Today we have access to numerous book and courses which help us think through how we can best share the good new of Jesus with our family, friends and colleagues. These can be very helpful, but as we continue our journey through Paul's first letter to the church family in Thessalonica, and as we listen in to his prayer of thanksgiving to God, for them, we discover why they are commended by Paul, as being a model church in this respect.

In verses 6-10 we move from thinking about what God has done for them, to what God has been doing through them, and how that has impacted not only their local community, but the whole country of Greece! Paul is full of thanksgiving because of the evidence that they have not only become a community who believe in Jesus, but how they have also become a community who are eager to imitate their saviour, and share Jesus with their neighbours.

So the first thing we can learn from the example of the church in Thessalonica is this…

they are marked by joyful imitation of their Lord

#1 - Their response to the gospel: Joyful imitation of Jesus

Let me read v6 again…

So, the first example they set is in they way imitate Jesus - they look to copy Jesus in the way that they live

… and the apostle Paul… only in so far as he imitates Jesus

So their love **for** Jesus, works out in their seeking to live **like** Jesus

But here is where we might be a bit surprised - it certainly surprised me this week as I was preparing!!

Because the example they set to us in imitating Jesus

… is not their *loving the stranger,* or *caring for the poor and weak and vulnerable*

… but their joy and obedience… even when its tough

That is to say… the thing Paul thanks God for, that he sees evidenced in their lives, is that they are joyful… amidst affliction…

joyful… even when they are having a hard time for being Christians!

#1… Joyful imitation of Jesus… even when they suffer

"But hang on" you say, *"this sounds rather twisted - the sermon series is entitled the gospel for an upside down world - but isn't joy at suffering "upside down" thinking!!"*

Well that would be yes

… but Paul is ***not*** saying they are joyful ***because*** they are suffering

but that they are joyful… ***amidst*** suffering

We get a first glimpse of this back in Acts 17, when Paul first preaches the gospel in Thessalonica… his enemies start a riot and then try to blame Paul and take him courts, but they cant find Paul, so they drag a guy called Jason into court instead - because he was letting Paul and Silas stay at his place -and Jason basically ends up having to post bail, and Paul and Silas have to leave town.

From the beginning, Thessalonica was not an easy place to be a Christian, and we will see more of that as the letter goes on.

And yet we are told that they are joyful **amidst** opposition

Why?

How?

well its important i think to notice that they are not joyful **because** they are being afflicted!

it is not joy **<u>at</u>** affliction

but joy **<u>amidst</u>** affliction

they are not rejoicing ***because*** they are suffering

but are rejoicing ***even though*** they are suffering… even ***when*** they are suffering

When Jesus calls people to follow him - he calls us to pick up our crosses first

… we follow a saviour who suffered

… we follow a lord whom the world rejected

.. and we should not be surprised if we suffer as Christians… not for being obnoxious or annoying or aggressive or pompous or arrogant… but because we love Jesus

It was Charles Spurgeon who expressed surprise that so many christians expect to wear a crown of roses, when their saviour wore a crown of thorns

And as Jesus said in John 14:23… "those who love me, will obey me" and here we learn of the Thessalonian doing that… even when times are tough

This week I was chatting with another dad at the school bus stop, and he mentioned a group of people he called "*life-stylers*"… I'd not come across the term before, but he used it to describe some people he knew who had quit their jobs and moved to the French Alps to spend their days skiing in the winter, and mountain-biking in the summer, whilst doing the minimum amount of paid work possible… in order to achieve "***the*** lifestyle"

But he also mentioned how it only works out for a few - a nice idea… but when things get tight financially… the stress-free life-style they sought quickly disappears and they often return home

… the reality did not meet their expectations

Which is why it is good for us this morning to look at these believers in Thessalonica and be reminded of how as Christians, we are called to follow him, keep obeying him, even in the midst of affliction… persecution

Well if that is **what** they are doing… it's good to also know **how** they do it

because… sure ***they*** might be able to do this… but i'm not sure I can?

