FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

1 Thessalonica 1:1-3

Key Verse 1:3

“We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The senders of 1 and 2 Thessalonians were Paul, Silas and Timothy. However, when we think of its contents and the constant reference to “I” (in 2:18, 3:5; 5:27), it indicates that Paul was the actual writer, the, single inspired author. Paul included Silas and Timothy because they were his fellow workers in Thessalonica and shared his concern for the believers there (3:6-10; Ac 17:5,10,14,15). While Paul was in Corinth, he received a report from Timothy whom he had sent to Thessalonica (Ac 18:5; 1 Th 3:6). In response, Paul sent this letter to the Thessalonians. So this letter was written in Corinth. Gallio was proconsul of Achaia at the time Paul was in Corinth (Ac 18:12). Archeological evidence (an inscription found at Delphi) indicates that Gallio’s rule was from A.D. 51-52. So it seems that Paul wrote this letter sometime around that time. Since Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia was probably written ca. AD 49-50, this was his second piece of canonical correspondence.

Thessalonica was founded in 315 B.C. by a Greek general Cassander under Alexander the Great.

Cassander happened to marry Alexander the Great's half-sister. Her name was Thessalonica.  So he named the city after his wife. You might be interested to know that the city still exists today. It is called Saloniki and it has about 300,000-plus inhabitants, in the metropolitan, about 1.1 million.

Thessalonica was one of three key cities in Macedonia, the other two being Philippi and Berea. When the Romans conquered the Greeks and they came in, they supplanted Greek rule in the year 168 BC. Then from 146 B.C. on, Thessalonica was designated the capital of the whole province of Macedonia and had the nickname, "The Mother of Macedonia."  It was a very strategic city and the hot spot for trade, business, and commerce. The city was granted the privilege of being a “free city” being loyal to Rome. As a result, adherence to the imperial cult was strongly emphasized. As a Macedonian city, it was obviously influenced by Greek philosophy. Religiously, the city was committed to the Greco-Roman pantheon. They worshipped the Greek and Egyptian gods. The worship of these idols was closely associated with sexual immorality.

Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in such a city. There was a synagogue in Thessalonica, for there were a quite number of Jews living among the Greeks in that capital city, while there was no synagogue in Philippi. Three Sabbath days Paul went to the synagogue and preached that Jesus who died and rose from the dead is the Christ. The Holy Spirit worked powerfully and a large number of God-fearing Greeks along with some of the Jews accepted the gospel with deep conviction turned Christ. Right away persecution arose from the jealous Jews, Paul could not stay, and Silas and Timothy, too. After Paul’s abrupt leaving, the Thessalonians were left alone like spiritual orphans. In Paul’s absence, persecutors arose among their own countrymen to stop the work of God. They slandered Paul to discredit the gospel ministry (2:14). Specifically, they accused him of having impure motives and using deception and flattery to win praise from people. They also accused him of being greedy (2:3-6). Persecutors used the fact that Paul did not return to Thessalonica as evidence for their accusations. Paul was afraid that the tempter would work to nullify his labor to preach the gospel. He sent Timothy to find out about their faith (3:5). Hearing from Timothy that the Thessalonians had kept their faith and love, Paul was greatly encouraged. He expressed his joy and encouragement this way in the letter, “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you!” (3:8-9). As we read this epistle, Thessalonian church became a model, an exemplary church to all other churches, though not perfect.

Subsequently, Paul wrote this letter, first of all, to encourage Thessalonians out of his great joy and thanks. It was also definitely to build them up filling their lacking part as written in 3:10, “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.” Since they had turned from idols to the living and true God and had begun to live holy lives, there was always a great temptation for them to return to their former way life, Paul strongly exhorted them to live a holy life (4:3-8). Paul also helped them to keep the hope of Jesus’ second coming even with the expression, “The dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And we will live with the Lord forever.” (4:16-17). And Paul taught them how to live in the hope of Jesus’ coming again (5:12-22), that includes the famous verses in the Bible, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:16-18).

