

The Preaching Pastor's Encouragement

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. And I'd like to pray for us. Let's pray. God, our Heavenly Father, all wise, all knowing, we pray that now we would trust you as we hear your word and that Paul's letter, your word through Paul, would shape this church, that it would impact our lives and make us like the body of Christ that you want us to be.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, here's something that I think I see Christians feeling guilty about and is something of an unspoken sort of hot potato and it's the issue of worry. Should Christians worry? Is it right for a Christian to be worried? Is it right for Christians to be anxious? I mean, like really anxious, like, you know, up late at night, all night, anxious about things. It's especially difficult if in your dining room you've got the plaque with the quote of Jesus saying, do not worry or from Matthew 5 or Philippians 2 where the Apostle Paul says, don't be anxious about anything.

Well, there's two commands, don't worry, don't be anxious. Therefore, is worry a sign of lack of faith? Is it a sin to be anxious? Does it mean you're not trusting God enough?

[1 : 27] Well, today's reading in 1 Thessalonians is a revelation because it shows the heart of the Apostle and we've already seen in previous weeks that Paul is like a spiritual mother, spiritual father, a spiritual parent to this church.

He planted this church. He proclaimed the gospel there. He loves them very deeply and he loves them like a parent. And you've really got to think, what is parenting if not worrying?

What good parent does not worry? If you don't worry and you're a parent, there's something wrong. And so actually what we're going to see is Paul's godly worry.

We're going to see his apostolic anxiety. We're going to see a good and godly form of worrying today in the reading and hopefully it will shape your worrying and our worrying together.

Let's have a look at it. Verse 17 of chapter 2. As for us, brothers and sisters, when for a short time we were made orphans by being separated from you, in person, not in heart, we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.

[2 : 44] Paul planted the church in Thessalonica. It was hard work and he wasn't with them long and he left for Athens. And it was costly for Paul to leave this church.

And in fact, even though he is the spiritual parent, I mean he should be saying to them, you were orphaned when I left you. But he says, I was orphaned when I left you.

That is how hurt he is. That is the grief he feels and the anxiety he feels in leaving this church. He's a good shepherd, Paul.

And he says, we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. Paul desires deeply in his heart. In fact, the word there for longing is a similar word used for lust.

But clearly here it's used in a positive sense, a deep, deep longing. That's how much Paul wanted, needed to see these people face to face.

[3 : 47] Paul's view of the Christian life is one where God's church are led by pastors who lead and pastor face to face.

I wonder what Paul would say. I met someone recently who said this. They're a Christian. They were encouraged that I was a pastor. And I said, where do you go to church? And their church was the Christian satellite TV that you can get.

And they just have it on all day. And they're pastored by people on TV. I don't think Paul would consider that a valid form of being pastored.

What would someone say to someone who thinks they're spiritually fed enough by downloading sermons off the internet or buying the right DVDs or whatever from Coorong or even from going to the right conferences but not actually being pastored week by week face to face in a local church?

What would Paul say to someone who thinks they can get to heaven on the back of a super disciplined quiet time? I think Paul would say, well, that's actually not enough. You need someone like me, Paul says.

[4 : 59] You need someone face to face with you. For Paul, pastoring is like parenting. You can't do it unless you're doing it face to face. Now, why isn't Paul going to see them then?

In fact, they may have been tempted to think, Paul planted this church but he doesn't care about us anymore because he hasn't come back. But actually, this is what's gone wrong. We wanted to come to you.

Certainly, I, Paul, wanted again and again but Satan blocked our way. Satan blocked our way. You see, Christians may devalue the place of face to face encouragement but Satan doesn't.

He knows how important it is. He knows how effective and valuable it is. Satan is the one that would block Paul from visiting the Thessalonians. And every time he tries, something happens that blocks it.

Satan doesn't want them to be shepherded by Paul face to face. And Satan would have you from being shepherded. He would have you give up Christian fellowship.

[6 : 04] He would have you try and think that you can do it on your own. This relationship that Paul has as a pastor to this church is so profound.

It's more than just kind of an emotional bond. For Paul, it's of eternal significance. Have a look at verse 19. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?

Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy. For Paul, he's going to stand in heaven, he says, not just as an individual with kind of a good track record on the mission field.

He's going to stand in heaven with those he loved and encouraged in the gospel, with the Thessalonians, with all the other churches he pastored. They will be his glory.

They will be his crown, his reward in heaven to stand with those that he pastored in the Lord Jesus Christ. They are his reward.

[7 : 08] No one here today is going to stand in heaven as an individual. You can't just say, me and Jesus. No one's going to stand in heaven as an individual. And certainly, I don't think, are going to stand in heaven in kind of marriages and our biological families, even if they're Christian, because Jesus taught clearly there's no marriage in heaven.

