

# *Therefore . . . Be Thankful*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

Last in a six-part series

October 15 & 16, 2016

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*Hebrews 12:25–29 (CEB)*

<sup>25</sup>See to it that you don't resist the one who is speaking. If the people didn't escape when they refused to listen to the one who warned them on earth, how will we escape if we reject the one who is warning from heaven? <sup>26</sup>His voice shook the earth then, but now he has made a promise: *Still once more I will shake not only the earth but heaven also.* <sup>27</sup>The words "still once more" reveal the removal of what is shaken—the things that are part of this creation—so that what isn't shaken will remain. <sup>28</sup>**Therefore**, since we are receiving a kingdom that can't be shaken, let's continue to express our gratitude. With this gratitude, let's serve in a way that is pleasing to God with respect and awe, <sup>29</sup>because our God really is a consuming fire.

*1 Thessalonians 1:1–7 (CEB)*

From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace to all of you.

<sup>2</sup>We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. <sup>3</sup>This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. <sup>4</sup>Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God, and we know that he has chosen you. <sup>5</sup>We know this because our good news didn't come to you just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know as well as we do what kind of people we were when we were with you, which was for your sake. <sup>6</sup>You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. <sup>7</sup>As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

*The final "therefore" in this series is a big one.*

*Gratitude is the only response to what God has done for us.*

*And this gratitude must be lived out in service to and on behalf of our Lord.*

After fleeing across the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites made their way to the mountain where Moses had met God at the burning bush. When they arrived, the presence of God dominated the landscape. A large mass of dark clouds encircled the top of the mountain, thunder and lightning roared and flashed, and the whole mountain shook violently (Exodus 19:16-22). The people understood that God was present with them and that this was no god to be trifled with. Amidst the sound of blaring horns, the Lord God spoke to them. And yet, they ignored God and his teachings. They ignored God's warnings. They heard and they turned away. It began with a golden calf (Exodus 32) but became the sad and tragic story of Israel. They simply would not love God (Deut. 6:5) and love others (Leviticus 19:18) as God had taught them. Despite all that they had seen and heard, even the earth shaking, they still ignored God.

Today's passage from Hebrews reminds us that God does not speak to us from a mountain, but from a cross. As the writer puts, we have drawn near "to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks better than Abel's blood." Rather than an earthquake, Jesus has ushered in the kingdom of God in what has been called a "heavenquake." The writer's plea is that we will hear God and heed his word, that we will not resist him as the Israelites did. We are receiving a kingdom that can't be shaken, so let's just be thankful. N. T. Wright helps us to get a little deeper into this passage:

The true God is not tame, nor does he spoil his children. He is like a fire: the holiness of God, emphasized through the Temple ritual, is not undermined by the fact that, in the new covenant, his people are invited into his presence in a new way. To think like that would be to make a radical mistake. It isn't that God has stopped being holy. God hasn't changed a bit. It is, rather, that Jesus has opened a new and living path, through the 'curtain' and right up to him. Only when we remind ourselves of God's holiness do we fully appreciate the significance of what Jesus achieved. It is noticeable that, where thinkers have spoken of God without stressing his all-consuming holiness, the meaning of the cross is downgraded in proportion. Hebrews, in line with the rest of the New Testament, celebrates the accomplishment of Jesus in his sacrificial death precisely because its view of God has not changed from the central Jewish belief we find in the Old Testament. God is the same; or, to put it the other way round, it is the same God who has now, in Jesus, brought his saving plan, set out in the Old Testament, to a triumphant conclusion.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, our only response can be gratitude and worship. But this gratitude can never be merely a feeling, or just a warm heart. Gratitude is lived out when we serve "in a way that is pleasing to God with respect and awe." In verse 28, the Greek root word which is translated "serve" in the CEB and "worship" in the ESV is *latreou*, actually means "serve" but came to be used by the early Christians as their word for worship. Even today we talk about going to a "worship service." Our gratitude and worship and service are all bound up together into one God-glorifying tapestry of devotion.

Such devotion is exemplified by the Thessalonian believers. In the opening to the letter called 1 Thessalonians, Paul notes that he, Silas,<sup>2</sup> and Timothy *always* give thanks for this community of believers and *constantly* lift them up in prayer before God. There may be a bit of encouraging hyperbole at work here, but not much. In the space of a few months, the Thessalonians have already become an example to all the believers in Greece and Macedonia, despite (or because of?) their persecution. This brief passage is worth a closer look if we want to understand the nature of genuine gratitude.

