

“A Fruitful Life In The Midst Of Hardships”

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Main Point: In the midst of suffering, let's recall what the gospel has accomplished up till now.

Goal: In the midst of suffering, remember the faith, love, and hope that come from the gospel, and receive the word more and more that you may bear fruit.

Theme: A fruitful life in the midst of suffering.

Have you ever thought about just giving up in the midst of hardship? A few weeks ago, I met up with a friend to talk. I asked him if he had any community in Tokyo, and he told me he had given up on that. He said he's come to see that the people in his neighborhood and at work aren't really interested in friendship, so he's given up on trying to build community.

Another friend and I recently hung out to play sports. Afterwards, we talked a lot about our lives and what was on our minds. I think a lot of people can relate to his experience. He loved his job and put a lot of effort into his work, and it had always been the thing he lived for. But when he was around 50 years old, he got transferred, and his new place of work was quite boring, and he felt he had lost the sense of purpose in his life. In the midst of all this, he became a Christian, but he can't really bring himself to believe that Jesus is really going to come back, and he still doesn't feel like he has much of a purpose in life.

Another friend of mine is really struggling in their marriage. There is a huge gap between their ideal and their reality. Marriage isn't what they were looking for and they are unsatisfied, so they are wondering if they should just give up.

Looking back, Grace City Church has also faced many challenges over the last year. It was tough both to keep the church going and to keep participating in the midst of Corona. Relationships couldn't be fully nourished through online worship services, and it was a struggle to hear God's Word, worship, and fellowship together. We've also faced financial hardships and concerns about Fukuda san's health. The suffering just kept going.

Have you ever thought about giving up in the midst of hardship? Today's passage has one answer for us: recall everything the gospel has accomplished up till now.

Recently, I've been really encouraged by my second son, Toki. He's three years old, and he'll turn four next week. From April this year, he started attending the kindergarten next to our house, Toyomi Youchien. Since we speak English at home, Toki doesn't speak much Japanese yet, but youchien is all in Japanese, and I feel quite sorry for him. But even though he doesn't understand much, he's doing the best he can to learn Japanese. At night when we read the Bible together, he's started to ask if I could read it in Japanese, or if he could try to pray in Japanese. I'm so encouraged by how he perseveres and tries to learn, even in the midst of hard circumstances. I think the reason Toki is trying so hard is because he sees his older siblings, Aya and Aki, talking in Japanese with their friends, and he wants to be like them. Having a role model is a mysterious thing. Toki is motivated by the example of his older brother and sister, and he tries his hardest in the midst of hardship. And then I am encouraged in my own struggles by watching Toki's example.

Today's passage is really similar. The Thessalonian church was in the midst of many trials, but they learned from those who had experienced suffering, and then became an example to others who were experiencing suffering as well. Let's also be encouraged by their example.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia,

but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

This letter was written by three people. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy thought, prayed, and worked together as a team to send this letter.

Verse 1: "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace."

Paul was a distinguished Jewish scholar who, in the beginning, persecuted the early Christians. But after encountering the risen Jesus, he became a Jesus follower.

Silvanus, also called Silas, was one of the leaders of the early church in Jerusalem, and, like Paul, he was both a Jew and a Roman citizen. Timothy was younger than the other two, half Jewish and half Greek, and had been taught the Scriptures by his mother and grandmother.

In the spring of 48 AD, around the time of the founding of the church in Thessalonica, Paul, Silas, and likely Timothy as well, went to Thessalonica and taught the message of Jesus for several months. Then, because of persecution, they went on to a nearby city called Berea. Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea, while Paul went on to Athens. Timothy returned to Thessalonica to check in on the situation at the new Thessalonian church, and then went to Corinth. After Paul's trip to Athens, he went to Corinth, so the three met up again in Corinth around the spring of 49 AD. Timothy informed the other two about the situation in Thessalonica, and the three of them wrote this letter to them. So the Thessalonian church received this letter about a year after the church had started.

