

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

A Church to Be Proud Of

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-5

Code: 53-1

I have a steady stream of material that comes across my desk that touts the glorious of various and sundry churches. I am amazed that all of the articles, all of the books, all of the surveys, all of the investigations, all of the contests and so forth that compare the virtues of varying churches. And for one or another reason, tout them as churches to be honored or respected or set up as models.

Just recently I was browsing through some of this material that had found its way to my desk. I found one church that boasted about its 18,000 members and one million square feet of building on 42 acres. And there was another church that boasted about its rejection from traditional worship for a service where you can be anonymous, quote, "You don't have to say anything, sing anything, sign anything, or give anything," end quote.

Another church praised its foresight in selling the pipe organ to get relevant and having the best rock-and-roll band for a generation who have rebelled against classical music. Another church had built its reputation and built up its 4,000 members by aiming at nominal Christians, among the Baby Boomers. Another church prides itself on addiction-busting classes. And so it goes.

Some churches are proud of their buildings. Some churches are proud of their stained-glass windows. Some churches are proud of their innovative programs. Some are proud of their music. Others are proud of their wealth, their wealthy members. Some are proud of their size, their numbers. Some are proud of their famous pastor. Some are proud of their theology. Some are proud of their liturgy. And on and on it goes.

Now when you look at all of this you sort of ask yourself, "What kind of church would God be proud of? If God were to write an article, what kind of church would show up in the article?"

I'm quite confident there would be a different group than the ones who usually show up in the articles. That takes us immediately into our text because I want you to notice verse 4 of 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 where Paul says, "Therefore we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God." That's a very interesting phrase. Paul is saying about the

Thessalonians, we are proud of you. In fact, we are so proud of you that we regularly speak about you among other churches.

Please notice verse 3. He says, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting." He says not only are we proud of you but we are thankful to God for you.

Now what you have then here is a church to be proud of and thankful for. I mean, that's fairly evident. Now what was it that made the Thessalonian church a church to be proud of and a church to be thankful for. Was it their buildings? No, they didn't have any. Was it their programs? No, they didn't have any. Was it their printed, published material? No, they hadn't published any. Was it their music? No, as far as we know there weren't any performers there. Was it their wealth? No, they were poor. Was it their size? No, they were small. Was it their famous pastor? No, we don't even know who he is.

You say, "Without significant buildings, or programs, or music, or wealth, or size, or famous pastors, or published material, how could this be a very significant place? What was there to be so proud of so that the Apostle Paul and his co-missionaries, Silas and Timothy, were boasting about this church to every other church?"

Well the answer comes in these first five verses. Here we find five features of a church to be proud of and a church to be thankful for. This is very important for us to note. I know, it's your desire as it is my desire to be the kind of church that the Apostles would be proud of, a kind of church that the Apostles would be thankful to God for. We may never win contests, that's not important. I...I have seen all of that that I care to see for the rest of my life, frankly. We may never be the one judged by the world to be the most prominent church or the church about which we should boast. But we're concerned to be the kind of church that were the Apostles around they would write about us. Five realities I believe can be found in the first five verses of this opening chapter that will identify for us a church to be proud of and a church to be thankful for.

But before we look at that, let's get our bearings a little bit. Verse 1, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians." I just need to make a few comments about this, since we've already studied 1 Thessalonians which begins in the very identical way that this one does. And so we have noted what is essential to be noted already about the first opening statements.

But to suffice it to say for this moment that Paul is the author and he has two fellow missionaries along with him, Silas, or Silvanus, Silas being his Jewish name, Silvanus his Roman name, and Timothy. They are with Paul and so he includes them in the opening greeting though Paul himself is alone the author. They are in the city of Corinth. They have been there for some time now. In fact, they were together when he wrote 1 Thessalonians some months before the writing of the second letter. They were together also for the founding of the church in Thessalonica. If you go back to Acts 16 and 17 you will see that Paul, Silas and Timothy were there when the church began. They were there later on when the first letter was written and they were together again in Corinth for the writing

of the second letter.

