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2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

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English Standard Version

“Persecution that Tests”

This is the 11th sermon in the series on 1 & 2 Thessalonians entitled,
“Life for the Long Haul.”

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ 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. ⁴ 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.”

Heavenly Father, we have come to Your Word again this morning and we find that we still need to learn a lot about what it means to be faithful and loving. We know we're not as faithful or loving as we should be ... or as You want us to be. So Lord, once again open our eyes and ears to truly hear and understand and apply this Word to our lives. Use it to make us more faithful and more loving. Do this for each of us, this morning, in Jesus' name, and for His glory, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *It's the Static, Ma'am!* ¹

I think some of the best commercials being done these days are the ones by the various cell phone companies. One of my favorites was from awhile ago where various commercials showed how a poor signal caused misinformation to be passed on. In one of these commercials,

¹ The Introduction is adapted from the sermon, “Praying for the Right Things” by Rev. Brian Bill, Pontiac Bible Church, Pontiac, IL, 11/17/02.

we see a married couple trying to talk to each other without a whole lot of success. The wife has just asked her husband to bring home, “*a movie, something old.*”

However, the husband thought she said, “*Bring home a monkey with a cold.*” The camera then shows a monkey lying on the couch with a thermometer in his mouth. In his best Joe Friday imitation, a man dressed in black says, “*It’s the static, ma’am.*” After he gets done extolling the virtues of his wireless network, the wife says, “*What about the monkey?*” To which cellular man responds with something like, “*Have him rest and drink plenty of fluids.*”

Misinformation can mislead members of the church as well. That’s exactly what happened in Thessalonica. The Book of 2 Thessalonians was written just a few months after 1 Thessalonians because these Christ followers had encountered some spiritual static. As a result, the believers were bewildered. They were puzzled because of the intense persecution they were facing (this is addressed in chapter 1); many were confused about the Second Coming because of a letter they had received from someone who had forged Paul’s name (chapter 2); and a number of believers were mixed up so much that they had quit their jobs to wait for the return of Christ (chapter 3).

Each chapter contains a correction of a very common response that many of us have when faced with misinformation. We tend to guess at what was really meant. And often we’re wrong. And so as Paul, Silas and Timothy processed the information they received about these young brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, they immediately wrote another letter in an effort to correct their confusion and comfort their concerns. We can learn a few lessons from this, first ...

1. We often need multiple exposures to God’s truth before it begins to make sense.

I know that I need to hear something many times before it starts to sink in. That’s why it’s important for us to stick with the fundamentals of spiritual growth — reading the Bible, coming to worship, coming to Sunday School, praying, and plugging into a small group Bible study.

Another lesson for us that we need to realize that ...

2. It’s easy for us to get sidetracked when things are difficult.

Because these believers were undergoing trials their capacity to cling to truth was diminished. And whenever we’re facing affliction, persecution, and even a little more stress than normal, it’s easy for us to get distracted and lose focus on spiritual things. Things get tough, we’re just trying to get through the day, and we simply put all those spiritual fundamentals aside ... ironically, just when we need them the most.

A third lesson for us is knowing that ...

3. Helping others grow requires patience and realistic expectations.

We must remain committed to Christians who get confused and we’re called to be diligent when disciples get distracted. I told someone recently that the Christian life often feels like three steps forward and two steps back, but at least we’re making progress. Hang in there with those who are wayward, worried, or weak. Follow Paul’s methodology — comfort *and* correct, encourage *and* exhort, affirm *and* admonish.

And a final lesson for us is that ...

4. Spiritual growth is often accomplished through a variety of means.

Preaching and prayer were Paul’s primary means for maturing believers. But there’s one other way to accelerate growth. We don’t like to talk much about this but it’s unavoidable if we’re serious about following Christ. And that’s suffering, affliction, or persecution. Preaching, prayer, and persecution can be catalysts for Christian growth.

And it apparently that was case for this struggling young church in Thessalonica. And so Paul writes to them again. And the Apostle starts by reminding them of their ...

v. 1-2: GENUINE CONVERSION²

The introduction to this letter is very similar to the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians. Take a look at verses 1-2, *“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Once again, Paul writes as a member of a team with Silas and Timothy. The church of the Thessalonians was a church facing pervasive persecution. They needed to be reminded that they were **in** God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Though Paul frequently speaks of believers as being in Christ, only here and in 1st Thessalonians does he describe them as being **in God the Father**. It is, however, an appropriate reminder of God the Father’s care for a church undergoing severe persecution. No matter what was happening, they weren’t alone. Grace and peace were available to them.