Thank God for granting us an opportunity to study 1 Thessalonians along with 2 Thessalonians. What a fitting study it is in our time, when a holy living is very much challenged in the flood of moral revolution and the hope of Jesus’ returning is increasingly dimming, even among believers. May God really fill us with the hope of our Lord Jesus’ coming again and with a holy, joyful and powerful life in him!

Today’s passage is 1:1-3. Let’s study this passage with the title, “Faith, Love and Hope.”

**First, the church of the Thessalonians (1).** Verse 1 begins, “Paul, Silas and Timothy.” As we thought of, Silas and Timothy were Paul’s fellow workers in Thessalonica and shared his concern for the believers there. So they were included in senders, while Paul was the actual writer. Paul wrote two letters to the Thessalonians and one to Philippi, and both cites were in Macedonia. Interestingly, in none of these three letters did Paul identify himself as an apostle. Apparently that was not an issue; his authority was not questioned to the believers in Thessalonica and Philippi. They had not besieged by someone who became confused about it. Particularly, in Thessalonians it is just written, “Paul, Silas and Timothy”, while in Philippians, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.” This simplicity of Paul’s introduction is one uniqueness of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Again, he wrote this letter with the primary purpose of encouraging the Thessalonian believers out of great thanks for them and to them. So, simply saying, “Paul” was sufficient.

We are familiar with Timothy, Paul’s spiritual son, who was with Paul in his first imprisonment and became his successor. Paul said of Timothy in Philippians 2:20-22, “I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.”

Silas was from Jerusalem church, and after Jerusalem council he was sent to support the gospel work in Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas ministered to. He joined Paul in his second missionary journey. In Philippi, he was imprisoned with Paul after severely beaten and flogged, simply because of their doing the work of God in the name of Jesus. In the prison, their feet were fastened in the stocks. Then Acts 16:25 says, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to him.” We also see the name Silas in 1 Peter 5:12, “With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly.” Silas is in Greek Silvanus.

Here in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 says continually, “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is also an unique expression among all the epistles of Paul. The church is in Greek, *ekklésia*, with *ek*, “out from and to” and *kaléō*, "to call”, so “to elect.” So the word “church” means the called out ones, the elect ones. So “to the church of the Thessalonians” is “to the elect ones of Thessalonians.” Paul did not use this expression in his other epistles. Paul wrote in 1 and 2 Corinthians, “to the church of God in Corinth.” “The church of God” can be a sort of general expression. But here, “to the church of Thessalonians”, “to the elect ones of Thessalonians.” Paul’s heart seemed to be greatly moved from the beginning of his epistle, when he thought of the Thessalonian Christians, losing no time to assure that they were God’s elected ones.” Right away he also wrote in verse 4, “he has chosen you…”

Jesus is the first person who used the word, “church.” In Matthew 16, when Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” At Jesus replied, “…this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Mt. 16:16-18). So we say that the church is the gathering the elected ones, who have made the confession of Christ, who is our Saviour and Lord through his death and resurrection.

Here in verse 1 Paul said, “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In none other of his epistles did Paul use this expression. In writing this, Paul is sure that they are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The description is not even “in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ”, but “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”, indicating that God the Father and the Lord Christ are equal in deity. Definitely, they are also in the Holy Spirit.

And then Paul greets, “Grace and peace to you.” This is a common greeting. These are the two most wonderful words. Grace is God’s favour to the sinner and peace is the result.

**Second, faith, love and hope (2-3).** Verses 2 and 3 say, “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 labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Verses 2-10 are especially Paul’s thanksgiving in this epistle. While giving thanks to God in his prayers, Paul continually remembered in the presence of God their faith, love and hope. This is also a unique thanksgiving among all his epistles. This is the present condition of the Thessalonian church. Paul said in Colossians 1:4-5, “because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven…” Yet, here it is written specifically, “your work of faith, your labour of love, and your endurance of hope.” This thanksgiving is his great commendation for the church of Thessalonians. Later on he wrote in 1:8, “…your faith in God has become known everywhere…” And he described in 4:9, “Now about your brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia.” In hope, they also were waiting for God’s Son from heaven. The church of Thessalonians was the church of faith, love and hope.

