

PLEASE PASS THE PRAISE

1 Thessalonians 1

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Thessalonians. We're looking today at chapter 1. This powerful book that Paul wrote to these new believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. "Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by 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 simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell 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 rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thessalonians 1:1–10, NIV).

The topic today is "Please Pass the Praise" and that's what's happening here in this city of Thessalonica. Notice there are some people who are passing the praise and they're identified in the first line of the letter: Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. There are some wonderful things about

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these people that we might just talk about for a moment, because they show the care which God takes to train his individuals.

Here is Paul. Paul, a Jewish person, who is a Roman citizen who lives in a Greek world and knows Greek thought. Silas, his companion. “Silas” is the contracted form of “Silvanus.” They were probably the same person. Silas, who’s also Jewish, who’s a prophet in the church. And who, in addition to being that, is also a Roman citizen. We know that from Acts 16, where Paul says in Philippi, “You’ve beaten Roman citizens unjustly.” Silas was with him. He was a Roman citizen. And he traveled the Greek world. Then there was that other individual, Timothy, who was born of a Jewish mother and a Greek father and also traveled the Roman world.

God put together three people in close relationship with one another, each of whom had, because of their background, unique training to come to a place like Thessalonica, which consisted of—in its citizenry—Jews, Romans and Greeks. How God can put things together! He can reach into your past, even unto the days before you knew Him as Savior. There are things there which He can redeem so that later you can find a unique and specific function in His work. Paul was a Jew, a Roman, and a Greek, before he ever met Christ. But he came to Christ with that quality, and Christ was able to use it. The Lord is able to redeem much out of our lives as we open our life to him. In addition to that, He’s able to put us in the right places with the right people. Faithful guidance.

But these individuals—Paul, Silas, and Timothy—don’t have a relationship with the church at Thessalonica simply because they are three world people. They have a relationship with that church because of a discipline and a call in their life, which they have responded to. If they had never responded to that call, there would have perhaps been no church at Thessalonica. But that

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church is fruit of a dedication which they made to the Lord. The fruit of prayer, which they had given to the Lord, and the fruit of lessons which they had learned in their discipleship.

Each of these men come onto the stage of Scripture out of a situation which looked like it was hopeless. When we first read of Saul, we read of him in connection with the death of Stephen. It looked, from a human point of view, like the church had suffered an incalculable loss. But out of the incalculable loss, Stephen was praying, "Forgive them!" and the Lord saved Saul. Out of a situation which looked like a disaster, Saul comes.

Then there's that person, Silas, who first appears in the Scripture in Acts 15. He'd have never made it as a missionary if the Jerusalem church hadn't had a big fracas over the question of Gentiles coming into the kingdom. They wanted to know, do you have to become Jewish before you become Christian? Do you have to be circumcised before you're a believer? Do you have to keep all the details of the ceremonial law before you're a Christian? The answer the church reached, guided by the Holy Spirit, was no. You are a Christian by faith in Christ. So they sent a letter to the church at Antioch and Syria and one of the men they entrusted with the letter was Silas. That's how he comes on the scene.

Then there's that man, Timothy. He is saved in his hometown of Lystra. That's where Paul was stoned and left for dead, but he got back up and went into the city.

All three of these men come out of situations, from a human point of view, that looked like nothing would ever happen. Maybe that training is what it takes to understand what happened in the church at Thessalonica. They had to be schooled and taught by these apostles that God is doing probably the most when you see the least evidence of it. That the deepest work of God is always a work where you seize it by faith and say, "I believe God is working right now, even

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though it looks like a disaster.” These men had been trained in the school of Jesus. They are responsible, mature, key disciples moving out further in a pilgrimage of faith.

To get to Thessalonica, they of course started out in a missionary journey through Thessalonica, which is present day Turkey. They walked about six hundred miles, trying to find the will of God. They kept on walking. Paul wanted to go to Asia and the Holy Spirit said no. He decides to go to Bithynia and walks that direction. The Holy Spirit says no. Finally, they wind up at Troy or Troas, and there the Spirit speaks. “Come over,” he says through a man of Macedonia. “Come over and help us.” So they journey across to Philippi. At Philippi, they have great success.

They’re finally kicked out of the town, and come a hundred miles down, to Thessalonica, a great city. A city which was the capital of its region. A city which was made up of Jews, Romans, and Greeks. All people of all cultures. And a city which was a major place, because it was on the road from the east and all the military traffic, anything that was worth anything commercially or politically or tourist-wise or anything was coming through Thessalonica. Paul was smart enough to get there with the gospel. He said, “If that’s where men converge, that’s where the gospel’s going to be.” So the gospel came to Thessalonica.

