

1 Thess 1:1-10 (Acts 17:1-12) (19th October 2014)

When last time you received a letter? (ASK) Amazing how quickly changed – at college in early 90s – wrote about 1-2 letters/wk, and received same back – only 20 yrs. Instant comms changed how we communicate – but nothing like receiving a letter, is there?

Good news – we all have 21 letters written to us – in bible, in NT. These letters describe what it's like to be a Christian in real world, and how to live in the light of that. Sometimes funny, sometimes angry, always passionate. Can read again and again, and still speak to us with fresh power. Start a series today in one of them, possibly first that was written (first Christian writing full stop?) – Paul's first letter to small church in Thessalonica – known as 1 Thessalonians.

Background to church – there in Acts 17 (can tie up some of these letters with actual account in Acts – when read, makes perfect sense why wrote letter he did.) Paul only had 3 weeks before forced out – (3 Sabbaths – i.e. 3 sermons plus meetings during week) – desperate to know how they are. Longing of a church leader who was dragged away before he wanted, and wants to know they are standing firm in faith.

If we go back to account in Acts – to Berea (more trouble) and then to Athens – and from Athens he sent Timothy back to Thess to find out (3:1). When Timothy returns, that seems to prompt the letter (3:6) – imagine Paul greeting Timothy on return (by now in Corinth), sharing excitedly and then staying up late into night composing a letter for someone to take back. He knows their faith only a few months old – follow-up letter to new converts – so wants to give them some simple, direct and practical advice.

Background to letters – 'theology on hoof' – responding to real life situations – in this case a young church in a tough situation without much back-up. Only 2 of Paul's letters 'systematic' – Romans (though even then reason for writing was to introduce himself and get support for a planned mission trip to Spain) and possibly Ephesians (a circular intended for wide distribution among lots of churches).

- Real letters – structured and full of content, but actual personal letters nonetheless.
- Designed for reading out loud – see 5:27. Like a sermon in note form.

Worldview:

- Persecution and suffering normal
- Jesus likely to return very soon
- Holiness a requirement – faith impacts lifestyle – not just a set of 'beliefs'

Letter itself:

- Remember your past experience – ch1-2(:16)
- Brief interlude to describe personal update (end ch 2:17, beg ch 3:10)
- Moves from past experience, to present lifestyle – lots of practical instructions 3:11-4:12

- Then future expectation from 4:13 – what will happen at the end and how we should live in light of that
- Quickfire instructions end ch5 – like running out of time or probably paper (expensive – like a postcard!) – get as many pithy instrucs down as can

Take 10 mins to read whole letter this week – read it like a letter (only 3 pages) – imagine you're Paul stuck 100 miles away, you expect to see Jesus return in your lifetime, you know this church you started is suffering. Feel his pain, feel the urgency, feel his emotions swing back and forth as he writes. What would you have written?

Back to ch1 – looking at past experience...

Before that – note greeting – Grace and peace. Adaptation of traditional Roman greeting – clever little cultural ideas (church always done it). Summary of gospel – God's grace leads to our peace. Every means to get message into our heads. E.g. Wrist bands WWJD, PUSH. Nothing wrong with it. Grace and peace. Grace and peace.

Rest of ch1 – pep talk. Bigging the church up. Half-time team talk against top of the table opposition. Key word – REMEMBER – v3 – we remember, so you remember.

What? How you received the gospel, how you lived the gospel, how you shared the gospel.

How you received the gospel – READ v3-4. Not just words.... Holy Spirit. At Theological College now there are lots of classes on how to preach, how to communicate effectively. (Article in Times). Sessions with a voice coach, media training etc. All good – but never forget that what we need more than anything is not catchy slogans or a rich deep voice or any other gimmicks – we need power of Holy Spirit. Not just a PR or marketing exercise.

What is evidence of work of Spirit? – back to v4 – conviction – sense that someone prodding you, not just human words. Can be dramatic (Jonathan Edwards), more often work of heart. Word really hits you between eyes, or an incident comes to mind and you know God is speaking directly on it, sometimes feel you pulse quicken, or an emotion. That is conviction of Holy Spirit.

