



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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English Standard Version

“Lives Turn Around”

This is the 1st sermon in the series on 1 & 2 Thessalonians entitled,
“Life for the Long Haul.”

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Heavenly Father, we have come to Your Word again this morning and we find that we need simple things ... things we take for granted. Lord, once again open our ears to truly hear. And we ask that by the power of the Holy Spirit, this Word would be a great encouragement to us to exercise faith, hope, and love. Do this for each of us, this morning, in His name, and for His glory, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *The God Driven Church*¹

It's pretty obvious in our society that man can build a big church. Today there are megachurches with weekly attendance over 10,000 people. In the United States alone, there are about 50 of these churches. And while all of them are big, not all of them are biblical. Some are, but more aren't.

But, let's be honest, there's lots of other churches out there which aren't big, nor are they biblical. There are small unbiblical churches and there are small churches which are very biblical. Apparently size doesn't have much to do with being biblical. Although, it's often presented as if being big was directly related to being biblical. People we say something like, "Our church has grown because God has really blessed us." Perhaps they wouldn't feel right saying, "Our church has grown because we entertain really well." A circus can draw a lot of people ... doesn't mean it's biblical.

And, to be honest, it's really not that hard to figure out which is which. Some of these churches are man-centered, trying to accomplish man's goals, using man's strength, with man's means ... and ultimately done for the glory of ... man. And all around us we can see the effects of the man-centered church. We live in an age where many churches, particularly large and well-funded churches, have become nothing more than entertainment centers, giving slick performances to growing numbers of unproductive churchgoers. If getting numbers is the goal, this has been proven to work with my generation.

However, with the younger generation, pretty much those under 30, this has also been shown to drive that generation away. And this has resulted in a huge identity crisis for much of the American church today.

And so churches are searching for an identity that "*works*." What "*works*" is defined as what gets people through the door. What "*works*" is **NOT** defined as what the Bible tells us to do.

And so some people say the church should be *consumer driven*. Survey our market, discover what they want, and give it to them. This is like having the patients write the prescription, being oblivious to the real illness, and thus never find a cure for what ails them.

Others think the church should be *culture driven*. A variation on the first model, this is where the church has embraced entertainment as the means to growth. Take the culture's latest forms of amusement; put a spiritual spin on it, and maybe the people will think they're at an off-Broadway production, with all its slickness and polish.

Still others envision the church as being *felt needs driven*. Address the apparent obvious needs of people. Tell them how to find self-esteem, significance, and success. And whatever you do, stay positive. No one wants to hear about sin, hell, or wrath.

Finally, others, with good intentions, want to be *purpose driven*. Get your vision, determine your objectives, define your strategies, develop your marketing plan, and you're in business. And that's exactly right, because you'll find yourself involved in a business ... but not a church.

Now ... a brief moment of honesty ... I've tried most of this stuff, and much to my

¹ The Introduction, Background, and the Exposition of the text are adapted from *The Gospel & The End of Time: The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. John R. W. Stott, pages 17-44; the article "*The God-Driven Church*" by Dr. Steven Lawson, 2006, www.newreformationministries.org/articles; and an old sermon of mine, "*The Message of the New Life*," 7/7/91.

frustration, and much to the frustration of thousands of pastors and churches, and even much to the frustration of some of the folks who pioneered this stuff ... for the most part ... **it just doesn't work**. It doesn't work, that is, if you define what "***works***" as that which enables and equips Christians to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now ... another brief moment of honesty ... not everything these people say is wrong or bad. There's lots to learn from a **few** of these megachurches, but you have to be very discerning. And a big part of the problem **is** ... is that we've **forgotten** that Jesus told us in **John 15, 16, + 17** that we would be **in** the world, but that we were **not** to be **of** the world.

The world is evil and is run by the evil one. We're not supposed to try and be like the world. We're supposed to be like Jesus. We're supposed to remember that we're citizens of heaven. Much of the church today is so enamored with **style** and **size** that they've forgotten to pursue **spirituality** and **substance**. One of the harshest criticisms that I think I've ever heard of the American church came from a Chinese man who was wrestling with religion. He said, "When I go to a Buddhist temple, the Buddhist clergy I meet are holy men. When I go to an American church, the Christian clergy I meet are entrepreneurs."

