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First Thessalonians
I. Faith, Hope, and Love
I Thessalonians 1:1-10

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> *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

"Your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." It's not the first time we have run across this particular triad of faith, hope, and love in Paul's writings. Actually it shows up several times in his letters – most famously, of course, in I Corinthians 13, the love chapter: *"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*[1] For Paul, this triad of faith, hope, and love seems to serve as a shorthand for both what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and for how we are to respond to that grace – faith, hope, and love.

But notice what Paul does here at the start of his first letter to the Thessalonian Christians – he adds a modifier to each of the three members of the triad. Not just faith, but "work of faith." Not just love, "but labor of love." And not just hope, but "steadfastness of hope." In other words, here at the start of Paul's letter, he is inviting us to go deeper in our understanding of exactly what is meant for us by faith, hope, and love.

"Work of faith." Right away the hairs on the back of our Protestant necks stand up in alarm – for we are saved not by our works, but solely by grace received through faith. Well, we can relax. Paul is not suggesting that we are saved by our works. Rather what he is pointing toward is the work we do **because** we have been saved by grace. The work we do in response to, and out of gratitude for, our salvation by grace in Jesus Christ. So what then are the "works of faith" by which we respond to our salvation by grace?

Paul here names two things – two basic movements of our lives in response to the grace of Jesus. Look at verse nine. Paul praises the Thessalonians because – first movement in the work of faith – they have turned to God. And then – second movement – because they have turned away from idols. The work of faith, our response to God's grace, is a) to receive and accept that grace by turning our lives toward the One who extends to us that grace; and b) at the same time, to turn our lives away from that which is not God, but which we have been serving as if it was. The work of faith is a turning to God and a turning away from false gods – and away from the lives we have been living in service to those false gods.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul uses the image of changing clothes to describe this work of faith, this double movement of our lives in response to our salvation by the grace of Jesus. In chapter three, he tells the Colossians, and us, to take off all the old ways of the fallen world which we have been wearing up till our salvation – "Put them all away," he says: sexual immorality, impurity, evil desire, covetousness, idolatry, anger, malice, slander, lying, and so forth.[2] *"Put off the old self with its practices,"* he tells the Colossians.[3] In other words, true repentance, true turning away from what we have been in the world in order to receive what we are now to become in Christ.

And what are we now to become in Christ? Paul then says that we are to put on the things which belong to the Kingdom:

> *You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe . . .*
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> *So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.*[4]

The work of faith is the work of letting God's grace not just save us, but also change us, to begin to reorient us away from the world's ways and towards His Kingdom and its ways.

The work of faith. Tony Campolo has a funny story about a Wall Street executive passing by a homeless man on the sidewalk. The homeless man looks up at the executive and cries out, *"Change? Change?"* To which the executive, with a pained look on his face, replies, *"I'm trying! I'm trying!"*[5] Toward God, away from the world.

But then Campolo follows that up with a not so funny story – one which speaks to the fact that this work of faith is one we do not take nearly as seriously as we should. He tells of reading a survey in which parents in various nations were asked what they most wanted for their children. One group said, *"We want our children to be successful."* Another national group said, *"We want our children to be happy."* Campolo says that if anyone had asked his Italian mother and father that question, they would have said, *"We just want our Tony to be a good boy!"* But how come, he wonders, no group gives the most important answer a parent could ever give, the right answer, the Kingdom of God answer, the work of faith in response to God's grace answer: *"We want our children to grow up to become like Jesus, to live a life pleasing to God and of service to others."*[6]

For that is the work of faith – for children, parents, and grandparents all. Our right response to the grace of Jesus Christ coming alive in our lives – to turn our lives daily toward Him, and daily away from the ways of the world. Here's Paul again, and again writing to the Colossians:

> *So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ – that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.*
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> *Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life . . . is with Christ in God. He is your life.*[7]

The work of faith.

Next, the labor of love. The labor of love. Anyone who has been in a deep and important relationship for more than fifteen minutes knows full well that love does indeed involve labor. And yet, culturally speaking – Hallmark movies, Valentine's Day cards, and just the way we tend to think and speak of love – culturally speaking, we tend to envision love as an emotion. Love as something you feel, more than something that you do. But love, if it is to be lasting and deep and sustaining and true, always involves labor – a lot of labor. And so the labor of love related to our acceptance of the grace of Jesus Christ is not something we are commanded to feel about God, so much as it – as in all human relationships – something that we that we do in relation to God. Something we attend to daily, work at continually, strive towards always in our relationship with our God.

So, in simplest terms, the labor of love in response to God's grace and our salvation is to do the things which keep our relationship with God close and alive and personal and real. Weekly Sunday Worship, of course. Prayer, certainly and constantly. But not just the sort of prayers we toss off thoughtlessly before a geometry test or a medical appointment or for a parking place close to the Publix entrance on a busy Saturday afternoon when the Krispy Kreme pumpkin spice doughnuts are in season. I'm talking about the sort of prayer in which we genuinely set aside time to talk to God about what is going on in our lives, our dreams and disappointments, our struggles and successes.

And not just to talk to God, but to talk with Him – meaning to give Him a chance to speak to us. By reading His Word, for example, so that we can learn what He asks of us. Prayer – telling Him what is really going on in our lives and in our heads and hearts, so that God, in return, through His Word and His Holy Spirit, can speak to us in our places of need and hurt and confusion and longing. The labor of love, actively working to keep our personal relationship with our Savior both active and personal – just as we would with any human relationship which was important to us.

