

INTRODUCTION

This morning I'm beginning a new series from Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians. Some people think an epistle is the wife of an apostle, but it's just a letter. When I finish 1 Thessalonians we're going to go right into 2 Thessalonians, and then 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. God did us a favor by placing all the books in the Bible that start with "t" together for us.

Not every city in the New Testament is still in existence. Corinth and Ephesus are nothing but ruins. But Thessalonica is still a busy port city in Greece. When Paul visited the city it had about 200,000 residents. Today it is the second largest city in Greece with over one million living in the metro area.

According to Acts 17 Paul, Silas, and Timothy visited Thessalonica and stayed for three weeks. Each Saturday Paul preached in the synagogue that Jesus was the Messiah. Many Jews and Gentiles became believers, but some of the Jews were angry and incited a mob that led a riot against Paul. He had to sneak out of town at night and head to Berea. He was chased out of town there as well and ended up in Athens.

The theme of 1 Thessalonians is: Be prepared for the return of Christ! The second coming of Christ is mentioned in all four chapters. The key verse that best summarizes this theme says, "May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." (1 Thessalonians 3:13)

During this study we're going to be talking about Finding HOPE in a Hopeless World. I love to talk about hope. Many of you have read my latest book was entitled, "HOPE When you Need it Most." I've received letters and emails reporting that this book is being passed around in many prisons around our country. But inmates aren't the only ones who need hope, we all need it!

Remember, the letters HOPE can stand for Having Only Positive Expectations. And we're going to see in Titus that we are "looking for our blessed hope and the return of our great God, the Lord Jesus Christ."

With that introduction, let's begin our journey through this wonderful letter. With email and texts, we've lost the art of writing letters. But when we used to write a letter, we'd sign our name at the end. Have you ever gotten a long letter without a return address, and you didn't know who sent it? You had to go to the end of the letter who find who wrote it. But during the time of Paul, it was customary to begin a letter with the name of the person who wrote it.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3: "Paul, Silas, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually 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 this introduction to his letter, Paul mentions four sets of twins. Most of us know people who are twins. Jacob and Esau were the most famous twins of the Old Testament. In fact, one of the

disciples of Jesus was a twin—Thomas was called Didymus, which means twin. You may be a twin, or you may be the parent of twins.

I've read that twins have a special connection. My son-in-law, Jason, has a twin brother, and he has told me he and Robert have a special bond. My favorite twin story is about Brielle and Kyrie Jackson. In 1995, these twins were born 12 weeks prematurely. They were placed in separate incubators in the NICU. After a few days, Brielle, who weighed just two pounds, was struggling. Her heart rate was low and she was blue-faced from crying. Kyrie was larger and was growing. The NICU nurse did something not often done in the US at the time. She asked the parents if she could place the twins together in the same incubator. They agreed, so the nurse put them together.

When she checked back a few minutes later she was surprised to see Kyrie had actually placed her arm around her younger sister as if to give her strength. Brielle had stopped crying and her oxygen level had increased. The nurse called the other staff of the NICU and they took a picture that has often been called the "rescuing hug."

Today Brielle and Kyrie are happy 17 year-olds. They are identical, except one of them is left-handed and the other right-handed. They're best friends and share a bedroom, but not an incubator.

Just as there are people who are twins, there are also twin truths in the Bible. There are a number of doctrines and beliefs that go together just like twins. They aren't identical twins, but they are inseparably tied together. Paul mentions four of these twins in these few short verses.

1. GRACE AND PEACE

The first is found in the second verse where he wrote, "Grace and peace to you." These twins' names are grace and peace. They always go together and the practical lesson is: You'll never have inner peace until you experience God's grace.

Actually, Paul is combining two customs of his day. When Greeks greeted each other, it was customary for them to say, "Grace to you." To the Greeks, grace wasn't a spiritual term; it would be like saying, "Goodness for you." We still greet people by saying, "Good morning" or "good day." But then, grace became the central theme of Paul's theology.

