

Genuine Faith Influences Behavior

SCOTT HOEZEE

These days, young people cannot imagine what it means to have to wait to hear from someone. Cell phones, texting, instant messaging, Twitter, Instagram; these modern communication tools keep us in constant touch. Once upon a time, though, people had to wait weeks, months, for letters and news to arrive. It could be agonizing to wait so long to hear how a loved one was doing. Well, the Apostle Paul knew all about that; and today on *Groundwork*, we will see why. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now our third program...program number three of a five-part series we are doing on the oldest epistle...the oldest letter in the New Testament, which is the first of the two letters in the Bible to the Thessalonians...to the Christians at a church Paul planted in a Greek city...a port city called Thessalonica.

DAVE BAST

You can follow and trace his steps in the book of Acts. So, Paul sailed to northern Greece, or Macedonia as it is called in the New Testament, and he started out in a city called Philippi. We are familiar with that because he wrote Philippians much later, at the end of his life...or toward the end of his life; and then from Philippi he moved on to Thessalonica; and he had trouble in both places. In Philippi he was beaten and imprisoned, and then set free when they discovered he was a Roman citizen. In Thessalonica, a riot broke out because the message of the Gospel that he shared was so divisive that a number of Jews accepted it, but a number of members of the synagogue rejected it, and then went to the authorities, stirred up trouble. So, Paul was hustled out of town in the middle of the night...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he moved on down the line, eventually ending in Corinth. Probably that is where he was when he wrote 1 Thessalonians.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, what that meant is that there were long stretches of time where Paul could not travel very freely, and sometimes if he was in jail, he couldn't travel at all. So, he was roughed up and so forth; and so, sometimes he couldn't travel; and therefore, it was very hard to keep in touch with the churches he planted. We saw in the previous program, Dave, in Chapter 2 of 1 Thessalonians that Paul got very personal, and you know, he compared himself to a nursing mother and to a patient, loving father when he was in the midst of the Thessalonians; and he is going to continue to get personal now into Chapter 3, which is the main thing. We are going to look at the first part of Chapter 4 as well in this program, but he continues to get very personal because, you know, he was...we are going to find out in just a minute...he was so eager to know if the

Thessalonians were maintaining the faith; but two thousand years ago, you couldn't pick up the phone and just call. I recently traveled to Nairobi, Kenya; got to my room around 1:00 in the morning, picked up my cell phone, called my wife. The call went through immediately; her voice was digitally crystal clear. I was seven time zones from home, and instant communication. Well obviously, not then. Nothing traveled faster than a mule or a horse could carry a letter, or a person could carry a message.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, he is concerned about what is going on there; and in Chapter 3, as he begins, this is how he describes some of his anxiety and what he did about it. Paul writes:

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ²We sent Timothy, who is our brother and coworker in God's service in spreading the Gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁴In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted, and it turned out that way, as you well know. ⁵For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you, and that our labors might have been in vain.

So, just reading these words from 1 Thessalonians 3, you can hear Paul's agony. You can hear it in his voice, he is... When you don't know how a loved one is doing...maybe someone is having surgery clear across the country, or you know, you think about 9/11—the terrorist attacks—how many people didn't know...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

For a while the fate of their loved ones who worked in the twin towers. More recently, we have seen those terrible fires...the Camp Fire in California. When you don't know, and you are desperate to know, we use very vivid imagery. We are climbing the walls; I am at my wit's end; I am pulling my hair out. That is where Paul is at.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and he explains why, too. It is so moving, because what he is afraid of, he says here, is that they will have left the faith. Those who responded positively in Thessalonica, are going to face the same kind of opposition and criticism, and maybe even persecution, that drove Paul out of the city; and Paul says: Look; I warned you about this. He knows that there is going to be a price to pay. If you embrace Jesus Christ, it is not all roses and sweetness and light. The easiest thing in the world, seemingly, is for people to just bag it then and say: Okay, this is not for me. I didn't sign up for this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And Paul says: Look, I warned you...I warned you this was going to happen. So, he is wondering, are they standing firm or have they...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is also a pattern in Paul's ministry where no sooner does he leave town very often and false teachers come in and preach a different version of the Gospel, which is no gospel at all, as Paul wrote to the Galatians; but it happened in Galatia; it happened in Corinth. People would come in and do one of two things or both. They would distort the Gospel message into something anti-gospel as it turns out, and they would smear Paul's character: Oh, he didn't tell you the truth. You cannot trust Paul. So, he was also worried about that possibility, that they might conclude: Well, let's just bag this whole Jesus thing because Paul wasn't a

