

## 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12, pt. 1

January 10, 2010

I think we have all heard of the Pony Express, haven't we?<sup>1</sup>

The Pony Express was a private company that carried mail through a series of horseback riders

- It ran from St. Joseph, Missouri (on the eastern end) to Sacramento, California (on the western end)

The cost for sending a letter through the Pony Express was \$2.50 per ounce (\$40/pound)

- If the weather and the horses were acceptable, the letter would complete the 2,000 journey in 10 days

It may surprise you that the Pony Express was only in operation for a short amount of time

- April 3, 1860 to November 18, 1861
- 17 months in all

The invention of the telegraph rendered the Pony Express too costly and time-consuming

Being a rider for the Pony Express was a tough job

- The expectation was to ride between 75-100 miles per day
- The riders would change horses every 15-25 miles

Other than the mail, the only baggage that was brought along was flour, cornmeal, and bacon

- In case of danger, very few medical supplies were at their disposal
- The light weight allowed the horse not to be slowed down

Who would dare sign up for such a task as this?

- An 1860 San Francisco newspaper ran this ad for the Pony Express, "Wanted. Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders willing to risk [death] daily. Orphans preferred."

Those were the honest facts of serving in the Pony Express

- But you know that they *never* had a shortage of riders

We listen to that story of the Pony Express and we marvel at the commitment of those riders who took mail from one location to the next

- They encountered horrendous weather
- They battled Indian attacks
- They dealt with personal sickness and weariness
- And so much more that we can only guess...

Yet, as I hear this story, I think of how the early Church was very similar to the Pony Express

- They had a message to take to the nations
- They were willing to risk death in order to make that message known

Today, we live in an age when many think of Christianity as a weekend religion

- It is something you think about one day out of the week
- The rest of the time, it doesn't matter how you live or what you do

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<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 109-10.

Nothing could be further from the truth

- We are going to see an example of how one particular church was suffering greatly because of their pursuit of Christ
- I am speaking of the young Thessalonian church

We have already studied the background of this church about a month ago as we looked at 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

- I want to cover this background briefly before moving on

Paul went to Thessalonica and discussed matters with the Jews in the synagogue for three Sabbaths (Acts 17:2)

- He presented the evidence that Christ was, in fact, the Messiah (17:3)

As a result of this, the Jews chased Paul down to Berea (17:10)

- But when the Jews found out that he was in Berea, they chased him all the way down to Athens (17:15)

As you can see on the map, that is a huge distance

- The Jews didn't want the influence of Paul anywhere near the city of Thessalonica

Paul eventually went down to the city of Corinth

- We believe that it was from Corinth that Paul actually penned the words of the Thessalonian epistles

During his time in Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the church was doing (1 Thess 3:2)

- After what seemed to be a long time, Timothy came back with great news
- The young church was standing strong in the faith despite being persecuted (1 Thess 3:6)

Paul is elated to hear of this truth

- The believers were growing and excelling despite the absence of Paul
- They were also growing in spite of the persecution and suffering that was coming upon them

The apostle Paul wanted so desperately to return to the city of Thessalonica and “complete what is lacking” in their faith (1 Thess 3:10)

- But so far, God had not allowed this
- Paul's perspective was that “Satan thwarted us” (1 Thess 2:18)

The young church at Thessalonica was enduring severe trials

- As young believers, they could have been susceptible to giving up
- But God was working in their lives to grant them perseverance

I believe that the Thessalonian church was like the Pony Express

- They realized that their duties would oftentimes take them into dangerous situations
- But others were depending upon them
- They had a job to perform and they were to be faithful
- They had a message to deliver!