Also 'power' – generic terms here, Paul talks elsewhere about demonstrations of Spirit's power, like miracles, to prove that these are God's words. Not so clear here, but clear that Holy Spirit is power of God, and therefore the message is a powerful message.

Why I insist on always preaching from a passage, and bulk of my content is straight out of bible, rather than lots of anecdotes or funny stories. Wish I had more (my jokes are terrible) – God's word has power. We usually forget jokes, but hope it's the power of God's word that stays with you. Remember, Paul says, how you received the gospel – the power and conviction of Holy Spirit.

Remember how you lived the gospel – READ v6. When join family of God, take on family likeness. My son a mini-me – genetic. But principle the same. In fact, quite sobering, that it's not just example of Lord Jesus. People also tend to imitate their leaders. I find that terrifying, but it's true.

People always say that faith is caught not taught – not a question of *whether* I'm a good example. Those of us in leadership *are* examples, whether we like it or not.

Fortunately it's not just about us – ultimately about Jesus. 1 Cor 11:1: 'Imitate me, as I imitate Christ' – now have gospels written down in way they weren't when this letter was written. We can read and ask God for grace to imitate Jesus.

Notable again how what we believe produces outcomes – back to v3 READ. Faith, hope, love – one of famous verses of bible – 1 Cor 13 – read at weddings and makes us feel all gooey. But this is real stuff, it means something – faith produces work, real outcomes. A changed life. Love does even more – it produces hard work ('labour'). And hope – the hope of being with Jesus forever – what does that produce? Endurance. We keep on keeping on because we know where we're going. It's not going to be like this forever. It will all be worth it. Heaven is real.

Remember, Paul says, how you lived it out – in fact how you are living it. Look how far you've come! You want to know that this stuff is real? Look at how your lives have changed! Look at the fruit it's producing.

Good for us too – progress in spiritual life seems painfully slow. 2 steps forward, 3 steps back. But actually if we think not just about last few weeks, but about last few years or even decades, I find it much easier to see changes. I'm not the man I was when I was 22. I'm much more grounded, more resilient, I understand the Fatherhood of God much better – lots of stuff. I also have a long way to go, but there *are* things I can point to. Take some time this week to think back 10 years – you'll be surprised how much you've grown.

And if you haven't – well can I suggest you go back to point 1 and ask God for a bit more of that power of the gospel – ask him to make it real, to bring real change. That's a prayer he loves to answer.

Finally, how you shared the gospel. One of the challenging things about Paul's letters is that he refers often to persecution or at least to trials – but he almost never prays for them to go; rather for us to overcome and prevail against them, or at least to keep going. And so it is here. He is open about the way life is for them – v6 'in midst of severe suffering', but he doesn't say 'poor you' or even 'I hope it goes'. What he knows is that God gives extra grace to those in difficult times – anyone remember footprints in the sand?

But also, as he says here, he recognises its power to witness to the gospel – READ v7-8a. This church shared the gospel without even needing to share the gospel (if that makes sense). The quality of their lives in the face of trial shouted it out loud and clear. *Nothing speaks more clearly of the truth and power of the gospel than the lives of believers living with dignity and love in the midst of trials.*

- Kidnapped aid worker – 'praying for us'
- Barnabas updates – many eg's of how brothers and sisters care for destitute in disasters, welcome refugees, and so on.

How we handle our trials not only show us that God is real, it also shows others as well. And in the wisdom of God, who knows whose life gets changed by that? If you find yourself in times of trouble, can I encourage you to pray not just for grace for yourself, but that the way you face it would speak to others too? You might be amazed what answers that brings.

So remember, remember – almost at that time of year (scary!). Remember, Paul says to this young church, but also to us today: remember how you received the gospel – with spiritual power and conviction. Remember how you lived the gospel, as your faith, hope and love turned into a changed life, a life of fruit and endurance. And remember how you shared the gospel – not even with words necessarily – but how your life spoke to others about how God is real.

Remember, remember – what do you need to remember today?