The Gospel in an Upside Down World
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a

Today we're beginning a new series in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Now this was written around 50AD, which is a long time ago. But what we're going to see is that it's just as relevant now as it was back then.

You see, Thessalonica, was not so different from Lausanne. It was about the same size, with a population of around 150,000. And like Lausanne it was the capital of its province – Macedonia, a place of trade and influence.

And just like our own city, it was filled with people worshipping multiple idols. Now, you might think – 'hang on, Lausanne? Pagan idol worship? Are we talking about the same Lausanne?' And of course in some ways you'd be right. In the 2000 census 70% of people in Lausanne said they were Christian, and 15% said they were atheists or agnostics. So hardly a hotbed of paganism. But think about what the idols were that the Roman citizens of Thessalonica worshipped. There were the gods of health, or power, or fertility, or trade, or sport. And if an idol is anything that takes the place of God in our lives, and we sacrifice stuff for it, and we give our lives for it, and we pursue our ultimate happiness in it, then our own city – maybe even our own lives – are not so different from those of these first century Romans. Because just like them, we worship gods of health, or profit, or success or sport, or sex.

And yet, just 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul is writing to a vibrant Christian church in a city thousands of miles from Jerusalem where it all happened. So, how did that happen? Well, Paul had recently visited this city and through his preaching people had come to faith in Jesus.

But not everyone was happy about that. And a riot broke out against Paul and his team and they had to flee the city.

And now weeks later, in Corinth, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out how they were doing. And Timothy returned and told him that generally this young church was going great. And in particular, as we'll see over the coming weeks, they had begun to spread the good news about Jesus around their area. But other areas within the church were less positive. They were still being persecuted. If you think it's not easy to be a Christian in your workplace or on campus, it wasn't for these guys either. On top of that, some of them had died. And imagine being in a small church, under pressure, where a string of people you love have died, and think what that can do to morale: why does God allow this? Is this faith real? Is God displeased with us? Why doesn't Jesus return and end this suffering once and for all?

So amongst all the joy of their newfound faith, and sharing that faith, some were feeling embattled and others discouraged. And it's into that situation that Paul writes this letter. Let's read its opening.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a

A New Community for an Upside Down World
In the Book of Acts, Luke tells us how the riot against these Christians in Thessalonica started. Agitators whipped things up by saying "These men [Paul and his team] who have turned the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6). But like any Roman society at that time, this was a culture that practised infanticide, killing its unwanted babies, a society in which slavery was widespread, where wars were

common and during plagues the sick and dying were thrown on to the streets, no one wanted to care for them. So was it men like Paul and these new Christians who were upside down, or the world they lived in?

And what about our own world? You don't have to look long at the news before you see something that makes you think, 'man, things should not be like this.' In other words, 'the world is upside down'. And it's not just the world that's broken, is it? What about our own families, or our own lives?

But what is God's answer to this brokenness? Well, look at Paul's introduction in v1: 'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians.' And there's God's answer – the church. Now depending on your experience of church you might hear that and think, 'O great! The church! That's really going to sort things: a bunch of old ladies and men wearing dresses. That'll solve it!' Or, you might see what's going on in the world and respond: 'yeh, but religion and fundamentalism are part of the problem. So saying the church is part of the solution is like throwing petrol on a fire thinking it will damp things down.'

But when Paul addresses the church here he is thinking about something very different from our stereotypes. This kind of church was an entirely new community, a counter-cultural community. For some of you maybe it's church as you have never known it.

Firstly, the word Paul uses for church tells us the kind of community he's talking about. It's the word *ekklesia*. And that's a borrowed word. It was used for when citizens of Greek cities met to decide city affairs – it was their assembly, their *ekklesia*. But that's not what Paul had in mind when he used it. You see, that same word was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the assembly of God's chosen people, Israel. When the people of God were gathered together, they were the *ekklesia*. And here in Thessalonica, Paul says – this is the *ekklesia*. This is the assembly of God's people. But what's incredible about that is who made up this new community, the church. Because whilst some of them were Jews, plenty of them were Gentiles. And some were freemen, but some were slaves. And some were high born but others were low. And Paul is saying, 'yes, and this is God's new people'. A community where dividing walls of race and class and nationality have been broken down in Christ. So in a world divided by countless barriers, this is the one true community where everyone can find their place, whatever their background.

But look at the second way Paul describes them. Verse 1 again: 'The church of the Thessalonians *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.' Now, you hear about sports clubs, or social clubs, maybe even village councils, where people use this organisation as their own little kingdom. Sadly, you can even experience that in churches. I remember once hearing someone back in the UK say about some change, 'you can't do that, this is *my* church.' Except, it's not, is it? As Paul says here, it's God's church and so this community should be a *power-play* and *personal-kingdom-building* free zone. Instead it draws its life from being rooted in God, and so from the outset it strikes at the root of the self-centredness we're all guilty of, and that's the cause of so many problems, that I want my way.