Paul only had a few weeks in the town, three weeks he argues in the synagogues and proves that Jesus is the Christ. He’s kicked out of the synagogue. He probably spent a few months witnessing to Gentiles. Then he has to go on his way, and he leaves. He goes to Berea and down to Athens, and finally back to Corinth, from where he writes this letter. He’s having a terrible time in Corinth when he writes. He’s having opposition. He says, “I came to you with fear and much trembling,” to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 2:3). He had an unsuccessful, so to speak, presentation of the gospel in Athens, where the intellectuals cut him off. They came to Corinth, determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him only. He’s having problems with the

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citizens of the town. Yet in the midst of all of those problems at Corinth and the fear and trembling which were within him—he probably was sick as well—he writes to his Thessalonian friends and says, “Your word to me from Timothy has brought me courage” (see 1 Thessalonians 3:6-7). He’s not so lost in his own cause that he doesn’t have time to get through to a church that he’s concerned about. He writes with a great word of praise.

In my prayer this morning, I used the praise, “We are come into his courts with thanksgiving and with praise” (Psalm 100:4). But that not only describes our relationship with God. That describes our relationship to other people. We’re to come into other person’s courts with thanksgiving and with praise. Praise is the basic and first language of life. Paul has learned that. So with Silas and Timothy, he’s going to sit down in this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, and say some words of praise and cheer and encouragement to these Thessalonian believers, which are going to make them so proud and so glad that they’re a believer, that they’re going to feel like any problem they may have had is washed overboard.

He says to the “church of the Thessalonians, in God the Father and in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 1:1). That word “church” is a beautiful word. The Greeks used it before the Christians ever got a hold of it. They meant it to apply to a political assembly, maybe. You’d have a group of people who were called out of the citizenry and they would pass on an item of business or something. They were an “ecclesia,” a church or group.

There might be others that got together and had an “ecclesia,” a meeting together. But this was unusual. There were civic and political groups in Thessalonica, but there was no group like this. “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and in Christ Jesus.” Right away, Paul’s saying, you are in God the Father and Christ Jesus. The atmosphere in which I live, my locations.

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If you really want to know where I'm at, and press me on all the surface things of life, that's where I'm at—in God. And in Christ.

Who were these Thessalonians? Some of these believers, according to Acts 17, were Jews. This meant they had been schooled in the law and knew the Old Testament. Some were devout Greeks. That meant they were persons who had just about converted to Judaism, and Paul came along and preached the gospel and they believed it. Some were leading women in the city. The Lord saved them. And some of them were just the broad stream of the population—the Greeks—the others who lived in the town. They, according to 1 Thessalonians 9, turned to God from idols. So it's a widely divergent church. Paul is writing, as you've seen by just reading this first chapter, to praise them.

I've said that the language of praise is the entrance to the courts. Paul had a different tact in mind. I suppose, if he really hadn't known the Lord or hadn't been filled with the Spirit, he might have taken a whole different approach to these Thessalonians. These people had some problems. We see some of their problems as we go through the letter. One of the problems the Thessalonians had was that there were those, as seen in chapter 2, who were saying, "The apostle Paul was simply a slick salesman who is with you long enough to get you stirred up in this particular, peculiar belief."

There were insinuations against his character. Paul knew that these were there. And he knew that perhaps even in the church were some who were believing it. But he doesn't talk about that first. Another problem within the church was the temptation to be pulled back to the old way of living (4:3): "This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality."

Thessalonica happened to be a city in which two of the chief mystery religions of the ancient world were headquartered, both of which connected sexual indulgence with worship. No doubt,

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some of the believers in this church were strongly pulled to go back to their old life. Paul knew that, but he doesn't talk about that first.

Some of the believers were having problems related to the second coming of the Lord. In fact, in 2 Thessalonians, we see that some had said, "The Lord has already come." Others were concerned because their relatives had died and they didn't know what was going to happen to them, and Christ hadn't returned. Paul knows that's a problem in the church.

Another problem the church had was—it appears—a restiveness in respect to its leadership. "We beseech you brethren to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you and esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thessalonians 5:12). That almost suggests like there were some do-it-yourself people in the Thessalonian church who said, "What's the use of hanging together with the main body of Christians? We'll do our own thing. Who says they're our leaders, anyway?"

One last thought I might point out is that this Thessalonian church probably had a certain lack of discernment in regard to spiritual gifts (5:19). "Do not quench the spirit." Obviously, this wouldn't need to be given if they were giving the Spirit free access. "Do not despise prophesying. Test everything. Hold fast that which is good" (5:20–21).

