

Living in the Hope of Glory:
The Message of 2 Thessalonians: #1

"God's Grace in God's People"
2 Thess. 1:1-5

--CEFC 6/27/18; cf. 6/13/04

Topic: Faith, Hope and Love

Without question, the big spotlight, hot-button issue in the most recent news cycle
has been the administration policy of separating children from their parents
when they are entering the US illegally
or are seeking asylum along the Texas border.

I don't think the President or his advisors
realized just how powerful the opposition to that policy would be.
It was a losing enterprise from the beginning--
I mean, did any of them think about the reaction they would get
from the millions of mothers across the country?

You knew something had to give when people started showing heart-wrenching videos
of toddlers being torn from the arms of their mothers,
sobbing hysterically,
and crying out uncontrollably for their Mama and Papa.

One news correspondent I heard said he was so moved by one such scene
that he had to turn away to compose himself
(though my wife wondered if that guy had ever served in a church nursery!)

It was a short-lived policy,
and for good reason.
There has to be a better way to deal with these issues.

I mention this not to make a political point
but to point to an analogous situation.

Any parent who is separated from their children
would be filled with all kinds of anxiety and fear for their well-being,
and I am sure that just that feeling
was very real to the Apostle Paul,
when he was separated from his spiritual children
in the city of Thessalonica.

We read in the book of Acts that Paul and his missionary partner Silas
had come to this prosperous capital city
and immediately began preaching the gospel in the synagogues
with evident success--

**"Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas,
as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks**

and quite a few prominent women" (Acts 17:4).

But within a matter of only a few weeks
intense opposition arose from within the synagogue.
Luke tells us that **"other Jews were jealous;
so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace,
formed a mob and started a riot in the city"** (17:5)—
a riot aimed at Paul and his fellow missionaries,
accusing them of disruptive and seditious activity--
**"These men,
who have caused trouble all over the world,
have now come here,"** they said.
**"They are all defying Caesar's decrees,
saying that there is another king, one called Jesus,"** they cried (17:7).
"When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil" (17:8).

Notice, that in order to arouse popular opposition against Paul and his cohorts
their opponents' argument was not religious;
it was political.

These Christians are not good Roman citizens;
they are not loyal to the nation;
they are troublemakers,
they are undermining the social order
because their allegiance is to another king.

I find it interesting that these words sound exactly like the words of the Jewish leaders
when they wanted to persuade the Roman governor Pilate
to put Jesus to death.

John tells us—"Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting,
**"If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar.
Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar"** (John 19:12).

This link between religious persecution and politics is intriguing. /

Anyway, this riot created a vicious and violent scene--
and to protect the apostle from imminent harm,
the Thessalonian believers sent Paul away from the city at night
quite suddenly.

These infants in the faith—having come to faith in Jesus just in the last few weeks—
these babes in Christ were separated from their spiritual father,
and were forced to go it alone in a very hostile environment.

Under such circumstances,
what chance did this fledging group of new converts in Thessalonica have?
How could they possibly withstand the fierce persecution
that had already begun to come upon them?

Paul is understandably anxious about this new church of very young believers

that were left in Thessalonica.
And we see this concern reflected in his first letter to them
written only a few months after his sudden departure--

1 Thess. 2:17--"**But, brothers and sisters,
when we were torn away from you for a short time . . . ,
out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.**"

3:1--"**So when we could stand it no longer,
we thought it best to send Timothy
to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,
so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.**"

3:5--"**when I could stand it no longer,
I sent to find out about your faith.
I was afraid that in some way
the tempter might have tempted you
and our efforts might have been useless.**"

Who knows what might have happened to them?
They may have started compromising the supremacy of Christ
by offering sacrifices to Zeus alongside the worship of Jesus.

They may have relaxed their moral stand,
by indulging in the sexual lusts that were commonplace in the Greek world.

Maybe they had grown to resent Paul for leaving them the way he did--
doubting both the sincerity of his love
and the truth of his message.

Perhaps they had just given up the fight altogether,
and gone back to the more socially acceptable form of life
of their pre-Christian days.

But the result of Paul's inquiry couldn't have been more encouraging--

1 Thess. 3:6--"**But Timothy has just now come to us from you
and has brought good news about your faith and love.
He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us
and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.
Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution
we were encouraged about you because of your faith.
For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord."**

Timothy's report confirmed all that Paul had hoped was true of this church--
They were standing firm in the Lord.

