

Message #1

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2 Thessalonians

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THE HOPE OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

FACING ADVERSITY

2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-12

I.

On this Independence Day weekend we Christians can be especially appreciative of the freedoms and prosperity that we enjoy from living in this country. We can also have a certain pride--- or at least recognition--- that our religious tradition has contributed significantly to the success of our nation.

Alexis de Tocqueville (PROJECTOR ON--- ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE) was a French historian and government official. He studied both the French Revolution and the American Revolution and recognized that the American Revolution was much more successful. In 1831 he undertook a tour of the United States to learn how the American brand of democracy was faring. In 1835 and 1840 he published a two part book entitled *Democracy in America*. (DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA) In it he noticed the significant contribution that Christians and churches had made to the founding and early success of our republic.

In his book he wrote, "**Upon my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more I perceived the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things. In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.**" A bit later he added, "**Religion in America... must be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country...**" De Tocqueville did not use the term, but he was describing the impact that healthy churches and a vibrant Christianity made upon the founding and early operation of our country. (PROJECTOR OFF)

All of the opinion polls show that the vast majority of Americans today believe that our country is headed in the wrong direction. As Christians we can recognize that much of the reason for this is that our culture has turned away from the values and the spiritual roots that have made our country great. What we need more than ever is healthy churches which can have a part in stopping this moral and spiritual decline.

We have finished our study of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. We have seen that the church that Paul and his friends Silas and Timothy established in Thessalonica (PROJECTOR ON--- THESSALONICA MAP 2) in what we know today as Greece was a healthy church. Although the Christian missionaries were there only for a short time before they were forced out by the local officials, the church did well. Paul commended them for their faith and love and hope.

Paul was still in Corinth (THESSALONICA CORINTH MAP), from which he wrote this first letter, when he received some kind of update about how the Christians were doing in Thessalonica. The fact that Paul speaks about being with Silas and Timothy suggests that he was still in Corinth and that this was less than a year later when he wrote 2 Thessalonians. It seems that adversity for the believers in Thessalonica had increased, especially adversity of the persecution kind. Paul in this second letter continues to encourage the Christians there to pursue faith and love and hope, but he especially focuses in this short little book upon the need for hope.

Many of us deal with adversity in a regular way. Just this last week we had three deaths of people who have had ties with members of our congregation. So we all need hope, not just wishful thinking, but hope that is based upon the sure promises of God.

II.

In vv. 1-4 of #1 in 2 Thessalonians the apostle says that **THE HEALTHY CHURCH FACING ADVERSITY NEEDS ENCOURAGEMENT**. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE HEALTHY CHURCH FACING...) Paul writes in vv. 1 & 2, "**Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**"

This introductory greeting is almost identical to the greeting in 1 Thessalonians. The same two missionaries are indicated as being present with Paul. Grace and peace are again mentioned.

In v. 3 he continues, "**We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly...**" Faith is the first of the virtues that Paul identified in his first letter as being essential to a healthy church. In v. 3 (1 THESSALONIANS 1:3) of his first letter Paul spoke of "**...remembering before our God and Father your work of faith...**" Four verses later he said that in combination with two other virtues the Thessalonian church was an example, or a model, to other churches.

Paul acknowledged that the Christians there were going through especially difficult times. So in v. 10 of #3 (1 THESSALONIANS 3:10) he wrote, "**...we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you**

face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?" It would appear that this earlier prayer has been answered. For Paul says now that their faith is growing abundantly. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 3 of our passage in 2 Thessalonians Paul also writes, **"We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing."** Paul was describing love for other people, especially for fellow believers. This is the second virtue that Paul identified in 1 Thessalonians as being essential to a healthy church.