Paul knows that the language of health is the language of praise, so those are the first words out of his mouth. So if you want to help the person through the problem, you don't begin by condemning them in the midst of the problem. But you point to the things in their life that please God. Maybe this is something that we don't see enough in our Christian experience. We tend to slide under the impact of guilt and condemnation in our life. We fail to see at times the very true scriptural vantage point that God does see good in us, and that the first word He wants to say to

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us is, “Well done good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). Not, “You blew it again!” But, “Well done!”

So these persons are passing the praise to persons, the Thessalonians, who are going to really deserve some honest praise. Paul says to them “Grace to you and peace” (1 Thessalonians 1:1). And this is probably Paul’s first or second letter, written in about 50-51 A.D. He gets a copyright on that phrase—“grace and peace.” In practically all his letters he uses it. He always uses it in that order. It’s never “peace and grace,” but always, “grace and peace.” He does that because you can’t have peace without grace. God needs to show you some favor. You need to receive some kindness. When that’s received, then something can happen within you—peace. It’s interesting that the root of that word, “grace,” is connected with the root of the word “joy” in the language in which Paul writes. Grace kind of does that. Grace is the bringer of joy. When you experience somebody being kind to you, someone saying, “I love you,” “I will do what I can to help you.” That’s grace. And grace produces peace. And “peace” is a word which means that you’ve got it all together. *Shalom*. You feel good—within yourself, toward God, toward other people. So, to these Thessalonians, grace and peace. That’s God’s word to all of us this morning. It’s the word He fundamentally wants to speak to you—“grace and peace.”

Paul goes on to praise these people. There are essentially two reasons why he praises them.

I. He praises them for their virtues, and he praises them for the fact that they are the chosen of God.

In the praise, he says, “We give thanks always for you all” (1 Thessalonians 1:2). Paraphrased, but I think it’s a good statement, because it reflects not just that Paul had a thankful heart, but that the apostolic team was praying together. When they prayed together for the Thessalonians, they weren’t saying, “Help those Thessalonians who are so weak and are about ready to go down

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the tubes. I'm not sure your church is going to live at Thessalonica." It wasn't that kind of prayer, but "We praise God for you all." Not for just the people who were close to them. But everybody in the church. Everybody, whether they had problems or not—"you all"!

And for your virtue. These believers at Thessalonica had some wonderful virtues, that were virtues that the Lord wants to give praise for in our lives. The first is the work of faith.

"Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Here, in a phrase, Paul beautifully puts together the two essential concepts of what a relationship with God involves in respect to faith. Faith is not something where you intellectually agree with a set of statements. That's not the kind of faith Paul is talking about. It is a work of faith. Faith has energy. Faith brings things to pass. Faith is not simply something for dreamers. I suppose in life you can divide people up into two divisions—dreamers and drivers. Some people dream a lot but never do anything. And some people drive a lot, but they really don't have any lift to what they're doing.

Paul says to the Thessalonian believers, "You've got faith, but you've got a lift of work behind it." He is not only saying, "your works of faith," but a "labor of love." These were individuals that had come to understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not something you simply feel good about. It's not something that's simply an easy, delightful emotion. But it's a labor of love. The word for "labor" is even a stronger word than the word "work." Work stands for the idea of doing the task. But labor stands for the idea of the sweat that's produced by doing the task. The toughness and the difficulty and distress that's involving getting the work done. But love works. It's like faith—it's active and it's energetic and it's seeking a good relationship with other people.

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II. Not only does he praise their work of love, but he thanks God for their steadfastness of hope.

They had hope. Their hope didn't come because they were young. Their hope didn't come because they were beautiful. Their hope didn't come because they were in good circumstances, because some of them weren't. What is the nature of hope in a Christian sense? Hope is something which is independent of anything external. Hope is ultimately rooted in what Jesus Christ has done, is doing, and will do. What he's done in the Cross and the Resurrection, He's doing now in my life, and anything that can happen to me physically and externally is insignificant because I've got a hope so deep that it's independent of anything else. It is there, planted by God. "I'm in God the Father and in Christ Jesus. And the hope is steadfast." Steadfastness is a word that comes from the combination of two words—"to remain" and "under." "To remain under." These people had a lot of remaining under to do. Persecution had been brought against them for their faith. In fact, the persecution was so severe when Paul was in the town, that they had tried to drag him out of a house. He wasn't there, so they grabbed another guy by the name of Jason. They had a big riot and said, "These are the men who turned the world upside down." That's kind of funny, because that was only the second town in Greece that Paul had been a missionary to, and yet already he turned the world upside down. They knew what was going to happen. Let the faith loose in the world and it is going to tear things up. Turn the world upside down.