No doubt we'll be reunited with our loved ones who have died in Christ. But this kind of teaching is the only teaching we have of who we are with in heaven. We're with those that encouraged us in the gospel and those we encouraged in the gospel.

You know, the people who encourage you, the people who pray for you, the people who worry about your spiritual life, you will be their crown. You will be their joy in heaven.

And the people that you are encouraging, the people that you are praying for, the people that you are worrying about spiritually, they will be your crown in heaven.

The Christian life is all about people, people growing firm and standing firm together in Jesus. Now, Paul's concern is so deep, he actually decides to hinder his own mission work in order to get news about the Thessalonians.

[8 : 28] That's in chapter 3, verse 1. Paul sends to encourage this church his best man, his right-hand man, Timothy.

Elsewhere in another letter, Paul says, I've got no one like Timothy. And here he says, you know, Timothy's my co-worker in proclaiming the gospel. He's doing good work here in Athens and I need him here in Athens.

But I'm sending him to you because I have to find out how you're going. And I must know that you're standing firm in Jesus. So I'm sending him to you. That's a costly decision for Paul personally, for his mission work in Athens.

It's sacrificing one ministry for another. But it's a wise thing to do, to prioritise based on where you think the need is.

The mission field does matter, but so does the sending church. And I think it's more than just the fact that Paul has no internet and email or phones or anything like that.

[9 : 48] The issue is not just communication. The issue is Paul needs to send someone to represent him as pastor to encourage them in Christ. And to represent Jesus to encourage them in Christ.

They need a pastor. And so he sends Timothy to build them up and then to report back. Now, you've got to ask the question, what exactly is it that worries Paul that he would give up Timothy? What are the dangers that are on Paul's mind for the Thessalonians? And there are two main dangers. See if you can pick them up in our verses three onwards.

We sent Timothy so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions, number one. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we were destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution.

So it turned out, as you know. And here's the second reason coming. For this reason, I could bear it no longer. I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain.

[10:57] So two great dangers of the Christian life. One, persecution from outside. Two, temptation from within. That's the internal thing where you'll be tempted to give up the faith.

These two satanic strategies cause Paul to fear. They cause him anxiety. They cause him to be up late at night praying for this church.

Paul knows and he actually warned them. He told them, Paul wasn't the kind of pastor that told people what they wanted to hear.

He actually told them this would happen. Be on your guard. It's a sign of a good pastor, I think, to tell people to trust Jesus even when it costs you.

That's the kind of pastor Paul was. And the internal danger, the temptation danger, follows on from persecution, doesn't it? Because what's the temptation if you're persecuted?

[12:03] Well, to start hiding your faith. The temptation if you're persecuted is to take the easy road, the road of self-protection, the road of compromise, the wide road, the easy way.

And Paul is worried that if they take that path, his whole labour is in vain. It will be wasted. And he wouldn't have his crown in heaven. The spiritual dangers that surround us are everywhere.

They're from without and they're from within. Satan wants to get you from every angle. Therefore, you know, don't you, it's important to have someone to watch your back.

That's us. That's each other. That's a church. That's pastors. We cannot do it alone. Well, Paul's speaking in the past tense because he actually did send Timothy and he did get a report back.

And will it be bad news or good news? Well, just as earlier in the reading, you could feel Paul's pain when he said, I'm longing to see you face to face.

[13:09] You could just feel his anxiety. Now you can feel his joy. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love.

He has told us that you always remember us kindly and long to see us just as we long to see you. Tears of joy running down his face. He's so happy.

For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution, we have been encouraged about you through your faith. You see, Paul's situation, he's in danger himself.

He's in a lot of trouble. He's in a lot of persecution. But that doesn't worry him. He's worried about the Thessalonians. And as long as they're strong in Jesus, he's happy. In fact, it even gives him life.

In verse 8, For now, we now live if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?

[14:17] They are his joy. Night and day, we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore what is lacking in your faith. Paul is excited.

Timothy's come back and he's heralded the good news that the Thessalonians are strong in the Lord, exactly where Paul was praying for them to be. And they're encouraged and they miss Paul as he misses them.

And so now Paul is happy. You still get a sense of a little bit of anxiety still. There's a challenge that they've got to continue to stand firm in the Lord but he's so happy to hear this good news.

Even though Paul himself, in and out of jail, in and out of getting beaten up, you know, on the run, that doesn't matter to him. He cares about the flock.

He cares about the church. And Paul's joy is fulfilled and you can imagine how this flows back and forward because when the Thessalonians read how happy Paul was, they'll be happy as well.