Thus he also said in v. 3 of the first chapter in the first letter (1 THESSALONIANS 1:3), **"...remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love..."** Paul had also prayed that this virtue would be further developed among the Thessalonian Christians. In v. 12 of #3 (1 THESSALONIANS 3:12) he wrote, **"...and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you..."** The verb used for the increasing love in v. 3 of our text in 2 Thessalonians was used by the Greeks to describe a flood or a fire that consumed everything in its path. So it would seem that Paul's initial prayer for increased love among the Thessalonians was also being answered. This healthy church is continuing to be healthy. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This faith is growing in spite of a considerable challenge that this young church faces. For in v. 4 we read, **"Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring."** Paul is not specific about these afflictions that involve persecution. But we know from the Book of Acts that when Paul was at Thessalonica that he spoke first in the synagogue. After three weeks he and his companions were forced out of the synagogue. The Jews who opposed Paul and his message got some of the Gentiles worked up about the Christian missionaries and started a riot. They also appealed to the local officials, who forced them out of the city. So there may have been some kind of local government persecution of the Christians. Probably there was some degree of family ostracism. Perhaps some Christians lost their jobs. Maybe some were imprisoned. Maybe even worse things happened.

So the faith and love of the Thessalonian Christians was challenged and tested. But this is also how faith and love grow. For it is only in the face of adversity that our faith is stretched and that we have an opportunity to love one another in a deeper way.

Paul in v. 4 of our text connects steadfastness with faith. The original Greek word for "steadfastness" literally means "to remain under." The steadfast person remains under the load that he or she carries. We naturally tend to what that load removed. We want persecution to end. We want the cancer to be gone, our situation of unemployment to be resolved, the difficult person in our life to go away and our financial difficulty to disappear. Yet these are the things that God uses to develop our faith and love. God often removes these loads from us. But they are replaced by other loads. For the Lord uses adversity to develop us, to learn to trust Him in new areas of our lives.

In the face of adversity and persecution the Thessalonian Christians are doing well. Paul boasts about them to other churches. Is it because they have become a megachurch? No. Is it because they have a big budget? No. It is because they are healthy church which is handling adversity well. Paul knew that the Thessalonian church was not perfect. He is going to address problems that need to be addressed. But he understood that the first thing that churches and individuals faced with adversity need is encouragement. Adversity is to be expected in the Christian life. But success is possible if faith and love are maintained in the face of adversity. Encouragement is needed to cultivate that faith and love.

Bible commentator William Barclay writes (*Letter to the Hebrews*), **"One of the highest of human duties is the duty of encouragement. It is easy to laugh at men's ideals; it is easy to pour cold water on their enthusiasm; it is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept a man on his feet. Blessed is the man who speaks such a word."**

Johnny Carson (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHNNY CARSON) has the reputation for being one of the greatest comedians of my generation. His agent and lawyer Henry Bushkin wrote in his memoir (*New York Post*, 11/2/2008), **"Many great comedians were miserable human beings... Johnny suffered a great many demons brought about by what I call a toxic sort of mother. His mother couldn't give a compliment. He's the biggest star in the world and she couldn't even acknowledge it."**

He went on to say that Johnny was a depressed man who cheated on his wives. He refused to visit his son when he was committed to a mental hospital for several months. His agent traced much of the problem with his personality to a mother who would not encourage her son. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Churches and Christians need encouragement. The pastors in our community often express frustration that they don't experience greater growth in numbers in our congregations. That was not the focus of concern for Paul in regard to the church at Thessalonica. His primary concern was church health, as measured by faith and love, especially in the face of adversity. How does a church do with older volunteers in pulling off a VBS program in the hottest time of the year? Perhaps that is a better measure of church health. Perhaps success in doing something like that is the kind of encouragement that we need.

III.

In vv. 5-10 we find that THE HEALTHY CHURCH FACING ADVERSITY NEEDS HOPE FROM ASSURANCE OF JUSTICE. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE HEALTHY CHURCH FACING...) Paul writes in v. 5, **"This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering..."** The third virtue that Paul identified in his first letter as being essential to a

healthy church is hope. It will be the focus of his attention in most of the rest of this letter. In the face of adversity churches need hope.