You will also notice that uncommonly Paul adds nothing to his name. He doesn't say, "Paul, an apostle...Paul, called of God...Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ..." All of those familiar things by which he designates himself are omitted here. It's almost as if he is intending to say that my apostleship and my call and my role and my title and my leadership and my office are not in question among you, so I need make no reference to it. And he doesn't. Although in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 he does defend himself against what would be attacks from the outside of the church against his integrity. There apparently were no questions inside the church so he makes no reference to his apostleship.

Furthermore there is a loving, intimate kind of tone in this letter and it is a letter written on that level so its purpose is not apostolic authority, but loving intimacy and encouragement. And therefore the absence of title makes it a more endearing introduction.

He includes Silvanus, or Silas, who was a faithful partner of Paul. He was senior in years to Timothy, probably closer to the age of Paul. In Acts 15:22 he is called "a chief among the brethren, a leader." He is called in Acts 15:32, "a prophet." It is noted in Acts 16 that he was a Jew and like Paul, also a Roman citizen. He is a familiar friend of Paul. Was with him in some very dire circumstances, including being jailed with him in the city of Philippi.

Then you will note Timothy, the young man Paul had met in Acts 16, moving along with him. Paul's companion, Paul's son in the faith whom he was training to take the mantle when he passed on.

So here the three were together. As I said, they were together when the church was founded. They were together when the first letter was written. And they're together again this time. And probably this is the last time the three of them were together in the life of Paul.

You'll note also he writes to the church of the Thessalonians. A church founded in the city of Thessalonica which is in the north called Macedonia. The main city in the south of what we know is Greece today would be Corinth. The main city in the north was the city of Thessalonica. Probably about a quarter of a million inhabitants, so it's not a small town. A very large city, it was called the mother of Macedonia, it was THE metropolis in the northern part.

It was a very important city founded by one of the generals of Alexander the Great, about 350 years before Paul ever arrived there. It was on a seaport, on the Aegean Sea. It was also a place where a river flowed into the port so it was a maritime center and that caused it to be inhabited and populated by traders and sailors. It was also on the route of the Egnatian Highway, one of the major east-west trade routes, so it was a busy bustling kind of city that brought together the west and the east, Rome all the way to the Orient. Became a major trade center. It was a place of vice. It was a place of crime. Murder was common. Prostitution was rampant and well organized. Historians tell us that

obscene pictures were painted even on the walls of houses. Babies were abandoned. People had to bar their doors and windows because of crime. It was a tough town because it was a trade town, a town of commerce. That's where Paul went.

In the year about 50 A.D., he landed there with his two companions and planted a church. By the way, that city still exists; today it's known as Salonica, Greece.

Now Paul was there for three Sabbaths, but in those three Sabbaths and some extended time, God used him to plant a wonderful and strong church. He left and continued on his journey. He wanted to know about them. He was very concerned to know how they were doing. There was heavy persecution. He had only been there a brief time. He was concerned about their leadership, about their staying power and so forth. And so he sent Timothy back. He refers to this in 1 Thessalonians. He sent Timothy back, "Find out about them, Timothy." And Timothy came back with a wonderful report and that's what prompted him to write the first letter.

Some time around the spring he wrote that first letter that we have studied called 1 Thessalonians. He then stayed in Corinth where he wrote that letter for about 18 to 22 months, so he had a long visit there. But after having written that first letter early in his stay at Corinth, he writes the second letter. And it's only months later. In other words, maybe some time from November through February is when he wrote this second letter. This means a few months have passed and he's gotten another report. We don't know where the report came from. We don't know the source and we don't know the specifics of it. But obviously he has heard further word and the further word about the Thessalonian church prompts him to write a second rich and wonderful letter to them.

Now when we study the letter, we can get a feeling for what the issues were. We don't, as I said, know who brought the report or what it specifically said. But it isn't too difficult to find out what was going on.

The first thing you note if you read 2 Thessalonians is that he talks about persecution and endurance. So we can assume the persecution had continued. The persecution may be escalated. The heat perhaps had been turned up.

