

## Seeking Good Life

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August 19, 2018

One of the phrases I love that we as Christians tend to use is “stories from the Bible.” We say “have you heard the story about Jesus gathering the fishermen to be his disciples?” or “do you know the story about the mustard seed?” or “do you remember the story about Jonah in the belly of the whale?” Stories have staying power. They are told to us time and again and each time we hear them we can learn something new, hear a different perspective, discover a fresh meaning or understanding or interpretation. I love stories: reading them, listening to them, writing them.

There are some sections of the Bible that we tend not to associate with stories, though, like the letters that Paul wrote to the young Christian churches. We tend not to see story-like qualities in these letters, but other valuable literary forms. That said, Paul’s letters certainly can be molded into stories that tell us, not only how to live as Christians, but tell us more about who Jesus is.

The Thessalonian church existed within the time of the Roman Empire and, despite hostilities, the church took root there and supported Paul in his missionary enterprise. After having to flee Thessalonica due to persecution from the Romans authorities, Paul continued to pastor to the Thessalonian church by writing to them. Paul wished to celebrate their faithfulness and wanted to help them continue to grow as Christ’s followers.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul expresses how happy he is with the Thessalonian church and their work of faith, steadfastness of hope, and labour of love. Paul also provides some advice for the budding church; advice that concerns both

their conduct and beliefs as Christians. In many ways, his letter centres around the daily life and living of these Christians. He wants to encourage their growth in God's goodness, their growth in Christ's grace.

Thinking of this, one might ask, "what does it mean to lead a 'good life'?" This is a loaded question. First, perhaps, we would have to consider what the word "good" means. However, in general, it really depends on who you ask. Some associate a "good life" with how morally upright you are. Some consider how much money you make and how you choose to spend it. Some think to faith and your devotion to it. Some think of the ability to hold power and authority. There are a few significant themes within 1 Thessalonians:

- one is the overwhelming goodness which comes from Christian leadership that emphasizes loving relationships
- a second is the holiness that comes from leading a holy and faith-driven life
- and another is an unshakable hope in the return of the resurrected Christ.

Drawing on these themes from 1 Thessalonians, here is a story that explores one perspective of the "good life" when one makes the choice to follow Christ and grow in his grace.

The traveller had journeyed for many years. She was not new to the ways of the world, yet not so long within it to be world weary, either. What she sought on her journey changed over time, but at present she was in the market for answers to big questions, questions like "what characteristics are needed to obtain a good life?"

The traveller asked this question of people she met along the way. Recently, a number of them had suggested she seek out a man named Jesus. He, too, was travelling around. Although, unlike her, he was not looking for answers, but was able to provide answers.

The traveller made her way to Jesus, and upon meeting him, immediately presented her question: “what characteristics are needed to obtain a good life?” Jesus looked at her thoughtfully.

“I suppose that depends on what you mean by ‘good life’” Jesus replied.

The traveller scrunched her nose and thought for a moment, but then Jesus continued, “Perhaps I can help you in your search for the way.” He then indicated towards two gifts at his feet that the traveller had not noticed until that moment.

“I have two gifts here” began Jesus, “the first contains authority, power, and cunning.

The second contains faith, love, and hope. Take the gift that you believe will lead you to a good life.”

The traveller thought for a moment, but then without any hesitation proclaimed, “I will take the first gift. Surely authority, power, and cunning will lead me to having a good life.” And she took the gift and went on her way.

The traveller began to use her new gifts straight away, and in a short amount of time, she found that she had obtained a great deal of authority. She could make demands of those around her without being questioned.

“Surely this is the good life,” mused the traveller, “I can say whatever I wish and am not questioned. It is good to always be right.”

But the traveller soon noticed that, while those around her did as she said, they also stopped coming to her. While she may have had authority, it did not stop others from being suspicious or untrusting of her narrow and limited perspective; a perspective that never seemed to consider anyone else.

“Not a problem when you also have power” thought the traveller, and she pulled out the gift of power and put it right to use. Now she could punish those who viewed her as untrustworthy, or who whispered about her in ways that made her appear weak or careless or cruel. She was none of those things, and she would make it known through her power. And it worked, to a certain degree; everyone said and did what she wanted them to say and do.

“Surely this is the good life,” mused the traveller, “I can demand whatever I want and everyone obeys. It is good to be at the top.”

But the traveller soon noticed that there was fear in the eyes of everyone who beheld her. No one respected the traveller, they only feared her.