By contrast, when Jews greeted each other, they said, "Shalom" which means "Peace." The early church was composed of both Jews and Gentiles – and they sometimes had conflicts. Paul was showing that these two cultures could come together under Jesus so he invented a new greeting, "Grace and Peace." Along with the Aramaic phrase, "Maranatha" which means, "The Lord comes," "grace and peace" became a distinctively Christian greeting.

When a mother has twins, one of them is always born first. Esau was born before Jacob. This is also true of these biblical twins: One always come first. Paul uses this phrase, "Grace and peace" in many of his letters. But he never wrote, "Peace and Grace." It's always "Grace and Peace" for a reason. You'll never enjoy God's peace until you experience God's grace. Turn to the person

beside you and give them a Christian greeting: "Grace and peace to you."

2. FAITH AND WORKS

The second twin truth is found in the phrase, "Your work produced by faith." Faith and works are twin truths that always go together, and the practical lesson we learn is: Good works are the product of living faith. And just like birth twins, only one can be born first. Faith is born first, and then works. It's never the opposite. The Bible never teaches that good works produce faith.

There has been a debate raging in Christendom since the beginning. It's a debate over what it takes for a person to go to heaven: faith or works? Sometimes it wasn't always a friendly debate. Christians have killed other Christians over this disagreement. This ongoing disagreement was the reason there was a Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.

Basically when the Catholic Church was ruling over the Holy Roman Empire, they got their priorities mixed up. They taught that salvation was only in the Church and to prove you were committed to the church you had to demonstrate good works. You had to attend mass and take the sacraments. The best work was charity, or giving money. And the best place give money was to the church. So, if you will give the church \$10,000 then, the church would guarantee your salvation. This practice was called selling indulgences. It was alike a get-out-of-jail-free card, except it wasn't free!

But there were still a few Catholics priests who were reading the Bible, and they couldn't find that anywhere in the Bible. So one day a German priest named Martin Luther went down to his church in Wittenberg, Germany. He said, "Salvation can't be bought with money or good works." He had a list of 95 objections to what the Catholic Church was doing and teaching. He took a hammer and nails and pounded that list on the front door of the church. Those hammer blows were heard around the world.

The battle cry for the Reformers was, *sola fide* or "faith alone." There other cry was, *sola scriptura* or Scripture alone. They said, "Why should we be listening to what the Pope has said? We have a better guide—the Word of God."

That was a needed correction, but the opposite extreme of working for your salvation can be wrong as well. It might lead a person to say, "Faith is all that matters. Just believe in Jesus. Go ahead and ignore the needs of hurting people. You don't have to serve God or give you money. Just believe. Sin all you want. Just believe, and in the end, Jesus will make everything okay." Of course, the truth is found in an understanding of how faith and works complement each other. They are twins and should never be made to fight against each other.

James addressed this in his epistle. Remember, James was the half-brother of Jesus. They shared a mother, Mary, but they had different dads. James's dad was Joseph, but of course, God is the father of Jesus. James wrote his letter to Jewish believers who were erring on the side of "faith alone." They claimed they believed, but their faith didn't result in good works. James wrote these words to correct their faulty attitude: "You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he

offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did... As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." (James 2:20-23, 26)

Abraham believed God, but it was his faith that empowered him to offer to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Have you ever thought that it was cruel for God to tell Abraham to give his son? And have you wondered what kind of father would even threaten to kill his son as a sacrifice? We're told in Hebrews 11 that Abraham had SO much faith that he believed that even had he plunged that knife into Isaac and killed him, that God would raise Isaac from the dead. That's faith—and it was his faith that empowered his actions.

I like the way Francis Beaumont expressed it: "Faith without works is like a bird without wings; though she may hop with her companions on earth, yet she will never fly with them to heaven."

James was saying, "Don't tell me that you know my brother Jesus if you ignore the needs of hurting people. I'm calling you a liar, and your faith is dead as a doornail. Because if you truly know my brother, Jesus, you're going to be so busy doing good works that it will appear to others that you're trying to earn your salvation."

Ephesians 2:8-10 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Then it says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works."

Let's make sure we understand the sequence of salvation. Here's the order: God's grace; our faith; then good works. Your good works don't earn God's favor or grace. Grace is God giving you what you need, not what you deserve. He offers to save me as a sinner, not because I'm good but because He is good. If you respond to that offer, by faith, you are saved. But when you are saved, you'll love God so much that you'll want to serve Him for the rest of your life.