The second thing you'll note as you read this letter is that there still remained confusion over the Second Coming of Christ. We know the first time he got a report from Timothy there was that confusion, so in 1 Thessalonians he had written about the Rapture and about the Day of the Lord. Well apparently that confusion still exists. There may have been a false letter, that is a letter said to be from Paul that was not from Paul that had been given to the church at Thessalonica with some error in it. They thinking it came from Paul bought into it and it created some of the confusion. So there is the possibility that they had a false Pauline letter that had created some of their problems.

Furthermore there were other false teachers who said that suffering means the end is present with you. You're living in the end. And so that confusion continued about the Second Coming and that is apparent in the second letter.

The third thing that must have come to him in the report was that some of the people were believing that Jesus was coming in any split second. And as a result of that, because they were already living in the end, Jesus would be there in any moment, they were not working. They had ceased to work and were becoming leeches on the Christian community and so the issue of indolence and laziness and a failure to work becomes a very important part of this letter.

Now if you understand that you can understand the flow of the letter. The first chapter deals with the issue of persecution and maintaining your endurance and perseverance. The second chapter deals with Christ's return and the details that will set them straight about that. The third chapter deals with refusing to work and the laziness of certain Christians and what is required by God for them.

And even though he's dealing with serious issues, perseverance under persecution, straightening out confusion about the Second Coming, and encouraging people to work and not be lazy, there is not an authoritative tone. It is a very loving tone in which he writes. Even when he's hammering away on the people who aren't working and who need to be strongly admonished because of their sin, he says, "Remember to admonish them as brothers." There's a tenderness in this letter which leads us to believe that though the problems were present, the problems were not severe and they were not to the point of destroying the testimony of this otherwise wonderful church.

Now before he launches into the issues that face them in this very opening part, he wants to commend them. And so he says, "We thank God for you and we speak proudly about you." This is a church to be thankful for, this is a church to be proud of. Why? Because of five simple realities...five simple realities. Here is God's criteria, God's standard for church to be proud of and thankful for.

Number one, and this, of course, comes through in the very opening as it did in the first letter, genuine conversion...genuine conversion. There is the first issue that you're faced with as you read verse 1. "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians...here it is...in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Makes the very clear point that this church is in God and Christ. And then goes on to say, affirmingly, "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Wishing upon them continued experiences of grace, continued experiences of peace which are theirs because they have a life union with God and a life union with Jesus Christ. This then is a regenerate church. This is a redeemed church, a believing church, genuinely converted. And that is the obvious point that comes out in the introduction.

You'll also remember that that is the same thing identically to what he said in chapter 1 of the first letter. Only one word differs. Notice in verse 1 the word "our God...our Father." That is the only word that differs from the opening of the first letter. The first letter says, "God, the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." And here in the intimacy of this letter he chooses to use that personal possessive pronoun "our" to emphasize that God is the Father of believers. May I add that is an unusual emphasis? Usually in the epistles of Paul God is seen as the Father generally, or God is seen as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rarely is He seen as the Father of believers. That is true but that is not the main feature or emphasis of his fatherhood in the epistles or for that matter in the gospels.

But here is an appropriate emphasis for a little church being approached intimately in a time of severe persecution. They are the subject and the object of a loving Father's tender care. And he notes, of course, the key word there, the word "in." We are in God our Father, and in the Lord Jesus Christ. And here he's simply reiterating their vital union with God and with Christ. No religion of the world talks like this. It is not said that you are in Confucius, or you are in Buddha. That is not the way the world speaks religiously. No one in the Muslim religion is in Mohammed, or in Allah. Such terminology is unique to Christianity because we know that the Bible teaches that when one puts faith in Christ there is then an intimate union of life, sure life in which we are indivisibly united with the living God and the Lord Jesus Christ. We have a common life. This is the mystery that Paul unfolds in Ephesians 3:9 and Colossians 3 where he talks about the union that we have. This is what he had in mind in Galatians 2:20, that mystical life union that we have with Jesus Christ. And so that marks our identity as a truly genuine believer. We are in God, in Christ, sharing a common union of life with them both.