What does the Apostle John say?

"**I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.**"
It's true--
Your children--whether biological or spiritual--

your children can accomplish all sorts of things that can make you very proud,
but there is no greater joy
than to hear that they are walking in the truth.

Paul's first letter to his spiritual children
is a letter of thanksgiving, and of praise, and of encouragement.
These Thessalonian believers are his delight,
and he even refers to them as a model to the Christians
in the two provinces of Greece—Macedonia and Achaia.

Paul worked to stay in touch with this fledgling church,
and it seemed that not long after that first report, he received another one—
one that was even more encouraging to him,
though there were a few issues that needed to be clarified for their benefit.

So he wrote to these Thessalonians again,
in the letter we call 2 Thessalonians.
Paul pours out his pastor's heart for these beloved believers—
encouraging them, praising them, and instructing them—
all the while, with a focus on what God has done among them,
what he is doing,
and what he will do,
calling them to live faithfully in the hope of glory.

So turn with me to 2 Thessalonians--

1:1 **“Paul, Silas and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians
in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:**
2 **Grace and peace to you
from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

In this opening greeting in vv. 1,2,
let me just call your attention to the way Paul closely connects
“**God our Father**” and “**the Lord Jesus Christ**” in both sentences--

**“To the church of the Thessalonians
in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:**
2 **Grace and peace to you
from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

In Paul's mind, Jesus is God's own Son on the same level with the Father.
There is no question that Paul is putting Jesus in the category of the divine.
In all likelihood, this letter is one of the earliest of Paul's letters—
written within twenty years of Jesus' death and resurrection.
Don't let anyone tell you that the deity of Jesus is some late theological development.
The divine status of Jesus was a part of Christian belief from the very beginning.
Jesus himself had said it—
“**Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.**” /

After the greeting, Paul moves in vv. 3-6 to his customary word of thanksgiving.

3 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters,
and rightly so,
because your faith is growing more and more,
and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.
4 Therefore, among God's churches
we boast about your perseverance and faith
in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring."

It is important to note that Paul is not thanking the Thessalonians;
he is thanking God for what he sees in them.
Paul always has something to thank God for as he thinks of the churches he writes to—
only his letter to the troubled church in Galatia lacks this section.

When Paul thinks of these dear friends,
his thoughts immediately turn to God—
He recalls what God in his grace has done in his people.

Do you ever think that way?
When you think of those you love
do you thank God for them?
Are you thankful for what God has done in their lives?

In fact, Paul considers such thanksgiving not just a nice thought
but a binding moral obligation—
V. 3—"We ought always to thank God for you, brothers,--
it is right for us to do so."

This reminds me of the solemn words of the ancient Anglican communion liturgy—
"It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times,
and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord . . . "
(They had a way with words, didn't they?)

That's what Paul felt as he thought of these his spiritual children. /

I'm sure Paul was a very good pastor.
He knew how to lead people to spiritual maturity.
And you have to wonder how he did it
without any of the many packaged discipling programs
that flood the Christian market today.

I suppose he simply shared the story of Jesus—
his life, his death and his resurrection,
grounding it all in the prophetic word of the Old Testament,
and he did it while sharing his own life--
all in the power of the Spirit,
who opens blind eyes and softens hard hearts
and gives us new desires that we never thought we would have.

It's rather simple, really,

but that's what disciple-making is all about.

Those in Thessalonica who received the gospel in faith began to grow,
but Paul didn't take credit for anything he saw in the Thessalonians.
He knew that the spiritual growth in those believers was God's work.

And those of us who are parents—whether physical or spiritual parents—
we ought to feel the same way.

When we see spiritual growth in our children—
when we hear them pray,
when we see in them a desire to read God's word,
when we see them thinking about other people and not just themselves,
and when we see them making wise decisions
decisions grounded in God's truth,
then we, too, ought to thank God—
for this fruit is God's doing. /

And what does Paul thank God for, as he thinks of them?—

Three things—
and, in God's sight,
they are perhaps the three most important things of all.
And here Paul commends the same three aspects of their character
that he mentioned in his first letter—

1 Thess. 1:2,3—

**"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."**

Faith, love and hope—great triumvirate of Christian virtues.

Faith, love, hope--

we think of these as emotions--they describe how we feel.

But in Christian vocabulary

these words can never be separated from what we do.

Paul thinks of their work produced by faith,

their labor prompted by love,

and their endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Let's look at these three central Christian qualities.