“It is not a problem when you can buy your happiness,” thought the traveller, and she pulled out the gift of cunning and put it right to use. Though her power and authority had brought her some wealth, she used her cunning to find ways of swindling more money from those around her. The traveller’s riches were unparalleled. She could buy

anything in the world, go any place in the world, meet whomever she wanted in the world.

“Surely this is the good life,” mused the traveller, “I can go anywhere and do anything and buy whatever I desire—money is no limitation. It is good to have such riches.”

But the traveller soon noticed that the people around her held blank stares—not even fear lingered there anymore; it was worse than having no fear—the people had lost hope. They had no hope in the traveller. They had no hope for themselves. They had no hope for the future. They simply existed.

First this made the traveller look upon the people around her with disdain. Then her disdain turned to anger. And eventually her anger turned to sadness. The traveller felt very, very alone. The traveller had authority, had power, had cunning, but they had not led her to the good life. This life was terrible. This life was lonely. This life was filled with sadness. How could the gifts she took lead to such a life? The traveller decided she had only one option; she returned to Jesus.

“You have returned,” said Jesus, “Welcome, my child.”

“Jesus, I fear I have made a grave mistake. I took the wrong gifts. The authority, the power, the cunning—they all seemed like the best tools to bring me the good life, but I was wrong. Instead they brought me suffering, sorrow, sadness, and loneliness.

Instead of feeling good about my gifts, they led me to do terrible things. Things I regret.

Things that hurt others. Please, Jesus, please, I know that I already chose my gifts and used them, but I beg of you, could I have the other gifts instead?”

“You need not beg, my child” said Jesus, “the gifts of faith, love, and hope were always yours to have. Just because you took the other gifts does not mean that you were never able to access these ones.”

So the traveller gathered up the gifts of faith, love and hope. “I do not want to mess things up this time. Will you teach me how to use the gifts? Where do I begin with faith?”

“Follow me,” said Jesus, “and you will discover faith.”

“What does it mean to follow?” asked the traveller.

“Do as I do, and then be an example to the world.”

So the traveller did as Jesus did and developed faith in God. In following Jesus she prayed earnestly. God called her to holiness. And she built her trust around Jesus. And to her surprise, as the traveller developed her faith, she found she also gained authority; she was listened to, respected, and proudly bore the title “child of God.”

“Jesus, I have faith, but now tell me, what does it mean to love?”

“To love is to value and respect and care for your fellow brothers and sisters” answered Jesus.

“But who are my brothers and sisters?” asked the traveller.

“They are all who you encounter.”

And the traveller learned to love as God taught to love. And her love allowed her to share of herself with others, and they with her. She built her love around Jesus. And to her surprise, as the traveller developed her ability to love, she found she also gained

power; there was power in the ability to care so deeply for others; there was power in the united love of a community.

“Jesus, I have faith, and I have love. Now how do I hold onto hope?”

“Ah,” said Jesus, “that you already know how to do.”

“What do you mean?” asked the traveller.

“You showed you have hope when you first returned to me; you held onto hope of a better life—a better future—from the one you had.”

“So I did,” mused the traveller.

“Hope will not always be so easy to hold onto, though,” warned Jesus, “there will be suffering, and there will be hardship. But it will be made easier to bear with faith and love.”

“I will place my hope in you,” said the traveller.

“I am glad to know that,” said Jesus, “for even the most cunning cannot escape death.”

“Death?” asked the traveller.

“Only if you want it. But for those who believe, who have faith, and love, and hope, there is eternal life.”

“But how?” asked the traveller.

“By answering my call” responded Jesus.

“Have I answered it?” asked the traveller.

“You have shown persistence and determination. You have followed my lead in faith. You have found authority and power in surprising ways and have learned to use them

to lift up and not to bring down. You rejoice in the Lord every day. You pray with tenacity. You show love through your words and actions. You have hope in me, in God, in the Spirit within you. You are caring. You own up to your mistakes. You are a child of the light. And you have answered my call. Now go share these gifts with others— spread your light within the dark corners of this world.”

The traveller took Jesus’ words of encouragement and went into the world once more. She shared her faith and sought holiness. She showed love. She held onto future hope, especially in the return of Jesus. The good life, she discovered, was keeping Jesus at its centre, and to labour for this was wholly worthwhile.

May the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ inspire holiness, make us loving, and keep us hopeful, both now and into the future. Amen.