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Introduction

Over the last couple of weeks or so the news has been filled with Barak Obama. With his inauguration, with his speeches, with him getting down to work as the President of the United States of America. For Obama has given the people of America and many throughout the world hope. His election slogan was "Change, you can believe in". And in electing him, the bulk of American's voted for this sort of change.

For I don't have to tell you, there are deep difficulties in the world and in America today. The economy, the wars, the violence, the inequality, the racism is causing great pessimism all around us. And so for many Obama is a Messiah, a Saviour who can bring about change and give his people hope.

Hope through change is a powerful statement, but the apostle Paul when he is writing to the Thessalonian Church thought a better statement was Hope through Christ. For when he writes to this young church in about 50 AD, they were also in the midst of deep difficulties. Verse 4 talks about how these young believers had shown great perseverance and faith "*in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.*"

These Christians were living in a hostile, non Christian environment. The Roman government demanded an undivided allegiance to Caesar, who in their mind was more than a man, he was a god. The Jewish people who lived in Thessalonica were jealous of Paul's success and had already run him out of town. They had formed a mob and were trying their best to stop anyone from being a Christian. So Paul had left the town after just three weeks there and now the Christians in Thessalonica were doing it tough, very tough.

So Paul wrote a letter, 1 Thessalonians, to help this young, struggling Church and within a month another epistle was needed. So here Paul sends them 2 Thessalonians and it could be entitled, *Hope through Christ*, as Paul turns these young believers again and again and again back to Jesus. That is where their hope should be found. That is where they will get the strength to go on from. God has done something, God is doing something, God will do something that will help them. So they should get their hope from Christ and nowhere else.

As we live in a world where the economy is slowing down, where unemployment is on the rise, where our superannuation has taken a beating, where sickness and cancer and old age seems to be having a field day, we too need to listen carefully to Paul's message, so that we can also have Hope through Christ. So to do that, Paul wants to encourage us with three ideas from his first chapter and the first one is

1. Give Thanks for God's grace.

Things might be tough, but Paul starts the letter with a tone of thankfulness to God. God has done something in their midst that fills him with great joy. Sure life isn't easy and times are particularly tough for both Paul and the Thessalonian Church. But that is no reason to just see the negatives, for even in the midst of their troubles, God is continuing to do his special work.

Look with me at verse 1. This is a letter from "*Paul, Silas and Timothy*", addressed to "*the Church of the Thessalonians in God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

These guys are not just on their own. This Church is **in** God, within his presence and within his power. The Church is not just **in** Thessalonica, it is **in** God our Father and **in** the Lord Jesus Christ. They are not just lone Christians bobbing up and down upon the ocean of life. They are **in** the good ship SS Jesus Christ. They are not just there together, giving one another a helping hand in their difficulties, they are under the protection of the God of this world and they are living and breathing **in** the kingdom where Jesus is their Lord.

And because they are in God and in His son Jesus, they will continue to receive from them grace and peace. Grace, those undeserved gifts that include being forgiven, saved, strengthened, comforted and changed, are available to this Church and every Church because God loves to graciously give good things to his children. And one of the things he gives to us is peace – peace with God, peace within ourselves. A trust, a calmness, that no matter what happens, God is still in control.

A number of years ago, there was a competition for artists to paint the best picture under the title of Peace. Now the winner did not draw a gentle brook, or a picture of a rainbow, or even the calm landscape just before sunset. It was a picture of waves crashing against jagged rocks, of a coming storm with thunder and lightning in the distance but in the corner, tucked away in the rocks, was a little bird sitting on her nest totally oblivious to everything that was going on all around her.

That is peace, not an absence of war, but a place of calm in the midst of chaos. And it is this peace, this grace that God gives to those who are in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ. To people like those in the Thessalonian church and in our Church who are doing it tough. But Paul has more to give thanks to than just for this. He tells the Thessalonian Christians he thanks God because "*their faith is growing more and more and that their love for each other is increasing*".

Someone once said that "faith is like a muscle, it has to be exercised to get stronger." These Thessalonian Christians were in the midst of a tough, tough time and so rather than just depend upon their own resources, they had exercised their faith again and again in God their Father and in the their Lord Jesus Christ. And by doing this the muscle of faith was growing, developing, strengthening.

Someone else has put it this way. They pointed out that a mushroom grows quickly in a day, but it never gets very big, whereas an oak tree, grows much more slowly but because its roots dig in deeper and deeper, it becomes more stable and is less likely to be pulled out or damaged.

