

Glory and Joy in Ministry

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[0 : 00] May I like to have open the Bibles at page 959 to the second reading from 1 Thessalonians chapters 2 and 3. That's the series that we're going through at the moment.

This is the second of our five weeks looking at the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. And let's pray. God our Father speak to us now from your word we pray that we may not only believe it but trust it and obey it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Amen. It's just a stage you're going through. You'll grow out of it. So say many parents to children who become Christians.

Or they may say things like this. It's not true. It's just an old myth. Science has disproved it. Or perhaps this. Don't trust preachers.

Think of tele-evangelists. They're just after your money. Or they're brainwashers. They're just trying to trick you and deceive you. Or they might preach love but they don't really care about you.

[1 : 01] Well that's just a sample of the sorts of things that you may have said or you may have heard said to you. Or heard said to somebody who's become a Christian. You see our world on the whole doesn't like people becoming Christians.

At best they simply don't understand. At worst they punish, persecute, imprison and forbid people to become Christians.

But mostly it's in the middle somewhere. A sort of ridicule, a mockery, a looking down on someone. Perhaps an undermining of their faith.

An opposition to it at some sort of level. And especially those who are new Christians. People who've recently become Christians. Are often under attack or opposition or ridicule for their faith.

It was no different in Thessalonica in 50 AD. Paul had been there, the Apostle Paul, for a short time preaching the Gospel. The first time ever that the Christian message was preached in Thessalonica.

[2 : 03] He was there for maybe just a matter of weeks. Certainly no more than two or three months it seems. But then because of the high opposition. He and his friends were forced out of Thessalonica.

And they went on to a near town called Berea. And from there eventually to Athens. The Thessalonians who'd become Christians were left behind to face the opposition.

And indeed this two chapters that we're looking at today. Gives us a good glimpse of what sort of opposition they faced. We find indications in these chapters.

That they were under attack. An attack that was in a sense directed back to the Apostle Paul. A smear campaign to undermine his ministry and motives.

So that their own faith might be destabilised. Several times in these two chapters Paul says something to the effect of. I didn't do this but I did this.

[3 : 02] And what he says he didn't do. Is it seems an indication of what accusations are levelled against him. By the opponents back in Thessalonica. Paul did this or did this or did this.

Paul's saying no I didn't do those things. But instead this is what I did. So in some senses these two chapters are like Paul's apologia. His self defence.

But we get it wrong if we think that Paul's motivation is clearing his reputation. As though Paul is writing because he wants his own reputation to be clear and untarnished.

His motivation in giving this self defence. Is for the sake of the Thessalonian Christians. Paul's not actually that fussed in a way about what people might say about him.

He knows his motives and actions are clear. But what he is concerned about is that the Thessalonians continue in Christian faith. So through these two chapters Paul refutes the mud that's been thrown at him.

[4 : 03] But for the sake of the Thessalonian Christians primarily. Not for his own sake. And therefore he writes for the sake of the gospel. So that people hold fast to the gospel that he's preached.

And that they have believed. So see verse 3 in chapter 2 to start with. Our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery.

That is it's as though those who are opposing the Christians in Thessalonica are saying. Paul just came with impure motives. That is he wanted to build up his own wealth.

Or he wanted to exercise power. He came with deceit. That is what he says isn't true. The gospel that he says was the true gospel of God. It's not true. Or he came with trickery.

To deceive you. To make you gullible people believe something that is fanciful. Paul says no I didn't come with any of those three things. Rather he says in verse 4.

[5 : 03] I was approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel. And that's what I've spoken. Not to please mortals but to please God. That is he acknowledges that there will be human beings who aren't pleased by what he preached.

But that's okay Paul says. My motive is not to please people. It's to please God. And I'm approved by God as a preacher of the gospel of God. He goes on in verse 5.

As you know and as God is our witness. We never came with words of flattery. That is words that might manipulate people. Or get them under his influence for evil. Or did I come with a pretext for greed.

That is I wasn't coming here to make money. In the ancient world philosophers and other orators would travel around to get money by their preaching and speaking. Paul says no that's not what I did.

It wasn't a pretext for greed. In fact as he goes on to say in the verses that follow. I actually gave of myself rather than to gain for myself. So he says in verse 7.

[6 : 04] Though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. We were gentle among you like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. And then in verse 9. We worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaim to you the gospel of God.

He says I actually came and I worked. Presumably as a tent maker which we're told elsewhere was Paul's trade. I came and worked so that I wasn't a financial burden on you. So that you could hear the gospel freely.

I didn't come with a pretext for greed is what he's saying. As the accusers are levelling against me. I actually came with the opposite. I gave of myself. And I worked for myself so that I was no financial burden on you at all.

Several times in this chapter in particular Paul says something to the effect of you know you saw you are witnesses. We see that in verse 5.

As you know we never came with words of flattery. The same in verse 10. You are witnesses. How pure, upright and blameless our conduct was.

[7 : 05] See as Paul gives his self-defence he's not trying to convince the Thessalonians of something that's untrue. He reminds them that you know this. You've seen it. You saw my ministry.

You heard my ministry. You saw my life given for you. So don't be deceived by those who are making false accusations against me.

And therefore seeking to destabilise your own faith. That is, you've seen it. You're witnesses. What I'm saying is the truth. Don't be misled by the false accusers.

Also in this chapter Paul is concerned that they understand the place of persecution. It's not easy when Christians are persecuted. It rattles us sometimes. It causes us sometimes to think am I really in the right place here?

Paul wants to reiterate for these Thessalonian Christians that persecution is what they should expect and understand to be in a sense an inevitable part of being a Christian.

[8 : 07] He says in chapter 2 verse 2 that he himself had been persecuted shamefully in Philippi. In Acts 16 we read about that and Philippi was the place that Paul was at immediately before going on to Thessalonica.

In Philippi Paul was beaten and he was thrown in prison despite being a Roman citizen. His citizenship rights were overlooked there. Paul says I was treated shamefully at Philippi.

I myself have been persecuted he says. So don't feel that what you're going through is something exceptional or unusual. He goes on to say in verse 14, Paul is saying you brothers and sisters

became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots.

Paul is saying you see that what you are suffering as a church in Philippi is exactly what the Christian churches in Judea around Jerusalem have already suffered from their own compatriots. That is this is what Christians and churches should expect. Then he goes on about this same point in chapter 3 verses 3 and 4. He says that he sent Timothy to strengthen them so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions.

[9 : 22] Indeed you yourselves know that this is what we're destined for. In fact when we were with you we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution. And so it's turned out as you know.

That is Paul is saying we actually warned you that persecution will happen and that's actually what happened. So don't let this persecution intimidate you away from being Christian.

Don't let it lead you to give up your faith. Not at all he says. We told you that this would happen. We told you that that's what I Paul had suffered.

We told you that that's what the Judean churches had suffered. So therefore stand firm in the face of such ridicule and opposition. Don't yield to the opposition.

The other accusation it seems that's levelled against Paul is that he didn't really love the Thessalonians because he left them so quickly. Now he certainly left after a shortish period of time.

[10 : 20] He left under the severe opposition of the city authorities and others. But Paul makes it very clear in these two chapters his leaving of them did not in any way indicate a lack of love.

So in verse 7 he says that the way he related to them, this is of chapter 2 verse 7, we were like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

In effect a mother caring for her own children is how some translations have it. Whether it's a nurse or a mother, the implication is that it's actually their own children. Therefore a mother nursing her own children might be the way to say it.

So that's a very tender and intimate and loving metaphor for Paul to use. A little bit further down in chapter 2 verse 11, he says, As you know we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children.

Paul compares himself to being both a mother and a father, which is an appropriate image for new Christians whom he has led to faith. That is, they're in a sense their new birth has come through, humanly speaking, his ministry.

[11 : 26] So he's like their parent in the faith, mother or father. In verse 17 of chapter 2 he says, When for a short time, talking about being separated from them, he says, We were made orphans by being separated from you.

Now in our language that would mean, well, Paul's likening himself to a child and they're his parents. He's been orphaned from them. But actually the word orphan, which is actually a Greek word, which is here, has both, it works both ways in ancient Greek.

For us to be orphaned means you lose your parents. But this word here means it could be you lose your parents or in Paul's case you lose your children. That's how the word would operate either way in ancient Greek.

So Paul is saying, again, I'm like your parent, but when I left you, I've been orphaned from you. I've been separated from my children. So he's not sort of left them lovelessly and abandoned them, as perhaps the accusers are saying, but rather he's been like a parent deprived of his children and that's caused him increasing anxiety, as he indicates in the verses that follow at the end of 2 and into chapter 3.

So in chapter 2, verse 18, we wanted to come to you again and again, he says, we wanted to come to you. And then because of his relationship as a parent to them as children, he's been so anxious about them and not hearing news of them having left them.

[12 : 56] That's why he sent Timothy, as he says in verse 2 of chapter 3, we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith.

And verse 5 of chapter 3, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. That is, I want to both encourage you in sending Timothy and I want to find out about you.

I've been so anxious about you, I can't bear it any longer. This is the parent whose child is away from home. And they hear nothing of them. Some of you who are parents may have experienced this sort of thing at times.

And so Paul is expressing deep love for the Thessalonians. My distance from you is not because I've abandoned you or I don't love you, as those who are accusing against him are saying, trying to drive a wedge between the Thessalonian Christians and Paul.

Rather, he says, my love is deep. That's why I sent Timothy, because I could bear it no longer, not knowing how you were. Well, Satan hates people becoming Christians and uses any means he can to draw people away, whether it's opposition and oppression and persecution, punishment, imprisonment, ostracism, those sorts of things, or whether more likely in our society, it's actually the temptations to entice us into a love of the world rather than a love of God.

[14:19] But either way, Satan will use whatever means he can to draw people away from faith in God. That's what Paul has been anxious about. As he says at the end of chapter 3, verse 5, I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain.

That our preaching of the gospel to which you responded in faith might have just withered away because the tempter tempted you. Well, Paul, understandably then, is overjoyed when Timothy comes back with good news.

Everywhere the expression good news occurs in the New Testament, it means to evangelise, to spread the gospel. That's the good news. The one exception is here.

Timothy has just now come to us, verse 6 says. Paul has moved on to Corinth, it seems, while he sent Timothy from Athens. Timothy has now come back and he says, Timothy has just now come to us.

It's as though Timothy's walked in the door, told them the news that the Thessalonians are standing firm in their faith and Paul says, I've got to write to them. And he sits down and writes this letter straight away. Maybe it was as immediate as that.

[15:26] Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and your love. Paul is overjoyed. Like a parent who gets a letter from their child and hears how well they're going and they're so relieved because all their anxiety disappears, having not heard anything.

Paul's love for the Thessalonians is like a parent's love and his delight in verse 6 onwards of chapter 3 is parental joy. He's so excited that they're keeping on in the Christian faith.

He goes on to say at the end of verse 6, Timothy has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution, we've been encouraged about you through your faith.

For we now live. The parents' joy overflowing. I've been so anxious about my child and now I hear good news. I can breathe easy again. I can live again.

I can relax because they're going well is what Paul is saying here. What a model of ministry this is. Paul who's got such a strong commitment, rightly so, to the Word of God and preaching the truth of the Gospel, trying to please God and not people in the face of opposition.

[16:44] But balanced so beautifully with his deep love for the Thessalonian Christians. It's not just the Thessalonians. We see Paul's love for all the people he ministers to in different places in the New Testament.

But here is that right and proper and deep balance of a love for God's Word and a love for God's people that Paul is expressing here. His joy at hearing news from Timothy shows that the accusations of the persecutors in Thessalonica have fallen in effect on deaf ears.

So the Thessalonian Christians are not deceived by the accusations that they level that the Gospel's not true, it's deception. They've not been beguiled by the charges that Paul was there for his own benefit and greed.

They've not been misled by the smears that Paul had abandoned them and didn't love them.

They've held fast to the Gospel, to the truth of the Gospel that Paul had preached to them, despite the opposition that they're undergoing and facing.

As I said, Paul's words here are not primarily a self-defence for his own sake. He is wanting to strengthen the Thessalonians in their faith. That's why he writes the letter. That's why he sent Timothy.

[17:58] He's not particularly fussed about what smears people might level against him. He knows that they're untrue. But what he is concerned about is the Thessalonian faith and the integrity of the Gospel.

And that's why he closes this section with a prayer in verses 11 to 13. In this prayer, he prays three things. Well, he tells the Thessalonians he's praying three things.

The first is, in verse 11, that our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus will direct our way to you. Now, earlier on, in chapter 2, verse 18, Paul had said that Satan blocked our way so that Paul couldn't go back to Thessalonica.

Now, whether that's the authorities' opposition, whether it was sickness or whatever else, Satan had blocked the way. The prayer now is that God will direct the way.

Same word is used. That is, it's as though you're driving along a road and you've come to a roadblock. The road has been destroyed. It's a pile of rubble you can't get past. That's, in effect, what Satan has done to prevent Paul going back to Thessalonica.

[19 : 02] The prayer is that God the Father and Jesus Christ will direct the way, make it smooth or straight, so that Paul can actually go back to Thessalonica. Well, it seems from what we know in the Acts of the Apostles that it was perhaps even five years before Paul got back there, although it seems he did, according to the beginning of Acts 20.

Notice also in this prayer that it's, that God our Father and the Lord Jesus will direct our way. That is, there's no sort of separation in a sense of, it's God and Jesus is sort of out of the picture in the prayer.

There's a close unity. It's actually a singular verb that's used, rather than a plural verb, that it's God the Father and Jesus, and in Greek, a singular verb for the two of them.

So it's a very close identification of Jesus with God that's reflected there in that first prayer.

Secondly, he prays that their love may abound.

He's already praised them for their love. We saw that last week in chapter 1, verse 2. It's there again in chapter 3, verse 6. He's encouraged by hearing of their faith and love. Now he says, May the Lord, Jesus that is, make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, presumably including the persecutors.

[20 : 23] Partly because love, when it's practiced, is such a strong witness against persecution. Partly because it's one of the chief, the chief Christian virtue that all Christians ought to practice, regardless of whether there's persecution or not.

Paul is praying, in effect, that what's begun in them will grow to completion. Their love will increase and abound all the more to all people. The third part of the prayer is verse 13.

That God, or the Lord Jesus, may so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

This is a prayer for perseverance, in effect. That what God has begun in them will come to completion on the day of Christ, when Jesus returns. So that on that day, they will be pure and blameless in the presence of God the Father.

Notice that there is no prayer that the persecution will end. There's no prayer that they'll now have an easy life. Rather, persecution is expected to continue.

[21 : 30] It always continues. Men love darkness more than light. And all Christians, as the New Testament tells us in several places, can expect and should expect opposition and persecution from time to time.

It will take different forms. In different countries, it will take different forms. But many of us have experienced that sort of social ostracism, ridicule, mockery, indeed as we sang in the children's song earlier in the service.

There is all sorts of opposition to being Christian because our world basically doesn't like people becoming Christians. In September, we prayed for the persecuted church around the world.

And for those who use those booklets for each day for three weeks, 21 days, we pray for Christians in different countries who are being persecuted. There's every country in the world Christians face persecution of some sort.

We're not immune from it here either. Our prayer ought to be for perseverance and strength. Not that persecution will go, it usually doesn't, but that God will give strength and perseverance so that on the day of Jesus' return, we, with all God's people in all God's places, will stand pure and blameless on that final day.

[22 : 44] It's a prayer not just for those who are facing persecution abroad, but it's a prayer for ourselves as well. That God may so strengthen us, our hearts in holiness, that we too may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus, with all his saints.

Amen. Amen. Amen.