

3. Growing Pains

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It is not easy to be a Christian in the U.S.A. with all the resistances and temptations around us. But certainly it was not easy to be a Christian in Thessalonica where believers faced physical and spiritual persecution and suffering.

Yet in the midst of suffering, the Thessalonian Christians experienced joy which became their strength to endure the persecution.

Paul certainly was burdened for his brethren who were going through suffering, and yet he also had joy. It was a fulfillment of our Lord's promise from John 16:33.

John 16:33 These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

Churches do experience "growing pains" as they seek to win the lost and glorify the Lord. We may not experience the same kind of political and religious persecution that the early Christians suffered. Yet if we are living "godly in Christ Jesus," we will suffer for His sake. In this portion of the studies in the Book of 1 Thessalonians, Apostle Paul explained the divine resources we have in times of suffering and persecution.

A. THE WORD OF GOD WITHIN US

1 Thessalonians 2:13 Also, this is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the message about God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the message of God, which also works effectively in you believers.

How grateful Paul was that these people not only listened to the message as God's Word, but they swung open their hearts and embraced it warmly as a cherished guest. Nothing could have encouraged the Apostle more than this spirit of welcome, this ready acceptance of God's truth by the Thessalonian Christians.

The word of human beings, however wise in substance or eloquent in expression, yet cannot produce spiritual life.

As that spiritual life began to blossom within the believers, certain changes in attitude began to bear fruit. Only the Word of God can give life to the dead, joy to the sorrowful, hope to the despaired and love to the unlovable.

The Thessalonian church was made up of Jews, God-fearing Greeks and formerly idolatrous pagans. From such varied backgrounds, these people had had the Word planted in their hearts.

The Thessalonians beautifully show us the principle that when God's Word is received, God's working is evident.

1) The Word that saves us enables us

The same Word that brings us salvation also enables us to live for Christ and endure suffering for His sake. Paul was thankful that the saints in Thessalonica had the right spiritual attitudes toward the Word of God.

The way a Christian treats his Bible shows how he regards Jesus Christ. Jesus is the living Word, and the Bible is the written Word. But in essence they are the same. Both are Bread, Light and Truth. The Holy Spirit gave birth to Jesus Christ through a holy woman, and He gave birth to the Bible through holy men of God.

2) The Word that gets applied in our lives enriches us

The Christians of the church of Thessalonica. They obeyed the Word by faith, and the Word went to work in their lives. It is not enough to appreciate the Bible, or even to appropriate the Bible. We must apply the Word in our lives and be hearers and doers of the Word.

Many people are careless hearers and cannot apply themselves to listen to the teaching of God's Word. These people have "itching ears" and want religious entertainment. Many churches put out theatrical presentations or almost stand-up comics by teaching pastors instead of pure Word of God during their Sunday morning services. Too many churches have substituted entertainment for the preaching of God's Word, and many people no longer welcome the Word of God in their lives.

If that is not bad enough, there are numerous people who will do just about anything to go against the truth of God's Word including believing totally absurd make-believes. This happens to more frequently within the ranks of scientists who are supposed to be smart people. Here is a recent article that showed up on www.LiveScience.com April 4th:

Jesus Could Have Walked on Ice, Scientist Says

Rare conditions could have conspired to create hard-to-see ice on the Sea of Galilee that a person could have walked on back when Jesus is said to have walked on water, a scientist said today.

The study, which examines a combination of favorable water and environmental conditions, proposes that Jesus could have walked on an isolated patch of floating ice on what is now known as Lake Kinneret in northern Israel.

Such floating ice in the unfrozen waters of the lake would be hard to spot, especially if rain had smoothed its surface.

If this walking on ice by Jesus is true, the greater miracles were done by the disciples and Peter. According to Mark 6:48, the disciples were rowing hard – on ice – according to these profoundly brilliant scientists. To make a greater miracle, Peter asked Jesus to allow him to walk on water in Matthew 14:28. So he started to walk on ice like Jesus and saw winds and waves, all of sudden, his ice gave in and started to sink.