In contrast, in v4, he calls them 'brothers loved by God.' Now, maybe your family growing up was great. You think of family and that experience was wholly positive.

But what if it wasn't? What if you have to admit you don't really know what a great family looks like. What if you know what someone else has called 'father hunger' – the longing for a father who loves you, who accepts you. And if we look beyond ourselves to wider society, can any of us say that, as a whole, marriages are thriving and families are strong? Well, it's into that brokenness that Paul says that this new community is God's family. A family where you can know that you are chosen and adopted and loved by the greatest Father of all.

So, whether it's a society's deep divisions of race or status; whether it's the brokenness of individual lives, or all pervasive self-centredness, or the loss of family, or the need to know you belong, and are loved by your Father, God has set about creating a new community in the midst of an upside down world.

And I say, 'in the midst of' because Paul calls them, v1, 'the church *of the Thessalonians*.' So they haven't retreated to the hills, they've not hidden away in a monastery. They are still Thessalonians. They're still in the city. They're in the world even if they're not of the world. And it was knowing that that helped them change the world.

But it was as Paul remembered all that God had done amongst them that his heart was filled with thankfulness.

The Hallmarks of Community

Look at v2: 'We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.' Now, as we'll see over the next few weeks, this church was far from perfect. But you'll never find a perfect church, will you? And as Charles Spurgeon reportedly said, if you find it, don't join it, because you'll only spoil it. But when you see imperfections in a church, how do you respond? Do you complain, and criticise, or like Paul, do you thank God for all the evidences of his grace?

You see, none of us like ingratitude do we? You do something for someone and they don't thank you, and you think, 'you know what, next time I won't bother.' And on a vertical plane, between us and God, a failure to thank God for his many blessings is one evidence of a drift away from him, isn't it. But how different is thankfulness? Thankfulness has this ability to replace a bitter, complaining spirit with a generous one, doesn't it. When we cultivate thankfulness in our lives it reminds us of all the ways God is at work in our lives. And it grows: the more thankful you are, the more reasons to be thankful you can see. And as Paul Miller says, thankfulness kills the cynic in you, it deprives the cynicism that lurks in our hearts of the poisoned air it needs to breath. Instead it pumps the fresh, clean air of gratitude into our souls.

And look what Paul gives thanks to God for: v3, 'Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Now, if overflowing thankfulness to God is one characteristic of this new community, what about faith, hope and love? If I were to ask you, 'what is a Christian?' you might come up with many things, but those three things, faith, hope and love, repeated time and again in the New Testament, tell us that whatever else a true Christian is, he or she is a believer, he's a hoper and he's someone who loves. They are the hallmarks of true Christianity.

Let's take them in the order Paul mentions them.

First of all, he thanks God for their faith. And if thankfulness is directed towards God, so is faith. Faith draws our eyes off ourselves. It tells us that however good we think we are we can never save ourselves, but it also tells us that however bad we know ourselves to be, God has the power to save us. It tells us that whatever situation we find ourselves in, God is greater. So whilst true faith tells us rightly that we are so small, it also tells us that he is so great, that with God all things are possible.

Secondly, Paul thanks God for their love. Now this is not romantic, slushy love. This is not the kind of love that wants to possess – the kind of love that won't let anything grow in its shade. Neither is it the kind of love that demands that you have to be good enough, or attractive enough, or funny enough for me to love you. This is Christian agapé love. A love that serves, a love that lays its life down, a love that loves the unlovely and the undeserving, inspite of everything.

Then thirdly, he thanks God for their hope. And this 'hope in our Lord Jesus Christ' (v3) is very different from the kind of feeble wish that we think passes for hope. A Frenchman might say, 'I really hope France will win the rugby world cup.' But that's not hope, that's just wishful thinking. Christian hope is this certain, confident, tenacious belief that the Lord Jesus is working out his eternal purposes for our good.

And that is why Paul puts *hope* last of the three, in what you might call the position of emphasis. You see, in the most famous passage where Paul pulls these three hallmarks of Christianity together, he puts *love* last: 1 Corinthians 13: 'So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.' But here Paul puts hope last. Because these guys are living out what it means to be Christians in an upside down world. And they know, and they need to know, this strong hope. Hope in the face of persecution, hope in the face of death, hope in the face of the wreckage of personal failure. The kind of hope that we all need.

And this new community, the church, is to be a place where this kind of faith, love, and hope are flourishing.

But did you notice, it wasn't that Paul thanked God *just* for their faith, love and hope? He thanked God for what flowed out of those things: v3 again, for their '*work* of faith and *labour* of love and *steadfastness* of hope.' Because faith, love and hope always result in something tangible.

A vibrant faith in God, that puts its trust in him, will be a faith that does something. And from what Paul goes on to say in this letter, he's almost certainly got in mind that despite all the opposition these guys faced, they were sharing their faith with those around them: the work of faith.

