

## Growing Pains

### 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

“For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. <sup>14</sup>For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God, which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, <sup>15</sup> who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are <sup>1a</sup>contrary to all men, <sup>16</sup>forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. <sup>17</sup>But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. <sup>18</sup>Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. <sup>19</sup>For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? <sup>20</sup>For you are our glory and joy.”

**As we come to the last part of 1 Thessalonians 2, we're moving into the warmest section of any of Paul's writings about the love and affection he felt for his fellow Christ followers. He begins by establishing that the basis for those relationships is the Word of God. The Bible is God's hammer that sometimes gently taps on us and other times it pounds away at our stubborn pride. This passage gives us 5 facets of Christian growth, a few of which have some pain associated with them.**

**The first facet is the *Word of God within you.* Look at verse 13, “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you**

who believe.” The word translated “received” literally means, “to be taken up with the hand.” **The idea here is that the Word of God is to be taken by us.** The word translated “accepted” goes a step further. It means, “to welcome eagerly.” **When we receive the Word of God, we are saying that we acknowledge its authority.** When we accept it, we are allowing it into our hearts so that we can be changed by it. This is the same idea that David expressed in Psalm 119:11, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.”

**If the Bible is the Word of God, then we must bow in submission to it.** We should never say, “I know what the Bible says, but...” If we know what the Bible says, then there’s no “but.” We should say, “I know what the Bible says, period.”

**Child of God, when the Bible makes a statement, it is not up for a vote.** If you’re waiting for God to tell you something different than what’s in the Bible you’ll be waiting a long time.

Paul takes this one step further in the last phrase of verse 13, “...which is at work in you who believe.” **The power of the Word of God is tied to a believing heart.** That is why Paul says in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

**The Gospel is the power of God!** In fact, Hebrews 4:12 puts it this way, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” **Most of us in this service tonight can testify to the fact that God has used His living and active Word to speak directly to our needs.** When God’s Word is in us, our attitudes and beliefs change.

**The second facet of spiritual growth is we have an enemy.** To the extent we experience the power of God’s Word within us, we will

**collide with a world that rejects it.** We could put it this way: If you believe the Bible, you're going to have some enemies. This truth is seen in verse 14, “For you, brothers, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews.”

**But in spite of the persecutions, the Thessalonians did not falter.** **They stood strong in the face of persecution.** The truth is, every generation of Christians has known persecution for their faith, and today is not different. Paul put it this way in Philippians 1:29, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” 1 Timothy 3:12 is even stronger, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

In verses 15-16, we read some of the most vivid language in the entire New Testament about those who killed Christ, “Who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.” **It’s important to see Paul’s response to these truths.**

**As hurt as Paul was by the treatment he received from unbelieving Jews, he had a tender love for his people.** **After all, he was Jewish himself, and so was Jesus.** Listen to his words in Romans 9:2-3, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.” His heart’s desire is made clear in Romans 10:1, “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.”

It must have broken the heart of Paul as he wrote that the sins of the Jews are being heaped up “to the limit.” This phrase means, “to fill to the brim,” and is the same term that Jesus used this term in his sermon against the Pharisees in Matthew 23:32, “Fill up, then, the measure of

the sin of your forefathers!” And yet, God patiently waits as His people continue to rebel against Him.

But when the time is up, God’s patience will come to an end and judgment will fall, “The wrath of God has come upon them at last.” **When Jesus returns and raptures the church, He will unleash an unprecedented time of tribulation and judgment upon those who refuse to embrace the Messiah.** The Jews and the world may continue to ignore and reject the truth of God’s Word, but there’s a limit to His patience.

**The third facet of spiritual growth is to surround yourself with fellow believers.** Look at verse 17, “But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.” As we learned in our last study, Paul dealt with the Thessalonians with the gentleness of a mother. The phrase “torn away” is a very powerful image that literally means, “When we were made orphans.” Paul had a close and intimate relationship with these new believers but now he feels like a child who has been ripped away from his parents.