First, Paul thanks God for their **faith**.

Evidently, the Thessalonians had faith that could be seen--

It moved them to action.

it wasn't just a private part of their personal lives

that had no impact on their way of life.

Christian faith must be personal, that's true,

but it is never private--it issues in a life of faithful action.

That's why the constitutional amendment mandating the free exercise of religion
is much broader than simple the freedom of worship.
Our faith, our religion, is very much about what we do outside of this building,
in the world.

It is faith in Christ that makes us say what is true;
It is faith in Christ that makes us do what is right.
Orthodoxy--right belief--
can't be separated from orthopraxy--right behavior.

We are saved by faith alone,
but real faith is never found alone—faith works.

In his first letter, Paul thanked God for the productive nature of their faith—
their work produced by faith;
in this second letter, he gives thanks for its increase.
He gives thanks to God, he says, "**because your faith is growing more and more.**"

This faith is their trust in the living God and in his Son Jesus Christ.
It is their personal connection to him
whereby their lives are lived in the light of who he is—
in his righteousness, his love, and his grace.

As he writes in his first letter—
these people had "**turned from idols to serve the living and true God**" (1:9).
And this initial act of faith in their conversion to Christ,
was now growing more and more. /

In one sense faith in Christ is an either/or proposition—
either you have entrusted your life to Christ or you haven't.
Or, to put it another way,
either you have put your trust in yourself to commend you to God,
or you have put your trust in Jesus
and his sacrificial death for your sins and his glorious resurrection.
It's one or the other—
you either have faith in yourself or faith in Jesus.

And that's a fundamental decision that each person has to make.
Every one of us needs to come to grips with that question—
Where do you put your trust?

Faith in Christ—either you have it or you don't. //

But in another sense,
because faith is a personal, relational quality,
it can also vary in its strength and vitality—
in other words, it can grow or it can diminish.

And here, Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonians' growth in faith.

That's what's supposed to happen, isn't it?

Our relationship with the Lord isn't static—it is either growing deeper
or it is becoming shallower.

It's the same with a marriage isn't it?

or a friendship?

Our relationship with God grows deeper
as we live more fully and more consistently
as his children—

Our faith grows as we grow up in the Lord—

I like to describe that growth using three C's--

First, we grow up as believers as we grow in godly convictions—
the great truths of our faith about God and ourselves—
the great story of God's work in the world
which he invites us to share in.

We grow in the Lord as we grow in Christ-like character—
to become more like Christ in the qualities of life,
the moral virtues, which reflect him.

We grow in the Lord as we develop those Christian competences--
those practices that nurture our faith—
things like Bible reading and prayer
and fellowship with other believers in the church.

Christian maturity is seen in

Godly convictions,

Christ-like character,

and competence in Christian practices.

And to those three C's I'll add one more--

And all of this enables us finally to more fully commune with Christ--
to abide in him, to know him and love him,
and to allow his life to flow through us.

You could say, growing in faith is as simply as listening to Jesus
and doing with he says to do.

I think of the conversation I had with someone

who has come to believe what Jesus said about the blessing that comes in giving—
so he decided to increase his weekly offering.

He decided that the percentage of his income that he gave, his tithe,
would come from his gross income
rather than his net income.

That is an evidence of a growing faith.

I think of another person who quit trying to resist and rebel against his boss--
who was the authority the Lord had put over him at his work.

Instead, he accepted that authority;

he submitted to him,

and even prayed for his boss
as an act of faith—

that is an evidence of growing in faith.

I think of another person who quit complaining about her circumstances,
and instead accepted them as a part of the gracious providence of God—
part of God's good plan for her life—
that is an evidence of growing in faith.

Those are things for which we can thank God—
for ultimately his grace is behind each of those acts.

The Thessalonians' faith was growing—
is yours?

What a tragedy when it doesn't.
When a child doesn't grow up and mature,
we say the child's growth is retarded,
and we grieve.

But what of our spiritual growth?

Let's be clear--growing in faith doesn't happen automatically with age.

Some who have been believers for only a few years
can be far more mature than some who have been Christians for decades,
who are stuck in spiritual infancy—that's sad.

I think of the challenge Michael Martin gave us at our retreat last week,
directed particularly us older believers

He urged us to continue to grow in our faith,
as we realize that none of us has arrived.

In fact, I would say, even the most mature among us
are just wading the shallows of the knowledge of God
and there is a vast, deep ocean before us.

