



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

Joyfully Receiving the Word

November 29, 2020

Rev. Lee Laaveg

TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (NASB)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly keeping in mind your work of faith and labor of love and perseverance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sakes. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word during great affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place the news of your faith toward God has gone out, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us as to the kind of reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is, Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come.

Dear friends,

Grace and peace are always for you from God, our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I'm wondering, what is the best news you've ever heard in your life? Would it be the words, "It's a girl. It's a boy." Maybe it's when the doctor walked into the room and said, "You're cancer free," or the employer said, "The job is yours if you want it." Or the young man that rises from his knees, having offered a ring, and he gets up saying, "She said yes!" Or the banker who says, "That was your last payment, your debt is paid in full." Or the news that the son or daughter who serves in the armed services is coming home safe and sound from the battlefield. Not long ago, our youngest grandson inadvertently swallowed a nail. So for several days we waited and we rejoiced in the news that the little boy passed the mail. In small things or big things, we rejoice and celebrate with good news.

Well, Paul was writing to the Thessalonika church; Christ's church in a seaport city in Macedonia, which we would call Greece. It was about 50 A.D., or about 20 years after Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into Heaven. And He's talking about how the people received the word of the gospel with joy. What is God's good news for us in Jesus' name? Well, let's not forget the greeting of Paul: "Grace and peace." These are the two biggest conceptual words of the scriptures. "Grace," God's unmerited favor; undeserved, forgiving love, which God lavishes upon us every day. And peace: shalom; more than just an absence of conflict or the suppression of anxiety and fear. Peace means victory over our enemies and adversaries, or the blessing of prosperity and God's love, or harmony united with the living God, the great I AM. "Grace and peace."

It is true that you and I are imperfect, flawed human beings who make mistakes daily. But God says to us in the name of Jesus, "I forgive you everything, and in His love I give you a new beginning. Though it is true that I'm egocentric and selfish by nature, in Christ's spirit, we have the power to become selfless, loving servants who put others before ourselves. There's the hope of transformation that character flaws or behavior patterns that are inappropriate can be changed by the presence and power of Jesus' spirit within us. Though it is true that I am weak with limits, the Holy Spirit has unlimited power, and we're given the name of Jesus and therefore all authority. Though it is true that I'm often defeated or I might feel like giving up, it is true that in Christ's love we are victorious – we're more than conquerors and we have reasons to abound in hope. Though I often might feel alone or unloved or unwanted, it is true in the name of Jesus that you and I are unconditionally loved, and that nothing can separate us from Christ's love. We're cherished. We are precious and important to God. Though it is true

that life can be hard and then we die, that all of us will die physically someday, the scriptures promise us, and God declares in the name of Jesus, we have abundant life and eternal life. Do you believe it? Let's unpack for a few minutes what we mean when we say "receiving the word."

We'll remember in John 1:14, it says the Jesus, who existed from all eternity, the creator of all things, became flesh and lived among us. To receive the word, therefore, is to receive the son of God, to receive Jesus. And that brings us joy. Paul's words to the Thessalonika church tell us that the word comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. And again in John 1, it tells us that as many as received Jesus, who believe in His name, God gives the power and the authority to become the children of God. Especially in John's gospel, Jesus uses the word "believe" over and over again. Remember some of these promises of Christ? "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son, that whoever *believes* [emphasis added] in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16.) Or in John 5:24, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life. He won't be condemned. He has already passed over from death to life." That's what biblical scholars call "the eternal now." As soon as you and I believe in Jesus, we become eternally alive. And the barriers between this physical realm and the eternal spiritual realm come down. We're eternally alive in a relationship with Jesus Christ. That's in why John 11 Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Do you believe this? The Gospel of John ends this way: "All these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." That's good news to receive with joy.

Have you ever heard the story of a man who is a pastor named Jay Speights? What would you do if you discovered you were royalty? How would you react if you took a DNA test, and when he got the results, it said that you were a prince or a princess? Jay Speights is a descendant of African-American slaves. His family was brought to America on a slave ship so he didn't know his ancestry and using modern technology took DNA tests that showed that he had royal DNA. He was from a West African country named Benin. Jay met a man who gave him the phone number of the king of Benin, but when he called the king, the king hung up on him. Then he talked to the king's wife, who confirmed that he was indeed a relative descendant. He was a prince. So he was the descendent of a man named King Deka who ruled from 1746 to 1765, and

the Queen invited Jay to come and visit. So Jay flew from Virginia to Benin, Africa. And when he got off the plane, his family photos were plastered on big blue posters hung all over the airport. The *Washington Post* reported that when Jay exited the airport, he saw what looked like a festival: hundreds of people dancing and playing instruments and singing. And it took him a few moments to realize that it was a welcome party for him. Jay knew up until that point he was a descendant of slaves, but then he discovered he was a descendant of a king, and discovering his identity made all the difference. It is true that we're slaves of our sinful nature; we're flawed, we make mistakes, and our sin separates us from the living God. But our identity, because of Jesus Christ, the son of God who loved us and came to give his life for us is that we are the princes and princesses of the Lord God, the king of the universe. That's our identity. The Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit can create the gift of faith within us.