So while he’s ministering in pagan Corinth, a city of merchants, priests, rabbis, slaves, prostitutes, seamen and noblemen and women, the Apostle Paul begins his second letter to the Thessalonians. He tells them that they are the recipients of God's call. In Acts we’re told who these people are, **Acts 17:4**, *“And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”*

They were called by the Father out of the kingdom of darkness and placed into the Kingdom of His Son. The apostle speaks of them in **1 Thessalonians 1:9-10**, *“For they themselves report ... how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”*

Spiritually speaking, these Christians were the recipients of God's grace. Paul reminds them that his own salvation, together with theirs, was a direct result of that grace. Grace is God's divine favor expressed toward men and women who were living in rebellion against Him and who were under His wrath. But then, in one of the great verses of the Bible, we read, **Ephesians 2:4-5**, *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved...”*

Also, the Thessalonians were the recipients of God's peace. They had come by faith to Jesus Christ, and part of God's favor to them was His peace. As Paul would write later in **Romans 5:1**, *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Now the apostle turns his attention from the gifts God had bestowed upon the Thessalonians to share with them his thankfulness to God for what Christ is doing in their life. In 1 Thessalonians Paul gratefully remembered that their faith, love and hope were very **productive**. He wrote, **1 Thessalonians 1:3**, *“remembering before our God and Father your*

² The Exposition of the text is adapted from Bill; *The Gospel & The End of Time: The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. John R. W. Stott, pages 142-145; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. John MacArthur, pages 221-230; *Let's Study 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. Andrew Young, pages 119-127; the sermon *Living . . . In Light of His Coming* by Rev. Ron Ritchie, Peninsula Bible Church. Palo Alto, CA, 6/22/86; *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and his Prayers* by Dr. D. A. Carson, pages 39-44.

work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Now, however, he emphasizes rather that these qualities aren't only productive, but **progressive**. He starts by mentioning their ...

v. 3: GROWING FAITH

“We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly...”

Clearly, thanksgiving is a fundamental component of the mental framework that largely controls Paul's prayer life. But for what does Paul offer thanks?

Well ... for what do we commonly give thanks? We say grace at meals, thanking God for our food; we give thanks when we receive material blessings — when the mortgage we've applied for comes through, or when we first turn on the ignition in a car we've just purchased. We may sigh a prayer of sweaty thanks after a near miss on the highway; we may utter a prayer of sincere and fervent thanks when we recover from serious illness. We may actually offer brief thanksgiving when we hear that someone we know has recently made a commitment to Christ.

But by and large, our thanksgiving seems to be tied rather tightly to our material well-being and comfort. The unvarnished truth is that what we most **frequently** give thanks for **betrays** what we **value** most highly. If a large percentage of our thanksgiving is for material prosperity, it's because we disproportionately value material prosperity.

That's why, when we first turn to Paul's thanksgivings, they may startle us; they may even seem alien, for they don't focus on what many of us habitually cherish. Paul gives thanks for **signs of grace** among these Christians.

And he starts by saying, *“We ought always to give thanks to God for you.”* The word *“ought always”* means “to be under obligation.” He had no choice **but** to give thanks because God's work was so **obvious** in their lives. Paul was positive, not negative about these believers. Instead of focusing on what was wrong with them, he “caught them being good.”

That's probably a good practice for us to follow.

Now, all along, the faith of the Thessalonians has been one of the Apostle's major concerns. Previously he wrote, **1 Thessalonians 3:2, 5, 10**, *“... we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ...⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. ...¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?”*

So this issue of having faith is a big deal to the Apostle Paul. Wanting to know if they were established and growing in the faith was one of the driving motivations behind the writing of these letters.

Faith in this context means a confidence in the reality of a personal God who is revealed in His Son Jesus Christ. The Thessalonians had received the gift of faith from God. In **Hebrews 11:1**, we read, *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*

The faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was simply their reliance upon a God who revealed Himself and whom they knew to be trustworthy. Such reliance enabled them to treat the future as present, the invisible as visible. Faith doesn't end at the moment of salvation, but continues to grow as one begins to trust God for the joys and temptations of daily living. Jesus demonstrated faith by trusting His Father for every word, action and direction of His life. And

Jesus was, as **Hebrews 12:2** says, “*the founder and perfecter of our faith.*”

Faith not only saves us, but gives us confidence in God for all that life throws our way. Again Hebrews says, **Hebrews 11:6**, “*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.*”

So the believer not only trusts God for his salvation, and leans upon God's power to cope with present realities, his heart is also filled with confidence that Jesus is coming again. According to Paul, that's the kind of faith the Thessalonians were exhibiting: “*your faith is growing abundantly,*” he said of them. But that's not all he said. He also thanked God for their

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v. 3: **INCREASING LOVE** ³

“*We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because ... the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.*”

This is a direct answer to Paul's prayer back in 1st Thessalonians, where he said, **1 Thessalonians 3:12**, “*and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.*”

The word Paul uses here for “*increasing*” means “superabundantly” and paints the picture of a river overflowing its banks. Most of us have some boundaries in our minds of how far we will go in loving someone. Limitless love is love that goes beyond those barriers.

