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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“HOPE FOR THE CHURCH”**  
**First Thessalonians 2:14-3:10**

☐ **“What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.”** (1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 2:19-20)

If you were to ask your neighbors: *What is your hope, your joy, your glory?* How many would answer: *It's the Church, silly!*

📖 What about you? Is the Church – the living organism formed by Christ Followers in very time and place, but for us embodied in this congregation – is it a primary source of hope, joy, and glory for you?

If so, do you freely admit it outside these walls?

☑ The Church at large has taken some big hits: various abuse scandals; the greed and immorality of many televangelists; the mutual exploitation of believers and political parties; the failure to speak out against churchgoers who carry “God Hates So-and-So” placards or murder abortion providers; and so on. {S. Butler} **“If [Christ] were to apply for a divorce [from the Church] on the grounds of cruelty, adultery, and desertion, he would probably get one.”**

To be sure, the secular world is quick to zoom in on our failures and ignore our redemptive presence. Most people do not have a clue how much worse off this planet

would be without our words of grace and truth and our acts of compassion, mercy, and justice.

Still, the Church is as flawed and broken as its members. At our worst it is greedy, power-hungry and immoral. And even at our best we are, from a worldly perspective, poor, weak and foolish.

→ Our Lord and Master instructs: {Mt 6:19, 20} **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”** Inform your accountant that this is your financial priority. He'll warn that it's a recipe for poverty.

→ Our Lord and Master commands: {Mt 5:39} **“do not resist an evil person,”** but **“If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other.”** Try it sometime. A lot of your neighbors will interpret your courage as weakness.

→ Our Lord and Master bluntly states: {Lk 9:23} **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”** Do this, and even some in the church will assume you are foolish, fanatical, possibly deluded.

Poor, weak, foolish – that's us at our best. At our worst we are greedy, power-hungry, and immoral.

Yet, Paul writes to the Thessalonians (and, by extension to us [!]): *You* {NLT} **“[give] us hope and joy,”** *you* are **“our proud reward and crown.”**

Hear the Word of the Lord to Beverly Covenant: **“What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?”**

Take a look around. It is in these brothers and sisters – not mainly the ones who packed the pews in decades past, not just those who might someday join us – it is in these very disciples (imperfect and frail and quirky as they are) that hope lies. And they are looking back at you, because, wonder of wonders, you are our hope.

- If that sounds too ridiculous to be true, consider the teaching in First Corinthians 1:26-29:

**Think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the *foolish* things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the *weak* things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the *lowly* things of this world and the *despised* things – and the things that *are not* – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.**

This has been God's *modus operandi* all along.

The LORD chose the Hebrews as {Dt 7:6-8} **“his treasured possession... not because [they] were”** the people most likely to succeed; just the opposite, they **“were the fewest of all.”** They were so unimportant as to be virtually nonexistent.

{Josh 6} When Israel entered Canaan, Jericho blocked their way. The Almighty demolished the city by having them march around the walls for seven days. His strategy was sheer folly.

{1 Sam 17} How about God's choice of a mere boy to take on mighty Goliath? David had never wielded a sword

and could not stand up under a suit of armor. Compared to the enemy, he was weak.

The Messiah was born a helpless infant, son to an unwed girl in a run-of-the-mill village (probably in a barn), attended by Mary's blue-collar fiancé and some despised shepherds. He touched lepers, rubbed shoulders with sinners, washed feet, and died a shameful death. Jesus was lowly and despised.

In each case (and countless others) the success of the LORD's plan depended on unlikely people, obeying his unexpected orders, in mostly unfavorable circumstances.

That brings us to our Thessalonian brothers and sisters. A quick glance reveals that they are too foolish, weak and lowly to be entrusted with the mission; yet they are God's agents in their corner of the world.

If the Lord of the Church can work in and through this small, embattled congregation, then the Gospel and the Church have a fighting chance. No wonder Paul says, **“What is our hope? ... Is it not you?”!**

Please turn to First Thessalonians. We'll look for signs of God's life and Gospel in the Church. That will answer the question, how are they Paul's hope?

- ✦ 1<sup>st</sup>, they are his hope because God and the Gospel of Jesus are active in their faith.

- 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5: **“we know... [God] has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.”** Now over to 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, which is indeed at work in you who believe.”**

☆ Their salvation fuels Paul’s hope.

⊗ 2<sup>nd</sup>, they are his hope because God and the Gospel are active in their sanctification.

📖 Sanctification is the *status* of being set aside for God’s purposes and the *process* of being conformed to the likeness of Jesus, so that God can be glorified by our lives and service. This is not reserved for super saints; it is part and parcel of kingdom citizenship.

Our status of sanctification is a gift, pure and simple. **“We have been made holy”** (it is the same verb as “sanctified”) **“through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”** (Hebrews 10:10).

In contrast, the process is a collaboration that requires both the powerful work of the Holy Spirit and our intentional cooperation. And so Hebrews 12:14 urges, **“Make every effort... to be [sanctified].”**

■ In 1 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul writes that believers all over Macedonia and Achaia **“tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”** And in 4:1 Paul says, **“As for other matters ...we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.”**

☆ Their transformation fuels Paul’s hope.

⊗ 3<sup>rd</sup>, they are his hope because God and the Gospel are active in their faithfulness under fire.

■ 1:6: **“you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering.”** 2:14-15: **“You suffered from your fellow citizens”** 3:2-4: **“we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way.”** And again in 3:8: **“you are standing firm in the Lord.”**

☆ Their courage fuels Paul’s hope.

⊗ 4<sup>th</sup>, they are Paul’s hope because God and the Gospel are active in their love for the Church.

■ 1 Thessalonians 3:6: **“Timothy has just now come to us... and has brought good news about your faith and love.”** And especially 4:9-10: **“about your love for one another we do not need to write ..., for you... have been taught by God to love each other.”**

☆ Their warm and practical love fuels Paul’s hope.

⊗ 5<sup>th</sup>, they are his hope because God and the Gospel are active in their fervent testimony.

■ 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8: **“You became a model to all the believers... The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere.”**

☆ Their evangelistic witness fuels Paul’s hope.

⊗ And they are his hope because God and the Gospel are active in their eagerness for Christ’s Return.

■ 1:9b-10: **“They tell how you turned to God from idols... to wait for his Son from heaven.”** And 5:10-11: **“He died for us so that, whether we are [alive] or [dead], we may live together with him”** after his Second Coming. **“Therefore encourage one**

**another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.”**

☆ Their anticipation of Christ’s Return fuels Paul’s hope.

Paul was no naïve idealist. He had an eagle-eye for greed, power-lust and immorality in the Church. He clearly understood how poor, weak, and foolish we are at our best. Still, moved by God’s Holy Spirit and in absolute sincerity, he wrote: **“What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.”**

We are not the Thessalonians. The details of our culture and ministry are different. Yet the same God and the same Gospel are active in this congregation, and as I look out over this sanctuary, his words are mine. I hope they are yours, as well.

**“What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.”**