Steadfastness of hope. These individuals were persevering in the midst of pressure. They knew what it was like to have a gun on them, but nevertheless, to be free and loving and good in their spirit. So there are virtues to be praised.

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Paul not only is praising them for their virtue—he is praising us also, as these qualities are present in our lives—but he praises the Lord for the fact that these individuals are chosen of God. The term maybe could be used—“election.” He thanks God for their election. Has that term ever bothered you in reference to God? Has God chosen you and not someone else or someone else and not you? How can you be sure? How can you be sure that you’re a believer? How can you be sure that you’re chosen of God?

Paul shares with the Thessalonians, and with us, how we can be absolutely sure that our salvation is there and that God has really chosen us. I think perhaps the simplest word we could use, in reference to the theme of election, is the word of Jesus in Matthew 11:27–28, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Who has the Son chosen to reveal the Father to? Jesus goes on to say who it is, “All you who labor and are heavy laden, come unto Me and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). What’s Jesus saying? The Father has chosen everyone who will come! And beyond that, I’m not going to go. God knows a lot more than me. But I know the Scriptures teach the believer, and Paul is very clearly teaching us here, that we have such a special relationship with the Lord that we no doubt are in His family and indeed are His child. The Lord says “If you want to be elected to My family, only two votes are needed—your vote and Mine. If you’ll vote, I’ll vote.” “Chosen of God.”

How do you know you’re chosen? There’s something inwardly that happens to you and then there’s something outward as well. Paul talks about that in this letter. The something inward might be described as a love condition which is created—he calls these Thessalonians “beloved of God” (1 Thessalonians 1:4). Since He’s in love with us before we’re in love with Him, it might be expected that sometimes we may not feel loved as fast as we’d like to in reference to

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God. But be assured that His love is there. And the same word which the Father used of Jesus, “Thou art My beloved Son,” that word was used at Jesus’ baptism and at His transfiguration (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). That same word is used here to speak of us. “Beloved of God.”

I don’t want to make too much of that, but it seems to me that, almost in the level of love, the Father is raising us to the position of Jesus, and He’s saying, “As I have loved the Son, so I love you. You are loved of God.” First of all, if He’s going to live physically in this world, He has to have somebody to love Him. You can’t take a five-week-old, stuff a bottle in her mouth, change her diapers from time to time, but never touch her and never love her; she is dead! That’s the way it is in the kingdom of God. If it’s just a religious exercise, a ritual, if you just feel like it’s a form that you go through and there’s no love there, you’re dead. You can’t live without love. So God gives us this assurance inwardly, “You are loved.”

III. Not only that, but the gospel has come to you—the good news.

And how does the good news reach you? Paul says it reached the Thessalonians “in word, in power, in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Notice “power, the Holy Spirit, and full conviction” are not possible unless the word has come first. Someone has to bring it.

Word of the Lord. It may be a preacher, it may be a witness, it may be an evangelist. Maybe the Word itself speaking to us. But somewhere, we’ve got to come into direct confrontation, dialogue, face-to-face with the Word of God itself. The good news is the Word. The Word that says, “You can be a child of God.” The good news says, “You can live your life in the kind of way that will be a delight to you and everyone else.” But that word simply can’t come as any other human speech. It has to come in power. I understand that this word “power” here means “the force with which that word comes.” When the gospel is preached, it arrests you. It strikes

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you immediately as something which is intensely true. The Holy Spirit is seeking to bring something creative to pass in your life, to bring Jesus into your life. As the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in the womb of Mary, so He's seeking to conceive Jesus in your heart spiritually, so you can live forever. The Holy Spirit, with full conviction.

When you're in tune with that process of being hit by the Word, the power of the Spirit, you believe and have assurance. So these Thessalonian believers, although they've been Christians less than a year by the time Paul is writing, they're already maturing. Isn't it interesting the Lord works through people who really believe things can be done? The apostle Paul says, "I dare to believe that the world can be reached by the gospel." Then he goes out and tries to do it. He dares to believe that a whole group of people can be saved and disciplined within a short period of time—like a year. The Thessalonian church has made incredible progress of belief in one year's time. It's done. They have the gospel with full assurance.

That's one proof of their election, of their being chosen of God. Inwardly, they feel and know and sense and obey and respond to what has happened. But outwardly, some things have happened which give attention to the fact that God has really chosen them.

