

A Model Congregation

Belcroft Bible Church

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I want to take all of that update and then have us turn to a passage of Scripture, with a few minutes left. And this passage was in my heart when I was in Argentina, and viewing all that I was seeing, and hearing all that I was hearing. And this was the passage that I can't get out of my mind as I think through of all of this explosion and convergence of missions. Turn in your copy to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, and I just want to highlight a few verses. Now, I'm not going to be able to exposit this like normal, not going to be able to exegete, obviously, as is normal. I just want to highlight for you a few truths from this passage about this church, because it has some interesting parallels to Belcroft Bible Church that are deeply encouraging. I want you to hear this and I want you to see it. I want you to be comforted and convicted by this. I'm gonna read it. I'm gonna read verses 1 to 10, and then I'll just pull out a few truths out of these three verses. You hang in there with this real quick--whatever my definition of quick is--starting with verse 1. Hear the Word of the Lord:

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 give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God

has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

There is obviously much in this text. As I've worked through the text and looked at it and, anxious to preach it, I would-- It would take me at least three sermons, if not four, to get through this section adequately. It is rich with truth and encouragement.

Basically, what this is a prayer of praise. It's an introductory prayer of praise to the Lord for His sovereign grace and work in and through this church. That is what Paul is doing here. He is praising the Lord for the believers in Thessalonica have become a model church. This is a model church and model congregation. He says it emphatically multiple times. You need to know that this church was planted under duress, under persecution and abuse, and it never stopped for as long as we can tell, from Scripture, in its existence. The day this church was really planted was a day of persecution and abuse, and you can read about that in Acts 17:1 to 9. That's the historical setting of this passage.

And the founding of this church in the region of Macedonia comes subsequent, or after, the Macedonian call of Paul, where he receives that Macedonian call, where the Lord literally sends him a vision and a man calling out for him to bring the gospel to Macedonia. And you remember Paul then goes to Philippi. And that's the first church in Macedonia that is planted, and you can read about that in the bulk of Acts 16. And there Paul plants the church in Philippi. And what happens in Philippi? He is arrested, he and Silas arrested, wrongfully abused by the government for preaching the gospel. And there he is—what? In the jail cell, abused, severely whipped for serving, planting the church, preaching the gospel, all wrongfully unjust, and yet the church was planted a faithful church, a strong church.

He leaves the jail cell, he says bye to the church, blood still dripping, no doubt, from his back, and heads--it's about 90 miles west of Philippi--to Thessalonica. That comes next. He walks into the town, still bearing the scars that he received in Philippi, and then goes and for three weeks he preaches the gospel in the synagogue. And, by the third week, the

Jews are rejecting, many of the Jews are rejecting. The faithful proselytes and Jews are, they're being saved. So Paul has to leave the synagogue and preach to the Gentiles. And the faithful Jews and the church in Thessalonica is started, but under duress. The people in Thessalonica do not like Paul there; they do not want the gospel taking away their pagan religion. And so they seek to abuse, they seek to persecute Paul. They can't find him. So they find Jason, Paul's host, the man whose house Paul was staying in, and they drive him before the leaders and they accuse him. And the town council, the leaders of Thessalonica—it's a free city, which is very fascinating. I wish I had time to explain what that means in relationship to Paul's Roman citizenship and how it didn't happen there because they had their own government and had a lot of freedom from Rome to do what they wanted, and it's very interesting. But they basically had to strike a deal, like a plea bargain. Jason had to sign a contract that these missionaries would leave so that the city would no longer be in an uproar from the gospel. And so Paul has to be, he's forced out, he's forced to leave Thessalonica.

And it's hard to tell exactly, because the text says he preached for three weeks, but it's obvious from 1 Thessalonians that he was there longer than that. He ministered during nightfall with them. They saw how hard he labored at his own expense. It would take longer than three weeks for them to do that. They had established leaders in the church that would take longer than three weeks. They were there demonstrating a depth and maturity. They were evangelizing. That would take longer. So most scholars think this church was likely three months old when Paul left. Think about that. That's nothing. That's why Paul is so anxious in this letter to get a report for how they're doing. Extreme suffering, extreme persecution, extreme difficulty, and a young church. What's going on? He wants to get back there; he wants to hear from them.