It is also essential to note and certainly Paul had it in mind, verse 1, he combines God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; verse 2, God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And by putting those two together on an equal footing, the Son is placed alongside the Father, you can see the emphasis on the deity of Jesus Christ. It is always interesting to me that this is done without any comment, without any need to sort of explain this. If indeed Jesus were not God, if He were not equal to God, then there would need to be some explanation here for putting God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ together as the ones in whom the believer is deeply united in eternal spiritual life. And furthermore in verse 2, there would need to be some explanation as to how God and the Lord Jesus Christ both can be the source of grace and the source of peace if Christ is not in fact God.

But the New Testament makes no effort to try to explain such equality because such equality is in fact the obvious truth of the New Testament. So he is saying you are not only gathered into a place called Thessalonica, but you are enfolded into God and you are enfolded into Jesus Christ. And as such, you are the recipients of ongoing grace and the recipients of ongoing peace. Grace simply being God's favor to the sinner; peace being the result of that favor. And you have it not once in the past, but ever and always in the present.

So he is identifying them as a genuinely converted group, and therein lies the first...the first reality, the first feature, the first element of a church to be proud of. It is a group of redeemed people. The church is not to be an association for unbelievers. It is not to be a mixture of believers and unbelievers. It is to be a place of redeemed people who come together in an assemblage for the purpose of worship, edification, the purpose of exalting God and learning about Him. This church was a church to be proud of because this church was redeemed. This was an assembly of genuinely converted people.

Chapter 2 verse 13 expands a little bit on this and we shall see the richness of that in more detail as we get to this section but for the moment look at 2:13 and 14. Here is a recitation of the great sweeping eternal work that God was doing in the Thessalonian church. "We should always give thanks to God for you, brethren, beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth and it was for this He called you through our gospel that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." I don't know if there's another Scripture in the New Testament more concise than that in sweeping us from eternity past to eternity future in the matter of salvation. God loved you and so He chose you. Because He chose you, you were saved. Saved through the gospel by the sanctifying work of the Spirit and faith in the truth in order that ultimately you may gain the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sweeping redemptive terminology.

This is a redeemed church. They were beloved of God before the foundation of the world. They were elect by God. They were brought into salvation through the hearing of the gospel and the sanctifying work of the Spirit and their faith in the truth and they're now headed for eternal glory. This is a saved church.

You might want to take the little word "in" in verse 1 and draw a circle around it and put down 2:13 and 14 because 2:13 and 14 explain what "in" involves. That's what "in" means. It means all of that sweeping redemptive reality is theirs and thus do they have grace and thus do they have peace.

What is a church to be proud of? A church of redeemed people. Not a club for unbelievers, a church of redeemed people. A church of those deeply united in the life of God and the life of Christ and the recipients of ongoing grace and peace. Genuinely saved, not a church like Sardis who had a name but was dead, had programs but was dead. Not a church like Laodicea that the Lord will spit out of His mouth because it nauseates Him. This is a church of genuinely redeemed people. That's what a church is. A church is an assemblage of the redeemed who gather for the purpose of worship and edification. And edification is only for the sake of greater worship.

The second feature, the second reality, the second characteristic of a church to be proud of, verse 3, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting because your faith is

greatly enlarged."

Here's the second thing, increasing faith...increasing faith. In verse 3 he says "We ought," opheilo in the Greek, it means you have a deep obligation. It isn't something we choose to do or not to do. It isn't something arbitrary. We are bound, we are under compulsion, we are driven. This must be done, is what he's saying. It has to be done. And at the end of that first opening phrase he says, "As is only fitting." In other words, it is deserved that we give thanks to God for you. We're bound, we're under personal obligation, compulsion because of the character of your life as a church, because of the quality of this congregation to always...notice that word...to always, unceasingly, at all times congratulate, listen now, not you but whom? God. Cause whatever you are it's because God has done His work. He is the source of the divine life. He is the source of the grace. He has made you what you are.