The church is called not to be man-centered, but **God-centered**. We're not supposed to be focusing on ourselves, but on **Christ**. What makes a church biblical is not worldly success, but the **presence** and **power** of God in that **place**. In a church where the driving force is God, He's not working primarily through events, programs, entertainment, or even strategic plans, but rather He's primarily working through **His Word** and through **the Sacraments**, by **His Spirit**, in the changed lives of **His people**. God **fills** people, not plans. He **indwells** believers, not buildings. He **anoints** preachers, not performances. Now there's nothing intrinsically wrong with buildings and plans, but when they become our chief pursuit, they become spiritual **cul-de-sacs** leading nowhere.

As we begin to search the Scriptures to see what God wants for the church, a good place to begin is with the church at Thessalonica. And so, with that in mind, let's start our study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, which is teaching us about, "***Life for the Long Haul***." However, just to keep you paying attention, we're going to find out a little bit about this church and see if this a good place to begin

The church in Thessalonica was founded by the Apostle Paul on his second missionary journey in Acts 17, and we know from this book that this was a church built on preaching and teaching of sound doctrine and nurtured with a pastoral ministry of love and devotion. Although it was filled with people who were less than perfect, nonetheless, it was a church where God's Spirit was at work.

I don't want to spend a lot of time on the background and so I've enclosed a bulletin insert that lays all that out. It has some of the themes of the book and a little map so you can see where Thessalonica is.

So let's dive into this book. Paul begins by giving us an overview of this church. Making no mention of their numerical size, worship style, or long-term strategy, he instead focuses on the substance of the Gospel and the genuine spirituality of the people. Let's see what it is that Paul tells us about this congregation. And he starts at the beginning, and that's by telling us about ...

v. 1: CONVERTED PEOPLE

Clearly, the first thing that identifies a church which honors God is that it's filled with people who have actually been converted to Christ. Without people who are truly born again, the

church is just a religious country club. But the miracle of new life in Christ places believers into union with Christ, and thus spiritually, united to each other. And this is the way it was in the church in Thessalonica, verse 1, “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians **in** God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.”

The church possessed a vital spiritual union with God as it was identified as being “**in** God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” To be “**in**” God means that they have entered into a personal relationship with God through faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Through the sovereign work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, every redeemed sinner enters into union with Christ, **Romans 6:3-5**, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.”

And if this is true, and we profess that it is, than the church is more than just another organization, but a **living organism** through which the Spirit of God can work. And this infusion of divine life into regenerated people is what happened in Thessalonica when Paul preached the Gospel there. **Acts 17:1-4**, “Now ... they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”

Because of the preaching of Paul and the work of the Holy Spirit, this church was built with the proper foundation, as Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:10-11**, “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

However, the reality today is that there’s lots of churches that lack this foundation. Churches are filled with people who seem **religious**, but have no **relationship** with Christ. They **profess** faith in Christ, but don’t **possess** Him.

They know the **facts** about the Gospel, but have no **faith** in Christ.

They know the **plan** of salvation, but not the **man** of salvation.

They’ve walked the aisle, raised a hand, been baptized, joined the church, and even participated in ministry, but sadly, they’ve never been regenerated. They lack a heart of **flesh** ... and still live with a heart of **stone**. They have an **outward** religion, but lack an **inner** spiritual life. And, as a result, they attend church thinking that they’re saved, when they’re really not.

And if that’s you, then **you** have a massive problem.

And if you’re not sure whether that’s you or not, you **still** have a massive problem. And you need to talk with someone, with me, with one of the elders or deacons, with some of our own ‘leading women,’ someone who’s willing to talk straight with you about Jesus.

And this problem of having unsaved people in church goes on and on in those churches where the Gospel has been watered down, the cross is **not** preached out of fear of offending, sin and hell and wrath aren’t presented as realities of life because “that’s not how to get more people to come to our church.”

