

# **"Thank God for Hope"**

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First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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I found some statistics recently. I'd like to share them with you. The statistics are about personal safety, and I found them under a headline. The headline read, "How to Stay Safe Today." So if you're wondering how to do that, I'm sure you'll be interested.

## **How to stay safe in the world today**

1. Avoid riding in automobiles. Automobiles are responsible for 20 percent of all fatal accidents.
2. Don't stay home. Seventeen percent of all deaths happen at home.
3. Don't take mass transit. Airplanes, trains, and buses are responsible for 16 percent of all accidents.
4. Watch where you walk. Statistics show pedestrians are involved in 14 percent of fatal accidents.
5. Of the remaining deaths in America, 32 percent happen in hospitals. Above all else, avoid hospitals!

But less than one tenth of one percent of all deaths happen in church! So statistically, the safest place for you to be in America is at church!

And I'm glad you're here with me in church this morning. And I'm pretty sure you feel safe here as we pray and read Scripture. But I need to let you know. As we listen to the Bible this morning, we're coming from a totally different place in our lives than the people who first heard the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians

You see the truth about this letter is this. It was written to people who didn't feel safe. And there were good reasons why. Paul knew the reasons and he mentions some of them in his opening prayer. He give thanks, for example, for the "endurance" God has given the Christians at Thessalonica in the second line of his opening prayer for them. And that's the first clue. The second one is even more telling. For a few lines later Paul mentions "severe suffering." And from those two clues and others you can find scattered through the rest of 1 Thessalonians that are even more explicit, it's clear. This is a church where people don't feel safe. Instead they're afraid. They're worried about the present. They're anxious

about the future. And the one thing they really need to find somehow is a sense of hope.

According to a national poll taken recently only one person in five says they feel "hopeful" about the future of America. Only one in five. And the story gets even more interesting. Ten years ago in a comparable survey, seven in ten people were at the opposite end of the spectrum. Ten years ago, seven in ten said they were "hopeful" or "very hopeful" about the future. That's quite a change, isn't it?

The pollsters thought so too. So they probed a bit further. They asked people why. Why they were more fearful about the future these days? And it turns out there were many reasons. Some people were worried because of what's happening in the world; anxious about the threat of terrorism. Others were afraid of the economy and the lingering effects of the recession. Some people had political fears. Others were anxious about their jobs. The list of reasons why people in America today are worried today goes on and on.

And it's interesting because while the circumstances are different, the situation in 1 Thessalonians is much the same. People who called themselves Christians were worried in a place where people usually didn't worry. You see Thessalonica was and still is a large, beautiful city. It's located on what is probably the best bay on the northwest corner of the Aegean sea. In Paul's day, it was a major city of nearly 200,000 people, a thriving seaport. And the slogan of the city reflected its success. "As long" people said, "as nature doesn't change, Thessalonica will stay wealthy."

But there's one more thing you need to know about Thessalonica and it's this. The city was intensely involved in the politics of the first century. Passionately loyal to Rome by the time Paul arrived there was already a larger than life statue of Caesar Augustus housed in an equally large temple in the city center.

So when Paul did arrive, not surprisingly, his preaching of Jesus and his kingdom aroused strong opposition. And that's why Paul goes out of his way to thank God in his opening prayer for the Christians of Thessalonica who "welcomed his message" even though it caused them "severe suffering."

And a few months later when Paul writes back to the church at Thessalonica, he isn't naive. He knows the opposition that was part of the

birth of the church is now part of the life of the church. He knows the people to whom he writes are living in a hostile environment. He knows their lives must be full of worry and anxiety. So in his prayer Paul thanks God for the gift he's given to the church, the gift of "endurance."

And he calls it a "inspired" gift. That means the "endurance" Paul sees in the church is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. And the work of the Holy Spirit that's happening inside the Christians in Thessalonica is known to Paul because of one thing. He's heard of their hope. He's heard about the way that the Holy Spirit is keeping their thoughts focused on hope. It's that hope, Paul writes that's enabling them to continue to "serve the living and true God" Paul says, as they "wait" for the arrival of His Son from heaven."

In the book that many of us are reading this fall by John Ortberg called *The Me I Want to Be*, John writes about how important it is to each of us in our Christian lives to allow the Holy Spirit to keep our minds focused on hope.

"One Saturday night," he writes, "our house was assaulted by an odor so indescribably noxious we had to evacuate. We figured it was a gas leak and called the gas company and the fire department. As it turned out a skunk had gotten close to us. I made a few phone calls but no exterminator would come to look for a skunk, so we figured the problem would go away on its own ... A week later I was on the road when my family called to say the skunk had struck again. I had to find someone who specialized in the ways of a skunk, a "skunk whisperer."

And when I found one John writes, "the man discovered that we had two live skunks and one dead one permanently residing in the crawl space under our house. It cost a lot to get the skunks removed. But it was worth it. You can't get rid of the skunk odor without getting rid of the skunk."

And then John writes this. "Our sense of smell has a unique power to evoke emotion, and in our inner lives, our feelings are like aromas. Our positive feelings - joy, pleasure, gratitude - thrill us like the scent of freshly baked bread. Negative feelings - sadness, worry, anger - can make us want to evacuate our lives ... But our feelings never descend on us at random. As a general rule our emotions flow out of our thoughts. Discouraged people tend to think discouraging thoughts. Worried people tend to think anxious thoughts."