What a contrast to much of what we see labeled as “Christianity” today

- People sitting on the sidelines as spectators instead of active participants
- People speaking of the positive benefits of being a Christian without emphasizing the hard demands and cost of following Christ
- People ready to give up at the first sign of conflict or opposition

Several months have passed since the writing of 1 Thessalonians<sup>2</sup>

- Paul is still in Corinth
- The last word he received from this young church was a positive one

But then he gets new information about this church

- Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 3:11, “*For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life*” (emphasis mine)
- We don’t know whether it was through a letter or a messenger

Still unable to return to this young church, Paul resorts to writing a second letter to this church

- In three short chapters, Paul writes to encourage and support a church that is undergoing severe trials from those outside the church

Specifically, he writes:<sup>3</sup>

- To comfort hurting believers in chapter one
- To correct false teaching about future events in chapter two
- To confront disobedience and lack of discipline in chapter three

This morning, I want us to see how Paul opens this second epistle to this young church

- This has been a bit more introduction than I normally give
- But I wanted to set the table properly so that we might capture the heart of the apostle as he writes again to this young church

Let’s read 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

A quick overview of this first chapter reveals the following

- A greeting from “*Paul and Silvanus and Timothy*” to the church at Thessalonica (1:1-2)
- An opening thanksgiving about their progress (1:3-4)
- A brief lesson on God’s future vengeance that will fall upon those who are presently persecuting this church (1:5-10)
- A prayer that the team offers for this church (1:11-12)

We will begin to look at this chapter this morning

- And will have to finish up next week

But I want us to look at how Paul interacts with this church, especially in how he begins his letter

Unlike the prayer in Colossians 1, Paul is very much familiar with this group of believers

- It was not his choice to leave them
- The Jews had driven him all the way down to Athens

Let’s look first at the thanksgiving that he offers for them

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Mayhue, *Focus on the Bible, Second Thessalonians*, 154.

<sup>3</sup> Mayhue, 154.

## I. Thanksgiving (1:3-4)

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is *only* fitting.

As we have seen in past prayers of the apostle Paul, it is very common for him to open up with a note of thanksgiving after the initial greeting

- As a matter of fact, only two (2) of the thirteen (13) Pauline epistles do not have a note of thanksgiving at the beginning
- Those two epistles are Galatians and Titus

But the predominant custom of Paul is to begin with this note of thanksgiving

- And that is exactly what we find here in 2 Thessalonians 1:3

As we have seen time and time again, the content of Paul's thanksgiving revolves around spiritual, eternal matters

- He praised God when he saw spiritual values, traits, and characteristics being lived out in the lives of His people

As you examine your own lives, for what do you most often give thanks?

- I think that most of us will find that we are very much earthly instead of eternal in what we thank God for<sup>4</sup>

Granted, earthly matters such as food, clothing, jobs, and health are all gifts from God

- But they shouldn't dominate our prayers or thanks

This particular thanksgiving is different, however

- The word that Paul uses for "**ought**" literally means an obligation
- In some cases, it can refer to a literal debt

Now let's correct one misconception that might emerge

- Their thanksgiving was not an obligation they were reluctant to give
- Rather, it was a privilege they were eager to fulfill<sup>5</sup>
- He is praying because he sees evidence of God's work in their lives and he wants to give credit to where credit is due

I know there is a balance here

- Paul saw prayer as a Divine duty and a personal responsibility to be performed for others<sup>6</sup>
- Not just an occasional event
- He prayed "**always**"

Why does Paul feel this godly obligation to give thanks?

- He gives two reasons
  - o Their faith
  - o Their love

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<sup>4</sup> D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 41.

<sup>5</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 302.

<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, 2 Thessalonians*, 307.

because your faith is greatly enlarged.

