

I THANK GOD FOR YOU
2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

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Amarillo, Texas
November 18, 2108

Perhaps you remember the beginning of Paul's relationship with the church at Thessalonica. On his second missionary journey, Paul and Silas – and by this time, Timothy had joined them in Lystra – were making their way westward from Antioch through the Galatian region. Paul and company wanted to go and preach the gospel in Asia, but the Holy Spirit told them “no.” Next, Paul intended to travel northward to Bithynia, but, again, the Spirit forbade it. And in Troas, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia (Thessalonica is in the region of Macedonia) calling, “Come over here and help us!”

Immediately, Paul and Silas and Timothy – by now, even Luke had joined – set sail to Macedonia because, as Luke describes, “God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

In Macedonia, the second city of major importance on the missionary tour was the city of Thessalonica. Paul, as was his custom, went to the Jewish synagogue and preached the gospel for three Sabbaths, reasoning with them from the scriptures, explaining to them that the Messiah had to suffer and to rise again from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”

Some of the Jews were persuaded about Jesus' Messiahship, and some of the God-fearing Greeks and leading women were persuaded as well.

But many Jews in the Thessalonican synagogue were jealous. Paul was stealing their members and their God-fearing followers. So, in today's terms, they went to the marketplace and hired a mob to go after Paul.

So, Paul and Silas are forced to flee, and they travel south to Berea. But even at Berea, the Jews from Thessalonica chased after Paul, agitating the crowds against him once again. Therefore, Paul was with the Christians at Thessalonica for only a few weeks. Sure, he convinced some of them that Jesus was the Messiah, but there was so much more that they still needed to understand. Therefore, Paul writes two letters to this congregation – a congregation in the midst of persecution – we call these letters 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

As we look at the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians, perhaps some of you have already been taught how to read Paul's letters. In studying the beginning of Paul's thirteen epistles, the reader should look for four different elements:

1. The sender.

Look at verse 1. “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy.”

2. The recipient.

Again, verse 1. “To the church of the Thessalonians.”

3. A greeting.

Look at verse 2. Paul usually says, “Grace and peace.”

4. Thanksgiving - our focus this morning

Verse 3, “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers,....”

I want you to notice an unusual element in this thanksgiving – the word “ought.” “We ought always...” “Always” even makes it stronger. “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers,....”

The way Paul words it here, “we ought,” says that he is duty-bound, that he and his fellow missionaries have a sense of obligation. Giving thanks is not an option. “We ought always,” “We are bound to give thanks to God for you.”

It gets even stronger. Look at verse 3. “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, *as is only fitting*....” You might translate it this way: we’re obligated to give thanks, and rightly so. This “ought” and “rightly so” only occur in this thanksgiving amongst Paul’s letters, the one called 2 Thessalonians.

Thanksgiving week. How did it get here so quickly? The week that Americans traditionally look to heaven, because we are reminded that God is the giver of all good gifts.

Many of us here have so many things for which to be thankful. A roof over our heads. Clothing. Employment. Maybe you have children that are a gift from God, or grandchildren. Maybe you have a loving wife or husband as a gift from God. The very fact that you have enough health to sit in this room on this day of worship and praise God – you give thanks.

In 2 Thessalonians, the spiritual leader of the Thessalonian church, Paul, says he is duty-bound always, and rightly so, to give thanks for his brothers.

And I join Paul today and say I, too, feel duty-bound always, and rightly so, to give thanks to God for you, the gracious members of First Baptist Church of Amarillo. What a unique church you are. I thank God that you have a passion for missions. I thank God that you are generous at the time of the offering, remembering that God is our provider. I am thankful for the way I see you care and love each other, both in the hallways of this church, in the hospital, during grief and loss. When I can, I always try to stick my head in the kitchen as a group of ladies is feeding a family that has just experienced a funeral. And I try to say, “Thank you.” Thank you for that casserole, that dessert, which is representative of the presence of Christ. I thank you.

Thank you is a word you can never say too much. For whatever you do that makes this place unique and special and grand and great and loving and kind and focused and dedicated and positive, I thank you. I could only wish that every pastor had the opportunity to serve you.

I ought always, rightly so, it's just fitting to give thanks to God for you.

Paul gives us some specific reasons that he is thankful for the Thessalonians.

I. "Because your faith is greatly enlarged."

Your faith is growing more and more. *The Message* says it this way: "You need to know, friends, that thanking God over and over for you is not only a pleasure, it is a must. We have to do it. Your faith is growing phenomenally.

Yes, first of all, he thanks God for their growing faith.