And this way of thinking, what John calls "stinking thinking" can happen to anyone. Because the truth is it happens to everyone. Tell me, has it ever happened to you? Has it been happening to you lately? And the reason I ask is this. I've been talking to several of you lately. And many of our conversations have been focused on your worries; worries for the future, worries about the country, worries over our economy, worries for your family or your job.

And I need to tell you this morning, as gently, but as clearly as I can. As long you let worry form a funnel for your thoughts, your emotions are going to flow through the funnel. You're going to experience anxiety, unease, a persistent sense of stress. You're going to feel tired, unsettled, unable to relax or let go. And the reason you can't let go is because your thinking is stinking. You're constantly inhaling the scent of worry, and you need to replace it with scent of hope.

But here's the thing. You can't do it by yourself. Because you've tried that, haven't you? And it doesn't work. You can't manufacture the scent of hope by yourself because you know the truth. Real hope has to depend on more than you. Real hope has to come from outside you and me. It has to come from the Holy Spirit. And its content is the hope you have in Jesus Christ.

Let me tell you a story. Several years ago Malcolm Muggeridge, a famous British journalist, was a guest at a breakfast in Washington, D.C. When breakfast was finished he addressed the audience and in his address he made a number of observations about the present state of world affairs. All of them were pretty negative. Then when the address was finished someone asked him a question.

"Dr. Muggeridge," this person said, "you've been deeply pessimistic in your talk to us this morning. Don't you have any reason for optimism?" And Malcolm Muggeridge replied to that question like this. "My friend," he said, "I couldn't be more optimistic, because my hope for the world is in Jesus Christ. Ultimately it's in Him and Him alone."

He allowed his words to settle in silence over the crowd for a minute. And then he added, "Just think! Just think if the apostolic church had pinned its hope on the Roman Empire!"

It's laughable isn't it? But it's what we do. We know somewhere down deep that we can't get rid of scent of worry by ourselves. So why should we expect other people to get rid of it for us? Why should we expect our family, or our friends, or our government to do what only one source can

do. For there's only one "whisperer" who can whisper hope into our minds and our hearts in a way that can make a difference. And that source is the Spirit. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to be our "hope-whisperer."

And that's what the Thessalonians were doing. And it was making a difference in their lives, not their circumstances, but their lives. So how can we learn to do that? How can we learn what the Thessalonians learned? How can we learn to let the Holy Spirit whisper hope into our minds in such a way that our worry turns into endurance, an endurance like Paul says in his prayer that's "inspired by hope?"

The answer I believe is simpler than we think. Because the whispers of the Holy Spirit come to us most often through our memory, our memory of words God has already spoken to us. It happened to the Thessalonians like this. "You know very well," Paul tells them, "that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." And if those words sound familiar, they should. Paul is reminding the Thessalonians of Jesus promise of hope for the future.

And the reason Paul's doing that is because he's listening to the Holy Spirit. He's listening to the Holy Spirit whisper and say to him, "Remember Jesus promise? Remind them about it. Write the promise to the Thessalonians. Put the promise in your letter to them and put it back in their mind and their thoughts."

And the Holy Spirit wants to do the same thing my friends for you and me. And He can. And He will. If we'll let Him. In fact, we can more than that. We can learn how to help. How?

Kathleen Norris is a writer, a poet, and a Christian. And she tells a story that's meant to teach us how. It goes something like this. I once met a man named Arlo. He told me he was "a self-made" man. And I believed him. He looked big and strong, but he was battling cancer. So he decided he could talk to me. He showed me a Bible. He told me that his grandfather, a Christian had given the Bible to him as a wedding present years ago. And sure enough, engraved in gold letters, on the cover was Arlo's name and the name of his wife.

Arlo told me, Kathleen says, that the Bible had been kept in a box on a shelf in the closet for thirty years. It had never been opened. And from time to time my grandfather would ask me about it, Arlo said. He couldn't seem to let the subject die. But a few days ago my wife found the Bible in

the closet and brought it to me and because I was anxious about my cancer and my future, I opened it.

I found something, Arlo said. I found that my grandfather had placed a twenty-dollar bill at the beginning of the first book in that Bible and at the beginning of every book after that. Over thirteen hundred dollars was hidden in that Bible, waiting for me for the last thirty years. I guess the joke's on me.

But it doesn't have to be that way for us this morning, my friends. It doesn't have to be. For if you walk away from this sermon this morning and say to yourself well that was an entertaining sermon. I enjoyed it. That will be making a choice. But that choice won't help you catch the scent of hope for very long.

If you want to do better. If you want to let the Holy Spirit become your "hope-whisper" instead, do this. Go home this morning. Go home and pick up your Bible. Take it off the table or the shelf and open it. Read one of Paul's letters and keep reading until you find some words that encourage you, that seem to take your mind off the nagging sense of worry you've been feeling lately.

And when you find those words, write them down. Put them in your purse or your briefcase or your backpack. And whenever you need to this week, taken them out and look at them and let the Holy Spirit whisper to you and give you the same gift that the Thessalonians received, "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Amen.