And their love was not just a matter of emotions. Paul says it flowed out into labour, the labour of love. And that word labour meant hard, exhausting labour. The kind of service that comes out of self-sacrificial love. A love that goes the distance in acts of service for others, even when it hurts.

And their hope resulted in the 'steadfastness of hope.' You see, repeatedly in this letter, Paul talks of the promise of Jesus' return. And when you know that he is making everything new, then it results in a steadfastness and a stickability that endures suffering and the seeming meaninglessness of life, it results in a hope that keeps looking to the glorious dawn ahead, no matter how dark the night is now.

So that is true Christian community for an upside down world. Instead of self-absorption and self-centredness, it's marked by a faith in God that draws us out of ourselves, and all the possibilities that flow from that, into loving self-sacrificial deeds for others, and an unflinching hope for what is to come.

But how can you create that kind of a church, that kind of a community, when it's building blocks are people like us?

The Power Behind it All

Well look at the second thing Paul thanks God for, v4: 'For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you.'

Now what he literally says is, 'For we know, brothers loved by God, your election.' But when you think about the doctrine of election, that God chooses you for salvation, rather than it being something to thank God for, it can be a stumbling block for some. We think if God chooses us then it limits our personal choice in the matter, and we don't like that. Or we think it makes God look capricious, that he picks and chooses at whim.

But think about it. When it comes to your eternal salvation, whose hands would you rather be in? Yours, or those of a loving heavenly father who never makes a mistake and never changes his mind? Because if you're like me, there are days when you wake up and you are filled with doubt and unbelief, and you're weak and your faith wobbles. And so speaking personally, I don't want my life to be in my unsafe hands. I would choose his unfailing hands any day. And as for God being capricious, in the Bible God's choosing of his people is always linked to his love. And so, like an adoptive parent will choose his adopted son out of love, so God chooses us. Not because we are lovely, not because we have earned or deserved his love, but because he is love.

But how does Paul *know* that God has chosen these Thessalonian Christians? Well, he tells them. Verse 5, 'because our gospel came to you.' 'We preached the good news of Jesus the messiah to you and we know it had a life transforming effect upon you'. And we know what Paul's gospel was, because Luke tells us in Acts 17. 'They [that's Paul and his team] came to Thessalonica. And… he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 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." (Acts 17:1-3). And the guys who instigated the riot tell us more: "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also… and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." (Acts 17:6-7).

So right at the heart of this message was the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that he is a better King than any worldly power.

And that message didn't just come to them in words, Paul says, but 'also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction' (v5). This gospel message had a profound

impact on them. It wasn't just something they heard, it was something they experienced. It became a reality in their lives and changed their lives. It was a message carried to their hearts by the power of the Spirit. In the words of Martyn Lloyd Jones, it was logic on fire and it penetrated their hearts and changed the whole orientation of their lives.

You see, when you know that you are loved and chosen by God and it has nothing to do with you making the grade, but it is all because of his love and his grace to you, then it profoundly humbles you. You know that there is no place for self-righteous religious pride; you know you are no better than anyone else, so you will welcome others, however broken they are.

But if the gospel humbles you, it also lifts you up. Though you know you are so sinful Christ had to die for you, you also know you are more loved than you ever dared imagine, because Christ did die for you. So it gives you a deep inner confidence and security to step out and to take risks in faith, to do the work of faith, as these guys in Thessalonica did in their spreading of the gospel.

You see, if you think you are saved *by* good works, you will always be doing those good works for the wrong reasons – for your gain. You'll witness to others, but you'll do it hoping to earn points before God. But when you know you are saved by grace, through faith in what Jesus has done for you, by his work, your good works will be motivated by genuine care for others, not by self-seeking.

And here Paul talks of their labour of love. And when you know that Jesus went through the hard labour, the exhausting effort of the cross, because he loves you, your heart will be filled with love for him and for others. And you'll find a place to serve – whether that's in church or in your community, because you know he served you. When you know how generous he has been to you, you will be generous to others and give as he has given to you, and you'll do it with joy, not grudgingly.

And when you know that Jesus endured the cross for you, and three days later rose again and is now reigning in glory, you'll know real hope. The kind of hope that meant these first century Christians could risk their lives for the faith, and in caring for the sick and the needy, because you'll know, as they knew, that something better is coming. The kind of eternal hope and security that means you can risk your earthly security. The kind of hope that is steadfast in the face of suffering and hardship, because you know there is another king, a better king, than Caesar.

So, it's the gospel, coming in power, the good news of all that Jesus has done for you in his death and resurrection, that creates this kind of community. A community of transformed lives, of barriers broken down, where the work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope abound. The kind of community our upside down world desperately needs, that all of us need.

So if you're a Christian – this week, let your life be challenged and changed by the gospel. If you're not a Christian – consider what Jesus has done for you today, and let your heart and life be changed by it. And may God, by the power of his Spirit, create this kind of a community among us.