[15:22] And the joy increases between the pastor and his flock as they together stand firm in Jesus. You see, there are some bad views of Paul going around and I think one of the bad views is that Paul planted churches to not need him.

That's one of the bad views that somehow you can plant churches and then move on and on and on. That doesn't really feel like what Paul was doing here. You know, and some people would even say it's unhealthy for a pastor to be so dependent on a church and a church to be so dependent on a pastor.

They'd say that's sort of a toxic codependency. But that's not what this feels like. This feels like a happy place to be, a happy Christian life, to be part of a flock where you're encouraged and to have a pastor who has your spiritual concern at the forefront of his heart.

That's a great place to be. There's another myth today that the job of a minister is to sort of do themselves out of a job. So if we can train enough people and have enough good small groups, the pastor sort of won't be needed because you've sort of got everything you need and you can just throw on a DVD or whatever.

But that's not the way Paul ministered, is it? Small groups are great and important and lay leadership and training is important, but the goal can't be to get rid of pastors. That's not how Paul worked.

[16:48] Paul was a shepherd of God's people, an under-shepherd of the Lord Jesus Christ. And for him, that was a face-to-face ministry.

And it was a ministry of worry, anxiety and prayer. And Paul says openly, he needs them and they need him. If you're wondering, by the way, who are the leaders while Paul's away, look ahead in Thessalonians and he has a little word of encouragement for them to love the pastors who have remained that Paul set up.

That's in chapter 5. You can look at that when you go home. The principle for us is this. No one is going to get to heaven merely on the back of individual spiritual disciplines.

It's not enough. Everyone in heaven will stand there as the crown of someone else, as the glory of some other shepherd, of some encourager, of some prayer warrior, some intercessor.

And then the people you encourage will be your glory and your joy. No one in heaven stands alone but as the glory of another and together all the glory goes to Jesus.

[18:06] Friends, we need to pray for labourers, for more pastors, don't we? There's a great shortage of people who love Jesus and love the flock, love the church, who will sacrificially, like Paul, take on the ministry of godly worry.

Without such worrying shepherds, the people of God are orphaned. Now, just to come back to Jesus and the other statements, why does Jesus say, do not worry?

Well, you've got to read that in context. You've got to read Matthew 5 where he says that. There he talks about Jesus is condemning in Matthew 5 a spirit of unbelief that doesn't even trust God for food and clothing.

It treats God as if he is not a generous father. And Jesus says, don't worry about stuff like that. Seek first the kingdom. Your father in heaven, he'll provide everything you need. So, to worry about those things in a way that betrays unbelief, that is a lack of faith.

But that's what it's talking about. It's not talking about being worried about your brother in Christ's spiritual life or your sister in Christ's relationship with Jesus. That's a good thing to worry about.

[19:23] In Philippians 4, when Paul says, do not worry about anything or he says, do not be anxious about anything, there I think he is challenging prayerlessness.

He's challenging people who worry but never pray. And clearly we see in Thessalonians, he worries and prays. He worries and prays. But in Philippians 4, he says, if you're worried and you don't pray, then you're sinning.

But when you worry and pray, you bring all your requests and supplications to God and the peace of God will guard your hearts in Christ Jesus. And that doesn't mean the worry goes away, it just means the peace of God guards your heart in Christ Jesus.

See, the Bible only contradicts itself when you take these things out of context. But in context, it's always consistent. The challenge for us is to think about, are you mindful of those who are worrying you, worried for you, and who are you worrying about?

Are you worried enough for the spiritual life of those around you, in your family and in this church? Are you giving over your worry continually in prayer to God for those around you?

[20:39] Are you worried about the right things or the wrong things? Is your worry about the kingdom of Jesus or is it about the things of this world? That's the question.

And be mindful, friends, of who is worrying for you. And, you know, if you don't have someone who's worried about your spiritual life, then I'm worried for you.

You need a pastor and you need to be mindful that you are their crown and joy. Are you making their life easier or harder? And also, think of your crown and joy.

Those people that you are encouraging in Jesus, those people that you teach in RE or that you give a Bible to or that you're praying for, in heaven, they will be your glory and joy, better than any possession you have now.

Keep encouraging each other face to face to love Jesus. In God's economy, the grace of Jesus is mediated through interdependent Christian relationships, especially that of pastor and flock.

[21 : 52] So, let's pray for God's blessing on us now. Lord God, our Father, we thank you that by the blood of Christ we have been given forgiveness of our sins and eternal life and more than that you've given us each other and you've made us part of the body of Christ to journey together and to carry each other along the way.

So, I pray, Father, that you'll bless us and give us godly pastors and leaders among us and make us godly encouragers of those around us and may it be our joy to do this and may it be for the glory of Jesus.

Amen. Amen.