trustworthy mouthpiece for God after all. So, he is desperate to know if that has happened...if either of those things has happened. They have been roughed up and so gave up, or that Paul has been smeared, and so they abandon what he said; but you know, Dave, it is such a Christlike example of love to see the level and the intensity of Paul's love for these people.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, what does he do? He is in this kind of agony out of love for them, out of worry and concern for their faith; so he does the only thing he can do. He sends someone to check on what is going on in the church in Thessalonica; and he says he sent Timothy; and he sent him from Athens, which was actually a couple of stops down the line. Paul is working his way south through Greece. You know, he has moved on since then from Athens, but he is harkening back and recalling to them what he did do in sending Timothy to them; and so, he is hopeful now. He is still kind of on tenterhooks until Timothy can return with a report about what is going on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, right; he dispatches Timothy. Timothy comes back, and in just a moment, we are going to see the report Paul got back from him. Stay tuned.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are working our way through 1 Thessalonians Chapter 3, a letter that deals on a deep level with Paul's relationship with his church that he planted, that he is following up with; and he has just told them how he sent Timothy to them in order to find out exactly what is going on. So, Timothy didn't take this letter, because Paul is writing after Timothy's quick visit back up north to Thessalonica. Timothy came back; what did Paul hear from him?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul was just in agony to hear something, and here is what he said: ⁶But Timothy has now come to us from you, and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us, and that you long to see us, just as we long to see you. ⁷Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸For now, we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

DAVE BAST

Wow; whew, Paul says. Major sigh of relief. It is interesting to me how much overlap there is between this letter of 1 Thessalonians and Paul's letters to the Corinthian church, which he would write a few years hence. There is a passage, for example, in II Corinthians, where he outlines all that he suffered: Shipwreck and hunger and thirst and beatings and imprisonment; and he sums up at the end of that list of physical suffering: And this above all, my anxiety for the churches. That was the biggest suffering that he bore...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Isn't that something?

DAVE BAST

And he had that anxiety for the Thessalonians, and here it is relieved somewhat by Timothy's report.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think we could all aspire to have as much loving investment in the wellbeing of the Church and of our sisters and brothers in the faith as Paul had for these people.

DAVE BAST

And the local congregation, not just the Church in general, or the theoretical Church; but this little group of people that Paul knew face to face and by name, and how he loved them, as you said.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he singles out two things in particular that Timothy reported back that they were strong in: Faith and in love...faith and love; and really, those are such key hallmarks, Dave, of a true believer of Jesus Christ; and one without the other is never complete, right? You need both. You need faith and love. We probably have all met people now and then who have a lot of faith. Oh, they are stalwart in the faith. They will defend the doctrine of the scriptures and the literal interpretation of this or that part of the Bible to the hilt; but sometimes, they can be a little mean-spirited when they do it. If you disagree with them even a little, they turn on you in a heartbeat. So, they have faith, but not a lot of love.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and as so often is the case, you can go off the cliff on the other side, too. It is kind of like walking on a ridge. You can fall off to either the left or the right. So, there are also people...and we probably maybe know of them...who are all love and love all the time, but it is a kind of a squishy love...it is kind of a soft love that maybe wants to turn a blind eye to things that ought to be pointed out—that ought to be said. A kind of message that is all acceptance. I mean, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a famous name in Church history, talked about cheap grace...those who preach cheap grace, which is grace without judgment, which is peace without holiness, which is love without truth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; in the first program of this series, Dave, we mentioned that in the letter-writing form of Paul's day, you have the opening and the conclusion, and then in between is the body of the letter, and that is where we are now; and we pointed out that Paul always had in the body of the letter two components: A theological teaching and then an ethical application; and that is what we have here. We have faith, which is theology, and love, which is ethics...how we live. So, you need both: Believing and behaving; believing and doing; faith and love; and the Thessalonians, thanks be to God, had both.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and so do we need both. I mean, there is such a temptation to think that one without the other is enough. If you are orthodox, and you believe all the right things, that is what saves you...that is what gets you there; and we forget the emphasis on the need to be loving as well, and that faith without works is dead, as the letter of James says; and that faith that does not change your behavior is not going to change your destiny...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, this has to be a kind of transformative belief that we have. It is not just a head thing; but on the other hand, there are those who say: Oh, doctrine. Don't give me that. Doctrine divides, behavior unites. Let's just be loving. Don't worry about whether there is a trinity, or all these...you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or if Jesus really rose from the dead.

