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THE WIND BENEATH OUR WINGS

1 Thessalonians 1:1-8

After we had lived in our house for 15 years some of our furnishings were in need of some change. The original carpet was still in the house and it was getting close to disreputable. We had a sofa that we loved, but the old war horse had seen its better days. It was a hand-me-down from my parents, so it was actually more than 30 years old. It was one of the most comfortable sofas I've ever sat on, but by this time in Laurie's description it more closely resembled a hammock than a sofa. So at least the carpet and the sofa needed to be replaced.

Laurie and I both tend to get comfortable with certain styles when it comes to home décor and maybe even clothes. By that I mean we get stuck in a rut. If you come to our house you might be able to detect that. As we were shopping for a new sofa and new carpeting without even discussing it we both had in our minds finding something very similar to what we already had. Like I said, we were maybe in a little rut. One day we were in a furniture store looking at sofas when we happened on a sofa that was radically different than our old one. It would not fit at all with the color scheme and the décor in our house, but we both loved it. As we contemplated that sofa and talked about it a strange thing happened. Together we both began to get a totally new vision for what our house should be like. Just that one idea caused us to see our home in an entirely different way. We changed the kind of carpet we were looking for, we changed the look of our fireplace, really changed the whole theme and color scheme of the house. Oddly we didn't get the sofa. But the idea of that sofa caused a paradigm shift for us, one that we still have in our house today.

That was a trivial example of the fact that sometimes one idea can create a whole new paradigm, a whole new way of thinking. Two millennia ago the apostle Paul and a couple of his friends showed up in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica and proclaimed some truth that had that effect on a group of people. It utterly changed their view of life, of morality, of God, of themselves and of other people. In fact, it changed everything and gave them a whole new way of living. This new way of living was radically different than they had before. It was completely foreign to the way people in the culture thought and lived. This change meant that they were no longer going to fit in to the culture they had lived with all their lives. They were

going to be aliens, outsiders, weirdos in the estimation of their peers. But this new life was so wonderful it was worth the estrangement they would experience. Today I'm starting a series of sermons I call "Alien Race" because that's what those Macedonian Christians would come to feel like. They were aliens in their own home town. Their experience is instructive for us because Peter instructed us in one of his epistles that we, too, live as aliens and strangers in our world. The Christian life is not natural. It is just a different breed of cat, one that many people cannot understand. We should not be surprised that the world does not understand, value or appreciate this life. It makes no sense to them. This letter was written to remind some neophyte followers of Jesus of their status as aliens and to help them learn how to live as aliens in their own world. We can learn much from it, for we are faced with the same challenge. We will begin our study of this letter by looking at the first 8 verses, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-8.

**PAUL THANKED GOD:
FOR HIS CHOOSING OF THEM**

According to Acts 16 while on his second church planting trip along with Silas, a prophet from Jerusalem, and Timothy, Paul's protégé, Paul had been directed by the Holy Spirit to leave Asia Minor and go to Europe. He headed up into Macedonia and came to the city of Philippi. Paul and his colleagues were able to begin a ministry there, but had to leave town because of the civil unrest their ministry was causing. From there they headed west. They passed through the towns of Amphipolis and Appollonia and eventually arrived at the major seaport city of Thessalonica. By first century standards this was a very large city. It was situated on the best seaport on the northern coast of the Aegean Sea but was also on the Egnatian Way, which was the major trade road from Asia to Rome. It had been declared a free city by the Romans, which meant that though it was ruled by Rome it was allowed to have its own independent government and laws. It was a thriving metropolis that, due to its port and its vital location on crucial trade routes had a booming economy. The city still exists today and is the second largest city in Greece. Though sometimes called Saloniki, on maps it is Thessaloniki. It's a couple of hundred miles due north of Athens and about 300 miles west of Istanbul.

The city had quite a stew of religions. There were the usual Greek and Roman pagan gods with their idols, but there were also a number of more recent mystery cults that had made serious inroads in the city. The cult of Dionysius and the cult of Cabrius were actually both sponsored by the state. By the time Paul arrived the cult of Cabrius was perhaps the chief cult in the city. The local authorities desperately wanted to maintain the town's status as a free city so they vigorously encouraged the worship of the "divine emperor" as a way of trying to keep on

Caesar's good side. Added to this mixture was a thriving Jewish population with their unusual monotheistic religion.