So it is only right because you are such a model church. You're such a wonderful church that we ought unceasingly, without hesitation at all times to give thanks to God for you, brethren. It's only fitting. It's no more than God deserves. Why? Because your faith is greatly enlarged. Would you please notice he doesn't say, "Because your congregation is greatly enlarged." He doesn't say, "Because your buildings are greatly enlarged." "Because your choir is greatly enlarged." "Because your Sunday School is greatly enlarged." "Because your bus fleet is greatly enlarged." He doesn't say, "We're thankful, so thankful because your pipe organ is greatly enlarged, your rock band is so effective, your stained glass windows are so nice." He says, "We are thankful to God all the time for you and under obligation to express it because your faith is greatly enlarged." This is the key.

Now this is a wonderful thing for Paul to say. I'm telling you, when he says this there's some background. If you go back to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, you remember in verse 3 he noted their faith? He said, "That when I pray I thank God for you and when I thank God for you, I thank God for your work of faith," do you see that there in verse 3? Your work of faith...they had faith, they had a real faith, they had a faith that worked. It was a real thing, it was genuine and it worked. James talks about a dead faith that doesn't work, this is a living faith that does work.

But notice over in chapter 3 of 1 Thessalonians, verse 10, Paul says there that he night and day keeps praying, most earnestly, to see your face. And then he says that God may complete what is lacking in your faith.

So he says you have a real faith. You have a faith that works. You need more faith. You need a larger faith, a stronger faith, a greater faith. So while on the one hand commending them for their faith, he also prays that their faith may be enlarged. Now you'll notice back in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 3 he says, "Your faith is greatly enlarged," so his prayers had been answered, the report had come, yes you have a faith, yes that faith works, yes that faith needs to be enlarged, and now I hear it has been growing. Your faith is hyperauxano, he uses one of those compound hyper

words that he loves to use. It is growing beyond what could be expected. It is growing beyond what I might have thought or even hoped. And this under persecution?

Let me give you a principle. Persecution destroys false faith. Persecution destroys false faith. Persecution never destroys true faith. Persecution destroys false faith. You remember Matthew 13 verses 20 and 21? Jesus talked about seed that fell into the ground, the ground was rocky, the plant came up for a little while. As soon as persecution came, it died. Persecution destroys false faith. It never destroys true faith. And somebody says why? And the answer is, because true faith is indestructible...true faith is indestructible. Luke 22:32, Peter looked at Jesus in the moment of his failure, Jesus looked back at Peter and said, "I have prayed for you that your faith fail not." Why is it indestructible? Because Jesus Christ will never let it be destroyed. It is indestructible. No matter how stressing, no matter how hard, no matter how troubled the times and events, no matter how deep, deep the pain, no matter how severe the persecution, the only thing that gets destroyed by persecution is false faith. That's why we always say that persecution produces a pure church.

And so, what happened to the Thessalonians? They were real. They were in God and in Christ, the genuine recipients of grace and peace. And therefore when the persecution came and the heat was turned up, all it did was increase their trust. Why? Because persecution drives the true believer to whom? To God. Remember 2 Corinthians 12 Paul says, "I had this thorn in the flesh." Where did he go? "Three times I went to the Lord." Trouble, persecution, distress, affliction, pain drives the true believer to the Lord and when you're driven to the Lord you learn to know Him more deeply and the more you know Him the more you trust Him and that's how trust grows. I would go so far as to say it is hard for faith to grow without difficulty, without persecution or affliction or trouble or trials or stress because God has no opportunity to draw you to Himself and display His love and mercy and power. So, the true believer accepts all of this and finds his trust in God is growing.

There's a movement running around that perhaps I need to just comment on at this point. And they keep talking about this idea of forgiving God. I've read about this now on numerous occasions. You need to learn to forgive God. That is a horrible concept, but I'm reading about it in Christian literature. Assuming that God, you know, is up there doing a lot of things and He's trying to make it as nice for you as possible, but every once in a while some good meaning Christian is going to get ground up in God's gears because God can't just quite make it all come out the way it maybe ought to in your life. You need to forgive God because He really has a good intention. He's really trying to do His best but it's really hard because there's so many contingencies and, you know, once in a while somebody is going to get ground up in God's gears, but He's a well-meaning God and just forgive Him.

