**‘HIS STORY’ 10 - THESSALONIANS - FAITH UNDER FIRE**

A war photographer captured the moment the American flag was placed on top of a hill at Iwo Jima – and this was after five days of intense fighting. This photo was on every newspaper across America within the next few days and became a moment when the nation was again welded together in its fight for victory. Today a monument of this photo stands on the Potomac River. And it was to fight and stand firm that Paul asks the believers in Thessalonica to do. But it’s a *particular kind of fighting* that Paul has in mind…. Yes, stand up for what is right, hold your convictions firmly, but when your faith is under fire give no reason by your lifestyle for unbelievers to accuse you.

The rugby league community across the world is still reeling from Israel Folau’s social media comments on homosexuality and Hell. No matter what position you take on this everyone has an opinion and it has divided people, families, and sports teams. So why is there such a backlash on this when the same people who seem so angry are also asking for tolerance on issues of diversity?  Did you notice how quickly the issue has now turned from sexuality to hate? There is no easy way to talk about some subjects, but there is a wise way to speak and more so as Thessalonians would teach – to live it out! Today I am going to talk about Hell – because it is in the book of Thessalonians – This week’s Book. And yes, some of you may even struggle with what I say. The best advice I ever received on this was something I once read. ‘When preaching on Hell – make sure you do so with tears not hate in your heart’.

The story behind Thessalonians is found in Acts chapter 16 and 17. Paul had arrived in Corinth after leaving Philippi where he had been beaten and jailed, then he spent time in Thessalonica where threats had been made on his life, and he left for Berea where again his enemies followed him and sought to drive him out of the area.   He is now an interim pastor at Corinth and he writes to this young Church at Thessalonica – where many of the believers were new Christians young in their faith.

In the first and second books of Thessalonians, there is a clear progression in each of three things:  Encouragement and Exhortation, then Teaching, then Application. Each building on the other. What concerns him is whether or not they will stand firm against such strong opposition to their faith. There are three main points to the essential message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

**1.**     **STAND UP!** **Stand firm when tested!**

The Church was flourishing, they were sharing faith, discerning, enduring in hope, and loving in deeds.  They refused to water down the truth even though unpalatable. These new Christians were passionate in their faith and full of conviction about what they believed. They received the message with great joy 1.6 and were Looking forward to the return of Jesus 1.10. They were receptive to teaching even if it was hard to receive 2.13.  It’s one thing to all be on board with teaching when it is good news, but how do receive teaching when it is more unpalatable? When it divides or challenges us and we are tempted to water it down or set it aside? And yes having strong convictions has consequences.  And I guess here is the rub for us today - how do we hold fast and stand firm to our convictions in a way that does not compromise truth but also carries with it grace? In Chapter 2 Paul tells how these new believers were participating in the suffering for owning Jesus 2.14, and he is wondering if this will derail their faith. In chapter 3 he writes - don’t be shaken by the trials and testing that come. Keep receiving truth to fill up the gaps in your faith 3.10. To me, the missing ingredient in the discussion on social media about Israel Folau – was that we are all missing the mark, not just the homosexual but you and I too. When we measure ourselves against God's standard we all need saving, it’s not about hate!  It's not even about a particular sin! It's about all our fallen-ness. We all say like Paul…. I’m the greatest of them all (next book Timothy)! Hell? I deserve it too, but God in his mercy has sent this message that if I turn to him, I can be forgiven. That’s his Amazing Grace, and it's grace that is missing. The truth about sin needs grace in equal measure.  And all that people have heard has been a statement that appears as hate and they have not seen grace….*Israel Folau’s statement was not inaccurate it was incomplete.* So – firstly stand up for your faith and your convictions….but stand up as a ‘grace saved’ sinner – not a judgemental do-gooder who passes sanctimonious comments on other people’s lives. Friends we need to get this right because we are going to have to be more and more clear about *what we believe and what we will stand for*. If we learn anything from this last week, being a Christian is going to start costing something. But let the cost be because we have *said well* what we believe…and let the truth stand with grace together. John described Jesus as being - *full of grace and truth!* (John 1:14)

**2.**     **LIVE IT OUT!  Live out your faith don’t just believe it!**

The more intense the battle the more need for clear boundaries. The more you are called to stand firm the more need for our lives to be above reproach. Don’t give those who oppose you any reason to discredit your faith. And here is why; when we speak out our convictions it matters how we live. With a sexual purity and faithfulness in marriage 4.1-8. This is a challenge in today’s world when all kinds of deviant behaviours are just a click away. There is a destruction that is going on every day right now in our homes and families, and our grandchildren are facing temptations we never had to deal with. We have easier ways of sinning. And when God designed us and built us as humans, he built us to live life with certain boundaries…. break them and we will pay dearly.  There is a sense in which hell starts not when you die but for many people, it starts right here in life when we breach the boundaries God set in place.

With a love for people that underpins your convictions 4.9.  Let people know that you love them no matter what they do…. what their sexual preference is, and especially the family of faith. Why? Because our diversity can divide but love forbears all things, hopes all things, and endures all things…. it is loving one another that we are supposed to be known for! Have you ever wondered what might happen if all the believers in Jesus in the world just did one thing together….and loved people, and were kind to people?  It would start a revolution. Because what the world expects of the Church today – is to be judged, not loved.