There was at least some dissatisfaction and cynicism regarding religion in the city. Common people figured out that local authorities had sort of co-opted both the emperor cult and the cult of Cabrius as a way of consolidating and protecting their own power. Once people figure out that a religion is mainly about someone controlling other people they tend to lose any real faith in and respect for that religion. They become more cynical and their loss of faith leaves a hole. Archaeologists have actually found a tombstone from the Thessalonica of that day that had the inscription "No hope" on it. Perhaps that was merely the sad summation of one life, but it may reflect the cynicism that I mentioned.

Imagine the challenge that confronted Paul, Silas and Timothy. The 3 of them arrived in a city of hundreds of thousands of people where they knew no one, a place awash in various already established religions, and their goal was to start a church there. They had to tell people that a fairly unknown man who was from a no-name Jewish town was actually God in the flesh. They had to explain to them that even though he was completely innocent of any wrong he had been executed by the Roman authorities on their behalf so they could be forgiven, and then he conquered death so they could live eternally.

The overwhelming majority of the people in that city would have thought that was the weirdest, and literally the most unbelievable story they'd ever heard. People don't rise from the dead. Plus most of them knew exactly zero about the Jewish Messiah. When Paul referred to Old Testament prophecies of Messiah all he got back was blank stares.

This new religion that Paul and his colleagues were promoting was deeply counter-cultural. First there was the idea that there is only one God and one Mediator between him and humans. In other words, there was only one Savior in whom people could believe. The pervasive view of people in that day was that such a thing was absurd. There were lots of gods and a variety of religions. When you were a kid and you ate dinner at home you may have run into the problem of "we are having tuna noodle casserole for dinner. There are people starving in India who would love to eat it. If you don't want this then you'll just have to go without food because this is what Mom has made for us tonight." In other words, there was only one item on the family menu, take it or leave it. The prevailing thinking of that day was that religion was not like that at all. It was more like Home Town Buffet. Just take your pick. There's fried chicken, there's some pot roast, there's pork chops,

there's lasagna, there are some enchiladas. Just pick what suits you. I'll take what I like, you take what you like and we all agree that no one's choice is better than anyone else's. None of them are very good, but at least you have a variety to choose from. How could anyone claim that their particular religion was the only true one?

This new Jesus religion was also dangerously offensive to some groups. Paul and his buddies ran into a problem with the local Jewish people. The 3 missionaries started their evangelistic efforts in the synagogue because the folks there at least knew there was only one God and they anticipated Messiah coming. But when Paul claimed that this Jesus guy was the Messiah but that he was executed on a cross by the Romans and rose from the dead, he lost them. Messiah was going to be a powerful conquering hero that would usher in an age of unprecedented power, peace and prosperity for Jewish people. They saw no such age happening so how could this Jesus be Messiah? And how could he be a conquering hero if he was killed by the Romans? And by the way, rising from the dead is a joke. Then Paul poured gasoline on the fire by claiming people, including Gentiles, could get into God's kingdom just by believing in this Jesus, completely bypassing the God-given Law of Moses! It literally was a sacrilege. That ultimately fostered such a violent reaction that it led to another riot and Paul once again had to be quietly escorted out of town after being there perhaps a matter of weeks.

Then there was this thing of Jesus being the Ruler of all creation and not worshipping anyone but him. This totally undercut the whole worship of the emperor thing. This was like an open invitation for Caesar to come and kick everybody out of the pool. When Caesar did that it tended to be a bad day for everyone. So could we tone down this "Jesus is Lord" stuff? We don't want Caesar to think he's got a rival here.

Finally there was the whole lifestyle thing. As we will see later in this letter the Jesus followers made a big deal about sex. If you can believe this, they claimed that God insisted that sex should be kept within the confines of a marriage between a man and a woman! This was as weird to people in that city as that "one God and one true religion" thing, maybe weirder. Nobody really believed that. Not only did they think that was unfathomable, they believed that one was supposed to go have sex with prostitutes in the pagan temples as a way of paying homage to the gods. You were supposed to be sexually promiscuous. It was in some of their religions!