Pastor Martin urged us
not to seek comfort for ourselves,
as if we now deserve it,
but instead to accept being uncomfortable for the sake of Christ.

We need to learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable--
For that's what it takes to grow in faith.

Faith is like a muscle—
for it to grow, you must use it,
you must exercise it.

And one of the ways you will exercise your faith
is if you share it with others.

Will you pray for what we call "gospel conversations"?
Are you willing to put your faith on the line by telling someone else about Jesus—
pointing people to him in some way?

Let me encourage you to be a part of the Engaging the Nations event
that will be here next month—

It is a stay-at-home missions trip
in which you will be trained and then encouraged
to get out into the community
to interact with people from other religious backgrounds.
Maybe that's just the exercise that your faith needs if it is to keep growing.

And when we see someone's faith growing,
that's something to thank God for.

Then Paul says it is necessary and right to thank God
because "**the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.**"

Their faith toward God has had an impact on their relationships with one another—
their **love** was increasing.

What do you think that looked like?
How did Paul know it was true?

Maybe Paul heard that they were meeting together regularly,
spending time in each other's homes.

It could be that he heard about ways that they were helping one another.

Perhaps he heard that they were sharing their resources—
if someone had a need, others tried to meet it.

Maybe somebody lost a job, and others took him in.

Maybe somebody was sick,

and others cared for her and helped with her children.

Maybe somebody died, and the others provided comfort and support.

Maybe Paul heard that some who had relational conflicts
were being reconciled to one another—
there was forgiveness and grace.

Whatever it was, Paul could tell that their love for one another was increasing,
and he thanked God for it—

He thanked God especially because this is just what he had been praying for—

Back in 1 Th. 3:12 he had written—

**"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other
and for everyone else, just as ours does for you."**

Now that prayer was being answered.

Surely, an increase in love is an evidence of the work of God in their midst—
that's what God does in the life of his people.

Jesus said, "**By this all men will know that you are my disciples,
if you love one another**" (John 13:35).

And isn't that a beautiful thing—love within the body of Christ?
I thank God for the evidences of that love I experienced

at last week's retreat—
just the way people seemed to interact with one another—
there was a joy to it—a beauty.
And it did not go unnoticed by some of the international students who joined us.

Psa. 133:1—"How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!"
It is an evidence of the work of God in our midst.

And don't we need catalysts, love enzymes in our church body--
—those among us who will lead the way
and give us examples
and stimulate us to this kind of love.
Maybe you could be that kind of person?
When we gather, you look for people who stand or sit alone
and go and greet them and speak to them.
You are quick to pray for others,
and to find tangible ways to help others in need.

May our love increase—to the glory of God!

A growing **faith**,
an increasing **love**,
and thirdly, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians' **perseverance in trials--**

v.4--"Therefore, among God's churches
we boast about your perseverance and faith
in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring."

Paul sounds like one of those proud parents,
who delights in telling you about his children's successes.
You know the kind.
Well, can I boast as a pastor about one of our own church family.

I got an email this week from a friend who was working at the basketball camp
at Immanuel Christian School.

He wrote:

"Bill,

*We have two people at our [~~ICS basketball~~] camp this week,
Mary Mae and John Bailey, who attend your church.
John did the morning devotions for the entire camp this morning,
talking about Job and passion.*

He was great.

. . . if he is a product of your youth, your church has done well."

Well done, John Bailey.

We are proud of you.
That encouraged my heart.

The Thessalonians had undergone a serious test of their faith---
a test to determine their worthiness to enter into the kingdom of God.
When they had become separated,
Paul was anxious of the outcome of that test.
He didn't know if they would pass.

They were persecuted for their faith—
people opposed them for what they believed.
They became social outcasts—
objects of ridicule;
rebels against the political order of the community.
That's tough.

Some Christians in this country are starting to experience this—
In some circles,
where Christianity was once viewed simply as false, or even as foolish,
it is now viewed as offensive or even hateful.

There was evidence of that just a week ago
when the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the provincial legal authorities
had the right to refuse legal accreditation to Trinity Western Law School
(which is affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of Canada)
simply because they had a community covenant
that mandated that sexual activity be confined to the marriage relationship
of one man and one woman.
It was deemed discriminatory against the LGBTQ community,
and the accrediting agency said that must not be allowed.
So much for religious freedom.