Jesus being the Almighty God, He stood next to the drowning Peter and pulled him out of water and they both got into the boat. When you try to rescue somebody who is going under water from frozen icy surface, you don't stand on ice, you lay flat and distribute your weight as much as you can.

I tell ya, these scientists have far more faith in their stupidity than I do have in the Bible.

B. THE PEOPLE OF GOD AROUND US

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, since you have also suffered the same things from people of your own country, just as they did from the Jews. 15 They killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and persecuted us; they displease God, and are hostile to everyone, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. As a result, they are always adding to the number of their sins, and wrath has overtaken them completely.

There are many differences among Christians around the world, but there is one thing we all share: Suffering.

Philippians 3:10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,

Personally, Paul felt a close bond between himself and the Thessalonians. They all shared wounds from a common enemy – an enemy whom God will eventually conquer at the Last Judgement.

With these words, Paul was encouraging his followers to continue standing firm. He and they were in this struggle together, and no matter what happened, God was in control.

The longer I walk with Christ, I often found that many of suffering people can become very self-centered and think that they are the only ones going through the furnace. Everyone goes through the normal human suffering such as sickness, pain and loss of the loved ones. They often forget that that is the time when they need to run to the Word of God and His people for comfort and encouragement. These Thessalonica Christians did that and that is the reason why Apostle Paul thanking God for them for their steadfast effort in Christ.

V16 is a rather frightening verse. God permits sin to run its full course. God patiently waits as sinners rebel against Him, and He watches as their measure of sin and judgment fills up. When the time is up, God's patience will end and judgment will fall. I am so thankful to the Lord that He chose me to save my miserable soul as He did it to yours.

C. THE GLORY OF GOD BEFORE US

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 But as for us, brothers, after we were forced to leave you for a short time (in person, not in heart), we greatly desired and made every effort to return and see you face to face. 18 So we wanted to come to you--even I, Paul, time and again--but Satan hindered us. 19 For who is our hope, or joy, or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory and joy!

Paul was not ashamed to state his affection for the Thessalonian Christians since he was their spiritual mother and father. His absence was only physical. But he was still with them in heart.

Paul made every effort possible to return to them, even though Satan was hindering his effort. It was the same kind of deep desire for Paul to be with them as Jesus had to be with His disciples before His death.

The Greek word 'hinder' was originally used for breaking up a road to render it impassable. It was also used in the athletic sense of cutting in on someone during a race.

Paul was committed to fight against the roadblock any way he could. If he couldn't be there in person, his letter will go for him and teach and encourage them in his absence. Many scholars believe that 1 Thessalonians was Paul's earliest letter written as an apostle to a church. If this is the case, then Satan's roadblock got Paul started on writing letters to the churches. When Satan saw the great work God did through these letters, I am sure that he regretted that he ever hindered Paul at all.

Paul eventually returned to Thessalonica and other churches in the area according to Acts 20:1-5.

Paul could have focused on his problem, self-pity and loneliness. But Paul instead lifted his eyes toward heaven and reveled in the hope of Christ's glorious coming. He imagined himself standing in God's presence, side by side with these spiritual children whom he had watched being born into God's family. They were his pride and joy. Nothing could diminish his hopeful anticipation of seeing them again, if not in this life, then in the one to come.

My greatest desire for our church is not being the senior pastor of the biggest church in America. Who wants that headache? Of course, I would love to see our fellowship grow if that is what the Lord wants. But I'd like to see our congregation loving Jesus our Savior deeply, becoming spiritually mature servants of God through the study of God's Word and spreading His Word to non-believers around them with unquenchable excitement.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) To Christians, heaven should not be the final goal, but a motivation to live godly living to bring glory to the Father in heaven, to introduce Jesus as the Savior and Lord to the lost.

2) The joy of greeting believers in heaven also brings with it a solemn warning: we will lose joy if we go to heaven empty-handed.

The Christian who has not sincerely tried to win others to Christ will not experience this glory and joy when Jesus Christ returns. It is not enough to "wait for His Son". We must also witness for God and work for His Son, so that when we get to heaven, we will have trophies to present for His glory. There is a special joy and reward for the soul winner.