That is an attitude of a non-Christian, not a believer. The believer's faith does not wane so that he starts collapsing and somebody comes to him and says, "You're going to lose it all, man, if you can't forgive God." Quite the contrary. The more difficult life becomes, the greater my confidence in God is that He is without flaw. A believer's faith and trust grows through persecution, it never destroys true

faith. It couldn't destroy Job's true faith, could it? He got it all and the worst of it was a lot of bad advice. Nothing is going to separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, Romans says. That's why...that's why the New Testament makes it absolutely crystal clear, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while if necessary you have been distressed by various trials that the proof of your faith being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Here comes the heat and all it does is prove your faith and it strengthens it. That's Peter, 1 Peter 1:6 and 7.

James says, "Count it all joy when you fall into these kind of things because they have a perfecting work." And what do they perfect? Your faith, your trust in God. The more trouble and trial and persecution you go through, the more you're driven to God. The more you're driven to God, the better you know Him. The better you know Him, the more you trust Him. Simple.

This was a church to be proud of. Why? They had genuine conversion and increasing faith. Their trust in God, their trust in Christ was growing beyond what might have even been expected under the severe persecution.

There's a third thing that marked out this church. He mentions that in verse 3. He says at the end of the verse, " And the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater." They not only had genuine conversion, increasing faith, but they had growing love...growing love. By this again I simply remind you we're not talking about some passive emotion. We're not talking about some squashy sentimentality. We're talking here about the kind of love that makes sacrifices for people, the kind of love that cares so deeply it speaks the truth. But I want you to understand that this too was a joy for Paul to write.

Go back to 1 Thessalonians 1 again. Please notice verse 3 again. Not only did he always thank God for their work of faith, but he thanked God for their labor of love. You see, they had love and he knew that, and he thanked God for that. But again go to chapter 3 of 1 Thessalonians. Yes they had love, there's no question they had love. But look at verse 12, he's asking that, "The Lord may cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all men." So he's saying you have love, you need more. Just like he said, you have faith, you need more. Now he says you have love and you need more.

Back in verse 6 he said, "I heard about your faith, I heard about your love, but I still want to see more of it." Now whatever report came back has told him indeed there has occurred a stronger faith, and a growing love so he says, "I've heard of it and your faith is greatly enlarged and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater." So his desire is being realized, his prayer is being answered.

It was growing extremely, like a healthy plant. And he says it's true of each one of you. Apparently there isn't anybody to single out who was a problem. Here was this church under persecution and they were loving each other. They were loving each other. That's the mark of a true believer. "By this shall all men know that you're My disciples," John 13:34 and 35, "that you have love one for another." And in hard times, trying times, persecuting times when the enemy comes with all his assaults, the true church embraces in love, the true church gathers in love. I'll tell you what, persecution will smoke out the ones who aren't true because they'll become hostile. They'll find it difficult to make the sacrifices, to show the love, to bear the burdens of others, they'll be so preoccupied with their own pain. Again persecution surfaces true faith and it surfaces true Christian love.

By the way, both of those are in the present tense...your faith is currently greatly enlarged and your love is currently growing greater. That was happening at this very moment. Those are the essential elements of the redeemed nature, faith in God and love toward others. And they were working, they were happening. Remember the great commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; your neighbor as yourself," that fleshes out in the church in faith toward God and love toward your fellow man. Those are the marks of true Christianity. And here were these genuine Christians being persecuted and it was just like pressing them together. And what was being squeezed out was a growing faith and a growing love.

God never evaluates a church ever by its external features. He never evaluates a church for its innovation, its cleverness, its artistry, its political influence, for its social prominence, its size or anything else on the outside. A church to be proud of is a church where the people are real Christians who have an increase in faith that has been tested and out of a growing love that flows unhindered among them all.

The fourth characteristic appears in verse 4. "Therefore we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God, for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure." Lets call this persevering hope, persevering hope. A church to be proud of confronts the world, gets persecuted, faith grows, love grows and hope perseveres. I love this.