It's not faith alone that saves you. It is faith in Jesus that saves you. There's only one way to make it to heaven, and that is through Jesus.

W. C. Fields was a film star and comedian in the early 20th century. He had a well-deserved reputation for living a wicked lifestyle. One of his friends visited Fields in the hospital before he died. The friend reported that he was reading a Bible. His friend said, "What are you doing with a Bible?" W. C. Fields replied, "Looking for loopholes." We have something better than a loophole. We have God's grace and forgiveness. But this only comes through Christ. Outside of Jesus there are no loopholes to get into heaven.

It is only by faith in Jesus that results in good works. Don't separate these twins; they belong together. C.S. Lewis summarized it best when he wrote: "Regarding the debate about faith and works: It's like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most important."

3. LOVE AND SERVICE

The third set of twins can be found in Paul's statement, "your labor prompted by love." These

twins are LOVE AND SERVICE and the practical lesson is: You can serve without loving, but you can't love without serving.

You may wonder what the difference is between "works" and "labor." Faith produces good works. That refers to the act itself. Love produces service. That refers to the energy expended in performing the good work.

Let me illustrate it. There's a sweet lady in our church, Betty Wilson, who often brings us homemade bread. She has done it for years. It's delicious, and I wear it well. The act of giving us the bread is the good work. But the energy she expends in making the dough and rolling it out and baking it, that's the service. She does it because she loves us.

Some people serve because it's their job. If you go to a restaurant today, a server will take your order and bring your food, not because he or she loves you. They are being paid to do it. So you can serve without loving, but you can't love without serving.

Love can be hard work. I heard about an Eskimo who said to his sweetheart, "I just drove a dogsled through 50 miles of ice and snow to tell you I love you." She said, "That's a lot of mush!" If we only SAY we love, but we aren't willing to serve, that's just a bunch of mush.

If you visit the campus of Dallas Theological Seminary you'll find an amazing sculpture. It's a life-sized sculpture of Jesus washing the feet of Simon Peter. I love the detail. Jesus is kneeling on both knees and in a posture of humility. I like the fact that Simon Peter's feet are hard and crusty with ugly veins and callouses. His feet were probably in poor shape after walking the dusty roads following Jesus. The good work was washing the disciples' feet. The service was the energy Jesus expended in washing the feet of twelve disciples—that's twenty-four dirty feet. Imagine how tiring that would be! These weren't men who wore shoes and socks. Their feet were filthy. Yet Jesus showed them a perfect example of love by giving them His refreshing and cleansing touch.

He started the experience with love. In John 13:1 just before He started washing feet He said, "I have desired to show you the full extent of my love." After Jesus finished He told the disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (John 13:34)

Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty—or wet—when you are showing them the love of Christ. You may not be washing feet that are literally dirty. But look around you. There are plenty of people who are hurting and they've picked up a lot of moral filth on their walk. They need the refreshing, cleansing touch that you give them when you show them the love of Jesus.

4. HOPE AND ENDURANCE

The fourth set of twins can be seen when Paul wrote about "your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." These twins are named hope and endurance. And again, hope comes first, then endurance. The practical lesson is: Hope is the power to hold on when you want to quit.

One of the strongest temptations Christians face is to give up and quit. Perhaps you've been struggling for a long time with a problem, and you're sick and tired of keeping on. The official position of the Catholic Church is that if a person commits suicide they have no hope of heaven. I don't agree with that position. Because I have known people whom I believed were true followers of Jesus. They became so discouraged and depressed that they decided to end it all. They took their lives and were quickly reminded that death doesn't end it all, especially for the family members left to deal with the grief of suicide. God's Word tells us over and over again that we must maintain hope, and that hope produces endurance.

Hope is a powerful force. Rabbi Mitch Hurvitz tells a story about how at a New York City university concert, a distinguished concert pianist suddenly became ill and could not continue. There was an old music teacher at the college nicknamed Herman who rose from the audience and walked on stage. Herman sat down at the piano and with great mastery completed the performance.