So God in the midst of our tough times helps us to exercise this muscle of faith, helps us to put down deep roots by our faith and that enables us to cope with almost anything this world throws at us. So even if we are going through persecutions and trials, God gives us the perseverance, the ability to hang on no matter what comes our way.

For we are part of a Church that is **in** God. He Himself gives us the ability to endure and ensures that we will hang on till the very end, no matter what. As we hang on our faith grows and our love for others increases. We begin to realize that we are safe in the orbit of God's love and so we are freed to share that love with the people around us. We no longer need to just worry about ourselves but we can lift our eyes up and see those around us and we can start to really care for them.

It was the group, The Black Eyed Peas, who had a hit a couple of years ago called "Where is the love?" *"The chorus went like this.....People killin', people dyin'. Children hurt and you hear them cryin'. Can you practice what you preach? And would you turn the other cheek? Father, Father, Father help us, Need some guidance from above. Cause people got me questioning, Where is the love?"*

In Thessalonica there was no need to ask the question, "Where is the Love" for everyone knew the answer to that question was in the Church. And that is the challenge that we face again in 2009, as we are surrounded with people in the midst of trials, of sickness, of marriage problems, of difficulties in raising children, of loss, of grief, of depression we don't want the people of Tweed Heads/ Kingscliff to ask "Where is the love?" We want them to see the love here, amongst us, amongst those who are **in** God and **in** the Lord Jesus Christ.

So Paul is encouraging us to stop for a moment and find hope in Christ. To be thankful that we are in a Church that is in God, that we have been showered again and again with grace and peace. That God is right now helping us through our difficulties and although we have had more than our fair share of difficulties in this last 12 months, he wants us to grow in our faith and to grow in our love. Yes we have a lot to thank God for and when we are a people full of thankfulness in what Christ has done then that gives us hope for the future. Thanks for God's grace, verses 1 to 4 and then

2. Waiting for God's Justice (verses 5-10)

For Paul wants the Church to look beyond their own suffering and to remember that God is just. So because *"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and will give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well"*.

You see sometimes we can get caught up in our bunker of suffering and think that this is all that there is. But it's not! Remember Jesus endured so much unjust suffering but in the end God vindicated his son and he rose back to life after three days. In the same way if we are going through unjust suffering, then that is not going to be the end of the story. No far from it! God is just. In the end, all unjust suffering will be reversed.

But in the meantime, remember that you are just following the path of Jesus. And so just as he suffered to bring in our salvation, so we are being counted worthy of suffering for the Kingdom of God. For there is a struggle going on in this world. It's not just between the rich and the poor, or the Muslim nations and the west, it is between God and the Devil.

So at times we will go through these tough times because God thinks that you and I are worthy of suffering in his name. Now none of us enjoy that sort of suffering, but in the midst of this suffering if we can be consistent in our faith, if we can grow in our love and if we can show others the wonderful grace of God, then that suffering will not be in vain will it? That suffering will lead to God doing his work in not just ourselves but in others.

But one day, justice will be done. All wrongs will be righted. All crimes will be paid for. Jesus will come and remove all evil, all sin, all injustice from this world. He will come from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. And it doesn't matter what we have done according to the laws of our nation or its courts, we will be judged according to God's justice.

It was the American Supreme Court Justice Horace Gray, who once informed a man who had appeared before him in a lower court and had escaped conviction on a technicality, "*I know that you are guilty and you know it, and I wish you to remember that one day you will stand before a better and wiser Judge, and that there you will be dealt with according to justice and not according to law.*"

Jesus will one day come and if we haven't got ourselves right with him before hand, if we haven't trusted in his death and resurrection for our sins, if we haven't put him first and believed and followed his gospel of good news, then "*we will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power*". We will face that bottomless pit and that eternal separation from Him forever.

What will that be like? It is almost beyond comprehension! But it was the preacher Bill Hybels who put it this way, "*The bottomless pit...conjures up dreamlike feelings of falling away -- falling, falling, falling. You've all had dreams like that; where when you woke your heart was beating because you were falling. Picture in your mind hanging over a precipice & God is hanging onto you & you're hanging onto him. "And you decide you don't need him anymore.*

So you let go. But the moment you let go you know you made a mistake. You're falling, and every moment you fall further and further away from the only source of help and

truth and love --- and you realize you made a mistake and you can't get back up --- and you fall further and faster and further and faster into spiritual oblivion --- and you know you're going the wrong direction --- and you'd give anything to go back, but you can't. And you fall, and you fall, and you fall, and you fall ...