And – here's the really great part – in doing so, we will learn the most amazing thing about this labor of love: that God wants this daily personal relationship with us perhaps even more than we need that relationship. God actually, truly, wants to talk with us, hear from us – believe it or not, He delights in us and is truly concerned about what is going on with us. He loves us and finds us endlessly interesting, the apples of His eye. I love how Richard Foster, in his book on prayer, describes this longing of God for relationship with us:

> *God has graciously allowed me to catch a glimpse into his heart, and I want to share with you what I have seen. Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence.*
>
> *And he is inviting you – and me – to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in . . .*
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> *The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer.*[8]

And so also the instruction of Francis Fenelon, the 18th century archbishop and great teacher of prayer:

> *Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and pains, to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that He may [deepen] them; tell Him your longings, that He may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them . . . Blessed are they who obtain to such familiar unreserved [conversation] with God.*[9]

The labor of love.

And last, the steadfastness of hope. I love that Paul uses that word "steadfast" in relation to hope – steadfast, meaning according to my dictionary "fixed or unchanging." In other words, the steadfastness of hope is not mere optimism on steroids, a fervent wish that things will somehow turn out okay. Rather the steadfastness of hope is no mere wish at all, but the rock-solid certainty that things really will turn out okay. A solid rock we can stand on amid all the shifting sands of life around us. Solid ground that will never shift, come what may – that's the steadfastness of the hope we find in Jesus Christ.

So, when life around us is going crazy, losing its bearings, spinning in circles and falling apart, we are able to still stand steadfast in Christ, rock-solid upon the promises of our Savior. Because they are fixed and unchanging – and what He has promised, we can be absolutely certain He will bring to pass. That is why our Lord is constantly, in one way or another, telling us through Scripture, *"Don't be afraid."* Don't be afraid because nothing can separate us from the love of God[10], because all things are going to be brought round to good in the end[11], and in the meantime He will never forsake us.[12] *"Be not afraid"* – that is the steadfastness of hope we live in response to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it in our letter – the certainty that God will deliver us from all evil in this life, and will send to us His Son a second time to lead us into His Kingdom life which will last forever.

The steadfastness of hope. Our nation marked the 9/11 anniversary this past week, and I did so by rereading the sermon Tim Keller preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City on the Sunday immediately after the terrible events of that day. Redeemer Church sits less than two miles from where the World Trade Center stood, and many in that congregation on that day had a personal connection to the tragedy. Keller's sermon on that Sunday was based on a text from John's gospel – the one where Jesus says to Martha, whose brother Lazarus has died: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live."*[13] In his sermon, Keller then referenced a scene from Tolkien's Lord of the Rings:

> *At the end of The Lord of the Rings, the hobbit Sam, who thought everything was going wrong, wakes up and the sun is out. He sees Gandalf, the great wizard. To me, this is the quintessence of Jesus' promise. Sam says, "Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?" The answer of Jesus is "Yes." Someday will be the great morning, not m-o-u-r-n-i-n-g, but m-o-r-n-i-n-g – the great morning that won't just console us. Jesus will take all of those horrible memories, everything bad that has ever happened, and they will actually be brought back in and become untrue. They will only enrich the new world in which everything is put right – everything.*[14]

And then he put that steadfastness of our hope into more personal terms:

> *Every year or so, I have a recurring nightmare that my wife is very flattered by. The nightmare is that my wife dies. Something has happened to her, and I'm trying to make it without her. My wife is flattered because it is obviously my greatest fear. But let me tell you something really weird. I almost like having the nightmare now. Do you know why? Because the first minute after I wake up is so unbelievably great! To wake up and say, "Oh my, it was only a bad dream. Everything bad I was living through has come untrue" . . . What I like about waking up is that the dream becomes untrue. It is a wonderful feeling to say, "It is morning. It was only a bad dream!"*
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> *Do you know what Jesus Christ is saying when he says, "I am the resurrection"? . . . He is going to make everything that happened this week be a bad dream. He is not just giving you consolation. He is going to make it come untrue. He is going to incorporate even the worst things that have ever happened to you. They will be taken up into the glory that is to come in such a way that they make the glory better and greater for having once been broken.*[15]

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live."[16] *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good."*[17] *"Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*[18] That is the

steadfastness of hope. To know this, to believe this, to claim this, to stand upon this promise of our God in all that we must face – that is to have the steadfastness of hope. And to be not afraid.

The work of faith, the labor of love, the steadfastness of hope.

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[1] I Corinthians 13:13.
[2] Colossians 3:5-9.
[3] Colossians 3:9.
[4] Colossians 3:9,12-14 as translated in Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2148.
[5] Tony Campolo, Let Me Tell You a Story (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), p. 84.
[6] Campolo, p. 88.
[7] Colossians 3:1-2, The Message, pp. 2147-2148.
[8] Richard J. Foster, Prayer (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), pp. 1-2.
[9] Quoted in Albert Outler the Preacher, ed. Bob W. Parrott (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), pp. 18-19.
[10] Romans 8:39.
[11] Romans 8:28
[12] Matthew 28:20.
[13] John 11:25.
[14] Tim Keller, sermon entitled, "Truth, Tears, Anger, and Grace," based on John 11:1-44 and preached at the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City on September 16, 2001. The source for this sermon is a special issue of Christianity Today dedicated to the "Life and Legacy of Tim Keller," published after his death in May of 2023: Tim Keller, "Everything Bad Is Going to Come Untrue," Christianity Today, (Fall, 2023), p. 49.
[15] Keller, Christianity Today, p. 48.
[16] John 11:25.
[17] Romans 8:28
[18] Romans 8:39.