As you can see the gospel was jarring in their culture, but it has the same effect in ours. There are considerable parallels between the conflicts their culture had with

the gospel of Jesus and where ours conflicts. How in the world were Paul and his friends supposed to get anyone to buy what they were selling? Throughout history really charismatic and dynamic people have been able to get others to buy some of the most absurd religions imaginable. We have some huge cults that exist for just that reason. That continues to this day. We still continually see whackos who are able to get a following so devout they are willing to commit mass suicide when the great leader tells them to do so. Consider Jim Jones, David Koresh down in Waco, Marshall Applewhite of the Heaven's Gate cult, Bhagwan Rajneesh and many others. So conceivably if these guys could put on a great show they might easily get a little following for Jesus. However, it turns out that wasn't an option for Paul. By his own admission he was the farthest thing from a spellbinding speaker and he was criticized by some because he was so unimpressive in person. By his charisma and oratorical ability he would have about as many followers as someone preaching about the evils of football at an NFL game. Despite all those obstacles, those 3 guys were indeed able to plant a healthy church of Jesus followers in Thessalonica.

In fact, Acts 17:1-9 tells us that a church was born and began growing in the face of serious opposition and persecution. Apparently some news of these 3 guys and their new religion had preceded them. The instigators of the riot were some Jewish people who were incensed at Paul's message. In Acts 17:6 they are quoted saying, "these men who have upset the world have come here also." Though their message was foreign and though they were less than impressive these guys had "upset the world" wherever they went. The accusation the ringleaders of the riot had against them is actually kind of funny. Acts 17:7 says, "they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." This was coming from some people who would never, ever obey the decree of Caesar that he should be worshipped. Some pots were yelling that the kettle was black.

How did these guys have such an effect? How did they get people to believe this weird, counter cultural message about Jesus? There are scholars that debate that question, suggesting various sociological factors that created an atmosphere of dissatisfaction. However, the verses we are reading say it was due to something else entirely. 1 Thessalonians 1:4 tells us why people responded to Paul's strange message. There are several factors there, but one that is the bottom line reason.

The message came in word, in other words, he and his friends explained it to people. They verbally told them about Jesus and the grace of the good news. But Paul also says it came with power. Part of that power is that God's power works in the gospel message. Romans 1:16 says the gospel of Jesus is the power of God.

God is able to change hearts and cause people to believe the truth. I also suspect that meant that some miraculous things happened there that validated the message.

In his book, *You Were Made For More*, Jim Cymbala tells an amazing story. Fernando Aranda was a career street criminal who lived a life of drug abuse, violence and theft. He was finally sent to prison with a sentence of 25 years to life. In prison he continued his ways until his mother came to visit him. She broke down crying, telling him she didn't want to see him in that condition for the rest of his life. Somehow that broke him, for the moment. He cried a simple prayer saying, "God if you get me out of this hellhole, I promise I'll serve you for the rest of my life." It was not too long after that day that he surprisingly was released after serving only 13 years. But he didn't keep his promise. As soon as he got out he was right back with the wrong people doing drugs again. One day he and a friend were out trying to get more drugs when they noticed the Drug Task Force was out on the street. He knew if he was caught with drugs he'd be immediately sent back to prison, so he ran. He saw a crowd of people in a park so he tried to lose himself in the crowd. But one of the people in the crowd said to him, "Hey, do you know that Jesus loves you?" It was an evangelistic rally. He was disgusted and moved away from that guy, but stayed in the crowd to avoid the police. What happened next defies explanation. He'd never seen any of the people in the crowd in his life, but one of them, a big, heavily muscled guy named Louie walked up to him and out of the blue said to him, "Hey bro, don't you remember the day you prayed in your prison cell that if God would release you from that hellhole you'd serve him the rest of your life?" Fernando was stunned. How could that guy know he'd prayed that? He'd told no one. That day Fernando gave his life to Jesus for good. The message came with power that day.

The message came by the Holy Spirit. Why does anyone believe the good news? We seek lots of reasons, but in the end Jesus said it is always for the same reason. It is because the Spirit of Jesus draws him or her. It is the Spirit who convinces people of their sin and of their need for a Savior, who helps them realize Jesus is that Savior.

The message came with full conviction, meaning it was obvious that Paul and his friends believed their message. It was no act. They were genuine, and he says "you know what we were like with you." By that he meant they were the real thing. They weren't showmen or religious hucksters. They were people who had been changed by the grace of God and wanted others to experience what had happened to them.

But the bottom line is, Paul and friends gave thanks because of God's choice of them. While we all know that at some point we chose to put our faith in Jesus Christ, it never would have happened if God had not chosen us. Ephesians 1:3 says God chose us before the world was created. We don't understand all about that, but Paul's point, and it is critical for us to remember, is that people didn't believe his message because he was so persuasive, or because he was such a dynamic speaker, or because he could out-debate anyone, or because they were socially oppressed and longing for something new. They believed because God chose them. That's why Paul thanked God for their faith in Jesus. He made it happen.