This letter is addressed to the church, rather than an individual. In fact, this is the only letter in the New Testament addressed to a single church. The other letters are addressed to all the Christians in a certain city or area, or to individuals along with the churches in a city. Only this letter is addressed to a single church in a city. Paul may have addressed this letter to 'the church of the Thessalonians' because the

people in Thessalonica highly valued being citizens of that city. This letter is to the church gathering of citizens of an important city.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy did not just start a church and then forget about them, they prayed for the Thessalonian church.

Verse 2: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers..."

As a team, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy remembered the Thessalonian church and prayed for each member. And when they prayed, they were full of gratitude, always giving thanks to God. The reason for that gratitude is that they were always recalling the faith, hope, and love that God had given the Thessalonian church.

Verse 3: "...remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Over the year that had passed, the faith that the Thessalonians received from the Father had produced concrete works in their lives. For example, helping those in need, or showing hospitality and encouraging the people around them.

The love that God bestowed upon the Christians also produced labor. In 48 AD Thessalonica, too, it was not easy to love the other Christians in the church. Different people have different ideas, and everyone makes mistakes. Loving people in the real world involves sacrifice and hard work. There may have been financial sacrifices, sacrifices of reputation, and the struggle to forgive people. Perhaps there was conflict in following the leaders, and conflict in leading the people. The brand new Christian members of the church were persecuted by the people of the city, so they likely had many worries and needs.

But even in the midst of these hardships, the Father had also given them hope. That hope is that one day, Jesus will return to earth and, through righteous judgment, make the world whole again. That hope generates and sustains perseverance. Even though they had challenges in the present, they knew it wouldn't be that way forever, and they waited steadfastly and eagerly for that day to come.

The authors of this letter were confident that the Thessalonian church was beloved and chosen by God, for they had seen and heard the report of the good works produced by their faith, hope, and love over the previous year.

Verse 4: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you."

In the Greek way of thought at that time, it was taught that people ought to be very careful not to bother the gods. But how wonderful it is that the one, creator God loved each member of the Thessalonian church, and chose them to be his own people in the same way he chose the Israelites in the Old Testament.

If a similar letter were to be written to us Tokyo-nians, what do you think it would say? How would you describe our work of faith, our labor of love, our steadfastness of hope that has been shown over the last year? I'd like to give it a try.

Dear Tokyo-nians of Grace City Church Tokyo, Looking back over the past year, you all have faced many hardships. Because of the Corona pandemic, you had a lonely year with almost no in person worship services. Many of you were working from home, so your relationships suffered, and your kids faced the same challenges. Everyone was really worried because your head pastor was facing health concerns. There were also worries about your financial circumstances, and how you all should move forward into the future as a church. However, we give thanks to God, for even in the midst of those challenges, you all persevered in your faith in the Father, and that faith generated good works. When you worshiped at Ochanomizu Christian Center for a year, the set up team, the worship team, the power point team, and the kids ministry all worked hard every week to keep our ministries going. We thank God also for the way many people collaborated with the special budget committee to evaluate the church finances and think through the budget. And even in the midst of the pandemic, many people did the best they could to maintain fellowship and hospitality, meeting together over Zoom and in person to pray for each other. Not only that, but the work to support the homeless people in Tokyo continued without fail. We thank God for the labor that came from your love. Moreover, even though many of your circumstances were not ideal, you didn't complain, but were steadfast in your hope that, one day, Jesus will return and our circumstances will be transformed. Indeed, God the Father

has been working in each of you and produced these results through you, and we give thanks to God for all of you when we remember you in our prayers.

In 48 AD, over the course of several months, Paul and Silvanus preached the gospel in a large city of about 100,000 people. They likely preached in the Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath, and in other places like town squares. Jews, a rather large number of Greeks, as well as some wealthy women were persuaded by their message and began to follow Jesus. Of course, Paul and Silvanos presented the message of Jesus persuasively with convincing arguments, but God also gave them a strong conviction through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 5: "...because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

Because of that, even in the face of persecution and hardships, the Thessalonians joyfully accepted the word of God and the message of the Bible, and became imitators of Paul and Jesus. Verse 6: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit."

So, as a result, the members of the Thessalonian church became an example to all the Christians in Greece, both in the north in Macedonia, and in the south in Achaia. Verse 7: "...so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."