*... work of faith and labor of love . . .*"

In verse 3, we encounter a triad familiar from 1 Corinthians 13: faith, love and hope, though in a different order. As elsewhere in Paul, faith does not mean mere intellectual acceptance of the gospel claims. Faith consists of trust and reliance. Indeed, "trust" is certainly the best synonym for what the biblical authors mean by "faith."<sup>3</sup> As we've talked about so often, Christian love is not about feelings but actions. Often, those actions entail sacrifice of our time or money or pride. If trust is the best synonym for faith, "sacrifice" is the best synonym for "love."

When Paul speaks of the Thessalonians' "work of faith and labor of love," he uses two different words for work. The first, this "work of faith," refers to work that produces something. The Thessalonians' work of faith is evident in the disciplined practice of their faith – it is work that has produced the fruit of the Spirit, to borrow a phrase from Paul's letter to the Galatians. The second word for work that Paul uses includes an element of hardship or discomfort. Thus, the Thessalonians' "labor of love" captures

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *Hebrews for Everyone* (pp. 165–166). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> "Silvanus" is a Latin version of the name, Silas. Timothy and Silas accompanied Paul on his journey through Macedonia and Greece. For more on this, see esp. Acts 17:1 – 18:5. Many scholars believe that this letter was written from Corinth, where Silas and Timothy had caught up to Paul on their southward journey. Though the letter is based on the shared experiences of the three men, there is little doubt that Paul was the letter's author.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth reminding ourselves again that the Greek word we translate "believe" is actually the verb form of the Greek word "faith." When we speak of believing in Jesus, we really mean we are "faithing" in Jesus – trusting him with all that we are, all that we have, all that we do, and all that we dream.

their understanding that love is about sacrificial doing, serving others even when it is difficult or distasteful.

“. . . *steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ . . .*”

It is this “hope” that most challenges our imaginations. Paul is not referring to a generally up-beat and hopeful attitude that everything is in God’s hands and will work out well. Rather, Paul is speaking of a patient and enduring confidence that Jesus Christ will return. Just as “trust” is the best synonym for “faith” and “sacrifice” for “love,” the best synonym for Christian “hope” is “confidence.” Just ahead in the letter (v. 10), Paul commends the Thessalonians for being ones “who wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” Repeatedly in this brief thanks-filled letter, Paul refers to Jesus’ return, his second coming (his *parousia* in the Greek), when all of God’s promises will reach their final consummation (see 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-5:11; 5:23).

Jesus’ return is the great Christian hope. We are not merely hopeful in the sense that this might happen. Instead, our hope is grounded in our sure confidence that God keeps his promises.

### The Imitation of Christ (and of Paul!?)

When Paul gives his thanks that the Thessalonians have become “imitators of us and the Lord” it can strike us as a bit odd. After all, aren’t imitations mere copies of the original, even phony at that? And is Paul really so bold as to expect that these Christians will imitate *him*? Aren’t we to be Christ-like, not Paul-like?

In our world, we get pretty shy about being role models, but the language of imitation was prevalent in Paul’s day. If Paul had not been willing to hold himself up as worthy of imitation, he would have been seen as an unworthy teacher. In this way, the ancients were more realistic than we sometimes are. Paul was a role model regardless of what he said. The ancients understood that “Do as I say, not as I do” just doesn’t cut it.

Paul means that we can look to Jesus and even to himself as we seek to learn the shape of an authentically Christian life. It is not a call for us all to do and say the same things, nor to be cheap knock-offs of the real thing. I must live my life, not Jesus’ life and not Paul’s.

But from them, I can learn much about what it means to live each day in right relationship with God and with other persons. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul urges them to have the “same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (2:5). It is a call for us to imitate the selflessness of Jesus so that, like the Thessalonians, we might, in turn, be an example to others (v. 7).

Thus, we can reach out to the future and grab it, certain that the God who resurrected Jesus will one day put all things right. We can give thanks today for God’s tomorrow.

#### *A life of thanksgiving*

Like the Thessalonians, we are called to be Christ-like. We must allow ourselves to be drawn more often into the praise and thanksgiving of God. But let’s not pretend that even feeble expressions of thanks are easy.

Nonetheless, as Richard Foster writes, “Our God is not made of stone. Like the proud mother who is thrilled to receive a wilted bouquet of dandelions from her child, so God celebrates our feeble expressions of gratitude.”

Living every day in a spirit of gratitude does not come naturally to us; there is much in life that wants to crowd out any sense of gratitude.

Nonetheless, we can seek to grow in our ability to see and to experience God and all his goodness, so that, like the Thessalonians, others will see our work of faith, our labors of love, and our patient confidence in Jesus’ return. This is the service that pleases God with awe and respect.

