

## **An Encouraging Word**

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

“This letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. We are writing to the church in Thessalonica, to you who belong to God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup>May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace. <sup>3</sup>Dear brothers and sisters, we can’t help but thank God for you, because your faith is flourishing and your love for one another is growing. <sup>4</sup>We proudly tell God’s other churches about your endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering.”

**A few months after writing his first letter to them, Paul writes his second letter to the Christians at Thessalonica.**  
**Why did he find it so necessary to write this second letter?**  
**Let me give you a short list:**

- 1. The 1st letter didn’t answer all their questions.**
- 2. Verse 4 tells us their persecution had intensified.**
- 3. Chapter 2:2 tells us they had gotten a letter from someone claiming to be Paul ... but this letter wasn’t from Paul.**
- 4. Chapter 3:11 tells us that some of the Thessalonian believers had quit their jobs to wait for the Rapture.**

**But the real problem was that these Thessalonian Christians were under such unexplainable persecution, that they concluded that surely God was displeased with them.**

Have you ever felt that way? I mean, when things go wrong...or when bad things happen to you...do you feel like God is punishing you...or is displeased with you to the point that He is withholding His blessings from you? I think all of us have gone through that kind of thinking at some time in our Christian life.

That kind of thinking is called “The Principle of Retribution,” and it is at the heart of every major religion. And this kind of thinking and/or teaching says, “If you displease the gods, they will get you...floods, famines, fire, disease are the result of the wrath of the gods.” And it is amazing how many Christians have the same kind of warped idea about God.

Many preachers preach, and many Christians believe that God will reward the people who do good with prosperity...and punish those who do bad with suffering. Why is it so easy to bring this kind of thinking from heathen religions over into Christianity? It is something we have learned from childhood. In one way or another, we have been taught that good behavior earns you rewards and bad behavior earns you pain or disaster.

And because of that kind of thinking, we carry this into our Christianity. And with that kind of thinking comes the idea that suffering is a sign that God is displeased with you, and that prosperity is a sign that God is pleased with you. And so we draw the natural conclusion: If you have enough faith, God will reward you financially, physically & spiritually. And the other side of that coin is, if you don't have enough faith, that's why you're sick, poor and unsuccessful.

**I know that I preach on faith just about as much as any preacher you will ever hear preach.** But there has to be a balance in our theology when it comes to this matter of **sickness** and **healing**, **success** and **failure**, and **wealth** and **without**. The truth of the matter is that bad things do happen to good people. **Why? Because we live in a fallen world and life is not always fair.**

**The truth is the wicked do prosper and the godly do go through tough times.** And this is not a new truth. David saw it and it troubled him, as seen in Psalm 73, “Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, and their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men...Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches...When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me...Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind.” David finally got his answer, as seen in verses 16-17, “When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me - until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.”

**It was obvious to Paul that Satan was working overtime.** As the *lion*, he was seeking to devour (1 Peter 5:7–8), and as the *serpent*, he was seeking to deceive (2 Corinthians 11:3).

**It was in response to these needs that Paul wrote his second letter.** He began with their most pressing need, the persecution they were experiencing because of their faith. In these first few verses, Paul offered words of encouragements to his suffering friends.

**He begins by encouraging them to *praise the Lord.*** In verses 2-4 he says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure." After greeting his friends, Paul launched into a statement of praise to God for what God Himself had accomplished in their lives. Paul was practicing his own advice that he had given them in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything give thanks." **You cannot help but notice Paul's repeated thanksgivings in these two letters.** You see, not only does *prayer* change people and situations, but also so does *praise*.

**No doubt the Thessalonian believers did not consider themselves to be very spiritual as they suffered, but Paul detected what God was doing among them.** Of all the people in our lives, you and I are the worst one to evaluate our own lives. Many times others can see the spiritual improvement when you and I miss it completely. On the other hand, we often will miss the blaring signal that our sins are sending also.

Paul points out four things that God was doing in their lives for which he was thankful for:

**First of all, he reminds them *their faith was growing.*** In verse 3 he says, “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly...” You have heard me say before - **A faith that cannot be *tested* cannot be *trusted*.** I think one of the truths that we often fail to teach new believers is they can expect their faith to be tried, because Satan will see to it. **You see, faith, like a muscle, must be exercised to grow stronger.** What a tragedy that so many Christian fall by the way-side when they face a trial of their faith!

**Second, he reminds them *their love was abounding.*** He says this in verse 3, “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other...” In 1 Thessalonians 3:12, Paul had prayed that their love for each other would increase, and now he sees his prayers being answered.

**Suffering and heartache can make us *selfish* and filled with *self-pity*, but when *suffering* is mixed with *grace* and *faith*, it produces *love*!** Why? Because when Christians suffer, their faith reaches upward to God, and their love reaches outward to their fellow believers.

**Third, he reminds them that *their patience was increasing.*** He says in verse 4, "...so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience...” No matter

how we look at it, these Thessalonian Christians were having a hard time for the cause of Christ.

**But let me remind you of something that I have said many, many times from this pulpit – God never wastes time and He never wastes experience.** If we will put our trust in the Lord, trials will work *for* us not *against* us. That is exactly what James 1:2-4 says, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

Child of God, if we trust God and yield to Him, then trials will produce patience and maturity in our lives. If we fight and rebel against our circumstances, then we will remain immature and impatient.

**Fourth, he reminds then that their faithfulness was their testimony.** He says in verse 4, “...so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure...” The Greek word that is translated “faith” can easily be translated “faithfulness.”

**Ladies and gentlemen, we revel our faith in God by our faithfulness to Him.** These early Christians were faithful to the Lord and to one another, in spite of the troubles they endured. When a person forsakes the church at the first sign of trouble in his life, he shows his lack of faithfulness to those around him.

**Paul had every reason to praise God and give thanks for what God was doing in the lives of these young Christians.** These believers had proved to be good soldiers under massive attacks from the enemy, and this fact caused Paul to rejoice "with joy unspeakable and full of glory." He never ceased to give thanks and praise God for the faithfulness of his converts at Thessalonica.

**One of the greatest things that any pastor will ever remember about the members of his church is their faithfulness to the cause of Christ!!** You might become my greatest friend and closest companion, but it is your faithfulness to the Lord that brings joy to my life.

Let me ask you this question, **Do you see yourself in this picture that Paul has painted of those early Christians?** Is your faith growing? Is your love for one another abounding? **Is your patience increasing?** Are others encouraged because of your faithfulness?