So he sends Timothy back when Paul's in Corinth. Timothy goes back in, and Timothy is so encouraged by his ministry trip to Thessalonica. He sees a thriving church. He sees an encouraging church. He sees, in every way, in so many ways, what is a mature church. He comes back to Paul, meets Paul in Corinth, and you can read about that and see that in Acts 18. And that's when Paul writes this letter, 1 Thessalonians, probably about a year after Paul has established the church. And so, when he starts this letter, all of that excitement, all that encouragement, and all that angst for this church is coming out in this

prayer of praise to the Lord, as he's heard of their work of faith, and labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope that Timothy has brought in this report back. And he's so encouraged, and this is what Paul is doing. It's a prayer of thanksgiving.

Now you can break this prayer down, and you can see it in verse 3. He praises God. He thanks God for the immediate cause. The immediate cause was the character and conduct of this church. You can see the trifecta, their work of faith, labor of love, steadfastness of hope, the general, overarching characteristic of the church. And so that's the immediate cause; it's where it starts. But then it goes, in verses 4 or 5 to the ultimate cause, the ultimate cause which is obviously the sovereign grace and electing love of the Lord in establishing this church, and blessing this church, and grounding this church in the truth, and that's what he says in verse 4. And then he highlights it even further in verse 5, when he talks about how they responded to his ministry and preaching the Word to them. That was the ultimate cause for this prayer of thanksgiving. But then, starting in verses 6 to 10, he transitions from the immediate cause, the ultimate cause, to the specific cause, the specific cause of this prayer of thanksgiving and there's a myriad. There's a number of these specific, detailed, intimate reasons for why Paul is praising the Lord, and it has to do with this church being a model congregation. That's really what he's what he's doing there, starting with verses 6 to 10.

I'm gonna give you three reasons now, three reasons why, why Paul sees this church as a model church. Three reasons why Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers serving as a model congregation for all to see. Here's your three words, so write this down. Number one: submissive, submissive. Submissive, you'll see that in verse 6. Number two: sanctified, sanctified. You see that in verse 7. And number [three: verse] 8--this is so encouraging--a sending, a sending. Paul praises God for this church because they were a submissive church, they were a sanctified church, and they were a sending church. Think about that. You see it right away in verse 6.

Look at it, now. Look at the text with me. He says, "*And you*" --Thessalonian believers, church in Thessalonica-- "*you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.*" He's building out of what he just said in verse 5, explaining his ministry there and showing the faithfulness that he had to

preach the gospel, he, Sylvanus, Silas, and Timothy. And there he is, speaking of the faithfulness and now he says, he transitions, a slight transition from the model that they were to them to, now, the fact that they became imitators of the model, the model leaders. And what does this church do? They submitted. They submitted to their leadership. They were a submissive church. They follow the leaders that the Lord had brought to them, the apostle Paul. They submitted to the leaders and they followed them. Paul further explains this reality of the impact of this church as they followed his example, listening to and embracing the gospel that he preached, and they lived it out. He lived it out before them, and they lived it out before a watching world.

The word translated here for “imitators” literally means *mimic*. They mimicked Paul; they watched him; they learned from him. They followed in his footsteps. They followed in the line of those who had gone before. They imitated the faith and the life of their spiritual fathers, much like Hebrews 13:7 commands the church to do. And, as a result, these people ultimately became followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because as Paul would say, in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “*Follow me as*” what? “*I follow Christ.*” So as they’re following Paul, they are ultimately following Christ. This was a submissive church. This church was not marked by arrogant independence, but by eager submission to their faithful leaders who started the church. Think about the church. It was only maybe a few months old when Paul was forced to leave. They did not seek to chart their own path, but they sought to strive after the gospel path that Paul pointed them to, and they lived it out before the world. They not only submitted to the leaders that the Lord had brought to them, but they submitted to the Word of God. They obeyed it despite much suffering.

You can see it in the text. This actually, the second part of verse 6 is actually, the reason why they submitted to the leaders. It is the cause. They were imitators of Paul for—reason, cause: “*you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit*”. They were following in the footsteps that Paul-- They saw Paul come to Philippi with the scars on his back, proclaiming the gospel through much affliction, and thus they received the gospel despite all the affliction. It did not hinder them; it did not stop them. They submitted to the Word despite all the difficulty that it would bring upon them. You can look across the page. He brings this up again in chapter 2, verse 13. “*And we also thank God*” -- Here he is again, praising God again for His sovereign grace in their life. “*We thank*

God constantly for this, for when you” --there’s our word-- “received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of God, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” This was a submissive church. They were submissive to their leaders because they submitted to the Scriptures. A model church on so many levels.