It is worth probing this line of thought a little further. A close-knit society with shared ideals and goals frequently finds it relatively easy to foster love, tolerance, and cohesion. Whether we think of the local rock-climbing club, the football team, or a socially cohesive local church, a certain amount of fraternal depth is common enough. Of course, such groups often run into terrible division over power politics or a disruptive member or a nasty bit of nepotism, but some measure of transparent love is not all that unusual in such groups.

Ideally the church is different. It's not supposed to be a socially cohesive group where everyone is just like everyone else. It's made up of people who are as varied as can be: rich and poor, learned and unlearned, practical and impractical, sophisticated and unsophisticated, disciplined and flighty, intense and carefree, extrovert and introvert — **and everything in between**. The **ONLY** thing that holds such people together is their shared allegiance to Jesus Christ, their devotion to **Him**, stemming from **His** indescribable love for them.

That is why it's so pathetic when a local church becomes a boiling cauldron of resentment and bitterness. This pitiful state of affairs may erupt simply because there's very little at the social, economic, temperamental, educational, or other levels to hold people together. Therefore, when Christians lose sight of their first **and primary allegiance**, which is Jesus ... then they'll squabble. When social or racial or economic or temperamental uniformity seems more important than basking in the love of God in Christ Jesus, then nothing less than **idolatry** has reared its blasphemous head. When declarations of profound love for Jesus Christ are not mirrored by love for others who profess to love that same Jesus Christ, we may legitimately ask how seriously we should take these declarations.

But we may put this positively. When Christians **do grow** in their love for each other, for no other reason than because they're loved by Jesus Christ and love Him in return, that growing love is **an infallible sign of grace in their lives**. Most emphatically is this particular display of

³ Henri Nouwen quote is from his book, *The Way of the Heart*, page 35.

love a signal demonstration of grace: it says “*the love of every one*” of the Thessalonian believers has been caught up in it, not some small, spiritual elite. This is the stuff of revival, and Paul is grateful.

And so here Paul is talking about this kind of sacrificial love, love that always recognizes another's worth, and holds him in high esteem. This is the kind of love that is filled with **good will** in thought and deed, whether directed toward believers or non-believers. It wants to do **the best** for the other person. It doesn't always follow our natural inclinations, nor is it always directed toward those who are easy to love. Rather, it's to be expressed by the power of God within us towards all men for their good.

The Dutch Catholic theologian and writer Henri Nouwen once wrote, ““In order to be of service to others we have to **die** to them; that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value with the yardstick of others. To **die** to our neighbors means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus to become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never exist with judgment because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other. ... When we notice things that are wrong with folks does this lead to compassion and helping, or to judging and distance?”

We don't often talk about love in terms of dying to others, but it does have a certain Biblical ring to it. After all, it was Jesus who said, **John 15:12-14**, “*This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*”¹³ *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*¹⁴ *You are My friends if you do what I command you.*”

And it was the Apostle John who wrote, **1 John 3:16-18**, “*By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.*”¹⁷ *But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?*¹⁸ *Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*”

This is the kind of love Paul is talking about. And so Paul's thanked God for their growing faith, their increasing love, and last, but not least, their ...

v. 4: **ENDURING FAITHFULNESS**⁴

“*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.*”

When Paul says they “*we ourselves boast about you,*” this doesn't mean that Paul's saying, “Hey, see what a great church I've planted!” What **he is saying** is certainly not boasting of that order, for that would be boasting about him, not boasting about them. Rather, he's saying something like this, “Have you noticed how powerfully the grace of God is operating in the lives of the Thessalonian believers? The way they withstand the pressures of persecution and of assorted trials is truly remarkable, a compelling testimony to the grace of God. Fortified by their growing faith and love, they just press on and on. What an example! What an encouragement! What an incentive for the rest of us!”

Thus, his boasting is nothing other than more praise and thanksgiving to God, uttered in the presence of other churches. Paul and his fellow-workers were proud of the Thessalonians' determination to bear up courageously, as well as maintain their trust in their God and Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of their persecutions and afflictions.

⁴ A small part of this section is adapted from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* and the sermon “*God Sanctifies His People*” by Dr. John Piper, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, April 12, 1992, desiringGod.org

The religious, civil, and social pressure was unrelenting: Jews against Jewish Christians, Gentile idol worshipers against new converts to a "new" God, husbands and wives against their Christian mates. How Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount would have applied to them, **Matthew 5:10-12**, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"¹¹ "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*"¹² "*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"

The Thessalonians were courageously enduring in the face of their enemies. They were, in Paul's words, **2 Corinthians 4:8-10**, "... *afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;*"⁹ *persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;*"¹⁰ *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*"

The Thessalonians did not react to discomfort the way many Christians do, by running away from their uncomfortable situation. Instead they viewed their circumstances as God's will and determined to hold up under the pressure. However, their attitude was not to endure by the force of their own strength. They had **faith** in God; they looked **to Him** for grace sufficient to bear up under their burdens and they accepted their circumstances as conditions which He was allowing for His glory. They were patiently **enduring...** Theirs was not a fatalistic, passive endurance, but endurance found in hearts that were filled with the blessed hope of the coming of Christ in power, glory and justice.