But it’s a love that does not harshly judge people nor does it appear sanctimonious or untarnished. It’s a love that embraces people as they are, in whatever deviant sin is their speciality, and extends grace because in your life you needed it too.

And if you develop a ranking of sinning whereby you condemn certain lifestyles verbally you are no better than the Pharisees.  This does not mean you condone sin or the gay lifestyle. But you better have built an equal amount of grace and love for that person you’re talking to, so they know – that what you say comes with love and grace. That’s why the media is not the place to debate this topic because you have no grace relationship with your listeners. In a relationship, you need to bank some grace before you start sharing your truth. Every time you speak with that person gracefully, in some encouraging way, loving them for being human…you are banking grace with them. So, the time comes when you need to share the truth which might deplete the grace you have banked.

Exemplary in your work ethic 4.11-12, find ways to admire, encourage and befriend your workmates. The best way firstly is to do your work well, be the best in your office. Faith is not something we can relegate to some spiritual dimension of life and pull it out on Sundays.  In the language we use, in the emails we write, and especially in our relationships. We don’t just dump onto people what we believe and walk away – thinking we have told the truth.  We love them deeply from the heart. Faith is not something we have – it is something we do and we are!  We are faithful people. We are faith-filled people!

**3.**     **LOOK FORWARD! Remember - Jesus is Coming Back!**

Then right smack in the middle of this living-it-out exhortation comes this…. remember Jesus is coming back and teaching about those who have died. It seems to cut across the content somewhat when you read through. We live more in this world than the next. Our focus is more about this world than the next. We just don’t hear much about it anymore because we are so ‘this world focussed’. Sadly, people get fixated by the chronology of all the details that they forget the main message! His return will come when no one expects. So be ready, stay sober, walk in the light. Be prepared and encourage each other. God will keep you through this period of trial. 2nd Thessalonians has more information on Christ’s second coming. There will be a time of great rebellion and lawlessness centred on a person who captivates people. People will believe his lies because they have refused the truth about Jesus and this hardening of the hearts God can do nothing about except allow them to choose evil rather than truth, 2.11.

So, what is the key driver under these three things? Why stand firm when tested? Why live out your faith in purity and faithfulness?  Why Look forward to Jesus coming back? Here it is: because it will become more obvious to whom you belong as the days get darker and more evil ….Truth and Light will become clearer the closer we get to Jesus' return. The divide of inclusion and exclusion is the key driver under these two books. The closer you get to the end of the NT the more this division becomes clear. The teachings of the final books have increased opposition to the truth, and increased opposition for those who follow Jesus. We live in a world where people are not allowed to be excluded. Everyone must be on board the bus. But the Bible is a book that teaches about inclusion in the kingdom and exclusion from it by those who reject the offer Jesus makes.

Hell -   It’s the topic of the week…. But it’s not just a separation of people into those in and out – it’s what are they separated to? One to be in God's presence for eternity and the other to be separated from God’s power for all eternity to a place of destruction called Hell.  In case you think this is a concoction of the early Church to frighten people into the faith, there are 162 verses in the Bible about Hell. 70 of them spoken by Jesus himself – why?  Because he came so you don’t have to go there. Everything about Jesus' life was focused on redeeming and rescuing people from eternal separation from God because of their sin.  2 Thessalonians 1.9 speaks of Hell as banishment from God’s presence.

Underneath all these writings of Paul and the New Testament scriptures is a theology of inclusion and exclusion from God’s presence and power.  If we don’t have this clear teaching, we don’t understand the purpose of Jesus coming here, we don’t understand the cross and forgiveness, and we don’t understand the gospel message and the need for sharing it.

I want people to see Jesus and the cross. It is not our job to decide who goes to Hell or not. I leave that to God to decide. Yes, it’s a real place of separation from God's presence, but God has done everything so that people don’t need to go there. But friends – the days are coming when if you are a Christian the heat is going to come on our lives more and more. It will call for great grace, and wisdom to stand firm for Jesus in the day to come….

You see here is the real challenge…. some people are content to talk just about God’s love – others want to go out and seem only content when they are wearing a big sign…..you’re going to Hell – repent! Who and which is right? What is the way to share this gospel that divides? I believe the answer is with love and tears! Love people into the kingdom and away from Hell. Declare the gospel message that Jesus wants to forgive and save people, regenerate them to a new life and way of living. But share the message with tears….and love for people, not judgement and superiority.

**THESSALONIANS - Stand up - Live it out - Look forward**… Is the essential message of 1& 2 Thessalonians.

There’s some great advice….in the final chapter of the book.

*Don’t pay back evil for evil. Try to do good to each other. Care for the weak. Encourage the timid. Be patient with everyone. Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. Do not scoff at prophecies – test them. Hold onto what is good. Stay away from every kind of evil.* See how practical these teachings are?

They are not about some kind of mystical ethereal spirituality. It's boots on the ground type of faith. And friends that’s what the world needs to see – when we talk about heaven and hell. That we are there to live in sacrificial service with copious amounts of love and grace.

Remember the song we sing….. It's not amazing judgement how sweet the sound. Or amazing purity or amazing separation, or amazing convictions…

But amazing grace!