"How long? Forever. And all the while you're falling you're saying, 'I'm further now; I'm further. I'm further from the only source of hope, truth, and love.'

This is a terrible but sobering truth. On the final day we can fall eternally in this bottomless pit or be glorified in his holy people and marvel at being among those who have believed. In the midst of our lives now we have to stop and look for the source of all hope. It isn't in a President of the United States, it isn't in changing our life, it is in Christ & Christ alone. He alone will keep you safe as you wait for God's justice. So thanks for God's grace, waiting for God's justice and finally

3. Prayer for God's Power

Because if God is a God who has given us our salvation by grace; if God is a God who will come again to end this world in justice, then that means we need to respond in some way. That means we can't afford to just put God somewhere in the middle of our priority list, it has to be at the top, the very top. And so to help God's people do that Paul prays for them.

He prays for their worthiness, that our God may count you worthy of his calling. In other words - you've been called, you are Christian now. So live in a way that is worthy of who you are. Not make yourself worthy of being Christian. We cannot make ourselves worthy. This verse is saying you are a Christian already - you know God - but live in a way that fits that.

It's like when I took on the position of being a father. When it happened I could not change it. I could not reverse it. I cannot do anything to make myself any more of a father. I'm a dad. But now that I am a dad I should live as if I am one, living out all the right responsibilities. And so Paul says, live according to your calling as Christian people. Live a life worthy of your salvation. Now you can't raise the bar any higher than that, so you and I need to get serious about the sort of life we live.

Then Paul prays for their walk. Character must lead to conduct. Paul prayed that they might have a resolute will, empowered by God, to do what He wanted them to do. Obedience and service do not spring from human talents and efforts, but from God's power as we trust Him. We don't just live the way we want to live, we live how God wants us to live. And that's not easy.

I was watching on TV last week a programme on Eric Liddell, the famous Scottish runner from the movie Chariots of Fire. After winning the Olympic gold medal he went to China and was a missionary there until he was interned by the Japanese during WW2. Well

Liddell used to get up every morning and by candle light have his time with God and one of the young students there with him decided to do likewise.

There he heard Liddell pray each day for his captors. God had told Liddell to love his enemies and pray for those who persecuted you and so he did that, right up until the day he died in that camp aged 45. But the young man who prayed with Liddell was so impressed by Liddell's Christian walk that after the war he became a missionary. A missionary to the Japanese, the people who had taken away 4 years of his life. That's the power of God, to fulfil every good purpose. Even in trials, even in difficulties, God has the power to help your love to increase and your faith to grow. Paul prays for our worthiness, our walk and lastly our witness

I believe it was Bart Simpson who on one Xmas eve said "*O God, if you bring me lots of good stuff tomorrow, I promise not to do anything bad between now and when I wake up.*" But we want everything we do, before and after we wake up to glorify God's name. To lift up the name of Christ. To show the world how great our God really is. One day every knee will bow at the sight of Jesus coming again, but in the meantime we want others to see our good works and to praise our father in heaven.

So in the midst of all our highs and lows we want to give thanks for God's grace, to watch for God's justice and to pray for God's power. No matter what is going on all around us, we need to recognize this is the voice of God speaking to us and to respond in faith.

Let me end with a true story one of our people sent me last week. It's about a man who a little while back started playing his violin at a metro station in Washington DC; it was a cold January morning. He played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was peak hour, it was calculated that thousands of people went pass him to the station, most of them on their way to work.

But in the 45 minutes the musician played, only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money but continued to walk their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed it. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition. No one knew this but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the best musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth 3.5 million dollars.

Two days before his playing in the subway, Joshua Bell sold out at a theatre in Boston and the seats average \$100. But this day, Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station and no one recognised him.

Today God is speaking to us through the apostle Paul. He is telling us to have hope, not in the people around you but in Christ. He wants you to look back at what God has given, His grace, to look forward at what God will do, bring about his justice and so in the meantime pray for God's power to live a life worthy of his calling.

Are you and I going to be so busy that we will walk on by and fail to hear God's voice?
Or will we stop, listen to what God is saying and then be changed by what we have heard? The choice is all ours, isn't it? The choice is ours!