The threefold combination of faith, hope and love is a Pauline favorite (5:8; 1 Cor. 13:13, Col. 1:4-5). Paul also wrote in 5:8, “But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” These can be three holy habits as trilogy. These three spiritual attitudes are to be essential in Christian life. According to John Calvin, faith, love and hope are a brief definition of Christianity. It is worthwhile to think of these three one by one:` faith that produces work, love that prompts labour, and hope that inspires endurance.

Firstly, faith. Faith is to produce work or deed. James said in James 2:14-17, “What good is it…if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” And he said 2:26, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” Then faith that produces work is a living faith, while faith with no work is a dead faith.

In Romans chapter 3, Paul clearly discoursed that one is justified by faith apart from the work of the law (3:28). Then in Romans chapter 4, he cited the case of Abraham and David as a strong support for his dissertation. He said also in Galatians 2:16, “…a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Christ Jesus…” And Paul continually said concerning this in Ephesians 2:8-9, “It is by grace you have been saved…not by works, so that no one can boast.” It is more than certain that we are not saved by work, but the saving faith produces work or deeds. We are to know this very clearly. That is why we read in Revelation 19:7-8, “‘…the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.’ (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)”

In Hebrews chapter 11, we see the vivid works of faith in the lives of those who lived by faith, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham…etc. As for Abraham, Hebrews 11:8 says, “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” Abraham’s faith was well shown in his life of obedience. In his life of obedience ,he solely depended on God holding on to the promise of God. As for Moses, Hebrews 11:14-27 says, “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” By faith Moses knew what to refuse, what to choose and what to value. When we read Hebrews 11, we also see that through faith the weakness of people was turned to strength. They did not become victims of their human weaknesses or life circumstances. They overcame the weak and fatalistic elements of life by faith. The weak became the powerful. The cowardly became the courageous. They pleased God with their faith, while the world was not worthy of those who lived by faith. It is clearly written in Hebrews 11:6, “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Jesus said in Matthew 17:20, “…if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” Here Jesus teaches that faith buried in one’s heart has an enormous power in his or her life. We should not limit the power of faith in me and in my colleagues of faith. Jesus said in Matthew 8:13, “…It will be done just as you believed it would.” Things will happen according to our faith. On other occasions Jesus said, “Your faith has healed you” (Mt 9:22; Mk 5:34; 10:52; Lk 8:48; 18:42) and “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” We are reminded of what John said in 1 John 5:4-5, “…This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”

Secondly, love. Love prompts/motivates labor. This love is agape, different from selfish human love. The love of God is the source of our life and the motivation of all our labours. Probably this is the reason Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:13, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” Because of the love of God who did not spare his own Son but sacrificed him for our salvation we can love God and love our neighbours. In God’s love, we can overcome difficulties in loving and strive to live a life love. And Jesus wants us to express our love for him through feeding his flock of sheep. We can say that the love of God motivates us to live a life of faith. Galatians 5:6 says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Thirdly, hope. Hope inspires endurance or patience or steadfastness. Christians are those who have hope. They do not just live in the present. They have hope for the future. Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:24, “For in this hope (the redemption of our bodies) we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” Faith and hope are certainly related. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” As we thought of, in Romans 4:18, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed…” Christians are those who hope in God when all human hopes are gone. Ultimately, we have the glorious hope of our Lord Jesus’ coming again. Titus 2:13 says, “while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.” This glorious hope is not for special people, but for all believers including you and me. Hope in God inspires us to endure and be steadfast.

Faith, love and hope are to go together. We have seen this in Jude 20-21, “But you, drear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.” We pray that we may keep faith, love and hope in us and serve God’s flock and raise our children with faith, love and hope.

Thank God for faith, love and hope in Jesus Christ our Lord. May we be his people of faith, love and hope – the faith that works, the love that labours and the hope that endures. Particularly our work of faith in love and hope be evident in our lives in this generation.