In the face of adversity the natural question posed by the people of God is "Why?" The initial answer by Paul may not make sense: "This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God." But this is the way of the cross. Jesus told His followers to take up their cross and follow Him. Jesus Himself achieved His greatest victory by dying on a cross.

In 1 Peter #4 v. 12 & 13 (1 PETER 4:12) the Apostle Peter writes, "**Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.** (1 PETER 4:13) **But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.**" This is the same kind of point that Paul seems to be making.

A few verses later (1 PETER 4:17) Peter adds, "**For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?**" We may be tried by adversity. But we can be assured when adversity is caused by people who want to do us in because of our Christian faith that judgment is coming.

When Paul brought the gospel to a town in Asia Minor called Lystra, some Jews cornered him and stoned him and left him for dead. He survived and even returned to the town and encouraged the new Christians there. According to Acts #14 v. 22 (ACTS 14:22) he was saying that "**through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.**"

In our passage sufferings are connected with the kingdom of God. Our qualification for entrance into that kingdom is based entirely upon grace through faith in the crucified Jesus. But our perseverance in the face of adversity demonstrates our worthiness to the world and even to the angels to participate in that kingdom. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul continues in our passage in v. 6: "**...since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you...**" Judgment for the bad guys is coming. The justice of God requires it.

Verse 7: "**...and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels...**" Relief for some Christians comes when they die. For some it comes when their persecutors are removed. For some it will come when the rapture of the church occurs. For those who become Christians during the tribulation it will come when Christ returns.

Persecutors will get their judgment when Christ returns. God's people will be vindicated, and the persecutors will be punished. Paul seems to have the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah in mind. For in #66 v. 13 of his book (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAIAH 66:13) he writes, "**As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.**" There is the relief for God's people. Two verses later he adds (ISAIAH 66:15), "**For behold the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.**"

Notice how Paul begins v. 8 in our passage: "**...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.**" (PROJECTOR OFF) There are some who think that Paul is referring to two groups of unbelievers, perhaps Gentiles who did not know the God of the Bible and Jews who have been exposed to Jesus, but who have rejected Him. Or perhaps it is people who have never heard about the God of the Bible and those who have had some exposure to Christianity but have rejected the story. These are possible explanations. I am inclined to think that these are simply two ways of describing unbelievers. Not obeying the gospel is simply another way of saying that people refuse to accept the simple offer of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus.

The Apostle John had a vision of this revelation of Jesus in His return to earth in the Book of Revelation. Beginning in v. 11 of #19 he wrote, "**Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.** (REVELATION 19:12) **His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself.** (REVELATION 19:13) **He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.** (REVELATION 19:14) **And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses.** (REVELATION 19:15) **From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.**" Here is the revelation of Jesus Christ that Paul seems to be referencing in our passage.

Of those who do not know God, Paul says in v. 9 of our passage (PROJECTOR OFF), "**They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...**" The objects of this punishment are not just the Hitlers and Stalins and Maos of the world. They are all who do not trust in Jesus. That is why the issues are so serious in regard to our decisions about Jesus. The eternal destinies of people are at stake. It is not even that unbelievers will be burned up at some point. Paul says that their torment continues for ever and ever.

Jesus Himself spoke of this punishing judgment in connection with His return to earth. In Matthew #25 v. 31 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 25:31) He is recorded as saying, "**When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.**" Ten verses later He adds (MATTHEW 25:41), "**Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'**"

Verse 10 back in our passage describes the other side of the coin, the destiny of the saved (PROJECTOR OFF): **"...when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed."** For Christians this Second Coming will be glorious. It will be far better than anything that we have ever experienced in this life. Jesus will show up in His resurrected and glorified body. He will be seen for who He truly is, not as the suffering Messiah who died on the cross, but as the wonderful Son of God in all His majesty and glory. He will come as the conquering King who will display His power and His judgment against His enemies. Because of faith in Him, because the testimony of the Bible was believed by us, we will participate in this wonderful event.