**Remember that Paul had stayed in Thessalonica for only a matter of weeks, and because of intense Jewish opposition, he was run out of town.** But, he always planned to return to finish the job he started. However, because he had been delayed in his return, his opponents had begun to slander his character. **Isn’t that just like human nature?** When people don’t meet our expectations we grip and complain. Some of the new believers were beginning to question his motives, “If he loved us why did he leave us?” they asked, “And why doesn’t he come back to see us again?”

**Even though Paul was not able to go back, he never really left them in his thoughts.** He thought about them all the time. And his longing for them was “intense.” **For Paul and his team, the Christian faith must be centered on a passionate all-consuming relationship**

**with Christ; but it must not be lived in isolation.** We need each other. Jesus made it very clear, we are called to do life together.

**Much of what the Bible teaches about the Church can only be accomplished as we function in deep friendships with fellow believers.** A quick search of all the “one another” statements in the New Testament reveals that we are to:

- Love one another (John 13:34)
- Be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10)
- Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16)
- Accept one another (Romans 15:7)
- Instruct one another (Romans 15:14)
- Greet one another (Romans 16:16)
- Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)
- Bear with one another (Ephesians 4:2)
- Submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21)
- Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)
- Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Live in harmony with one another (1 Peter 3:8)
- Offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9)

**Over 100 people are involved in Life Groups here at Mountain Grove.** For those of you in a group, you have experienced the beauty of Christian community. If you're not in a Life Group, you don't know what you're missing! **Let me encourage you strongly to make every effort to get involved in this very important ministry.** Take the time to call Jeff and ask about Life Groups.

**The fourth facet of spiritual growth is to know your enemy.** Look at verse 18, “For we wanted to come to you-certainly I, Paul, did, again and again-but Satan stopped us.” Paul tried again and again to reconnect with the church at Thessalonica but it never worked out. The phrase “Satan stopped us,” is a military metaphor for an army that sets up a roadblock in order to impede the enemy. Every time Paul

tried to return to Thessalonica he ran headlong into a satanic obstruction.

**We must remember that Satan is real and that he is determined to attack Christian relationships.** 2 Corinthians 4:4 refers to the adversary as the “god of this age.” Ephesians 2:2 describes him as “the ruler of the kingdom of the air.” In John 8:44, Jesus called the devil “a murderer...and the father of lies.” 1 Peter 5:8 warns us about ignoring the reality of Satan’s destructive work, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” And, Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that, “...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

In spite of the satanic attacks that hindered Paul from returning, he had the assurance of knowing that these believers were his crown and joy, even though he couldn’t see them in person.

**The fifth facet of spiritual growth is the rewards of God before you.** Look at verses 19-20, “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.” Paul has “hope” because even though he can’t see the believers, he has confidence in them. The word “joy” pictures his own inner feelings when he will see them presented to the Lord and welcomed into His kingdom. **The “crown” refers to the wreath of leaves given to the winner of a race in the Greek games.** It’s a victor’s wreath, a gold medal, and a trophy of triumph.

**I want you to notice something. Paul’s greatest hope, his most joyful aspiration, and his crowning achievement was to see men, women and children in the presence of the Lord Jesus when He comes in His glory.** If we could ask Paul what really fired him up, if we could find out what kept him going when things were tough, his answer

would be something like this: “I will do anything I can to make sure no one is left behind when Christ returns!”

Revelation 1:7 reminds us that when Jesus comes again, many people will be filled with fear because they’ve not been saved, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.” But, Revelation 4:10-11 also teaches that believers will one day lay their crowns at the throne of Jesus, “The twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” **These crowns will be presented to believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ.** But the greatest joy will be when we are able to lay them at the feet of Jesus in recognition and honor of the price that He paid for our salvation.

**If we’re serious about growing, let’s follow these five facets that will lead us to a victory wreath.**