One thing that Paul notes is that they became imitators. "Imitators of us," he says, "and of the Lord Jesus Christ—in that you took the Word with much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:6). The word for "imitators" here kind of conveys the idea of mimicking. Paul's simply saying, "When I was without, I didn't simply speak the word to you, I acted it out. I taught you how to respond."

This is how the gospel is really caught from one person to another, from one generation to another. It's lived out and we learn to imitate. The gospel puts us in a whole new environment. We've never been in it before, so we've got to learn. Somebody has to teach us. We're imitators.

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We mimic. As soon as we become imitators...we're imitators just long enough to become examples. So Paul says, "You became examples" (see verse 7, KJV). The word he uses for "example" is the word from which we get the modern word "type." And "type" means to leave a mark or an impression when you transfer something to something else. So these Thessalonians, once they became imitators, were learning to be examples, to transfer their faith onto someone else. Their mark was being left on other people.

Paul says, "Your faith has been proclaimed in Macedonia and Achaia" (1 Thessalonians 1:8), north and south Greece, and literally the ends of the world. "Your faith is an active faith. People have caught it and they're already gossiping about you and saying what has happened to you—you've become an example." What is your example? "You turn from idols." Can you imagine the significance of that thought within the Thessalonian experience? Individuals passed sixty to seventy years—all of their life—with their mothers and their fathers and their grandparents and great-grandparents always having an icon in the home. They had always been in the pagan temple, where there were idols. They'd always served them. Now, all of a sudden, these believers had stripped that completely out of their experience. They had forsaken polytheism and completely and totally embraced the Lord Jesus Christ. What a powerful description of faith. To turn, to become an example, is to turn away from every other source—from everything else that we might choose to serve. To what? To emptiness? Nothingness? Lowliness? Frustration? Defeat? No. They turn from idols for the better. "To serve the living and true God" (verse 9). He's both! He is both living and true.

Not only that, Paul tells these Thessalonians, "You turned from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son, who has risen from the dead, to be revealed from heaven and to save you from the wrath to come" (verses 9-10). They were actively waiting for the Lord's

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return—eagerly expecting it. Not living in the frustration of fear that they might not be ready for the Rapture. Or wondering if the next moment they might not go up in the event of the Lord's return. There was such a hope that they knew that they were in communion with the Lord now and that they'd be in communion with the Lord if He came again. The theme of the second coming is very large in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In every chapter in 1 Thessalonians, Paul comes back to the theme of the Lord's return.

You see how a work of faith, a labor of love, and patience of hope fit in with our example. They turned from idols. That was their work of faith. They didn't simply say, "I believe in Jesus," and keep on doing what they were doing. They changed. They had a labor of love. They served the true and living God, with emphasis on the word "serve." That denotes the activity that was involved in their relationship with God. They waited for the appearing of the Lord—the steadfastness of home, which they held as true. "Christ will come again for me. Please pass the praise." It can't be a praise which is simply a good mouthing—a praise that's undeserved or a praise that's a come on to guile people to your sales approach. It has to be honest. But the Holy Spirit has that remarkable way of praising up when, in our experience, we need it. These Thessalonians needed it. I sense you and I need it. When we partake of the cup and the bread in worship, we are in essence hearing the Father praise us. He's saying, "I've made you worthy to take of this. This is what I think of you and how I regard you. This is how much I love you. Respond to Me, and I will meet you."

Closing Prayer

I thank You, Lord, for the way Your Word has come to us. We find it coming the same way that Your servant Paul described it in respect to the Thessalonians. We see, Lord, in whatever age we may be, Your true church always manifests itself by having similar characteristics. Your true

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people also identify themselves with believers of all ages by having the good news at work. We thank You for the good news, which is at work in our lives today. I pray that the intensity of our relationship with You will be easily spilled over and will go forth from here to the ends of the world. It is really not our faith, Lord. It is Your faith working through us. We thank You for the marvelous changes which have occurred in the lives here today. We're only here because of the work of rebirth that's occurred and because, in experiences of individuals, You have given praise for the virtue and the certainty of their calling. Let this message from the Word put to rest fears which may be present in individuals here as to whether You really are their God and their Lord or not. Teach us that, upon a recognition of a true confession of faith in You, You honor us and keep us as Your beloved and that, as we walk with You, You reward us with increasing responsibility and duty. Now, Lord, as we turn to the bread and cup, we do so in remembrance of You. In remembrance of Your work of faith, Your labor of love, and Your patience of hope. You who, for the joy that was set before You, endured the cross. We thank You for that today. And we pray that Your virtue will be ours. In Jesus' name. Amen.