Let's talk for a minute about how believing and receiving the promise also means that we believe and receive the one making the promise and that we receive the promiser for the purpose for which He came. A few weeks ago at our church building, we had a problem in the men's restroom where the men's urinal developed an overflow problem – the water just gushed out of that fixture like Niagara Falls. And a few women who discovered that that was a problem went into that room and started mopping up the water, trying to contain the damage until another man ran to where the water shutoff was for the whole building. And then who did we call? We called the plumber. When you have a problem with your plumbing, you call the plumber. Well, the world was broken and sinful, so God sent a savior. You remember when the angel told Joseph before Jesus was born, “You should call his name Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins,”? So I'm a sinner and I need a savior, I'm condemned, I need someone to take the punishment I deserve. By myself, my life is out of control. I need the Lord, who will direct and guide my life and give me daily counsel. By myself, I'm also without hope. I need someone with the power to open up a whole new future for me. His name is Jesus.

We therefore receive Jesus the word in the capacity for which He comes. He comes to be our savior, He comes to be a reconciler. He comes to be our Lord. We receive in Jesus the capacity for which He came. We ask Jesus Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. How about you? Have you asked Jesus Christ to be your savior?

I love the story I read recently of Clemson University head football coach Dabo Sweeney. He used the poker game, Texas Hold'em, where if you're betting everything,

you slide all your chips into the pot in the middle of the table and stand up and say, "I'm all in." You're betting everything on that hand: if you lose, you lose it all, if you win, you win it all. Either way, you're all in. So during the season, Coach Sweeney gave all his players and coaches a poker chip before each game, and he asked them to commit to the game, commit to the team, to the school, to one another that they were all in. Believing in Jesus is saying to Christ, "I'm all in, I'm committing my life to you. I'm betting my eternal destiny on you. I received the word with joy."

Joy is not just a higher level of happiness to the extreme. Happiness is circumstantial and temporary, but joy is relational and long lasting. So if you've, on your spiritual journey, lost your joy, I encourage you to hear with fresh ears the promises of God. Cast all you care on Him for He cares for you. Let go of your guilt and shame to Christ. Do the next good thing, believing that God is with you. No wonder the psalmist said, "The joy of the Lord is my strength." It gives us the inner fortitude of character which never gives up and continues to thrive and shine. Because we declare in faith, "I belong to Jesus. He lives within me. I'm victorious in his love."

I like how Paul says of the Thessalonian church that their "faith sounded forth." What they believed became publicly known to all people. So I wonder in your life and or in your church, what emanates from your heart? Would people say you believe in Jesus? It's also clear in this passage of Paul to the Thessalonian church that the lordship of Jesus was how they viewed life. It says they turned from earthly idols to Jesus as Lord. Maybe you've heard the saying "Jesus is Lord of all or he's not Lord at all." Idols can be anything that turns us away from God to things that have no power to save us, or love us, or give us joy. A false God is anything that becomes my reason for living or my purpose for living or from which I seek to derive security in life. What is it that you depend upon? Is that your idol, or is it Christ? Perhaps it's pleasure, or money, or people's approval, or politics, or even your family whom you love. Anything that becomes more important than the Lord can become an idol. Turn from that which cannot satisfy, that which distracts you, and turn to Jesus. And again, hear the good news that He loves you, that you're forgiven, and you have a new beginning with Him living within your heart.

The final word that he speaks to the church of Thessalonika is to wait for God's son, Jesus, to come back. So we derive this principle truth from that as we live our journeys of faith: this world is not our home. When Paul was in prison, sentenced to die because

he had been a witness for Jesus Christ, in the Book of Philippians, he says, "For me to live as Christ and to die is gain." Do you suppose that today is the day that Christ might return? Martin Luther was once asked if you knew the Christ would return to the world and time would end tomorrow, what would you do today? Luther said, "I would plant a tree." In other words, continue to love your spouse, continue to love your children, continue to love your grandchildren, continue to love the people God brings into your life, continue to share with others how you have found in Jesus Christ your whole purpose for living.

Celebrate and receive with joy the good news of Jesus Christ. But what a day it'll be when Christ comes again to take us home!

Amen.