

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
18 October 2026

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

There is an old story about a farmer's donkey that accidentally fell deep into an abandoned, dry well. The animal cried out for hours. Finally, the farmer realized he couldn't get him out, so he decided the only humane thing to do was bury the well. He asked his neighbors to grab shovels and help him fill it in. At first, when the dirt started landing on his back, the donkey panicked and cried out terribly. But after a few minutes, he quieted down completely. The farmer peered over the edge to see what was happening and was absolutely astonished. Every single time a heavy shovel of dirt hit the donkey's back, the animal did something incredible: He would shake it off and take a step up. Before long, to everyone's amazement, the donkey stepped right over the edge of the well and trotted off into the pasture!

Today in our lectionary we begin a reading of the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. This letter, most likely written around the year 50 to 51 of the Christian Era, has the distinction of being the earliest surviving letter of Paul, as well as the very first book of the New Testament. We know that in the year 49 A.D. Paul, Silas and Timothy travelled from Philippi to Thessalonica, the capital of the district of Macedonia. The intent, during this second missionary journey, was to preach the Gospel in Europe.

We know that this mission was quite successful in the beginning. After preaching the Gospel in the Jewish Synagogue for some time, some Jews and a large number of Greeks, which included some prominent women, began to follow Jesus through the witness of Paul and his disciples. According to Acts 17:5, "The Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar." Knowing that trouble was near, some of the new converts hid Paul and his disciples until the evening and then "the brothers and sisters sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea." (Acts 17:10).

There are a few things we need to know about Thessalonica to fully understand the powerful message of this letter. This city enjoyed self-governance, which means that as long as they obeyed Rome completely and paid their taxes, they could choose their own city officials, establish their own court system, and

manage their own affairs. This self-governance required a careful balance of obedience to Rome, worship of the imperial gods, control over the peace of the city (which included the quelling of insurrections and the harsh treatment of criminals,) and the prompt paying of all taxes to Rome.

When Paul and his disciples begin to preach Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed, the king, this type of teaching was viewed as political treason and the local communities were instantly concerned about social unrest, which would focus the eyes of the Romans on the city. As a result, the new church faced immediate persecution from their own neighbors from the very beginning. Paul puts it this way, “In spite of persecution you received the word (the Gospel) with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.”

Paul began to worry about this young congregation from the time his group escaped the city under the cover of night. A bit later on that year, he sent them Timothy to assess the situation and to see how the young congregation was fearing. After some time, Timothy returned to Corinth, where Paul was now ministering, bringing a very positive and encouraging report. Despite severe affliction, the Thessalonian Christians were standing firm in their faith. And they were spreading the gospel throughout Macedonia and Achaia with great success. It is this positive report that inspired Paul to write this letter.

The letter begins with a greeting, which is customary for Paul. “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.” After the greeting, he goes into a long prayer for the Church. This prayer gives us a pretty good idea of what is happening in Thessalonica. Paul gives thanks to God for three particular reasons: The congregation’s work of faith, their labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. The congregation is living into the three cardinal virtues of a Christian: Faith, Love, and Hope. Faith in the midst of persecution; love in the face of great social, political, and economic challenges; and hope in Christ despite societal pressure to worship the pagan, imperial gods of the day.

To live these three virtues when every minute of your life involves a struggle for survival, when what you believe in can lead you to incarceration and death, when others ridicule and abuse you for your hope in Christ requires great courage and strength. Paul then affirms that they are able to live this way because they have

been chosen by God. They accepted the gospel message “not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” Their faith was not just intellectual assent. A mental belief. Rather, when they accepted Christ, they accepted the power of his Holy Spirit, and this power has resulted in their service to others in love and their full conviction that Christ is their redeemer. The Gospel has transformed their experience of the living God into lifestyles of love and service, and Paul has heard of the positive results this lifestyle is having in the area.

The young church has “become imitators of Paul and of the Lord” and they have become an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. They have “turned away from idols to serve a living God” and they continue “to wait for God’s Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead.” Although life has been very difficult and some of the members have been killed in the persecution, they continue to imitate the life of service they saw in Paul and his group.

When I think of the great sacrifices the early churches had to make to become imitators of Christ in hostile and dangerous times, I wonder if we have become too comfortable in the West. If we have compromised too much and have become too enamored by power and wealth to the point that we have forgotten what it means to follow the Suffering Servant of God. I wonder if we have become too set in our ways, too content with our privilege and status, too willing to ignore the many ways in which brothers and sisters are being oppressed and abused by corrupt political and economic systems around the world.

Today, as we remember this courageous young church, let us ask God to give us the ability to imitate Christ fully in our lives, knowing that life is going to shovel dirt on us from time to time because of our faith and service. Christianity doesn’t offer a conflict free life. Sometimes people throw dirt on us, as in the story I told you when I started this sermon. Hardships may come our way and life may become difficult at times. But God remains faithful and active in our lives and in our suffering. God is in control.

May God’s Holy Spirit continue to be with us always. Amen!