First and foremost, if this is going to be church where God sets the agenda, and not me or

you, then this church needs to be filled with converted people who really do know Jesus. And you can tell if this is a church where people know Jesus because there will be ample evidence of

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v. 2-3: **CHANGED LIVES**

Converted people have changed lives. And if you profess faith in Christ, but you're life hasn't changed, then we, the rest of the church, have the right to question your profession of faith. And Paul makes it clear that's not a problem in this church, look at verses 2-4, "*We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your **work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.***"

Paul starts by thanking God, not for their building or programs, but what matters most — the reality of their new life in Christ. Succinctly summarizing God's grace in their lives, he gives thanks for their faith, hope, and love. An authentic commitment to Christ will always manifest itself in a changed life that, to one degree or another, bears this kind of fruit.

First, Paul commends their "***work of faith,***" which means that he recognizes that it's their faith in Christ which motivates their service to Him. In other words, their faith **in** Christ empowers their work **for** Christ. All believers have faith, yet, as James 2 tells us, faith always results in works, which is seen in our obedience to Christ in our daily lives.

Second, the Apostle affirms their "***labor of love,***" again meaning that it's their love for God which prompts their labor in the Gospel. The word translated "***labor***" is *kopov* in Greek, and it means "wearisome toil," "extraordinary effort," and "expending oneself to the point of fatigue and exhaustion." This isn't talking about the occasional kind deed, but going to great lengths on the behalf of others. This is how they were serving each other in the church of Thessalonica — laboring hard to reach out to one another, sacrificially giving of themselves and their resources. It's their love for Christ which generates this kind of love for each other. The more they love Christ, the more they love His people, the more they labor for them and for others. And it's no different for us.

Third, He praises their "***steadfastness of hope,***" again meaning that it's their hope in Christ which enables them to keep going in the Christian life, in spite of opposition and persecution. Because they're sure about the unchanging promises of God regarding Christ and His return and their future with Him, their lives were anchored in His Word. Their hope in Christ so gripped them that they were able to press on in overcoming obstacles and enduring opposition.

In our world today, hope has been reduced to some kind of mindless optimism. We say things like, "I hope it doesn't rain today" or "I hope the preacher doesn't talk too long."

We've lost the sense of hope in the New Testament. 1st Timothy 1 and Colossians 1 tells us that Christ is our hope; Romans 8 tells us that we're saved in hope; Hebrews 6 says that hope is the anchor of our soul. Christian hope relates to what Christ has done for our salvation.

Thus our work is produced by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,

Our labor is prompted by love in the Lord Jesus Christ,

Our endurance is inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the evidence of changed lives.

And where did they get these changed lives? Well, it started with ...

v. 4-6: **GOSPEL PREACHING**

This work of God's saving grace, so powerful in the lives of the Thessalonians, could be

traced back to eternity past when God first **chose** them to be His own. Look at verse 4, “*For we know, brothers loved by God, that **He has chosen you.***” Here, in unmistakable terms, is the humbling doctrine of election. Now I know there’s a lot of people out there who don’t like this doctrine. They think it runs counter to human logic, it disturbs our emotions, it cuts against the grain of our American mindset of personal freedom and democracy, but it is, nevertheless, **clearly taught in Scripture.**

No truth so inspires confidence in God to build His church than this one. But if this doctrine is lacking, and we believe that we’re responsible for our own salvation, then a man-centered church will inevitably result. And the church will be full of unsaved people who think they’re doing just fine.

Foundational to the spiritual growth of this church, or any church, is the primacy of the Word of God. This is seen first and foremost in the **preaching** of the Gospel, as Paul says in verse 5, “*because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.*”

There are a few things in this verse that are essential to good preaching.