In 2014, after we had been in our present home for about a year, we spent a Saturday planting a row of pine trees – a windbreak. By the way, these pine trees came as a gift from a Sunday School class here at First Baptist Church. The soil was as hard as a rock. I was glad I had bought the smallest possible Australian Black Pines sold in this city. I believe it was ten pine trees – that meant I had to dig ten holes. Each little pine was only about 12 inches tall. They looked sort of pathetic when planted. So small.

When you watch that pine tree every day, you don't see any change. But when spring came around this year, I looked, and, behold, some of those little pines were above my head. Four years of growth – continual, slow, steady, methodical, unnoticed. But then, all of a sudden, look how strong and tall they stand even already.

Some people's faith is like that. You notice. You look back and, man, they've grown in Christ.

I did that with one of our teenage boys last Sunday night. He has always been just a little kid running around, and I looked and I was almost eye-to-eye with a young man. "When did you grow like that?" I asked. He shrugged his shoulders as if I should have noticed all along.

Well, Paul notices. Not their physical stature, but the enormity of their growing faith. "Your faith is greatly enlarged," he says.

Now in 1 Thessalonians 3:10, his first letter to the congregation, Paul says, "...as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith." Knowing that they had room to grow before, now he sees what he had hoped for, what he had prayed for. They are growing in faith.

II. Their love for each other.

Go back now to 2 Thessalonians 1:3. "And the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater. Not only their faith, but their love had grown. *The Message* puts it this way: "Your

love for each other is developing wonderfully.” And this love that he finds is in the whole community, the whole church.

During Operation Desert Storm, an officer stood before his three dozen soldiers and ordered them to attention. “Soldiers,” he quietly began, “I need three of you for a dangerous, but very important, mission behind Iraqi lines. You will be dropped off at night, but we will be unable to pick you up until we have broken through enemy lines. We do not know when that will be. It may be many days. You will be in danger the entire time. If you are willing to take on this perilous mission, step forward while I turn my back.”

When he looked around, the ranks were unbroken. “What,” he asked, “would not even one of you step forward to volunteer?”

All was quiet, then a female soldier spoke. “Sir, we all stepped forward.”

**Such should be the loyalty of all His soldiers.
(*Illustration Digest*, Sept-Oct-Nov 1992)**

I want you to notice the vertical and the horizontal. Vertically, their faith that is growing, directed toward God. And their love is horizontal, directed toward other believers, serving as an affirmation of their growth in faith. If you grow toward God (your father), you will, likewise, grow toward your brother.

We live in a time when there is a loss of basic civility in the way we treat each other. Respect, courtesy, kindness, being a lady or a gentleman in our conversation, our post, our tweets – it’s lost. Perhaps in this vulgar culture the church can be the one place where people sense love and kindness.

Look back at 1 Thessalonians 3:12. You remember in 3:10, Paul saw their faith which was lacking. Look at verse 12: “May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you.” May I translate that for you? “I am praying that you will love each other the way that I love you,” Paul is saying. Paul had prayed for their love to grow, and, lo and behold, he discovered that it had.

I heard one of our deacons saying to someone visiting this church a few weeks ago, “When we say ‘Welcome to the Family’ here, we mean it.”

Thank you for being a church like that. We spoke of one of our ministries here earlier – Fostering Hope. There are so many families in our church who foster and who adopt. You’re loving in such a way that your whole life is being rearranged. You have taken a child into your family, or multiple children – some for one night and some for a lifetime – to be part of your family.

A couple of Wednesday nights ago, during the evening meal at First Baptist, one of our members, a foster mom, was holding her foster baby. Unexpectedly, she was called by the agency that evening and asked to care for yet another child for an emergency placement. After the second foster child was dropped off at First Baptist, I watched her fix his plate. I thought, “This little boy

is sure taking it well – from one foster family to the next in an evening, and neither family is a forever family for him.” But, when she took him over to the table, all of a sudden, he realized this was another mom, another place, another table. Life wasn’t settled or safe. As he sobbed, I watched this foster mom pick him up and hold him. She was that evening, for him, the presence of Christ. Then I watched one of your staff members get up and help her by feeding a bottle to her younger foster baby.

“I thank you,” Paul says. “Your love for one other, it grows wonderfully.”

Thank you for being a loving, caring church. We’ve got a Christmas tree out in the hallway today. We have about 500 names on it of kids who need presents for Christmas. I can tell you with great confidence that those names will be taken care of, because you’re that kind of people. You’re that kind of church.

I thank my God for the way that you love.

III. Patience, or steadfastness.

There is a third reason Paul gives thanks for the believers in the church at Thessalonica. He is thankful for their patience.

Look at verse 4.

...therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance...

We might put it another way: Paul is thankful for their patience. It’s the Greek word *hupomonē*. It means much more than just hanging on. It’s not just a passive endurance, not just a test of survival. It’s an active word in which one is seen not only as enduring, but also taking the trial or suffering and using it in a positive way.