Verse 7 shows us that they were also a sanctified church. This church was set apart, set apart by their exemplary lifestyle. That's what's being highlighted here. They were living out godliness; they were living out holiness. They weren’t sanctified in the completion of their progressive saints of sanctification, not at all. You're trained well; you know that's not possible. And yet they were a church marked by holy living. That's the point. They were a church marked, that was set apart from all the other churches in that region, because they lived out the gospel, even though it cost them everything. That's the point he's making.

You can see the result. Verse 7: *“so that”* -- He's giving a result of what happened because they became imitators of the apostle Paul, and ultimately the Lord, in that they *“received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.”* *“So that”* --this is what it resulted in-- *“you became an example to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia.”* This is talking about not only the fact that their reception [was] under great suffering, but the lifestyle that they lived. This church was a model church in living holy lives, and this becomes crystal clear throughout the rest of the letter. You can look across the page at chapter 4. What Paul says in verse 1: *“Finally, then, brothers, we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you have received from us how you ought to walk and please God, just as you are doing, so that you do so more and more.”* And then, if you look up the page at verses 9 and 10, you can see that this church was marked by a deep love for the brothers and for outsiders. They were a Christ-like church. This was a sanctified church. They lived clear, exemplary lives before the watching world, and it impacted them.

Don't miss it, church. Don't miss it. This is the only place where Paul ever speaks of a whole church being an example. The term here “example” literally is the term *pattern, mold*, literally in the Greek. This church was a mold for other churches to mold themselves after. That's what he’s saying. This church was a pattern for other churches to follow. This

is the only place where Paul does this. He lifts up himself. He lifts up the elders. He lifts up his compadres many times as examples and tells the church, "Follow one another." He even tells them, "Follow one another's example." This is the heart of true discipleship. It's imitation--you know that--following the example of faithful leaders before you. And this is what Paul is saying. But here he says—notice--the whole church, the entire church, is an example. This is amazing. Not one individual, not the leaders that he talks about later in chapter 5, not just them, not just Aristarchus, who's an amazing guy that comes out of this church and travels with Paul all the way to the Roman prison, that this church sends out, not just him. But the entire church lived exemplary lives of faithfulness, so that the church's reputation around the globe was one of encouragement, sanctification, faithfulness, to where they became examples that encouraged the whole region of Macedonia, Achaia, and beyond, Paul will say in the next verse. That is amazing. This is so encouraging.

Well look at verse 8. This is not only a submissive church and sanctified church, set apart as an example and set apart to holiness. Look at verse 8. He continues explaining, "*For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you*". Church, what is this talking about? This is the evangelism of the church. The Word of the Lord had sounded forth. The gospel was going out from this church. The gospel was going out so effectively from the people in this church that Paul says that when he gets to the outer regions when he's traveling, he doesn't even need to tell anybody about the church in Thessalonica or about the gospel, because they've already heard it because of the ministry of this church. "Wherever I go, everybody's talking about how you have turned from idols and to the living God and are waiting upon the Lord Jesus Christ to come, who saves us from the wrath to come." Paul is like, "This is amazing. Your ministry goes before you. Your ministry of evangelism and your ministry of the deep, abiding faith that you have in the Lord, despite all your suffering."

There are a number of things we can learn from this verse, but one in particular: this was a church that sent the Word out. It was a sending church. They sent the Word out. They didn't hoard it; they didn't keep it; they didn't sit on it. They sent it out wherever they went. Where they went, the Word went. Where they sent their people, the Word went. This was a gospel evangelistic church, and thus a model church on many levels. You can

trace the Thessalonian church and you will come up with at least 12, if not 15, marks like this, of why this church is a model church. It's so encouraging because it's clearly the work of God. No reason for this church to have this reputation and this ability apart from God's sovereign grace.

And, dear church, why this passage? Because, as I said, in Argentina, and I've been listening to these reports, and talking to many people, and hearing different things, and getting emails and phone calls, and this convergence of what's going on in our church as of late, I could not help but think of this model church, and how, in many ways, we are seeking to follow in their footsteps. Because we desire to be a submissive church. We desire to be a church that will submit to the Word of God, wherever it leads us, wives submitting to their husbands, brothers and sisters submitting to one another, submitting to our elders, our leaders, and rightfully submitting to the government as we should and where we can. We want to be a submissive church. We want to submit to the Word at all levels. Because without that, we have nothing. We have nothing.