First, the gospel has to be preached **intelligently.** It came to them in **words** ... which they heard and applied to their lives. The Apostle communicated the gospel to them through an intelligent, factual, rational, cognitive, straightforward, verbal presentation of gospel truth. Preaching should appeal to the whole person — mind, will, and emotion. But before the heart and will are engaged, it must be understood by the mind. And so, the explanation and application of Biblical truth is the first order of preaching. Paul emphasized this with Timothy, **1 Timothy 4:16**, “*Keep a close watch on yourself and on the **teaching.** Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your **hearers.***”

Second, the gospel has to be preached **powerfully.** Preaching isn’t supposed to be an exercise in rhetoric, but a demonstration of the power of God given in His Word, by His Spirit, through His messenger. Power in the Christian life comes from the Holy Spirit, for any of us. And if the Holy Spirit isn’t working in the life of the preacher, then there will be no power, regardless of how gifted a speaker he is. If, and when, I preach in my own strength and my own ability and my own gifting, it just doesn’t come across. And it’s pretty obvious. And I’ve had sermons that I thought were great ... and pretty much everyone just yawned. They weren’t necessarily poorly written, but the Spirit wasn’t there, and so there was no power.

But I’ve also had sermons that I just wasn’t sure about, that I was convinced needed a lot more work, that I didn’t think were good enough ... and people’s lives were changed, much to my surprise. Sermons that were prayed over, by me and you, sermons that are agonized over, sermons where the Holy Spirit was present in the writing and well as the giving ... tend to be sermons that are powerful and effective. They weren’t necessarily well-written, but the Spirit was there, and so there was power.

Now that doesn’t mean that you liked them. Some of the best sermons are really uncomfortable and convicting. Some of you hate them. And that’s okay ... because that’s evidence that God is at work in your life ... and that’s a good thing ... even when it’s uncomfortable.

I’m amazed that despite all the technological advances of our world, God is still pleased to use the foolishness of preaching as **the primary means** to build His church. And I believe that all other means of presenting the gospel are **subordinate** and **inferior** to **Gospel preaching.**

They all have their place, but none of them have the same power to change lives as does the powerful presence of God coming from the pulpit **week** after **week** after **week**.

And last, the gospel must be preached **incarnationally**. That means it has to be lived out as well as said. Now I usually cringe when people put the preacher on a pedestal, because I'm well aware that I'm a **really big sinner**. And I know how easy it is to fall off those pedestals, and I know how easy it to fool you into thinking I'm a pretty good guy, when I know that I'm way worse than you think.

That's okay, you're way worse than you think too.

However, there does have to be some level of consistency between the words of the preacher and the life of the preacher. This is what Paul means when he says, "*You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.*" He said that his life authenticated his message ... he lived as if he really believed this stuff. And the people who listened to him could tell. And so they started doing what God's Word said, because they heard it in Paul's words and they saw it in Paul's life. Look at verse 6, "*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit,*"

They received the word and they put it into practice. They imitated Paul, and Silas, and Timothy ... and Jesus, because it was in those lives that they saw the gospel lived out. And Paul says that's okay, you need to learn from someone. In fact, he told the Corinthian church, **1 Corinthians 11:1**, "*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*" We all are influenced, for better or worse, by the people in our lives. And so we need to make sure that a lot of the people in our lives are people worth imitating. Jesus Himself said, **Luke 6:40**, "*A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.*"

The point is, a church where the gospel is preached and lived, will have leaders whose lives are worth following. That was true in the church in Thessalonica, as they followed Paul's example and teaching; they grew in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that should be true in our church as well. As you hear the preaching and teaching, as you follow the leadership of this church, then you too should be growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

No holiness in the leadership, no holiness in the congregation. Right or wrong, good or bad, like it or not ... **that's** how it works. And that's why we're so particular, and so slow, in choosing new leaders. Because they have to be godly people worth following ... or the whole church will suffer. Apparently that wasn't the case in Thessalonica, because we see that this group of church people had ...

v. 7-10: REPENTANT FAITH ²

Because the world is hostile to God, it will be hostile towards the church that God is building. And yet, in spite of great opposition, they couldn't stop talking about Jesus. They had to share the gospel wherever they went, verses 7-8, "*so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*" ⁸ *For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.*"

The text tells us that "*the word of the Lord sounded forth from you.*" This word, translated here as **sounded forth**, literally means to blow a trumpet. The gospel went out from them "**loud and clear.**" Whatever Paul taught them, they passed it on. They weren't just

² The list of "Christian idols" is taken from *How People Change* by Tim Lane and Paul Tripp, pages 7-10.

hearers of the Word; they were doers of the Word.