At a party after the concert a faculty member asked Herman how he was able to play the difficult pieces from memory with such great skill. Herman said, "In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practice every day. I drew a keyboard on my bed board and began by fingering a piece from my repertoire late one night. The next night I added a second piece and soon I was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years. It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was part of that repertoire. That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Every day I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom."

It was his hope of performing again that gave him the ability to endure the harsh conditions of the concentration camp. Our hope is that we will see Jesus face to face. And no matter how harsh life becomes, this hope can give you endurance to hang in there.

Don't forget Paul wrote most of his letters sitting in prison. When Paul entered a city, he didn't ask about what kind of hotels they had, he asked what kind of jails they had. When he preached, revival didn't break out, a riot usually broke out. The man who wrote the most about hope personally endured shipwrecks, beatings, and stoning. In spite of this, his hope in Jesus gave him the endurance to hang in there.

CONCLUSION

I love the attitude displayed by the picture of a kitten hanging onto a rope. The caption says, "Just hang on." A pastor once told me that when you get to the end of your rope, just tie a knot and hang on. Since then I've come to believe that when Jesus is your rope, you're never going to come to the end of Him! And we're not holding on to Him, He's holding on to us!

Are you tempted to give up and quit? Maybe God has given you a dream or a vision and it hasn't happened yet. You want to give up—but don't. Hang in there. Maybe you've been praying for something to happen for a long time and God hasn't answered your prayer—don't give up. Keep

on praying. Keep on trusting. You may be in a bad situation, and you don't know how you're going to make it. Hang in there and hang on. Don't give up!

Some believers give up too soon. I have a Pastor friend named Terry Hill. Thirty years ago he was working at a Wal-Mart in Mineral Wells, Texas, when God called him to preach. He continued to work and took seminary classes on the weekend. God laid on his heart to plant a church in Alaska. So he loaded up his wife and three children in their car and packed all their worldly possessions into a U-Haul trailer and headed north. While they were on the Al-Can highway they encountered a problem. They were running low on gas, and had no idea when they would find a gas station. This was long before GPS. And to make matters worse, a huge Grizzly bear walked across the gravel road in front of their van. They had to slow down to let it pass. Terry said it looked like it weighed about 6,000 pounds. It was getting dark and they didn't want to run out of gas in the middle of the highway, so while they still had a little gas they pulled over to the side of the road to spend the night. Terry said it was the longest night of his life. It was crowded and stuffy in the car. He said that they were hungry and thirsty. Nobdoy got out of the car to use the bathroom because they were afraid that big bear was still around. They got very little sleep that night. Terry said that when the sun came up, they prayed a prayer to just make a little farther. He cranked the car and drove down one hill and up another one. At the bottom of the second hill there was a 24-hour gas station and restaurant. It was less than half a mile from where they had stopped. Terry said, "My mistake was I just stopped too soon. I should have kept on going."

That's good advice for us. Are you considering quitting? Don't stop, your greatest blessings could be just down the road. So, don't give up!

Years ago someone shared a short poem with me from an unknown author. Does this describe your situation? God has a word for you:

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest, if you must, but don't you quit.

Life is hard with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns.
And many a failure turns about
When he might have won had he stuck it out.
Don't give up though the pace seems slow—
You may succeed with another blow.

Success is failure turned inside out—
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt.
And you never can tell how close you are;
It may be near when it seems so far.

So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit,
It's when things seem worst that you **MUST NOT QUIT**.

— Unknown

I love that kind of attitude. Don't quit. Don't give up. Jesus will give you the hope to hang in there!

OUTLINE

Theme of 1 Thessalonians: Be prepared for the return of Christ!

"May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." 1
Thessalonians 3:13

TWIN TRUTHS IN THE WORD:

1. *"grace and peace to you"*

GRACE AND PEACE: You'll never have inner peace until you experience God's grace.

2. *"your work produced by faith"*

FAITH AND WORKS: Good works are the product of living faith.

3. *"your labor prompted by love."*

LOVE AND SERVICE: You can serve without loving, but you can't love without serving.

4. *"your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"*

HOPE AND ENDURANCE: Hope is the power to hold on when you want to quit.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes