

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

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Date: 05 May 2019

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[0 : 00] Again, the scripture text is 2 Thessalonians 1, verses 1-4, on page 1092 of the White Bibles. Please stand for the reading of God's Word.

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.

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.

Therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the inflictions that you are enduring. This is the word of the Lord.

You may be seated. Good morning. It's a joy to be together this morning. We almost wish that we were outdoors.

[1 : 08] Maybe in time we could have like a retractable roof or something. Pastor Helm sends his greetings. He is in prayer for us this morning as he is away.

He is both in the UK and in, I believe, Brussels doing training for pastors. So he covets our prayers as well as we covet his.

Let me just pray for us as we make our way. Father, we come to you this morning. And as we look outside and as we have been outside, we acknowledge that this is the day that the Lord has made and may we rejoice and be glad in it.

But may our joy and our gladness not merely come from the sun and its rays and the warmth, but may it come from the spirit of the Lord. And so, Father, would you infuse joy into us through your word this morning.

We pray these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. What makes for a good church? Or better put, what type of church would you be proud of?

[2 : 32] What kind of church would you brag about? Perhaps it's a particular program that is suitable for you and your family.

Maybe a dynamic or well-thought children's ministry. Or a robust university work. Or one that has a musical program that you're familiar with and comfortable.

Perhaps it's the facility. Aesthetically appealing, modern in architecture, well-lit, nice and up-to-date amenities. I'm aware that some of the stalls here don't, the doors don't close.

Comfortable seating, ample leg room. These are good. Good programs. Nice facilities. Possibly attractive and desirable traits.

But this is not the picture that the New Testament provides when it commends to us a church. This morning, I want to hold out that what the New Testament applauds is not a program or a facility, but a people.

[3 : 47] A particular type of people. It does not commend a place, though those may be worthwhile, but a people.

What the New Testament holds out for us is not a product, but a people. Particularly, a persevering people, of which we formed our series title in 2 Thessalonians.

And as we come to 2 Thessalonians, the Bible will commend to us a picture of people who are persevering under great difficulty. If you were here with us last week, Paul's arrival to the city of Thessalonica began with great hostility.

As the church was birthed, the city was turned upside down. There was a huge uproar, the Bible tells us, in Acts 17.

There was so much tension in the city that Paul and Silas had to leave at night, the Bible tells us, really, in fear for their very lives.

[4 : 59] The church in Thessalonica was situated in a hostile city. Its survival was definitely not guaranteed. What would be required of them to continue?

What type of people need they be? Perhaps that may be one of the contributing factors why they were recipients of two Pauline letters.

They were a church under duress. Feeble. There was an onslaught coming from all around. I have one aim this morning, and that is to hold out to you the portrait of a commendable church.

What are the characteristics of a congregation that are praiseworthy? And in order to do that this morning, there are two questions that ought to be asked and answered, and those will guide our time.

What is the church? And what is being commended? What is the church? And what is being commended? As I've already mentioned, the church is not primarily programming or some marketable product.

[6 : 09] It is not a building or a weekly event. It should be far less associated with a place or geography. If we are careful readers of the Bible, we begin to sense that as the Bible unfolds, place is superseded by people.

The Old Testament, granted, in the Old Testament you have these emphases on journeying and securing the promised land and establishing a kingdom that is out from Jerusalem.

Yes, geography is important. But as you move into the New Testament, you will find that concern for land gives way to concern for people.

As a result, the chief concern is not securing a place in the New Testament, I would argue. The chief concern in the New Testament is securing a people.

This people is the church. The church is an assembly of people who gather regularly under a shared identity. And this identity is something that is not achieved or obtained, but gifted.

[7 : 18] And allow me to unfold this just from verses 1 and 2. The church is comprised of those who call God Father.

Who call God Father. You see the doubly repeated phrase in both verse 1 and 2. It's almost redundant. Some have said, Paul hasn't written this because why would he say the same phrase twice?

God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And again in verse 2, the exact same verbiage. God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. What Paul is emphasizing here is that Paul, Silvanus, Silas, and Timothy all share the same father as those who were receiving the letter.

They share a dad. How does this happen? What makes this true? When I was in youth ministry, I tried to devise clever ways of communicating with youth.

And we had these outings in the summertime. And on one occasion, I took them to an animal shelter. An animal shelter. So you can, actually a dog shelter.

[8 : 41] Well, there are a few other non-dogs. But, and we walk in. And this was probably two dozen, you know, or so. 30 middle school students.

6th, 7th, and 8th grade. All that to say, they go in. And they're in love. They're in love with all the dogs. All the animals. Can we pet them?

Can we play with them? And this shelter allowed you to actually take them on. They had a gated field where you could take them on a walk. And can we take them on walks? Can we feed them?

Can we do?

And at the end of the time, our time, I said, well, it's time to leave. It's time to leave. And they looked at me and thought, well, why do we need to leave?

Because I told your parents we would be back. But they began being distraught and uncomfortable. I said, well, we don't want to leave. No one's here to take care of these animals.

[9 : 37] No one's here. They have no home. That's why they live in the shelter. And incidentally, as we were leaving, there was a young family there who was receiving one of these young puppies from the animal shelter.

And to their delight, they're like, oh, he's going home. That little dog's going home. They were ecstatic. And as we walked out, I moved the kids to an area near the facility in the shade.

And I remember asking them, so how did you feel about that? What was the best part? And I remember a young sixth grade girl saying, the best part was that family taking that dog home and adopting that dog.

And I said, well, why? Well, because that dog has no family, has no home. I mean, the play area is so small. And no one wants it. You know, the dog could stay here forever if no one wanted it. And I looked at that daughter, or that sixth grade girl, and I said, do you know what that family did for that dog? Is what God does for you.

[10:47] And they looked at me, and they're like, no, that's not what happens. And to them, I began to unfold the doctrine of adoption.

Adoption. Because what is happening here is adoption. It's a theological term. It's a social term, cultural term as well. But here in the Bible, it gives us a picture.

Adopted status belongs to all those who receive Christ. It means that through Jesus, God loves them as he loves his one and only son.

Adoption is incorporation into a family. It is a relationship. The initiation of a relationship. Theologian J.I. Packer says, adoption is the crown blessing.

Crown blessing. The Bible tells us in Galatians chapter 4 that we receive adoption. And when we receive adoption, we become sons and daughters.

[12:01] And as a result, we're able to cry out, Abba, or Father. Father, we are no longer slaves to sin and death. But now sons and daughters.

And if sons and daughters, heirs to eternal promise. And you begin to see that this relationship, it puts us into a standing with God as Father.

But it actually affects our horizontal relationships as well. And the text gives us a clue. Because in verse 3, the address that Paul, Silas, and Timothy make to the church or the recipients are brothers.

Or actually the term there is Delphoi, which consumes all siblings. Brothers and sisters. We are put into a family. In other words, the church is a family of people who have been adopted by one Father.

We may or may not have blood relations. But what we share. But that's not what is definitive of this family. The defining characteristic is the gift of adoption initiated by a common father.

[13:14] You see, the church is conceived by God. And it continues under God's activity. It's comprised of a people who have received God's work in redemption.

And have been adopted by him and set into his family. For these reasons, the church is unique from all other gatherings, assemblies. Especially in her composition.

Just look around. You're like, well, no, no, really. Look around. Look around. If not for Christ, few of us would know one another.

We are an odd bunch. Of all sorts, sizes, shades, and shapes. We're an assortment.

To borrow a phrase from the King James translation of the Bible. We are a peculiar people. Modern translations don't use that. Because peculiar means we are odd or strange or unusual.

[14:18] But that is true, isn't it? That if you look to your neighbor, there is no reason you should be sitting in a room with them. How did I end up here?

How did I end up in such a company of people? How did I get into this peculiar bunch? Interestingly, this was asked to me about this time last year.

As our four congregations gathered in Rockefeller Chapel. We were assembling. And one of the employees of the university who works at Rockefeller. Visibly astonished.

With genuine interest. Asked me. Bing. She said, Bing. How do you attract such a diverse group of people?

To which I should have answered. May I tell you about adoption? What is the church?

[15:27] An adopted people? An adopted people? Set into a family? That call God Father? And associate with one another as brothers and sisters?

This is no program. This is no facility. This is a people. And in the rest of our time.

I want to spend. In answering the question. What is actually being commended here? As Paul, Silas, and Timothy reflect on the Christians at Thessalonica. Beginning in verse three.

He's compelled to do two things. One in verse three. He's compelled to give thanks to God. And then in verse four. He's compelled really to brag about them.

Why is he compelled to give thanks to God? Well, the Thessalonians have a faith that the Bible tells us in verse three.

[16:27] We ought to always to give thanks to you, to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly. This phrase, growing abundantly.

It's the only occasion of it in the New Testament. It describes a fervent and feverish growth. The Greek prefix hyper is used here.

It is used to bring emphasis or excess. Their growth in faith is so unusual. Even unexpected. So you and I tend to think of faith as this static possession.

We make these remarks like, oh, I wish I had your faith. In the same way, like you might say, hey, I wish I had your hair. We may think of faith as, oh, I've lost my faith.

Thinking it's like losing one's keys. Rather, faith in this passage is intriguing because it's living, it's dynamic, and it grows.

[17:30] It's worthwhile to consider that in gospel accounts, Jesus hints at this. Right? As the disciples are caught in this storm, fearing for their lives, they wake Jesus up, who happens to be sleeping, and they're pretty much begging Jesus, hey, can you do anything about this?

And his response is, why are you afraid, you of little faith? And then in that same chapter, in Matthew chapter 8, you have a centurion or a Roman guard coming to Jesus and pleading for Jesus to do something because he has a sick servant.

And Jesus says to the centurion or to the crowd, I tell you, there is no one in Israel, nowhere in Israel have I found such great faith.

Little faith, great faith. See, we begin to see that faith is not just an object or a gift we receive, but it can be tended, nurtured, and developed. It is living.

It's a helpful way to think about faith. Consider aspects of your life that are living and relational. How are those being cultivated and developed? Whether it's a plant, animal, or person, there are steps that can be taken to tend, nurture, and develop that relationship.

[18:53] Faith will not naturally grow. In the same way plants need to be nurtured, watered, tended, exposed to sun, our faith needs to be watered, tended, and receive sunlight.

Faith is not so much some object you receive and then put on a shelf or bury it in your heart. It is more aptly seen as a seed that must be cared for.

And here you see it. Faith primarily has this vertical dimension. But this is not the only way the church in Thessalonica is growing. It's not only growing in faith in its relationship to God, but verse 3 also tells us that the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

Their faith is growing and their love for one another horizontally, relationally, is increasing. One writer says this phrase is without parallel in the New Testament.

The expression is such a strong one. It's clear, clearly Paul is saying there's actually no exceptions here. Love was the bond that was holding the thing together. In other words, the Thessalonians were manifesting a relational growth with one another being conjoined together in love.

[20:17] They were growing relationally with one another. They were likely sharing their resources. They were coming alongside those in need who were among them. As their faith was growing abundantly, their love for one another was increasing.

And once again, we're challenged. Because the question that the text poses to you and I is, if this is the church that is being commended, then how might my love increase in this congregation?

How might you love your neighbor better? How can you increase your love for one another? What would be a tangible expression of that love? I believe many of us walk into this building hoping to sense and receive love.

And here the challenge is, can you walk in and love extravagantly, lavishly, gladly, freely?

[21:36] And what that looks like is different for all of us. And you begin to sense this participatory nature of being part of the people of God.

What takes place here is not spectatorship. We are not, well, this is not some sporting event where you go and cheer on the athletes up front.

There's not one up front right now. But this is not a theater where you acquire a ticket to be entertained. This is not a musical concert that comprised of a particular genre of music, bringing in this company of people with similar tastes to hear and enjoy.

This is the church of God where all contribute and participate. You see that, right? Verse 3. The love of every one of you.

Wait, wait, everyone? No, Paul, you're exaggerating. All of them? All of them were in on this?

[22:50] Yeah. The church is participatory. None of us spectate. There is no other cultural event that summons its participants to such a task.

Tell me some fandom of some sport where the fans come together and their commitment to one another is love.

Now, the commitment to one another may be a whole host of things. Propriety or... But they're instructed to be civil.

But not necessarily to love. Members of a social club or society are called to promote a purpose and try to get along, but not to love. Classmates in the classroom are summoned to be reasonable and attentive, but they are not called to love.

But in the church, you're called to love. That's what's being commended. So you have this picture of faith that is growing abundantly, a love that is increasing for one another.

[23 : 57] And they're demonstrations of progress. We are not a static people, but can and ought to be taking strides to grow in faith and increase in love. In other words, it is both cultivating an upward dimension between us and the Lord and an outward dimension between one another.

The Christian is unbalanced if we're only one of these things. We cannot only love God in private and when we go out in public, do nothing.

Conversely, we cannot only... Without loving God well, we cannot actually truly love one another. This is what Jesus alludes to when he's confronted.

What's the greatest commandment, Jesus? Well, let me tell you. To love God and love one another. The Thessalonians were fulfilling this. And as a result of their growing faith and increasing love, Paul, Silas, and Timothy are then compelled to boast.

It's... Is this like a... I don't know if this is a humble brag of sorts, but you got to think about this. The founders of the church are boasting about how well their church is doing.

[25 : 17] What is actually going on? What is making them boast about the Thessalonians? This in verse 4. We ourselves boast about you in the other churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

For a congregation situated in a hostile city, they remain resolute and stalwart. Their faith did not buckle under pressure or stress.

Two hardships are presented here. They are being persecuted for their faith. In other words, they are suffering on account of being Christians. Secondly, the additional hardship is translated afflictions that simply denotes great difficulty of all sorts.

One is a consequence of faith commitment. The other is a consequence of living in a fallen and broken world. Both are weapons of destruction that are directed to Christians and the church. Both are reasons that people fold and give up. Yet the Thessalonians in faith were steadfast and endured. They had not failed under heavy duress.

[26 : 37] And because of that, they became an example to Paul to use among the congregations he visited. Their faithfulness to Christ despite hardship was of such exception that Paul himself could not restrain from boasting of them.

And granted, we sit in this room with the privilege of religious liberty. In our context, few of us will suffer persecution as opposed to many of our brothers and sisters elsewhere.

Yet we're not spared from affliction. We may be spared from persecution, but not affliction. And routinely have the opportunity to sit down with people in this congregation and to hear them share about their afflictions that they are enduring.

They share about loss, strife, pain, hardship, burdens that seem unbearable. Most times I stumble over words or am left speechless when they share these things.

I leave conversations discouraged, unsure of how to proceed. Yet as I reflect on these painful conversations, I'm always struck by the desire these individuals have to continue on and try to make sense of life.

[27 : 59] I'm struck by their desire to walk with Jesus even when it appears that Jesus is not walking with them. I'm struck by their resolute determination to bring cohesion to their life story while considering what the role is of God the Father.

And I have to say, as a member of the pastoral team, this is one of the sources of great encouragement. I watch from my vantage point and think to myself, wow, wow, he has it hard. She has it hard. But they have determined that this difficulty is not enough to dissuade them from the belief that they have a Heavenly Father that loves them.

Let me say this openly. Whether you know this or not, you sit next to people that are afflicted. And they have resolved to be here amongst the church, the adopted family.

It makes me proud. It keeps me going. It spurs me on. What type of church ought we to be?
[29 : 23] What type of church is Holy Trinity? And yesterday, on occasion, I was asked, it was just yesterday, this lady asked me, what type of church are you at?

And to my shame, my first thought was, size, or building, or budget, or attendance.
When I should have said, you know, we have bathroom stalls that don't work. We sit in an auditorium with chairs. You have to take faith to sit in some of these chairs.
We're in an elementary school auditorium. We have no air conditioning. Our young nursery kids crawl around on a gymnasium floor.

But may I tell you about the people? Can I tell you about the people? May I tell you that in their affliction, they continue.

[30 : 44] They endure. May I tell you of their increasing faith, their devotion to Jesus, their fidelity, their holiness, their selflessness. May I tell you of their mutual love for one another, sharing paychecks, sharing bedrooms, sharing resources, all in an increasing manner.

May I tell you about the duress they are under because of our broken world. And may I tell you how they stand and continue and walk. And may I tell you that I thank God for them and boast about them.

I'm proud of you. I'm proud to come under and alongside you.

Wherever we meet, wherever we go, become a people that not only grow abundantly in faith, but increase in love for one another and endure, persevere, regardless of hardship.

This is the church that is commendable. It causes people to thank God for them. It causes people to boast about them. The word goes up to heaven, really.

[32 : 09] The word of thanksgiving goes up to heaven. Thank you, God, for this. And then the word goes out. This spreads across the earth.

Thank you, God, for this. May these be true of us in an increasing manner. Father, we thank you for this morning.

We thank you for this template that you've laid down. Real people living real lives under real duress. Yet, in spite of all that, they have a Father in heaven. And they are growing abundantly in faith.

They are increasing in love for one another.

And they are enduring despite affliction. Amen. May that be true of us. Help us to that end.

[33 : 14] We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Monthly, we have an opportunity to commemorate the Lord by taking communion.

Communion, a few words, is a family meal. We've talked about family this morning. It is for those who have come to acknowledge God as Father, who have received the gift of adoption, who look across the aisle, behind or in front, and call one another brothers and sisters.

If you're unsure of what that means, I encourage you to refrain from sharing in this meal. and simply observe the people of God honoring God, the Father, and receiving sustenance from Him.

I'm going to invite two elders up and a deacon. They will help me serve. And as they do so, let me just read from 1 Corinthians.

Paul writes, For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. That the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed, He took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, This is my body, which is for you.

[34 : 39] Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, also He took the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

So how we do it here, we invite the musicians to process first, just given how they will serve us later in the service. And then afterwards, please just form two lines down the center aisle.

Fan out when you arrive at the front. There will be two servers on each side. And just make your way when you are ready.

when you are ready. when you're ready.