Now the Word went out from them to every place they went, and people responded to that word. And they responded because of the truth they heard in the Word and the truth they saw in their lives, verse 9, *“For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,”*

There were changed lives here. They turned to God from idols. Wherever there is a turning to God in faith, there is a turning from idols in repentance. Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. If you find one, you’ll find the other. In the case of the Thessalonians, the change in their lives, the turning to God from idols, was so dramatic that it was obvious to everyone.

Our idols may not live with the Greek gods at Mt. Olympus. But they’re still there. And they’re alive and well in the church. Even if we’re not bowing down at the altar of money, sex, and power ... which a lot of us are ... there’s still a unique set of “Christian idols” that especially affect those of us in the church.

In their excellent book *How People Change*, Paul Tripp and Tim Lane identify seven counterfeit gospels — religious ways we try and “justify” ourselves apart from the Gospel of grace. They call it Christian Externalism: Things that fill the gap. I found these unbelievably helpful. Which one (or two, or three) of these do you tend to gravitate towards?

Formalism. “I participate in the regular meetings and ministries of the church, so I feel like my life is under control. I’m always in church, but it really has little impact on my heart or on how I live. I may become judgmental and impatient with those who do not have the same commitment as I do.”

Legalism. “I live by the rules—rules I create for myself and rules I create for others. I feel good if I can keep my own rules, and I become arrogant and full of contempt when others don’t meet the standards I set for them. There is no joy in my life because there is no grace to be celebrated.”

Mysticism. “I am engaged in the incessant pursuit of an emotional experience with God. I live for the moments when I feel close to him, and I often struggle with discouragement when I don’t feel that way. I may change churches often, too, looking for one that will give me what I’m looking for.”

Activism. “I recognize the missional nature of Christianity and am passionately involved in fixing this broken world. But at the end of the day, my life is more of a defense of what’s right than a joyful pursuit of Christ.”

Biblicism. “I know my Bible inside and out, but I do not let it master me. I have reduced the gospel to a mastery of biblical content and theology, so I am intolerant and critical of those with lesser knowledge.”

Therapism. “I talk a lot about the hurting people in our congregation, and how Christ is the only answer for their hurt. Yet even without realizing it, I have made Christ more Therapist than Savior. I view hurt as a greater problem than sin—and I subtly shift my greatest need from my moral failure to my unmet needs.”

Social-ism. “The deep fellowship and friendships I find at church have become their own idol. The body of Christ has replaced Christ himself, and the gospel is reduced to a network of fulfilling Christian relationships.”

Is it possible that you have a gap in your gospel and that it’s been filled in ways you didn’t realize. If so, and probably so, then for you, faith and repentance is the order of the day.

You need to turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God. And you'll probably only be able to do that, if, like the Thessalonian church, you know who you're doing it for. And that takes confident hope.

This church is a Second Coming church. They weren't fascinated with the trends of the world, but were living in anticipation of the return of Christ. Look at verse 10, "*and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*"

They believed that Jesus was coming back and would rescue them from the divine wrath to come. This is the part of the mission of the church. We're to be, **Titus 2:13**, "*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*"

No matter how difficult and demanding the days were, the Thessalonians believed that Jesus was coming back and God would make all things right in the end. Despite the world's opposition, they knew their reward would come from heaven. If they were looking forward to the return of Christ 2,000 years ago, how much closer to are we today to His appearing in glory? We act like we're farther away. And I'm convinced as I study the Word ... as we went through the Book of Daniel, as we start 1 & 2 Thessalonians, and as we get ready to wade into The Revelation of St. John ... that this HOPE is one of the defining characteristics of a biblical church. And that kind of church can only be built on God's Word, by God's Spirit, with the sole purpose of magnifying God's glory. And this church will use God's means to carry out God's work.

The Word of God went into Thessalonica, a Roman colony that was pagan and heathen and cultic, a city that was controlled by one of the greatest political and military powers the world has ever known, and there it reached the hearts and minds and lives of people and changed them!

And they did it without entertaining them. And they did it without a strategic plan full of goals and objectives. And they did it without emphasizing self-esteem or success. And apparently they didn't have even very slick production values for their PowerPoint presentations.

But they did have the Word of God preached and lived.

And they put it into practice with simple things like faith, hope, and love.

They turned to God from idols – which is a work produced by faith.

They served the living and true God – which is a labor prompted by love.

They waited for the Lord Jesus Christ – which takes endurance inspired by hope. And, you know, God blessed that. Last I checked, He still does.

CONCLUSION: *The Story of a Real Church*³

In a recent book, author Ted Kluck tells a story about attending a funeral at the church he grew up in. Listen carefully ...

As the story goes, a young schoolteacher, new in town, repeatedly visited a bank to make deposits into his savings account. He would come to the same window each time, where there happened to work an attractive young woman with dark hair and a nice smile. He always had a kind word to say to her, and one day, breaking protocol, she asked him, "What are you going to do with all of that money you're saving?"

"I'm going to give it all to you," the man replied. Three years later they were married. They remained happily married for 40 years until the man passed away. Today I'm showing my

³ The Conclusion is adapted from *Why We're Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)* by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, pages 133-135. The story is told by Ted.

wife the church of my youth, as we're early for an 11 o'clock funeral — the funeral of the schoolteacher who married the attractive teller. The church is, as it always was, immaculately clean. There are stained glass windows throughout, and while fashions and movements have come and gone, the church — adjacent to a used car lot, a funeral home, and the firehouse — has stayed the same. Same red carpet. Same understated beauty. It's probably been over 20 years since I've been in this building. Walking through the church is like taking a walk back in time. I hug people I haven't hugged in two decades. I visit a fellowship hall downstairs — complete with folding tables, a drop ceiling, bad carpet, and a potluck lunch.

This church, like many in America, has survived a great deal. Car wrecks, cancer, extramarital affairs, some bad theology, and the like. But, much like the town that it's in, it has taken care of its own. It has mourned with those who mourn. It has delivered meals. It has made countless hospital visits. It has, for the most part, spoken truth and preached the gospel of Christ crucified. It's come alongside single mothers, of which there are many in town. I find myself, this morning, very proud of the church and its people.

Those here [for the funeral] today came to honor the life of a man who lived largely because of a proposition — that sometimes outmoded belief that Christ paid the penalty for our sins, and that we are, because of that, compelled to live for Him, and like Him.

As I look around the church, in what is thought to be an insignificant small town in an insignificant part of the country — I see the fruits of this man's life. He has brought together diverse populations: six-figure administrators from the university are sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with six-dollar-an-hour workers from the concrete plant, who he may have visited in the hospital.

I am reminded that there are still churches and places in this country where one doesn't have to work at being "*authentic*." Authentic isn't a look you put on in the morning, or a new and snappy way to bathe the sanctuary in 'mystery' through the strategic arrangement of candles and projected images. Authentic is bearing one another's burdens. Authentic is people coming to a funeral in their work clothes — Carhartts and hospital scrubs — on a Friday morning.

That's what a real church looks like. That's what a God-centered church looks like. It's a place where lives turn around. And, I pray, that's what this church will look like.

Life for the Long Haul. **That's** what Thessalonians is all about.

Think about that. You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the church in Thessalonica. May the lessons You gave them not be lost to us. Give us the faith to believe Your Word, the Love for Your people, and the Hope in the return of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Show us how much we are loved by You. Lord, come quickly, we pray in the Name of Your Son, who lives, and reigns, and who is coming again. Amen.

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Revelation 22:7, 17, 20

“And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”¹⁷ The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”