Who knows how quickly similar rulings may come in this country,
with a huge impact on Christian institutions,
not to mention just how Christians are perceived in the culture.

Are you ready for that?
To suffer for any public expression of your faith?
Will you affirm that you have "**another king, one called Jesus**"?

The Christians in Thessalonica experienced that hostility immediately,
and to keep going, these believers had to have faith
in God's future for them—
that the Lord would not abandon them,
but that he would, in his time, make things right
and reward them for their unswerving perseverance.

There's another word for that—it's called **hope**—
and these Thessalonians had it.

Paul makes that connection explicit in his first letter--

1Th. 1:3—“We continually remember before our God and Father . . .
your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Endurance is the fruit of hope.

Perhaps you've heard stories of prisoners of war who survive years of confinement,
while some simply give up and die.

The difference, they say, is hope—

those who survive hold on to the hope of the rescue.

Hope makes that future rescue real to them—

it motivates and encourages them in the present.

Their endurance is inspired by hope.

This is not the hope of "I hope my dreams come true."

This is the hope of young woman engaged to be married--

waiting for the day of her wedding,

enduring the pain of separation,

remaining faithful in her love,

knowing that soon, she will be forever joined with her beloved.

This is the hope of the distance runner

who rounds the track and hears the gun signaling the last lap.

He gets a burst of energy knowing that the finish line will come--

it's in sight--

and the reward for completing the race

will make it all worthwhile.

We have such a hope--

a finish line worth striving for;

a wedding banquet worth waiting for.

Do you ever feel like giving up?

Don't do it--the bridegroom is coming to claim his bride.

The Christian has a real hope—

It is real because we know that God can turn the darkness of Good Friday

into the bright new dawn of Eastern Sunday.

That's the solid foundation of our hope.

Christ has died, Christ is Risen, and Christ is coming again.

And present hardships, trials, and persecutions

can only fuel our hope in that future reality.

“among God's churches,” Paul writes,

“we boast about your perseverance and faith

in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

5 All this is evidence that God's judgment is right,”

which I take to mean,

their perseverance demonstrates the truth of God's assessment of them

as his own people.

“and as a result [of that perseverance],” Paul says,

**“you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God,
for which you are suffering.”**

That's the ultimate goal, isn't it—
to enter the kingdom of God.
And that goal is only attained as we stand firm in faith,
and continue to grow in love,
and look forward with confidence,
enduring in hope of Christ's glorious appearing.

Faith, love and hope—
this is the great triumvirate, the central trinity of Christian virtues.
That's what Paul saw in the Thessalonians—
Growing faith,
increasing love
and enduring hope—
and for that, he thanked God.

This is what the gospel does.

The gospel has the power to bring forth working faith,
laboring love,
and enduring hope--
And in a secular world too often filled with cynicism, distrust, and despair
this is indeed a miracle of God.

This is the power of God we should be praying for among us--
and when we see it,
may we give thanks to God.

Closing Hymn-- *Let It Be Said of Us*

Benediction--
"May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father,
who loved us and by His grace gave us
eternal encouragement and good hope,
encourage your hearts and strengthen you
in every good deed and word."

**Living in the Hope of Glory:
The Message of 2 Thessalonians: #1
June 24, 2018**

**“God’s Grace in God’s People”
2 Thess. 1:1-5**

Paul the pastor gives thanks to God for the spiritual vibrancy he sees among the new converts in Thessalonica. Though they were challenged by trials and persecution, they had continued to grow in faith, love, and a persevering hope. May we do the same-

We should give thanks for—

I. Growing Faith

II. Increasing Love

III. Perseverance in Trials

**These are the marks of the work of God
that fit us for his kingdom.**

Sermon Discussion:

“God’s Grace in God’s People”
2 Thess. 1:1-5

- In this opening passage, what motivated Paul to give thanks to God? How could you be similarly motivated to give thanks to God?
- In v. 3, why does Paul think of giving thanks as an obligation?
- Do you want your faith to grow? Why? What has caused your faith to grow in the past? What are things we can do to encourage growing faith?
- What are some acts of love you have seen in others in our church? How does love increase? What can you do to increase your love for the Lord? and for other people?
- How do you think the Thessalonians, as very young believers, were able to withstand the persecution they endured? Are you afraid of encountering persecution for your faith? What can help you overcome that fear? What role does hope play in your life?
- Take time to give thanks for the work of God in the lives of people and churches that you know about. Think specifically about how you can see the Spirit’s presence in their lives.