

Holiness and Hope

January and February 2018. Evening Sermon series



Is it possible for the Christian faith to survive and thrive in a world that's indifferent at best and hostile at worst? What does such a faith look like – at home, at work, and in other places where Christ's people find themselves? And what kind of church does it take to sustain that vision?

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians helps us with questions like these. It's likely the first letter Paul wrote to a church, and so it provides one of the earliest windows we have on the early Christian movement. It also brims over with Paul's affection for the young converts, and his delight that they are 'standing firm in the Lord' (3:8). He writes to strengthen their faith in Jesus and reaffirm the instruction he had passed on to them. Socialised in a pagan cultural environment, Paul helps them to learn the very different way of life that flows from leaving idols 'to serve the living and true God' (1:10) – where holiness is not withdrawal from the world but involvement in it in a new way, marked by faith, love, and hope.

Punching well above its weight, 1 Thessalonians gives us: a model to follow, in Paul's own commitment and service to the people of God; a vision for the church, in the call to live distinctively in everyday life; and a reaffirmation of our faith, in the foundational truths of the gospel of Christ crucified, risen, and coming again.

It's a great letter for preachers – and for congregations! The Thessalonians were a new church, doing well in difficult circumstances, but needing instruction in some areas of how to live as Christians, and struggling with what hope in the future coming of Jesus looks like. It might sound like a church you know.

Like other letters in the New Testament, Paul is responding to very specific circumstances. This in itself is an encouragement for us to be highly local and contextual in our preaching. But what Paul says in drawing on the larger biblical story of what God has done and will yet do in Christ carries significant implications for our own contexts centuries later. For all those who have turned to God from idols, to serve the true and living God, and to wait for his Son from heaven (1:9-10), God continues to speak to us and shape us through Paul's words.

For church leaders and preachers, letters like 1 Thessalonians allow us to listen in on Paul's guidance to churches, to see something of his pastoral practice, how he seeks to shape congregations for their lives together and in the world. In spite of the differences between Paul and ourselves, and the differences between the situations of the churches to which he wrote and those of ours, there is sufficient overlap for us to recognise in him a model for how we engage with our own congregations.

Further Resources:

"1 Thessalonians Preaching Pack" on www.licc.org.uk

"1 Thessalonians" is an excellent seven minute animated overview on www.bibleproject.org

07 January 2018	Holiness and hope	Pres	Christian mission - passing it on	1 Thess 1:1-10
14 January 2018		ES	Christian Imitation - pleasing to God	1 Thess 2:1-16
21 January 2018		ES	Christian Friendship - longing to share	1 Thess 2:17 - 3:13
28 January 2018		ES	Christian holiness - living it out	1 Thess 4:1-12
04 February 2018		Pres	Christian hope - waiting with confidence	1 Thess 4:13- 5:11
11 February 2018		ES	Christian community - walking with others	1 Thess 5:12-28