## The Letter to the Hebrews

Other than Revelation, no book of the NT seems more foreign to most Christian readers than the Letter to the Hebrews. And the reason is clear. More than any other NT book, Hebrews is steeped in the Old Testament world of temples, priests, and sacrifice. Since most of us don't know much about the Old Testament, we are puzzled by the writer's theology, illustrations, and allusions. Our understanding is made all the more difficult because we can't answer the simplest questions about the "letter." Who wrote it? When? To whom? In his *Interpretation* series commentary on Hebrews, Thomas Long gives us a good and colorful sense of the problems:

"Among the books of the New Testament, the epistle to the Hebrews stands out as both strange and fascinating. Unique in style and content, as a piece of literature it is simply unlike any of the other epistles. Though some of its phrases are among the best-known and most often quoted passages in the New Testament, many contemporary Christians are largely unacquainted with the book as a whole, finding themselves lost in its serpentine passageways and elaborate theological arguments.

For those who take ropes and spikes and torches and descend into the murky cave of Hebrews, there is much about this document we wish we could discover, but our historical lanterns are too dim. For example, we wish we knew who wrote this curious epistle. Even though many names have been suggested—Apollon, Barnabas, Luke, Clement of Rome, Priscilla, and Silvanus, to mention a few—the arguments are not strong for any candidate. We actually have a firmer grasp of who did *not* write Hebrews than who did, since on stylistic grounds alone, it is a virtual certainty that the apostle Paul did not pen this letter. But who did? The best answer to that question is the comment of Origen in the third century: "But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows."

We also wish we knew more than we do about the recipients, the first readers. Were they in Rome? Jerusalem? Colossae? Were they Gentiles? Jews? A mixture? We can only guess at the answers to these questions. The one current geographical reference in the book, which mentions Italy, is ambiguous (see comment on 13:24). Early on, someone attached a title to this document—"To the Hebrews"—but whoever did that was probably just speculating about its original recipients and was as much in the dark as we are.

Moreover, we would like to be able to pinpoint the date of Hebrews, but we can only provide an approximate range. Clement of Rome appears to quote Hebrews in a letter written sometime near the end of the first century, so it had to be composed before then. Also, most scholars believe that the elaborate christology of Hebrews could not have developed overnight and would more likely reflect the theological activity of the second or third generation of Christians. Putting these thoughts and a few other bits and pieces of evidence together, most scholars make an educated guess of A.D. 60 to 100 as the possible span during which Hebrews was composed.

So we peer into the depths of the text unsure of who wrote it, to whom, from where, or when. Imagine being handed a book today with the comment, "Here, you may enjoy this. It was written in America or Russia or France, I'm not sure, by a Jew—or was it a Gentile?—anyway, it was written sometime between 1920 and 1970. Enjoy."

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Not only is our thanks to God built upon a foundation of faith, love, and hope, it is to be accompanied by our proclamation, the "message of the gospel" that came to the Thessalonians "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (v. 5). Perhaps it is a little like a child who opens a Christmas present only to find it is the one thing . . . the one thing . . . she really wanted. Her heart bursts with joy and excitement as she runs to embrace the gift-giver. Then she can't wait to run outside and share her excitement with all her friends.
2. Do you find yourself truly excited about the many blessings you've been given by God? If not, what can we do to capture that sense of joy and excitement . . . an excitement and enthusiasm for God that is so consuming we couldn't help but tell others about it? Our spirit of thanksgiving would just come bursting out of us! Perhaps, we need to look beyond what God has "done for us lately" to the larger gift of being God's chosen and beloved (v. 4). Such a gift is not meant to be hoarded; it is meant to be shared.

## *Weekly Prayer List*

During the week, jot down the names of people who need your prayers.  
Such prayers bind you to them in the presence of God.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Monday, Hebrews 1:1-4</b> Jesus is the living Word of God and the supreme messenger	<b>Tuesday, Hebrews 3:7-15</b> How do you respond to Jesus?
<b>Wednesday, Hebrews 4:11-14</b> God can see right into our hearts. What does your heart truly confess about Jesus?	<b>Thursday, Hebrews 11:1-20</b> The nature of faith and the Hebrews "Hall of Faith"
<b>Friday, Hebrews 11:21-12:2</b> The "Hall of Faith" goes on . . . what sort of race are you ready to run?	<b>Saturday, Hebrews 13:1-16</b> Some closing instruction

## Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Monday Evening Class

**We have just begun the book of Genesis**

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

**We are studying the Gospel of Luke**

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

These classes will not meet the weeks of Oct 23 and 30, as Scott will be leading a trip to Israel.

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## Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

### Current Series: *Our Family Tree*

The story of Christianity and its denominations

While Scott is in Israel, the class will be taught by Len Wilson, our new Creative Director. He will be teaching a three-week series based on his book, *Think Like a Five Year Old*, which presents a theology of creativity. Len's series will begin on Oct. 23.

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Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org). Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

## Sermon Notes

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