In the first epistle, Paul remarked that after being run off by the Jews, he sent Timothy “to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith” (1 Thess 3:2)

- When Timothy returned from Thessalonica, the entire team was “comforted about you through your faith” (3:7)

But Paul wanted to return to this church so that he would complete what was lacking in their faith (3:10)

- As new believers, they had further need of growth in the knowledge of God’s Word

Pastor Paul was so elated that these young believers were growing in their faith

- So he gave thanks

Throughout Scripture, “faith” can refer to two different things

- It can refer to an objective body of truth found in God’s Word
- Or it can refer to a subjective level of trust and trustworthiness in a person’s life

The faith we have here in this prayer is not a body of truth

- Instead, Paul is commending these believers for their faith that continues to increase greatly
- Of course, this is a natural by-product of God’s faithfulness in their own lives

The persecutions and suffering that they are presently enduring are not hindering their faith

- Instead they are serving to bolster and strengthen their faith

“The storms they have endured have not destroyed their faith but rather strengthened its roots”<sup>7</sup>

- Suffering and persecution have always strengthened the Church

As you look over church history, the times of greatest persecution and suffering have been purifying times for the Church

- It separates the wheat from the chaff
- It helps to distinguish those who are seriously following Christ from those who are merely attaching themselves to a name

and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater;

Not only was their faith being “greatly enlarged,” but “the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater”

- Their love to God is not in focus here

The love that Paul has in mind is the love that is being demonstrated toward one another

- Isn’t this exactly what Christ implied when He wrote, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35)?

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<sup>7</sup> Hiebert, 303.

This young church, although they were suffering greatly, was manifesting Christlike *agape* love toward one another

- Notice that Paul specifies that “**each one**” was doing this
- Not just a few
- But everyone in the church was adopting this mindset

This is an answer to his prayer in the first epistle, “**may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men**” (3:12)

Love is but one of the many “one another” passages that deal with the “Body life” of a local church

- They deal with the responsibilities of each and every believer in a local church

As if we need to be reminded of this, both “**love**” and “**faith**” are fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22)

- It is impossible for us to have these qualities apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives

The fact that these qualities were present – and increasing mightily – was strong evidence that God was at work in their lives

- That is why Paul is so adamant about giving appropriate thanks to these young believers

It is also the reason why Paul brags about them to other churches

- That is where we turn to now in verse 4

**4 therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God**

Both in their faith and love this young church was a model and example for others to follow

- Their faith was growing internally
- Their love was manifesting itself externally

In light of their progress, the church became the “talk of the town” from the missionary team

Paul, Silas, and Timothy spoke “**proudly**” of this church

- Of course, this is a pride that has its source in God
- A recognition that God has been at work in their lives

Something that is very obvious that we might otherwise skip over is the phrase, “**churches of God**”

- This is similar to Acts 20:28, “**Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood**”

Let’s keep in mind that the Church belongs to God, not to humans

- God purchased our redemption with His own blood

**for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.**

In light of their faith and love, this young church was an example to others

- Paul, Silas, and Timothy “**speak proudly**” of them toward other churches

The believers at Thessalonica would never promote themselves as a model

- But Paul and his team could
- And they did

If you turn back to 1 Thessalonians 1, Paul has written, “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup> so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (1:6-7)

- This church had become an “example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia”
- That is covering a large area!

Many times, Paul will group together the three qualities of faith, love, and hope

- We have faith and love mentioned
- But not hope

But this isn't to say that hope was not being demonstrated by these believers

- As a matter of fact, verse 4 speaks very clearly to this issue

Paul speaks of their “perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure”

- The word “hope” may not appear in this verse
- But the concept is definitely here

Hope is the Christian character that anticipates the future fulfillment of God's promises

- It looks ahead with an attitude of trust in God

This church was enduring an intense time of suffering and persecution

- Paul wanted to write and encourage them that this was being recognized by others

Trials and suffering drive us to God

- So it makes sense that their faith would grow internally
- And their love would grow externally

Sometimes we adopt the mindset that trials are some type of punishment for our sins

- Granted, there may be times when God allows us to reap what we sow
- The consequences of our actions

But trials are designed to build our faith, perseverance, and other godly qualities

- Trials also serve to reset our priorities to what is really important

Next week, we will take a look at the rest of this chapter

- God's vengeance will be discussed
- Then Paul and his team tell what they have been praying for this young church