And here's why: as your pastor, I'm so encouraged. Church, hear me. You're doing it. You are doing it. Many of you are submitting to the Word of God like you've never done in your life. I know; you've told me, and I see it. You're growing like you've never grown before. I see your faithfulness. I see your eagerness in the Word. It strengthens me. It encourages me. It overwhelms me to tears. It's a joy to watch you grow. Oh, some of you need to grow; some of you need to get off your can and start studying the Word and do it. You do, and you know who you are. But many of you are growing and serving and faithfully following the Lord, and you need to hear me say that. And the reputation of this church keeps growing, that that is us. People are coming in, visitors are coming in, and I'm hearing all the time: "Something's going on at Belcroft. The church is growing. The church wants to fight for holiness, godliness." It's encouraging. Why? Because Belcroft's learning to submit itself to the Word, not to its own passions and desires and lusts, not to what the world wants, not to what anybody wants, any leader wants, not to what we want, but what the Word says, what Christ desires. And it is exciting to watch.

Church, you are demonstrating, on many levels, a sanctified living, godly living. Watching husbands, watching wives, watching children, watching our body grow together in holy

living. I hear it all the time; I get comments from visitors; I get comments from people. And this is what they tell me: they see it. It's encouraging. We are not a perfect church. So, if you hear me saying that, delete it. You will not be perfect until I leave. [Pause]. Exactly. You don't have a perfect pastor. You're not perfect. We're all sinners, but we are being perfected, by God's grace. But we are growing, and I'm watching it happen, and it's encouraging. And, church, you are you are growing in your ability to share the gospel, teach the gospel, send out the gospel and it is encouraging to watch. This is what we need to keep doing. Submitting to the scriptures and submitting to our leaders, submitting to our leaders that the Lord has given to us. As they are faithfully following the Word, we must faithfully follow them. We're commanded to do it, and it is important. It is *importante* because that doesn't normally happen today. People are independent and they want to follow their own way and make their own Christian life. And there are no independent, faithful followers of Christ. They are dependent on Christ and upon the church and upon the Word of God to follow in the path that He has lined. And we must grow in that, and we must continue in that, and we must continue fighting for holiness and godliness if we're ever going to have an impact for the glory of God as we must and as we should.

And, church, we are growing more and more in being a sending church. Haven't you heard it? I mean, how many more missions updates do you need to see before you start realizing Belcroft Bible Church-- Again, I am blown away. I can tell you're not, but I am shocked. Like I can't-- And this is my own faithlessness; I'm being honest. Right? Like I tell Amy, I'm like, "There's another email. Here's another email. Look at this. This is crazy." I wish I could show you, I wish you could see all the things that the elders see. That's why this is not a normal Sunday, but there are times in which we, the elders, have to come before you so that you can be encouraged. This, it doesn't stop. I wake up Friday morning, pull open my email account when I get to my office. There's the most encouraging email from our dear beloved brother, Taylor Marsh. You remember the Marshes? Phenomenal family. I still weep over the fact that he got transferred to Arkansas, but that was the best thing for his family, which is glorious and that's what needed to happen. The Fishes are going to be spending time with them on vacation--awesome. Taylor sends me this long email; we've corresponded back and forth. We've sent all of our men's Bible study material to them because their church requested it to use in their men's ministry. Taylor sends me this

encouraging note: “Pastor, I've been meaning to send you this. You just need to know Belcroft Bible Church has blessed our church. The men want you to know the church, Belcroft, men's ministry has impacted our men's ministry. We have been working through all the notes and blessing.”

The church in southern Maryland--Jim and Bonnie can tell you about it--another guy there, under revitalization. Belcroft Bible Church is blessing that church, encouraging that church beyond what you can even imagine. They need it. We're having the privilege to do that. A church in New York calls the other day and says, “We've heard about the missions ministry at Belcroft.” “How did you hear about this?” “Can you share with us your mission philosophy?” “Sure, take it, use it.” Church right across town: “We've heard about what's going on at Belcroft. We want the same missions mindset in our church that we are hearing about at Belcroft. Can we meet with you?” “Yeah, come and meet.” Deacons, pastor come and meet; we give them everything. “Here's our missions calendar. Here's our missions philosophy. Go and do likewise.”