Do you think you learn more from stories of success, or stories of suffering? I think you learn from both, but I think the harder times put a person to the test and bring out what's really on the inside.

I'm currently researching a man named Kanzo Uchimura. Exactly 100 years ago, he was preaching the message of the Bible right here in Marunouchi every Sunday. He is a well known figure in the Christian world, but, even though he was quite well known to non-Christians during his time, I don't think many people outside of Christians circles know him today. He worked at Daiichi High School in Tokyo 120 years ago. It was the most famous school in Japan at that time. Students who graduated from that school went on to study at Tokyo Imperial University, which is now known as the University of Tokyo.

Uchimura taught history. However, in 1890, a copy of the new Imperial Rescript on Education from Emperor Meiji was displayed at the school. At a special ceremony, all the students and staff bowed to the signed copy of the Imperial Rescript. But Uchimura did not bow, as he considered bowing to be an act of worship that he could only direct toward the creator God. Because of this, he was told, "You respect neither the emperor nor Japan, and you have betrayed your country by giving priority to a foreign God," and he was persecuted for it. In the end, he was forced to leave the school. Because of the stress he experienced, he became ill. His wife also became sick and, sadly, she died. Even still, because of his faith, Uchimura trusted and followed Jesus in the face of persecution. He was an example.

Both Uchimura and the Thessalonian church are examples of faithful suffering. And who did the Thessalonians learn from? They learned by watching the example of Paul and Silvanus and Timothy set when they were persecuted. And in following that example, the Thessalonians were imitating Jesus himself. Especially when we are suffering, we must remember Jesus, follow him, and imitate him. Christianity doesn't teach the way to success, but how to follow Jesus. Jesus suffered persecution, jealousy, insults, and attacks from the leaders of Israel. But in spite of it all, he trusted and obeyed the Father. Jesus is our ultimate example.

Let's get into groups of three and think about this together. What do you think about this? Have you ever considered giving up in the midst of hardship? What can we learn from the examples of the Thessalonian church, of Paul, of Jesus, and of Kanzo Uchimura? Over the course of just one year, the Thessalonian church went out into all parts of the country to share the message of Jesus and about their own life of faith. So many people from many different regions not only heard the message of the creator God, but also saw an example of a life of faith and obedience to Jesus. Verse 8: "For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything."

Their example of faith included receiving Paul and his friends, turning from idols to serve the living God, and anticipating the second coming of Jesus. First, their reception of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

Verse 9: "For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you..."

It's easy to forget that in 48 AD, not everyone knew about the Apostle Paul or Christianity. It was almost completely unknown and viewed with a lot of suspicion. So it would have been very helpful for the Thessalonian church to travel to various places and tell people positive things about Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. Other Christians and people who were not yet Christians were then able to hear Paul's message positively, rather than with suspicion.

Then, the compass needle of their lives changed 180 degrees when they accepted the gospel. Before, they followed the thinking of their Greek culture, worshiping idols like everyone around them. This included both physical statues as well as idols of the heart that made things other than the creator God the center of their lives. But by coming to really understand that Jesus and the Father are the one and only creator, they turned from worshiping false gods to serve the living and true God.

This change was an example, for it is a necessary part of genuine faith. Instead of adopting this new Christian religion while continually holding on to the idols that had been central to their lives, they completely turned from them.

Furthermore, even though they had only been Christians for a year, they were looking forward to Jesus' return and to his judgment. Verse 10: "...and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."

After Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, he rose from the dead by the power of God and now in heaven. In the future, he will return to judge the whole world. In that judgment, all sin and injustice will be revealed, and righteous punishment, consequences, and wrath will be accomplished. However, just as the Thessalonians believed, anyone who trusts in Jesus will be delivered from the wrath of God. Jesus' return, his righteous judgment, and the deliverance of all who trust in him were things that the Thessalonians were eagerly anticipating.

What do you think when you hear about the exemplary faith of the Thessalonian church? How does it compare with your own faith? Have you accepted Paul and his teachings? Have you turned from idols to God? Do you eagerly await Jesus' return?