DAVE BAST

Right; people are always ready...some are ready to dismiss that as unimportant, as long as you just try to do the right thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And this, too, falls short of what the full Christian life and full Christian faith is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Paul is relieved as the day is long to hear Timothy's good report. Curiously though, Dave, that doesn't mean that Paul thinks that they can just rest on their laurels, because he goes on to say that he still wants to visit them, and then this line: To make up what is lacking...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In their faith. What Paul seems to be saying is we are never quite done growing up into ever greater Christ-likeness. So, happy though he is with the Thessalonians and the state of their faith and love, that doesn't mean that they cannot still improve, and keep getting more like Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, he is going to bless them...he is going to kind of give them his benediction in this next section of 1 Thessalonians 3, but he is also going to more than hint that there is more for him to do there, so he wants to come again. So, this is what he writes:

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus (and again, let me just pause and point out how early this letter is, and how Paul is putting Jesus and God right together on the same level—the full deity of Jesus Christ). So...may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

¹²May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³May 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So again, there it is. The Thessalonians are wonderful, and he is thankful, and yet, love can still increase; love can increase to the point of overflowing; and what that also means is that we all need the ongoing help of God. We all need ongoing, divine help to get shored up and strengthened even more, so that we can go so far, Paul says, as to be blameless.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Most of us don't feel terribly blameless most of the time, but that is the goal.

DAVE BAST

And Paul is wishing for them that the Lord will do this in him; and by Lord I think he means Jesus here, because he refers to God the Father later. So, the Lord has more work to do for them and in them, and Paul is going to turn to that in the next passage that we will read. We will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are now going to move into 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4. We have been dealing with Chapter 3 in this program, and we have seen how Paul commends both their faith and their love; those two things that must go together always: Faith and love all our days, as we follow Jesus; but now, he has more to say to them, and he gets pretty specific about some issues dealing with sin.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, here is 1 Thessalonians 4, beginning at verse 3: It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable; ⁵not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶and in this matter, no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before; ⁷for God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸ Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being, but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

DAVE BAST

So, here...you might call it one big advantage in reading the scripture and trying to teach the scripture, as we do here on *Groundwork*. We keep saying our tagline is dig into scripture; and we do it in series, and we are going through the whole of 1 Thessalonians 4. So, we come to a passage like this, which is about sexual immorality...it is *all* about sexual immorality, and there is the temptation to want to kind of duck this or dodge this; and partly, it is because of the caricature, you know, that we have as Bible-believing Christians that, all you care about is sex. You are just, you know, you think sex is dirty and you are just trying to get people to give up sex and look, here you are. I mean, it is kind of easier to slide past this; but, here it is, squarely in our face. It confronts us. Paul says to the Thessalonians: Look, there is a big problem with sexual immorality, and you need to be aware of it, and you need to avoid it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think we need to acknowledge, too, that it is not that Paul...or Christians today, I hope...but, it is not that Paul thought sexual sins were worse than all other sins. In fact, we know that in his vice lists, as they are sometimes called, Paul puts sexual sins right up there with gossip, or foolish talk, or greed, and swearing. So, you know, they are all wrong; but what we do know is that in the Greco-Roman world, there was rampant sexual immorality in Paul's day—in the First Century. It was rampant in the Roman Empire and throughout the Greek-speaking world as well; as well as the things that often went along with it, which was wild parties often involving a lot of drinking and a lot of terrible things happening to men and to women. So, it is not that it is the worst sin, it was just a rampant sin, and it was easy to go along to get along back then, and Paul says you cannot do that.