Church, this just keeps happening. Go to Argentina. Alejandro's like, “Pastor Matt, we just want Belcroft to encourage us and help us and be a model for us, because we want to do what you're doing. Can we have you complete hard drive?” Isn't that what he said, Tom? “I want all the notes.” He wants to take the material that we used. He says, “This is a book. I want to print this in Spanish and turn it into a book for all of South America.” He says, “I want to replace the training,” in the current church ministry growth class that they have in the seminary and use what we just taught them. He wants me to record it with Tim, do a whole 'nother, more classroom-setting recording so that they can use it as their main church ministry growth class, for all of South America.

Church, if you think I'm boasting in this— Trust me, I don't like to do this, but I'm trying to encourage you. Church, don't stop praying. Don't stop giving. Don't stop living for the Lord. We will be the lid on our ministry, is if we become selfish, prideful, arrogant, independent, hoarders of our time, hoarders of our money, glory thieves. But if we keep striving after the Lord, despite whatever may come, if we stay faithful to the Word, if we keep preaching and proclaiming the Word, if we keep repenting of our sins, humbling ourselves before one another, serving, encouraging one another, living for Christ, church,

there is no telling what the Lord can do. None whatsoever. We're not even close to being done. The revitalization even in our church isn't done. We've still got things to do. But God is at work. Be encouraged, church. Stay the course, stay the course. Don't quit; don't complain; don't grumble.

Church, here's a good opportunity for you to test that. Next week, we will be meeting a Camp Wabanna for eight weeks, a good opportunity for you to test whether you will complain and grumble. There's many reasons why we do this, and it is encouraging. We will not always be able to do this. Much like we used to have fellowship dinners after church on Sunday. Those of you that were here for a while remember. Remember how we used to do that, Chris and Mike? Can't do that anymore. Logically, logistically, we just can't do it. So now we do it in our elder family groups. We will not always be able to go and worship at Wabanna like we can now. So we will enjoy it and do it, and it is good for us to do it on many levels, for many reasons, nonetheless, supporting what's going on there to camp, as well as humbling us and reminding us what the church really is. As we come out from our creature comforts and remind ourselves this is the church, where the people of God meet, under the worship of God, through the preaching of the Word. That's the church. It's so good to be reminded of that.

Multiple pastors as of late have told me, "Our church would never be able to do that. How is Belcroft able to do that without dissension, without division, without complaining and grumbling?" My first response was, "Well, I'm confident there's complaining and grumbling." And I don't mean that disrespectfully, but we understand how this works, right? We're not perfect. The Lord is growing us. But, by and large, for the last few years, this has been one of the most encouraging times in our ministry, to come together in a very special, unique way to honor and worship the Lord in a way. Don't miss out on the opportunity. It is encouraging on so many levels. May the Lord use these things that are difficult for some, easier for others-- And obviously, those with health issues, it gets hot. Obviously, we know that. But we look forward to this, that the Lord might continue doing His sanctifying work and making us a biblical church, a faithful church that, in His grace, if He so chooses, He would make us a model church. Churches helping churches is one of my greatest passions. May the Lord continue what He's been doing for His honor and

glory, through your faithful ministry, as you give, as you serve, as you love one another. Amen?

Isn't that encouraging? I love you, church. I'm thankful for you. I'm blown away that I get to be your pastor. I do not deserve to pastor this church. I'm not adequate for it, sufficient for it. I am not, but I am humbled that the Lord has chosen me to be here and to grow with you and to be used with you for His honor and glory. I hope we never get over it. I hope I never get over it. I hope I continue to weep in my study like I always do, as I did trying to figure out, *how am I going to talk about all of this?* To the praise of His glory and grace. Amen?

Let me pray.

Father God, we love you. This entire day, the service, communion, all the songs, the prayers, the children's choir, the updates from Gedi, the updates from Argentina, in the beautiful passage of praise from Thessalonians, Father, it's all a blessing and praise to your name. It's all about you. We assemble on this Lord's Day for you. We assemble on this Lord's Day because of you. And we go out from this Lord's Day, now, to your honor and glory because we want to bless your name in how we learn and how we share the gospel. Father, help us, help us to be faithful followers of Christ in all that we say, as we preach and teach and evangelize and share the gospel, and then how we live, that our lives would not be a contradiction to the truth, but our lives would be a complement to it. Help us, Father, to do this for one reason and one reason alone, for your glory and honor, above all else, for you are worthy. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.