… I'm more in danger of becoming like those 'life-stylers'… where i think my following Jesus is just the spiritual equivalent of skiing and downhill mountain biking…

but then when things don't go so well… when I think my reputation might be affected… when things might get uncomfortable… well then I just give up on imitating Christ…

In the 1950's, Florence Chadwick was the first woman to swim the English channel both ways. But the next challenge was to swim from Catalina Island off the coast of California to the mainland. It was 21 miles. On

the first attempt it was a foggy day and the visibility was very poor. She could never see more than a few metres in front of her. They pulled her out of the water exhausted just half a mile from the finish. When she was asked why she gave up so close to the end, she told a reporter, "Look, I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen land I know I could have made it."

But two weeks later, she swam the whole distance with ease, it was still foggy, but the difference this time was she said she kept a mental image of the shoreline in her mind as she swam

For Florence to keep going, in spite of fog… it was being able to picture the shore…

[For Jesus - Hebrews 12:2]

For the Thessalonian Christians, their being able to hang on in there, in spite of persecution… their remaining steadfast when having a hard time for being a Christian… was possible because of their certain hope… their remembering that Jesus will return to rescue them

Which brings us back to v3 and their steadfastness of hope

… you may recall from last week how christian hope is not “wishful thinking”, but certainty over things God has promised

well look with me now to v10…

… You see it’s the the work of God;s Holy Spirit, convicting us of the truth that Jesus will return, that gives us a right perspective on whatever we may undergo in the here and now

… because whatever we may be facing now… it’s nothing compared to the wrath to come

… and the christian believers joy is founded in knowing that Jesus saves us from the wrath to come!

So are these Thessalonian Christians suffering for their faith?… yes

… afflicted for following Jesus?… yes!

but they are joyful too…

… not because of their circumstances… but because other status

… because God’s Holy Spirit is testifying to their spirit, that they are loved and chosen by God our Father… and that one day Jesus will return to rescue them

And so the reason they are a great example to us here today… is because they remind us how gospel joy is not based on our circumstances, but on our status

And so convicted are they, by the truth of the gospel, that they live for Jesus, no matter what the cost!

So yes, we may suffer for our faith in the present… but our joy is not confounded, because our hope is steadfast and certain

In the UK we have a saying, where we might describe someone as “a chip off the old block”

… its usually used when someone displays a characteristic or likeness to a parent or grandparent

well here is where we look at the Thessalonians and see that they are a chip off the old block - where they imitate their saviour… in joyful obedience even in the midst of affliction… confident of the future

And here’s the thing… as we look at the rest of this chapter we quickly discover that they are not only commended for wanting to ***model themselves on their saviour…*** but that as they do so, they ***model their saviour*** to others

… not only ***imitation*** of Jesus

but ***propagation*** of his gospel

#2 - Their relaying the gospel: Effective witness about Jesus in both lip and life

Now the Thessalonians living lives like this, does not only result in Paul praying and thanking God for them… the effect it has on the area surrounding them is huge!

read vv7-8

you see the Thessalonians not only received the gospel, and kept following Jesus in the face of persecution… they also bore witness to the gospel to the surrounding area, because they knew others had to hear this message!

"Macedoina & Achaia"… that's basically the whole country - the whole of Greece!!

… they have been so effective, that the apostle Paul realises there is no need for him to preach the gospel in Greece!

It's a wonderful word - where it says in v7 that the gospel "sounded forth from you" .. the word can mean a trumpet sound… or even thunder!

now if you play a trumpet a few neighbours might hear you… but thunder!

It was a couple of weeks ago when we experienced our firs Swiss thunder storm - it was really quite dramatic… visually very stunning

But i found myself, everyone there was thunder - saying to the kids - "did you hear that?"

… they nodded… it;s a stupid question really - because OF COURSE they heard it - it was thunder!… everyone heard it

And so it is with the gospel thundering forth from this church family in Thessalonica throughout the country of Greece

But here's the thing, it wasn't just their speaking about Jesus… it was their living like him… especially as we've just been thinking… their living like him in the face of persecution

So there in verses 9 & 10… it seems that when Paul meets someone and asks them, *"Have you heard about Westlake Thessalonica?"*

… everyone replies "yes of course we have heard!"

but they haven't heard about their wonderful band, tasty coffee or great kid's programme

What they have heard… v9… is how the Thessalonians have turned from idols, to serve God, and wait for Jesus!

