the power of the Gospel.

The Christ Followers in Thessalonica are standing firm despite these difficulties. Nevertheless, **they need a fresh infusion of hope** if they are to {2 Pe 3:18} **“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord**

**Jesus**” – hope that is grounded in historical fact and personal experience and points to future glory.

✪ And so Paul assures them that salvation is real, they are starting to receive it, and when Jesus returns they will experience it in all of its fullness.

He presents three proofs.

⊛ The 1<sup>st</sup> Proof is the saving work of God revealed in the Gospel. This is the element of historical fact.

□ 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5: **“We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.”**

○ Later, Paul says that {2:13} **“when you received the word of God... you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God,”** the record of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

✚ The historical fact of the Gospel is crucial to our hope as well. The knowledge of what God did in the past takes our gaze off ourselves and puts it on the One who creates, redeems and sustains his people; enables us to see that our troubles are {2 Co 4:17} **“light and momentary”** and they **“are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all”**; and reminds us that God uses hardship {Ro 8:29} **“to [conform]”** us **“to the image of his Son.”**

⊛ The 2<sup>nd</sup> Proof is their transformation into growing disciples. This is the element of personal experience.

□ 1 Thessalonians 1:3: **“We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

□ In verses 7-9 he reminds them that they **“became a model to all the believers”** and their **“faith...has become known everywhere.”** Reports are pouring in that that they have **“turned... from idols to serve the living and true God.”** God is transforming them.

✚ Remembering our personal experience of the Gospel is equally crucial to our hope. Reviewing the changes God has made in us enables us to {1 Th 4:1} **“please God...more and more”** in thought, word and deed; motivates us to {Php 2:12} **“continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling”**; and fills us with confidence {Php 1:6} **“that he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”**

⊛ The 3<sup>rd</sup> Proof is the consummation of the kingdom, which is guaranteed by Christ’s resurrection and will be achieved at his return. This is the element of future glory.

□ The verse 3 phrase: **“hope in our Lord Jesus Christ”** refers to his Second Coming.

□ And in verses 9-10, Paul writes: **“They tell how you turned to God...to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”**

It is no coincidence that every chapter in this epistle of hope concludes with a reference to Jesus’ return. For while some Christians are so fixated on the end times it hinders their love and ministry, a proper

understanding of the Second Coming equips us for better love, more faithful ministry, and truer hope.

‡ Certainty that Jesus is coming again is just as crucial to our hope. Anticipation of Christ's future return {1 Th 1:3} fortifies us to endure struggle and opposition; convicts our hearts to {1 Th 3:13} **“be blameless and holy”**; and spurs us on to {Mt 28:19} **“make disciples”** inspires us to {Mt 25:14-30} seize our opportunities to do justice, exercise mercy, and extend compassion to the needy.

There is hope that is real, hope that is true, hope that does not disappoint. It is hope in the God whose power to save is revealed in the Gospel, who is transforming us into growing disciples, and who has promised that his Son will return.

{Ro 15:13} **“May the God of hope fill [us] with all joy and peace as [we] trust in him, so that [we] may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”!**