

Thanks Today for God's Tomorrow

24th Weekend after Pentecost – November 18/19, 2006
Sermon Background Study

1 *Thessalonians 1:1-7* (NRSV)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

We gather to give thanks for the many blessings of our lives. We can also give thanks today for the certain hope of God's tomorrow.

If Paul were to write me a letter, I'd want it to begin as he begins his letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. In the Greek fashion, Paul typically opens his letters with a greeting and thanksgiving, but this one is over the top.

Paul, Silas,¹ and Timothy *always* give thanks for the Thessalonians and *constantly* lift them up in prayer before God. There may be a bit of encouraging hyperbole at work here, but not much. In the space of a few months, the Thessalonians have already become an example to all the believers in Greece and Macedonia, despite (or because of?) their persecution. A few weeks ago, we saw that Paul lifted up the Thessalonians and their giving as an example to the church in Corinth. They had begged to be part of Paul's collection for the believers in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).²

Eat This Book

In about six weeks, we will complete our journey of reading *Thru the Bible* in one year. Many St. Andrew members who never thought they could do it, will soon have read through the entire Bible – all 66 books. The question for us is this, "What's next?"

I've thought about this a lot and I invite you to join me next year in learning the art of spiritual reading. A few months ago, I read Eugene Peterson's recent book, *Eat This Book*. The title is taken from three biblical passages in which a prophet is told eat God's Word (Revelation 10:9-10; Jeremiah 15:16; Ezekiel 2:8-3:30). They are not just to read or hear God's Word, or just understand it, or even just apply it. These people are to eat Scripture, to take it inside themselves so it gets into every part of their person and being.

This became clearer for Peterson when he saw his dog working over a bone, slowly chewing and growling. Not long after, he was reading Isaiah 31:4, where a lion "growls" over his prey. Then, Peterson had one of those *aha!* moments, for the Hebrew word translated "growl" is usually translated "meditate" in the Old Testament. So there's the question for us: How often do we take the time to "growl" over Scripture? To chew on it, to take it inside ourselves, to eat it, so that we are transformed, not merely informed.

Much of my week is spent teaching and writing about the Bible. It is very easy for me read the Bible for information as I struggle to pull together the many classes and studies. I also often find myself treating the Bible as a tool that I can use to inspire me or fix a problem. What is hard is taking the time to really "eat this book." Even the three or four chapters a day of the *Thru the Bible* reading plan was too much for this meditative growling – at least for me.

The Bible is "the Word of God for the people of God." Reading Scripture is not about using the Bible to try to pull God into the bits and pieces of my story. Instead, it is about my entering the Bible so I can step into God's story.

Beginning in January, I invite you to begin growling over Scripture with me. We'll go through selected books, reading one story or one key passage each day. It is my hope that we'll learn how to ingest the story and keep it with us throughout the day, living with it and letting it work within us.

The daily passages we'll read each week will be the page three Bible readings that have always been part of the Sermon Background Studies. (These studies are always in the bulletin and posted on-line.) I hope that you will prayerfully consider joining me as we strive to be ever-truer readers of Scripture.

¹"Silvanus" is a Latin version of the name, Silas. Timothy and Silas accompanied Paul on his journey through Macedonia and Greece. For more on this, see esp. Acts 17:1 – 18:5. Many scholars believe that this letter was written from Corinth, where Silas and Timothy had caught up to Paul on their southward journey. Though the letter is based on the shared experiences of the three men, there is little doubt that Paul was the letter's author.

²Like Philippi, Thessalonica was in Macedonia. In 2 Corinthians, Paul refers to the "Macedonians" who beg to participate in the collection. Given what he says a couple of months later to and about the Thessalonians, it is hard to imagine he doesn't have them in mind as an example to the Corinthian Christians, perhaps along with the Philippians. See the Oct 15, 2006 Sermon Background Study which is posted at www.standrewacademy.org.

“ . . . *work of faith and labor of love . . .* ”

In verse 3, we encounter a triad familiar from 1 Corinthians 13: faith, love and hope, though in a different order. As elsewhere in Paul, faith does not mean mere intellectual acceptance of the gospel claims. Faith consists of trust and reliance. Indeed, “trust” is certainly the best synonym for what the biblical authors mean by “faith.”³ As we’ve talked about so often, Christian love is not about feelings but actions. Often, those actions entail sacrifice of our time or money or pride. If trust is the best synonym for faith, “sacrifice” is the best synonym for “love.”

When Paul speaks of the Thessalonians’ “work of faith and labor of love,” he uses two different words for work. The first, this “work of faith,” refers to work that produces something. The Thessalonians work of faith is evident in the disciplined practice of their faith – it is work that has produced the fruit of the Spirit, to borrow a phrase from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. The second word for work that Paul uses includes an element of hardship or discomfort. Thus, the Thessalonians’ “labor of love” captures their understanding that love is about sacrificial doing, serving others even when it is difficult or distasteful.

“ . . . *steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ . . .* ”

It is this “hope” that most challenges our imaginations. Paul is not referring to a generally up-beat and hopeful attitude that everything is in God’s hands and will work out well. Rather, Paul is speaking of a patient and enduring confidence that Jesus Christ will return. Just as “trust” is the best synonym for “faith” and “sacrifice” for “love,” the best synonym for Christian “hope” is “confidence.” Just ahead in the letter (v. 10), Paul commends the Thessalonians for being ones “who wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” Repeatedly in

this brief thanks-filled letter, Paul refers to Jesus’ return, his second coming (his *parousia* in the Greek), when all of God’s promises will reach their final consummation (see 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-5:11; 5:23).