FOR THE EFFECT HIS CHOOSING PRODUCED

Paul had to leave Thessalonica before he wanted to. The church there consisted entirely of brand new, weeks old believers in Jesus. They had no veteran believers, no seasoned wise leaders and no New Testament to guide them. But for Paul and friends to remain there would have put them in jeopardy. So he left, went to Athens then onto Corinth. He sent Timothy back to check on them. He and his buddies wrote this letter because Timothy had come back and reported they were standing firm in the faith and doing well. So the letter is full of thanksgiving for their continued faith.

When those people put their faith in Jesus something happened. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul would later write, "if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold new things have come." What that person used to be has ended, and something new has come. That person is changed. The Thessalonians were an example. Their lives were transformed by the grace of God in them.

When I was a kid I remember discovering a principle of physics all on my own. Actually it was a principle of aerodynamics first identified by a guy named Daniel Bernoulli. I remembering rolling down my window, which involved actually turning a crank, and sticking my hand out side as we were driving at highway speeds. If I put my hand flat with just a slight curve to it the wind going by would cause my hand to fly straight up. Without even knowing it I had discovered the principle of an air foil. The air going over the top of my hand flowed faster than that under it, creating less pressure above my hand , causing it to rise. It is this principle that makes airplanes able to fly. The curved surface of the wing creates that same effect and lifts the plane. When you go to the airport and see those huge metal planes loaded with people and fuel and think it is impossible for them to get off the ground, remember it is that principle of aerodynamics that causes them to

fly. The thing I want you to see is if you have the right curved surface on the wing and you push it through the air with speed, it will rise. It happens every time.

My point here is that just as it is inevitable for that principle to make a plane fly, so it is inevitable that when a person is in Christ they become a new creation. They will soar spiritually. Just as it is impossible for the aerodynamic principle not to work, so it is impossible for a person to be in Christ and not be changed. Paul saw the change in the Thessalonians and thanked God for it.

Verse 7 says something that pretty much sums up the changes in these young believers. It says they had become a model for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, the surrounding region. From the very beginning they had become what Paul wanted all believers to be. They weren't perfect. They had areas of life to learn and grow in, which is why Paul wrote this letter. But they had their hearts in the right place and they were moving down the right track. None of us is perfect. But think of a railyard. There are lots of tracks a train can take. Paul was saying they were on the right track. Being on the right track doesn't mean the train has reached its destination, but it is on the only track that will get it there. The Thessalonians were on the right track.

This is evidenced by their commitment and their energy in serving God. In verse 3 Paul rejoiced in their “work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” This was no minor thing. The word he used that is translated “labor” according to the *Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament* meant “working to the point of weariness, sweat or fatigue.” These people were tireless in serving God and in loving each other. Their effort and commitment was noticeable to everyone.

They became imitators of Paul and of God. They had seen Paul’s integrity, honesty, holiness, faithfulness, goodness, kindness and love for other people. They wanted to manifest those same qualities because they knew that God himself is like that. He is the epitome of those qualities and he wants us to be like him. So that’s what they wanted too.

They also wanted other people to know about what they had found. They had a whole new life full of hope and love and meaning and so they absolutely had to tell others about it. Verse 8 says the message of the Lord rang out from them to the surrounding area and to everywhere else as well. In his commentary on 1 Thessalonians Mark Howell wrote that when the good news of grace through Jesus

Christ transforms us, “we become passionate about the proclamation of the gospel.” That absolutely happened with the Thessalonians.

That’s the most natural thing in the world. The Sunday after Christmas I was talking to Dylan, our worship leader. I mentioned that Laurie and I were going to see the new *Star Wars* movie that week. He said, “You’re going to love it.” I asked if he had seen it. He had and he said he didn’t want to spoil it for me, but he said it was the best movie he’s ever seen. He had to contain himself from getting evangelistic about it. Isn’t that what you’d expect when you experience something wonderful? The Thessalonians had experienced the most freeing, joyful, hopeful thing they’d ever encountered in their entire lives, and they naturally were eager to tell others.

There’s one other thing about them that we should note. Verse 6 says they “welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” They had learned that there is a real God and that he is good. They had learned that he actually cared about them and wanted them to be his children, that he loved them. They had learned they had incalculable value in his eyes and that the failures and the guilt that weighed them down were totally forgiven. They had learned that they had a certain future, that eternal life was theirs through Jesus Christ. That was so much good news that even though they were being ridiculed, mistreated, rejected, opposed and persecuted, even though the persecution resulted in terrible hardships for them, they were full of joy.

