

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Introduction

We'll shortly be entering Advent, which begins four Sundays before Christmas. The *first* Sunday of Advent formally marks the beginning of the church year. It's the period in the lead up to Christmas in which we think not only of Christ's first appearing but especially of his return. The whole church year is lived in the light of the return of Jesus.

This letter, written less than 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, is filled with references to Jesus' return. It's the second of two letters from the apostle Paul to the church in Thessalonica, which he had planted during his missionary journey to Macedonia. Thessalonica was the capital city. In his *first* letter Paul expresses his joy at having received news that the Christians there were holding fast to the gospel message he had taught them. But they were facing persecution. And, if anything, that persecution was intensifying. So, Paul writes this *second* letter to explain why Christians experience such suffering and to urge them to endure it by living in the light of Christ's certain return. It reminds us that we too are waiting for Jesus to return. And it teaches us how to live while we wait.

It begins with Paul's thankfulness, which is our first heading.

Paul's thankfulness

Please look down again at verses 1 to 4.

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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 all of you have for one another is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

Paul not only thanks God for the Thessalonians; he says that it's right to do so. It's right because everything that's happening in Thessalonica is down to God. It's his doing.

Their faith is growing stronger and stronger, like a plant that grows in the garden, putting its roots down deeper and deeper, growing taller and taller. Their faith is growing and maturing. They're learning to trust God in all circumstances.

And the love between them is spreading. Like the heat from a fire that spreads through a cold room, the love they each have for one another is spreading. Everyone loves and is

loved. No one is overlooked or forgotten. And all this comes from God. It's evidence of his work in them.

I suspect that's why Paul begins the letter the way he does: **To the church of the Thessalonians in God *our* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...**

It's so personal. Not God *the* Father, as he says in the next line. But God *our* Father.

Some of us have good fathers, whose love we've cherished. Others haven't. For some, a father's love may have been absent. But whatever our experience of earthly fathers, every Christian has a Father in heaven who is perfect and entirely beyond compare. Even the best of earthly fathers is only a pale reflection of our heavenly Father. Whereas all earthly fathers fail in one way or another, our heavenly Father never does. And the evidence of his loving care of us is the faith and love that he nurtures among us. That's what makes Paul's heart sing.

And it should make our hearts sing too... because it all comes from God. He's the one who plants faith in our hearts and causes it to grow. Faith is his gift to us. If you have love for your fellow believers, it's God's love that created that in you. It didn't come from yourself. Our faith and love are *his* work in us by his Holy Spirit. And it's really important that we recognise that.

If we fail to see God's work in our lives, then we're a bit like the husband who comes home from work at the end of the day to a beautifully tidy house, with not a speck of dust in sight, clean floors, gleaming surfaces, and the smell of dinner cooking in the oven, and then says to his wife, "Hello, darling. What have you been doing today?"

And if we're blind to what God is doing in *our* lives, and in the lives of others, then we'll easily give in to complaining and ingratitude. We'll be the kind of Christians who are always grumbling about this or that which isn't the way we want it to be. But if we can see God's handiwork in the faith and love that's growing among us, in ourselves, in our friends, in the children, in those who are coming to faith and joining us, then, like Paul, our hearts will overflow with thanksgiving.

How much time do you spend in prayer to your heavenly Father, just thanking him for the faith and love that he's working in your life and in the lives of others?

Paul's heart sings with thanksgiving. And not only does he sing with thanksgiving to God, he also sings their praises to others – verse 4: **Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.**

This too is God's work. It's in knowing the love of our heavenly Father that we find the strength we need to face the trials we go through. That's how the Thessalonians were able to endure persecution. It's how persecuted Christians around the world today are able to

endure arrests and beatings and false allegations and confiscation of their property without renouncing Christ and giving up. It's through the strength that our heavenly Father's love supplies.

And that's what gives Paul confidence, which is our second heading.

Paul's confidence

Please look down again at verse 5.

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.

Paul's saying that God is using the Thessalonians' sufferings to make them worthy of his kingdom. And he's saying the fact that their faith is growing, and their love is increasing, is evidence that God knows what he's doing. His judgment is right. And so Paul's confident that on the Day of Judgement the Thessalonians will be declared to be worthy of the kingdom of God because God is at work in their sufferings *now* to *make* them worthy. He's using even their persecutions and trials to bring his people to perfection.

And that has huge implications for us. We don't suffer persecution in this country as others do elsewhere in the world or as others have throughout history. And probably because of that, our attitude to suffering for the name of Jesus is markedly different.

I tend to think of suffering for the sake of Jesus as something to be regretted and, if possible, avoided. I suspect we might all feel that way. We know the Bible calls us to be willing to suffer for the sake of Jesus. But if you're anything like me, then you probably don't want that suffering to come too close. We don't really want to suffer ridicule and disgrace and hostility for the name of Jesus. Not if we can help it. And perhaps that means we keep quiet about our faith when we're at work or talking with our friends.

Yet that's not how other believers have felt. Certainly, in the early church, it was regarded as a blessing to be counted worthy of suffering for Jesus.

Think of Peter and the other apostles, who were flogged at the orders of the Jewish Sanhedrin, yet left rejoicing that they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus.