DAVE BAST

Can you imagine a society in which sexual immorality is rampant? Hmmm, wow. Is that hard to believe?

SCOTT HOEZEE

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

DAVE BAST

But there is something really interesting here, I think, that Paul says. He describes, not in detail, but enough so that they know what he is talking about, the behavior that is going on around them, and then he says: Look; people who behave like this don't know God. That is the key to what is going on here. People who do that kind of thing, who live that kind of life, they just don't know God; which is a rather interesting diagnosis, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is an interesting way to root the ethics of what he is talking about here. I mean, any of us who have been parents or grandparents, or maybe uncles and aunts...we have maybe counseled with children or grandchildren to tell them, you know, there are certain things you shouldn't do before marriage; and to flee sexual immorality, and pornography, and on-line pornography; and we always look for reasons, you know; like, well, you know, you are not ready for it; or, you might regret it; or, you might feel or actually get used; but the one thing I don't think many of us tumble to is it so say: Well, you shouldn't do that because you know God. Don't you know God? Well, how does that help?!

DAVE BAST

Right; well, I think it is a huge help because people who know God have a different thing to live for; and people who know God know some things about God, and about themselves...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

So, you know, Paul also adds, in case you need kind of another reason beside that: When you behave this way, you are taking advantage of a brother or sister...you are wronging them. So, it does harm to other humans, too; but even sins that we might say: Well, nobody is hurt by this. I am just doing this myself in my own private life... No, because to know God is to know that we belong to God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that God knows better than you do what hurts you and what helps you, because God made you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And God wants you to have delight; he wants you to flourish; and since he made you, and made everybody in his image, that they are your brothers and sisters, not the objects of your desire or people you can use and discard, knowing God means knowing that he has our best interest at heart...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And his instructions to us are the owner's manual for the human body and human life...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, if you know God, and you know he has your best interests at heart, then you do what God says, also sexually, because that will avoid pain and lead to flourishing.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; you know, I have often said you don't have to change the oil in your car. You can just run your engine for thousands upon thousands of miles, but don't be surprised when it conks out...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Because you are ignoring the owner's manual...you are ignoring the way your car was designed to run; so, in the same way, God knows us. God made us, he knows our bodies, he knows what we were designed to do, and how we were designed to enjoy sex; and he spelled it out. It is pretty clear in the Bible. If we follow that way, we will flourish; if we don't, then don't be surprised when things go really wrong inside of us, and to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which Paul doesn't want. Let's close this program with just a few more verses from Chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians, starting at verse 9, where he closes out this section of ethical teaching by saying: Now, about your love for one another we do not need to write you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other; ¹⁰and in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet, we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more; ¹¹and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life. You should mind your own business, work with your hands, just as we told you; ¹²so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders, and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

DAVE BAST

I love that phrase in there. Try to lead a quiet life, you know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don't be a busybody, don't be criticizing people all the time...

DAVE BAST

Don't be a slug, don't be a drag on anyone; just get a job, do your work; work as long as you can and as well as you can, and mind your own business, Paul says, because some people, too...in the church, don't we all have these kinds of people, maybe, that we have met; or maybe they are in our congregation. They are always, you know, trying to help you with your business. No, Paul says, don't do that; just get on with it; get on with your walk with the Lord; get on with the love that Paul calls for from the body.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, that is what we have seen in this program in 1 Thessalonians 3, and now the first part of Chapter 4. It is...as we said, Dave...it is all about faith and love. Paul himself was head over heels in love with the Thessalonians. He couldn't wait to hear how they were doing. The news that they were abiding in faith and love was so good to him, because it is all about faith, and the one who loves us; and that is the Gospel, thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time, as we seek to understand a Christian view of death from Paul's teaching in the second half of 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4, and on into Chapter 5. Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com; share what *Groundwork* means to you, and tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

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