In 2 Corinthians 8:2 Paul told the church at Corinth about the Macedonian churches, of which the Thessalonians were chief. He said, “in the midst of a very severe trial their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” They had very severe trial. Not just a severe trial, but a very severe trial. That reminds me of a line from the old movie *A Few Good Men*. After Colonel Jessep was on the witness stand and claimed he was going to transfer Private Santiago because he felt his life might be in danger Lieutenant Kaffee asks, “Grave danger?” Jessep responds, “Is there any other kind?” Is it a very severe trial? Is there any other kind of severe trial? They were in extreme poverty. Property was taken from them and they were considered outcasts so they had no way to make money. They were desperate to find enough food to sustain their lives. They were despised by some people, and in the midst of all that they weren’t just joyful, they had overflowing joy. They felt they had been given something so incredibly wonderful that it outweighed all the negatives, and there were a ton of them, that they had in their lives.

CONCLUSION

THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST TRANSFORMS

The Thessalonians teach us the truth we've already seen, that the good news of Jesus is powerful. Remember Romans 1:16 says it is the power of God. Where it enters a life it will have an effect. It will change people. For instance, people who have truly experienced God's grace through Jesus Christ will have joy even in affliction.

1 Chronicles 16:27 says of God, "splendor and majesty are before him, strength and joy are in his dwelling place." Where God is there is joy. When he is in our lives there will be joy. Psalm 16:11 says to God, "You fill me with joy in your presence." Psalm 30:11 says, "you turned my mourning into dancing, you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy." Romans 15:13 says, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy." Not just some joy, not a little joy, but all joy. That's what God wants to do in our lives.

On Sunday, December 13 the Chargers played a dismal game and lost to Kansas City 10-3. You all know I am a big time football fan. It was downright depressing to watch them play so poorly and lose yet again, dropping their woeful record to an ugly 3 wins and 10 losses at that point. This was in the context of reports that after 55 years here in San Diego they are about to move. For a dedicated sports fan the picture was about as gloomy as it could be since in addition to that misery the Padres were doing next to nothing, thus setting them up for yet another pathetic season. Monday, December 14, was a great day in my life. I was more joyful than I can describe. That's because just a few hours after that ugly Charger game Toby called us and told us that he and Anna were at the hospital. She was in labor. At 4 o'clock the next morning Leilani Myatt was born. That was such an incredible blessing that not even reading all the bad news about the Chargers could dent it. Leilani's arrival was infinitely more important than anything having to do with sports, and immeasurably better and more joyful.

That is a little bit like what happened with the Thessalonians. They had some crummy, painful and very depressing stuff going on in their lives, but they had been given something so good, so unimaginably terrific that none of the gloomy stuff could put a dent in their joy. That is what the gospel of grace can and will do in us as well.

People who have experienced the gospel of grace through Jesus Christ will have a divine quality of life. They will have faith that will motivate them to serve others, to give generously to an extent that makes no sense to other people. If you recall

that verse in 2 Corinthians 8 said that the poverty of the Macedonian Christians welled up in rich generosity. Paul was raising money for starving Christians in Jerusalem, but he had told the Macedonians that because they were so poor they should not worry about it. But they begged him to let them help! They insisted on giving even when they had nothing to give. That's not natural. That's God making a new kind of person. That is an example of what Paul meant when he talked about their work of faith and their labor of love. That is one evidence of the fact that they became a model for others to follow, one that we would do well to follow today.

That love for other people will put a desire in the lives of transformed people to care about others to the point where they want to make sure they know about the good news of Jesus. They will want deeply for people to experience the same joyful transformation they have found, and will be anxious to do all they can to tell them about it.

People who have experience the gospel of grace through Jesus Christ will have an ability to endure. One of those classic Bible verses reminds us of this. Isaiah 40:30-31 says, "Even youths grow tired and weary; and young men stumble and fall; but those who put their hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

Those are beautiful words. That was true of the Thessalonians. Paul gave thanks to God for their endurance inspired by hope. There is a key element of that ability to run and not grow weary. It is hope. The most important factor in being able to persevere, to endure and to do it with peace and confidence, is hope. William Barclay wrote, "A man can endure anything as long as he has hope, for then is walking not to the night, but to the dawn."