In the generation that followed them was a man named Polycarp, who was appointed Bishop of Smyrna by the apostle John. He was arrested by the Romans for refusing to worship the emperor. And he was told that unless he denied Jesus and worshipped the Lord Caesar he would be burned at the stake. Numerous times he refused. Until eventually they did what they had threatened. He was 86 years old. The account of his death, probably from eyewitnesses, is the oldest written account of a Christian martyrdom outside the New Testament. It records how, just before they lit the fire, he prayed this prayer to God: 'O

Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your presence, I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, so that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs...’ (*The Apostolic Fathers in English, Michael W. Holmes*).

That’s an extraordinary prayer. I don’t tend to think that way. That to suffer for Christ is a blessing and a gift. Something to rejoice in and give thanks for. That’s just not how we tend to think. Yet if we’ve understood what Paul’s saying here in 2 Thessalonians, we *will* think that way. Suffering for the gospel, while persevering in our faith in Christ, is evidence that our faith is genuine. Our sufferings are an instrument in God’s hands by which he strengthens our faith and makes us worthy of his kingdom. Paradoxically, suffering on account of our faith is a means by which God guards our faith and keeps us safe for heaven. I worry that I might have to suffer for being a Christian. Those in the early church would have been worried if they *hadn’t* suffered. For them, to suffer for Christ was a blessing.

Nonetheless, in a moral universe sin must be punished. God isn’t indifferent to our sufferings. Look at verse 6.

God is just: he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

Just as Paul is confident that the Thessalonians will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God because of the sufferings they endured, he’s also confident that those who are persecuting them will one day face justice. It will happen on the day Jesus returns. Those who persecute God’s people will receive what is due to them.

But notice that persecuting the Thessalonians is not the worst thing these people have done. See how Paul describes them in verse 8. These are people who **do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus**. Those who are persecuting the Thessalonians do so because they don’t know God and have rejected the one way of salvation that God has provided. That is their fundamental problem. And take note of the loss they’ll suffer, in verse 9: **They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...**

Have you ever got home and reached into your pocket for your door key, only to find that it isn’t there? Somehow, you’ve managed to leave home without taking a key with you. And with a growing sense of frustration and helplessness, you realise that you’re shut out of the

one place you want to be. You can't get in. One day, that's how it will feel for those who do not know God and have rejected the gospel of his Son. They will be shut out from his presence forever. They'll be shut out from the one place they know they should be. And at that moment, they'll realise that they've lost everything.

How we respond to Jesus in this life matters more than anything in the world. It will determine how we experience eternity in the life to come. Hear how Polycarp responded, when the Roman official threatened him with death by burning. He said this: 'You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly.'

One day, justice will be done. All who reject the apostles' message about Jesus and refuse to receive him as their Saviour and King will suffer permanent loss. They will be shut out from his presence forever. It's what every one of us deserves by nature. It's a terrible prospect. No wonder Jesus told his disciples; '**Pray for those who persecute you...**' (Mt. 5:44). But the good news of the gospel is that those who believe the apostles' message about Jesus, and embrace him as their Saviour and King, will share his glory when he returns.

Verse 10. **...on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.**

That's what makes the suffering worth it. Because one day we'll be with Jesus forever, along with all his people. On that day, we'll be lost in wonder. His glory will surpass anything we have ever known or imagined. And amazingly, we will be united with him in his glory.

The news is full of headlines at the moment about Storm Bert. It's battering the whole country. You might have battled the wind as you came to church this morning. We can hear it. Perhaps last night it kept you awake. But we can have confidence because the weather forecasters assure us that it'll pass. The Thessalonians are in the middle of a storm as Paul writes. They're being battered by relentless persecutions. But Paul's giving them the long-range weather forecast. He's assuring them that one day the storms will end, and the weather will be significantly better.

And that's why Paul prays as he does, which is our final heading: Paul's prayer.

Paul's prayer

Please look down at verse 11.

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this 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.

What Paul's acknowledging in this prayer is that the Christian life is wholly dependent on God. As we wait for Jesus to return, we might long to live lives that are worthy of God's calling. Our deepest desire might be to bear fruit for Christ's kingdom and bring him glory. And all of that is good and right. Our lives *can* bring glory to Jesus in any and every situation, even in our sufferings. And that should be a cause of joy. If you're a Christian, that is the chief goal of your life: to bring glory to Jesus. But none of it is possible without God.

If living a life worthy of God depended on you and me, we'd be in trouble. Thank God that it doesn't. It depends on him. Merely having the resolve to live as God wants is not enough. We need his *power* to actually do it. And that's why Paul prays. It's why *we* must pray. The extent to which you and I pray reveals the extent to which you and I recognise our dependence on God to do anything of eternal value with our lives.

We need to pray for ourselves and for each other, that when we stand before the judgement seat of Christ, by God's grace, we'll be counted worthy of his calling and hear the words, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant!'

Let's pray now.

And I'm going to pray for us using Paul's words here at the end of 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. So, let's pray.

Loving, heavenly Father, thank you for the faith and love among us that are evidence of your gracious work in us. Thank you for the faith that is proved genuine in our sufferings. Father, we long to be counted worthy of your calling. So, by your power, please bring to fruition our every desire for goodness and our every deed prompted by faith. And we pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in us, and us in him. Amen.