[BTW… if not yet a Christian here this morning - it's a great description of what being a Christian is all about!!]

In other words… people have seen the Thessalonian Christians speak of **AND** live like Jesus

it's a reminder that

lip and life

creed and conduct

belief and behaviour

… the two must go together

And here's the point… effective witness, is both telling ***about*** Jesus, **<u>and</u>** living ***like*** Jesus

It was a little while ago now, but I can still remember being told at school that how we behaved as pupils on the school buses really mattered -

Why?… because on the bus we were still wearing our school uniform and therefore members of the public would often view the school based on our behaviour!

but it wasn't just my school… Gandhi, the Indian leader who led his country to independence, knew it too…

When the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?"

Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ."

He added, "…If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today,".

Now he wasn't the first, and won't be the last person to charge Christians with hypocrisy.. but he makes a valid point… people will not be inclined to listen to what we say, unless our lives back it up

And so no wonder Paul is thanking God… because the Thessalonians weren't ***only saying*** that Jesus is the most important thing in their life… ***they were demonstrating it too!***

… As neighbours looked… and listened… and watched these Thessalonian Christians - they noticed how they didn't just sing *"Be thou my vision, oh Lord of my heart"*… they could see that he really was!

It was obvious to everyone, how they had turned from idols to serve God

Now I guess many of us, when we hear the word idol, we are inclined to think of a statue of some sort

.. and if you visit somewhere like Indonesia then you can see that sort of thing… but we have plenty here in the West too…

For an idol is anything we live for, we worship… or we rely on to give our lives meaning, or ourselves worth… other than the living and true God

It was John Calvin who described the human heart as a "factory of idols"… what he meant by that was that we are really good at making idols **for** ourselves, or **of** ourselves

So whether it is money or family or pleasure or reputation or popularity or career or sex - there's a great number to choose from, and of course there is no monotheism when it comes to idols - we don't just serve one - we can serve lots all at the same time!

… and they can be very subtle - so take materialism - it may be that when we think of materialism we imagine someone half human, half monster… earning huge amounts of money, accumulating loads of stuff, and crushing anyone who gets in their way

but the idol of materialism - is simply where we spend more time thinking about stuff than Jesus

… so here's one tha'ts been brought home to me just this past week… how easy it is for me to spend more time choosing my next car than praying for my friends - now I could dress it up as prudent stewardship, but if i'm honest…

and the more i think about it, the more John Calvin is right - my heart is a factory of idols…

… i can spend more effort on planning a ski trip, than on a bible study… and i don't even ski!!

… more money on house stuff, than supporting gospel ministry.

… i can look to increase my own glory, rather than God's

… now please don't mis-hear…those things are not necessarily bad things…

well self-glory is!!…

… but homes and holidays are good things…

BUT when good things become god-things, we need to be careful

Not least because our friends will be very good at spotting when we ***say*** Jesus is God, but we live as though he isn't… and some**thing** else, or some**one** else is…

The reason the Thessalonians were so effective in their witness was their consistency!

They didn't only say they turned from idols, they actually turned, to serve the living and true God

how easy it would have been, when being persecuted for what they believed, to have turned and worshipped the idol of self-pity instead… but they didn't.. they remained steadfast.

They knew that idols were dead and false.. they knew their idols could not deliver on the promises they make, so they turned from them to serve the living and true God.. imitating Jesus… whilst waiting for him to return

.. and the glorious result was that all of Greece was hearing about them!

no wonder Paul was thanking God for them!

According to an internet search, 25 000 books to help us in evangelism… but here in just a few verses, the apostle Paul points us to the example of the Thessalonian Christian and reminds us of the simple stuff!

if we want to see this city won for Christ, if we want to see Lausanne for the Lord - well these verses are a great encouragement to us… to love Jesus and to keep living like Jesus

For Jesus is coming back… as we wait… may we be those who turn from idols to serve the living and true God, and may God graciously use us to bear witness to HIs glorious gospel in Jesus Christ

May God give us the grace to imitate Jesus, in lip and life, through thick and thin.