And so Paul is amazed by faith he found in this church, he's amazed by the love he found in this church, and he's amazed by the endurance he found in this church. And because of all that ... he thanks God for this church.

CONCLUSION: Not Ready to Leave

Over the last couple of weeks I've been contacted three times by a church in Alabama that wanted me to candidate to be their Senior Pastor. No, before you either panic or rejoice, you need to know that I declined the opportunity. And it was a pretty good opportunity. Unbeknownst to me, I'd been recommended by two prominent leaders in the PCA ... and it feels good to have folks recommend you. And to be honest, it felt good to be asked. This is a large 1,700 member church that has a substantial outreach in that community ... and it would be an exciting challenge to take on.

Of course, it's possible I was recommended for the job because the people giving the recommendations hated that church and thought I'd wreck it in short order. One never knows.

And, to be honest, its location didn't excite me a whole lot.

But there were three main reasons I declined their offer to candidate.

First, I thought, you know, perhaps ... **God** might have something to say about this. Just a thought. Actually, God didn't speak to me at all about it, which means that A) I'm a bad listener ... or B) God wasn't calling me to do anything other than what I'm doing right now. And so I chose B.

And I chose B because I'm a big believer that once God calls you somewhere, you shouldn't leave until God calls you somewhere else. And at no time did I sense that God was doing that. And until He does, or you fire me, I'm not going anywhere.

Second, there's a really good group of supportive elders here who are very wise ... most of the time. Sometimes they're flat out dumb but it's pretty rare. **Anyways** ... I figured it would take 3 – 5 years to build up a group of elders that are as good as the ones I've got here. And that

challenge doesn't excite me.

And third, and this is the part that concerns you ... we have already gone through a lot together in the last 12+ years. Going back to the church almost running out of money our first summer here. Making the move from Ashburn Elementary here to Harper Park and wondering if we were ever going to come close to filling up this auditorium. We went through a challenging season without a worship leader. One year we only had enough money to hire a youth pastor or buy an office ... and so we did both. When the high-tech bubble burst we had seven families go unemployed in two months ... and that was difficult.

We've seen good friends come ... and good friends go ... and that's hard too. We've watched the Hefner and Zunino clans arrive ... and arrive ... and arrive. They've helped us learn how to love ... and showed us the power of the Gospel to change lives. And they're still arriving.

We've been through Todd's heart surgery and Phoebe's cancer ... and the only thing we could do was pray. And it turned out that prayer was just what was needed. And so when those crises come again ... and they will ... we've learned what we need to do. Time and time again, the elders have prayed over people ... and we've watched them get better.

We lived together through marriage issues, parenting issues, job issues, financial issues, and many other issues. All of us ... together. The two-year-olds in the nursery when I arrived are now teenagers entering high school. And it's just a guess on my part, but I think over the next ten years there's going to be a lot of weddings. We've gone from a time when the oldest person in the church was in their late 40's ... to when the oldest person in the church is ... well, older than that.

We've sent groups out on six mission trips ... Cherokee, NC; Bay St. Louis, MS (twice); New Orleans, France, and there's some folks here newly acquainted with Iowa. And we've sent Ann Marie and Marcy everywhere.

I've preached here 516 times ... not that anyone's counting ... and I'm amazed that you remember each and every one. Which means we've been through Romans, the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, Hebrews, Nehemiah, the Seven Deadly Sins, 1 Peter, Galatians, Ecclesiastes, 2 Corinthians, Ruth, The Gospel of Luke (which went from Dec. of 2000 to May of 2003), the Minor Prophets, Acts, selected Psalms, Romans again, Old Testament Prayers, Song of Songs, 2nd Timothy, The Gospel of John, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, New Testament Prayers, Daniel, 1 & 2 Thessalonians now, and soon ... Revelation.

And there's lots more Bible to go.

But more than anything, "*your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.*" And so the bottom line is ... I'm staying here ... **because of you**. And I'm staying here because of your **faith**. And I'm staying here because of your **love**. And I'm staying here because I just want to see how it's all going to turn out.

And so I'm not ready to leave.

And I hope you're not either.

Think about that. You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the church in Thessalonica. Thank You for their faithfulness in the face of affliction. Thank You that they received and accepted the Word of God and so they

loved each other. May we do the same. We ask that You would do this within us ... in the Name of Your Son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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1 Thessalonians 2:13, 19-20

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ... For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.”