Patience could also be translated “steadfastness.” It’s a dogged determination that will not let go, no matter how contrary the circumstances.

Notice the setting of their patience. Look at the end of verse 4. “...in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.” As you read the rest of the chapter, you realize these Christians are suffering. Remember, Thessalonica had been a hostile place for Paul.

Verse 4 begins with an emphatic message: “We ourselves.” It might seem odd that Paul, the founder of the church, would actually be boasting about the church he founded, but he was. They were undergoing – the first word is “persecutions.” This word specifically refers to someone suffering for his faith. The second word was “trials” (translated “afflictions”) which you endure. Trials is a broader word. It means there is pressure, there is a burden, there is oppression.

They were suffering, but they were patient. They were persevering.

A wise man once said that enduring suffering is like collecting a pile of rocks. You can do one of three things with your suffering, with your rocks.

(1) You can put them on your back and walk through life burdened by the suffering of the past. You can let your suffering cripple you, impede you, ruin you. You see some people like that. Suffering comes into their life and they go through a metamorphosis of change in such a way that they no longer reflect the graces of Christ.

(2) Another thing we can do with our suffering is to take those rocks and hurl them at somebody else in our anger, because life isn't fair. We have been hurt. We've experienced a great loss – a death, a change, a divorce, a hardship. We're treated badly because of our faith. You can throw rocks and strike those around you.

(3) Or, third, you can take those rocks and build an altar. In the midst of that suffering, you can worship God – the God who shares your suffering in the crucifixion of Christ.

What are you doing with your rocks, your suffering? The church in Thessalonica had built an altar, and they were patient and steadfast and enduring, even as they were suffering persecution.

IV. Your trust.

Paul says, “We boast in all the churches everywhere about your perseverance,” but also notice “and your faith.” How is this faith mentioned here different from the growing faith, the second reason Paul is thankful? In this fourth reason, this use of “faith” is more specific than it was in verse 3. This is a reference to the kind of faith that allows them to remain steadfast in the face of a trial. Maybe a good translation would be “trust.”

So Paul says, “We have to give thanks to God for you, our church family, because your faith is growing, just like we prayed that it would. And the way you treat each other – selflessly, sacrificially. Your love for each other. That patience and steadfastness you have. And then, finally, your trust in God.”

What happens to those who are persecuting Paul's brothers in Thessalonica? We learn in verse 6 that God will repay affliction with affliction. Jesus is going to return. In verse 7, Jesus shall be “revealed.” It is the language of an apocalyptic event. You know the title of John's last book. It has the word revelation, “reveal.” It could be translated, “The Apocalypse of John: a revealing.”

You see, while the equation is broken in this life – while the innocent suffer and the children of God are persecuted – in the next life God will work out His righteous purpose. While we think of suffering as something to be avoided, Paul sees it – the very one with a thorn in his flesh – as God's means of working out His eternal purposes.

If you don't think the innocent suffer, look at Jesus, the Son of God, perfect, sinless, innocent. He suffered the worst kind of death. But in the world to come, He is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

And through their suffering, they show themselves worthy of the kingdom of God (v. 5), the kingdom for which they are suffering. When Christ comes, He comes first of all, notice v. 7, from

heaven, meaning there is no higher place from which the Lord can descend. Second, He comes with the mighty angels. Notice what kind of angels – angels that bear the power of God at the command of the Christ. And, third, he comes with flaming fire. The glory of the appearance of the Lord is best described as a flaming fire.

And when he comes (look at the beginning of verse 7), He gives “rest” to the saints who are suffering. But “to those who are unrighteous, to those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord” (v. 8), notice the penalty. “These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (v. 9).

Eternal means “without ending.” It means “forever.” Eternal punishment does not come because they are ignorant. It does not come because they do not know better. It comes because they have willfully rejected the gospel and the Christ of the gospel.

Eternal punishment equals being separated away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. God is everything that is good. And when you’re in eternal punishment, you do not have the presence of the One who is good; you do not have the presence of God.

C.S. Lewis suggested that the one who had chosen to be separated from Christ in this life is simply given the freedom to continue that choice of separation from God. In that sense, heaven or hell sort of begins in this life. And in death, our choices are sealed.

This Thanksgiving, we all have a lot for which to be thankful. And I join Paul. But while Paul speaks about the church at Thessalonica, I speak about the church in Amarillo, Texas. I must, it is necessary that I should boast. Why? Because your faith is growing. Because I can see great love that you have in this church for each other. Because I watch some of you endure the harshest of circumstances and stay steadfast. And because you trust God, even when it’s not easy to do so.

You’ve taken your rocks and built an altar, fallen on your knees, and worshiped the God who will be revealed through His Son’s second coming from the highest place, with the mighty angels and shrouded in a flaming fire.

I thank my God for you.