If you're like me, you may be looking at the exemplary faith of this one-year-old church and feeling that your own faith is lacking and shallow. However, when Jesus returns, he will not repay those who trust in him with wrath, but he will save us. In Jesus' death on the cross, he took the consequences for our lack of faith and our love of idols. So those who trust in him are completely forgiven, and they become beloved children of God. When Jesus returns to judge the earth, he will deliver those who trust in him. He will resurrect Christians from the dead, and remake the world perfectly, a society and community where there is no evil. And he will dwell with us there. Let's anticipate his salvation.

But for those who do not trust in Jesus, this judgment is actually quite frightening. One day, Jesus will return and execute perfect judgment on all sin, evil thoughts, actions, words, and motives. What do you think would happen if every thought, motive, word, and action throughout your life last week, last month, and last year were seen and correctly evaluated by Jesus?

Jesus' standard is not unclear, he will judge on the basis of whether you have loved your creator and loved your neighbor. And the problem is that we are all way off from that standard. But Jesus followed that standard and lived a perfect life. So Jesus takes the consequences for your sins, and offers you the rewards that he deserves.

Some people don't feel much of an impact when they hear that Jesus is coming again. I think that we should find hope and purpose in the midst of our work and life instead of looking forward to heaven.

For some reason, phrases like 'his coming wrath' and 'the day of judgment' sound unrealistic to us. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy mention it here, but I think there are many people who find it hard to believe. If that is you, I invite you to ask yourself, why is this so hard to believe? If Jesus actually rose from the dead, then we can

believe that he is the creator. If he is the creator and he told us that he would come back to judge the earth, why can't you believe it? But if you believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead and is actually the one and only creator, then, please, listen to what he and his disciples say about judgment.

Actually, placing our hope in Jesus' return has a very positive impact on our lives. You no longer need to constantly try to gain a sense of self-esteem and purpose from unstable careers, relationships, or opinions about you. You can be satisfied by the hope for the perfect circumstances your heart longs for, a perfect world, and a perfect relationship with your creator. You can endure even in the midst of hardships.

Some people have fallen into tough situations in their relationships, workplaces, and marriages. I am sure that many in the Thessalonian church had similar difficulties. We experience the trap of trying to make our lives worth living by our relationships, our marriages, and our careers. Those are what our passage called idols. Good things become idols when they become something we can't live without. It is an idol because it becomes the center of our lives in place of God. But if Jesus is with you, you don't have to have perfect friendships or a perfect workplace or a perfect marriage. Let's turn from a life centered around these things and serve the living and true God. When Jesus returns, you will be delivered from the judgment and wrath that the world will receive. And you will be delivered from the corruption and pollution of this world. You will be resurrected with the risen Jesus, receive a perfect body, and live in a perfectly remade world with Jesus and all who believe in him. Because those who trust in Jesus have this hope, we can serve the living and true God with endurance in the face of hardships and imperfect relationships with our friends, co-workers, and spouses.

I know that each of you are currently facing different kinds of hardships in your lives. In the midst of this, you may be tempted to give up on living as a Christian.

But let's remember this last year, the work of faith that God produced in us, the labors of love, and the steadfast hope we have. The creator loves us and has chosen us. Let's be encouraged instead of giving up.

Let's also remember that over the past year, even in the midst of hardship, we heard and accepted the Word of God with full conviction from the Holy Spirit. Let's remember the example of the Thessalonian church and recall our faith. We have, indeed, turned from a life focused around the things of this world, relationships, comfort, and our own reputation. We are now people who serve the living and true God. Our hope is not in having an easy life and a good reputation in this world, but in being delivered by Jesus and together with him in a perfect world.

There's no guarantee that our hardships will end in the coming year. The exemplary Thessalonian church had hardships, Paul's experienced continuous hardships, and Jesus suffered all the way up to his death on the cross. But just like Jesus rose from the dead after his suffering, those who trust in him will also be resurrected, and one day, live in a perfect world.

Have you ever thought about just giving up in the midst of hardships?

Today's passage has one answer for us:

In the midst of suffering, recall everything the gospel has accomplished up till now. Recalling our gratitude, conviction, and hope, never giving up, let's pray that God will generate the work of faith, the labor of love, and steadfastness of hope.