The adversity that most of us Christians face in the United States and most of the rest of the Western world pales in comparison with the persecution and adversity faced by our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Middle East and other parts of the world. But it pains most of us to see how God's laws have been flouted in recent years in our culture. There is a cost to be paid for a society which turns against the true God and His Son and His principles. Sin always cries out for justice. The accomplishment of full justice lies in the future. But occasionally we see glimpses of it on this side of eternity.

David Sylvester (PROJECTOR ON--- DAVID SYLVESTER) was a member of Parliament in the UK from Oxfordshire. He became incensed several years ago when his own Conservative Party came out for same-sex marriage. He wrote letters to newspapers and voiced his opinion in Parliament. In a more recent letter he said, **"I wrote to [Prime Minister] David Cameron in April 2014 to warn him that disasters would accompany the passage of his same-sex marriage bill, but he went ahead despite a 600,000-signature petition by concerned Christians and more than half of his own parliamentary party... He has arrogantly acted against the Gospel that once made Britain great."**

That law went into effect early in 2014. That winter there was a natural disaster. The Prime Minister himself described it as "the wettest winter in 250 years." There was coastal flooding and flooding of rivers in many parts of the country. Electrical power was lost, railway lines were cut and flight schedules were disrupted. Thousands of people were forced from their homes. The government estimates that the financial cost was in the neighborhood of one billion pounds. Of course many authorities blamed the disaster on global warming. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The healthy church facing adversity needs hope from assurance of justice. The Apostle Paul assures us that justice is coming. Christ's followers will be rewarded. Persecutors and unbelievers will be punished. We Christians are involved in a spiritual war. So we should expect adversity, both corporately and individually. But we can be confident that in the end justice will prevail.

IV.

In vv. 11 & 12 we are reminded that THE HEALTHY CHURCH FACING ADVERSITY NEEDS PRAYER. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE HEALTHY CHURCH FACING...) At the beginning of v. 11 Paul says, "**To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling...**" The reference is to God's choice of us, His calling us to be His children and to be part of His kingdom.

Back in 1 Thessalonians #2 v. 12 (1 THESSALONIANS 2:12) he wrote, "**...we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.**" That is the same kind of thing that Paul is praying for here. He wants us to grow in holiness, which was the theme last week in our study of the conclusion of 1 Thessalonians. Our salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus, but Paul's prayer is that we may grow in holiness to reflect the character of the one who called us. In the midst of the adversities of life we need to pray for one another. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Notice the rest of v. 11: "**To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.**" The assumption seems to be that the Thessalonians are seeking to accomplish good things for God, individually and corporately. Such it is that we plan a Vacation Bible School. We trust that this work of faith will accomplish good things for eternity in the lives of these children who came to us.

In v. 12 Paul concludes his prayer, "**...so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.**" It is not clear grammatically whether "our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" is referring to God the Father and God the Son, or only to Jesus Christ, who is also our God.

Paul sees our ultimate purpose as Christians as being to glorify the name of Jesus Christ. The "name" refers to His reputation. Our resolves for good and our works of faith should have as their purpose not our own glorification but rather the glorification of Christ.

Paul in our passage recognizes that the sovereign God puts us in situations of adversity. But the apostle wants us to be confident that we serve a God of justice. We pray for our enemies. But we also recognize that there is judgment coming for unrepentant unbelievers, especially for those who continue to oppress God's people. There is reward coming for us who serve the true God. The issue is whether we will bring glory to Jesus Christ. Regardless of the nature of our adversities and challenges we can live faithful lives and accomplish the purposes that God has for us. We can glorify Him.

To help one another to do that we need to provide encouragement for one another, we need to have a confident hope that justice is coming and we need to pray for each other.

The greatest injustice of all was the killing of the only sinless human being who ever lived. We are going to remember that sacrifice for us after we conclude the message now with prayer.