Jesus’ return is the great Christian hope. We are not merely hopeful in the sense that this might happen. Instead, our hope is grounded in our sure confidence that God keeps his promises.

Thus, when we come to thanksgiving, we can reach out to the future and grab it, certain that the God who resurrected Jesus will one day put all things right. We can give thanks today for God’s tomorrow.

A life of thanksgiving

Like the Thessalonians, we are called to be Christ-like. We must allow ourselves to be drawn more often into the praise and thanksgiving of God. But let’s not pretend that even feeble expressions of thanks are easy. Nonetheless, as Richard Foster writes, “Our God is not made of stone. Like the proud mother who is thrilled to receive a wilted bouquet of dandelions from her child, so God celebrates our feeble expressions of gratitude.” Living every day in a spirit of thanksgiving does not come naturally to us; there is much in life that wants to crowd out any sense of gratitude. Nonetheless, we can seek to grow in our ability to see and to experience God and all his goodness, so that, like the Thessalonians, others will see our work of faith, our labor of love, and our patient confidence in Jesus’ return.

The Imitation of Christ (and of Paul!?)

When Paul gives his thanks that the Thessalonians have become “imitators of us and the Lord” it can strike us as a bit odd. After all, aren’t imitations mere copies of the original, even phony at that? And is Paul really so bold as to expect that these Christians will imitate *him*? Aren’t we to be Christ-like, not Paul-like?

In our world, we get pretty shy about being role models, but the language of imitation was prevalent in Paul’s day. If Paul had not been willing to hold himself up as worthy of imitation, he would have been seen as an unworthy teacher. In this way, the ancients were more realistic than we sometimes are. Paul was a role model regardless of what he said. The ancients understood that “Do as I say, not as I do” just doesn’t cut it.

Paul means that we can look to Jesus and even to himself as we seek to learn the shape of an authentically Christian life. It is not a call for us all to do and say the same things, nor to be cheap knock-offs of the real thing. I must live my life, not Jesus’ life and not Paul’s.

But from them, I can learn much about what it means to live each day in right relationship with God and with other persons. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul urges them to have the “same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (2:5). It is a call for us to imitate the selflessness of Jesus so that, like the Thessalonians, we might, in turn, be an example to others (v. 7).

³It is worth reminding ourselves again that the Greek word we translate “believe” is actually the verb form of the Greek word “faith.” When we speak of believing in Jesus, we really mean we are “faithing” in Jesus – trusting him with all that we are, all that we have, all that we do, and all that we dream.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

November 19 ~ 25

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Daniel 4-6; Psalm 144 Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation; the writing on the wall; Daniel in the lion's den</p>	<p>Monday Daniel 7-9; Psalm 145 Chapters 7-12 tell much the same story as the familiar stories of chapters 1-6, but using dramatic apocalyptic images; when Jesus calls himself the "son of Man" at his trial, he is quoting from Daniel 7:13</p>
<p>Tuesday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Wednesday Daniel 10-12; Psalm 146 Daniel 12:1-5 one of the OT texts that explicitly speaks of resurrection.</p>
<p>Thursday 1 Thessalonians 1-2; Psalm 147 Paul praises the Thessalonian Christians and reminds of their work together.</p>	<p>Friday 1 Thessalonians 3-5; Psalm 148 Paul urges the Thessalonians to live a life that is pleasing to God.</p>
<p>Saturday Joel; Psalm 149 Joel was written after the Jews returned from exile in Babylonia. The book presents God's merciful response to Judah's pleas for help.</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this fall. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Books that would make good Christmas gifts

I've been making book recommendations for almost three years. Here are a few that I think would make good Christmas gifts to friends and family. *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore, still has copies of these.

The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible, Ed. Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, et al

Talking the Walk, by Marva Dawn

Prayer, by Philip Yancey

Finding God in the Questions, by Dr. Timothy Johnson

The Jesus I Never Knew, by Philip Yancey

Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision, by Paul Wesley Chilcote

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Not only is our thanks to God built upon a foundation of faith, love, and hope, it is to be accompanied by our proclamation, the "message of the gospel" that came to the Thessalonians "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (v. 5). Perhaps it is a little like a child who opens a Christmas present only to find it is the one thing . . . the one thing . . . she really wanted. Her heart bursts with joy and excitement as she runs to embrace the gift-giver. Then she can't wait to run outside and share her excitement with all her friends.

Do you find yourself truly excited about the many blessings you've been given by God? If not, what can we do to capture that sense of joy and excitement . . . an excitement and enthusiasm for God that is so consuming we couldn't help but tell others about it? Our spirit of thanksgiving would just come bursting out of us! Perhaps, we need to look beyond what God has "done for us lately" to the larger gift of being God's chosen and beloved (v. 4). Such a gift is not meant to be hoarded; it is meant to be shared.

Because Jesus' return is certain, we can offer thanks for it today. In so doing, we are thanking God for the covenant promises he made and the covenant promises he kept through the sacrificial faithfulness of his only Son. How can we make the promise of Christ's return more concrete and more immediate in our lives – *without* imagining that it must happen in our lifetimes? How does the assurance of Jesus' second coming affect us today? How can we learn to be thankful for a promise that seems so distant?