Have you seen the new *Star Wars* movie? I've seen it twice...so far. It seems like *Star Wars* is everywhere doesn't it? We bought some *Star Wars* oranges this week! What does *Star Wars* have to do with oranges? Nothing, as far as I can tell. Anyway there is an example in that movie of exactly what I'm talking about. One of the central characters in the movie is a former Stormtrooper called Finn. He was horrified and sickened by the cruelty and brutality of the First Order, which is sort of the latest manifestation of the Dark Side. So he ran away. In the process he allows himself to be mistaken for a fighter for the Resistance, the group trying to oppose the evil First Order. But there comes a point where he must either cast his lot with those who truly are fighting the First Order or flee. He admits that he is not, in fact a member of the Resistance, and insists he is going to run away. He

tries to get his friend to run away with him. He says that the First Order cannot be defeated, they are too strong. The fight is hopeless. If there is no hope then the only alternative is to give up and run away.

Those who put their faith in Jesus have hope. It is not hope that nothing bad will ever happen to them. It is not a hope that life will be pleasant and easy. The Thessalonians had very severe trial and extreme poverty, and in the midst of it they had hope. They had hope, not wishful thinking, but the certainty of God's promise, that God loved them and accepted them, that God would be with them and never abandon them, that God would give them the strength to stand, that God is in control and is working good in every situation for them, that their lives have eternally significant meaning, and that in the end they need not fear humanity's greatest enemy, death, for they had the hope of eternal life.

Hebrews 6:19, our church's motto verse, says, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul." Our hope anchors us and enables us to stand firm with optimism, gratitude and joy even on the darkest of days.

THE TAKEAWAY IS NOT "GO CHANGE YOUR LIFE"

We have a tendency to hear this and get discouraged. We can easily think, "I'm not a model for every Christian everywhere. I don't sound out the gospel everywhere. I work hard, but mostly for myself. I'm not at all joyful when things turn against me and life is depressing." From there we typically think we need to try harder. We have to do better. So we try to drum up more enthusiasm for serving God, more joy, be stronger and more generous. We try to transform ourselves, give ourselves an extreme spiritual makeover. And it doesn't work. All it does is tire us out and make us even more depressed because of our failure.

This is not an uncommon problem. Psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes noted a strange thing they called the Imposter Syndrome. They observed that high achieving people often believe they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite the evidence to the contrary. The psychologists say these people often live in fear of being found out or exposed as frauds. Maya Angelou, the poet and author of 11 successful books said every time she wrote a book she thought, "they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody and they're going to find me out." Marketing expert Seth Godin who has written a dozen best sellers said in his book, *The Icarus Deception*, that he still feels like a fraud.

We feel that. We think we're frauds who haven't really been transformed at all by the gospel we say we believe. So we think we have to do better. We have to

measure ourselves against those traits we see in this passage and try to live up to them. It won't work. I read an interesting little news item recently. We know that the government has mandated that restaurants reveal how many calories their menu items contain. This has met with widespread approval. Polls show that over 90% of people are in favor of this idea. This is where it gets interesting. Despite that approval studies show that it has made exactly zero difference in how people choose what they eat. Somehow by putting those numbers out there and implicitly informing people they need to eat more wisely, even though people think that's a good thing, nothing changes.

My point here is that listing a lot of things that Christians ought to be and urging them to go out and be more like that will not do much good. Even when we agree with all those things, it won't change us. Paul and friends did not come to Thessalonica and tell this people, "you need to be joyful, you need to work to care about each other, you need to persevere in hard times and you need to be excited about telling people about Jesus. He told them about Jesus, about the new life and the hope that he offers, and when they received the grace offered them by Jesus it transformed them. Notice where the work, the labor, the perseverance came from. They came from faith, love and hope.

So how do we respond to this message? Try harder to be better? It's good to try to be better, but that's not really what's needed. We need to trust more in God's love and grace. We need to remember what an incredible thing he has done for us. We need to value it more, give thanks for God's grace more. We need to let him fill us with his life and his joy. We need to experience his grace more than ever. Remember who you are. You are a child of God because of his grace and for no other reason. Remember what you have been given. You have hope. You have God's love. You have his presence with you. Rejoice in it! Then tell God what you want more than anything in life is to travel down the right track.

Remember that one idea can give you an entirely new paradigm for life. It can change everything. The one idea that changes us is that God loves us, that because of what Jesus has done for us we are new people who are part of God's kingdom and that we have eternal hope. As we live in that reality we will become new people, people who are on the right track.