This church had a strong hope. Go back to 1 Thessalonians again, chapter 1 verse 3, same thing. He says, "Every time I pray for you I always remember your steadfastness of hope." You have a strong hope. But over in chapter 3 again, verse 5, 3 through 5 actually, he says, "But I want you to have a stronger one, I've concerned about whether you're really hanging in there, whether you're going to endure all these afflictions." So he says you have hope, I want you to have more hope. Here he writes and says, "Yes, you are having more hope, you're persevering, you're hanging in there." So it's the same kind of pattern. First time he wrote them, you have it but I want to see more of it. Second time he writes, yes, yes, God is answering my prayers, I'm seeing increased faith,

increased love, persevering hope.

So in verse 4, "Therefore because of your faith enlarged, because of your love enlarged, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God," and then he adds, "And also for your enduring hope." "We ourselves" is a wonderful emphatic phrase that the Apostle puts in here, "We ourselves." And it introduces us probably to a very lovely little nuance that you might miss. This was, no doubt, a humble group, the Thessalonians, and having received the first letter they may have been a bit overwhelmed by the first chapter because the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians extols their virtues and even the second chapter extols their virtues, and even the third chapter extols their virtues as a church. And they may have been a little bit humbled by it all and felt quite unworthy of such grandiose affection coming from Paul and they may have been humble in their response and been reluctant to accept that they were a worthy church, reluctant to accept that they were a church to be proud of and certainly be the last people to blow their own horn, or say anything about themselves. And so it's almost like Paul says this in a contractive way, and thus the Holy Spirit chooses the emphatic as if to say, "We ourselves, rather than expecting you to do it, speak proudly of you among the churches of God. For we know that you would be too humble to ever do that." And certainly this suits, doesn't it, the revelation of God in Proverbs 27:2 where it says, "Let your praise be in another man's mouth and not in your own." And so he says I know you wouldn't say anything but we ourselves are happy to say it.

And there's another little idea here, too. It's as if to say, we're just not plain common folk, this is us, you know, Paul and Silas and Timothy, and, you know, we're kind of significant in the kingdom and if we think you're something, then believe me, you're something. We speak proudly. And again he uses another of his beloved compound verbs to say when we say we speak proudly, we speak super-proudly. We're absolutely thrilled at what God's done in you.

And you can understand that, can't you? There were so many churches that just broke Paul's heart and gave him all kinds of problems and little did he know that where he was ministering even as he wrote this in the city of Corinth, they would turn out to be a heartache upon heartache for him.

But this church brought him tremendous joy. And so he says, "We ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God." Why? Why? "For your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure." You just endure all of this, your hope is unwavering. Perseverance is not passive acquiescence. It doesn't mean "oh well, I'll just give up and let it happen." It is...it is enduring courage. It is to remain under patiently, enduring courageously the trouble.

The word "faith" there can mean an enduring faith. It can mean a faith that doesn't die. But perhaps it's best to see it used in the sense of faithfulness. That is the way Paul uses the term pistis which means faith in Romans 3:3, Galatians 5:22, Titus 2:10. So it is not out of line to see him using it here

and it seems to fit. He is thankful and proud of them for what God is doing in their perseverance or their enduring courage and their faithfulness. They really hang in there, in the midst of all your persecutions, that's a technical term that means persecutions, and afflictions, that's a general word that means the physical harm that is done by the specific persecution. So through the persecution and what they do to you, you endure it all, you persevere, you stay faithful. That means your hope hasn't died. You're still looking ahead. They refused to give up their hope. They took it all.

This is a church to be proud of. Not the church that is popular with the world, not the church that has won the favor of the world. Not the church that the world doesn't really see as any different than them. Not the church that wins the attention and the love of the world. But the church that under terrible persecution has an enduring hope.

There's a fifth component in verse 5. This, perhaps the most fascinating verse in this text. This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment, "So that you may be considered worthy of the Kingdom of God for which indeed you are suffering."

At first glance it might be a bit confusing as to what he is saying and admittedly it has confused some. But I think the simplest way to understand it is this, the fifth mark of a church to be proud of and thankful for is a kingdom attitude...a kingdom attitude. They had the right perspective. Churches today tend to be world centered, man centered. This kingdom was...this church was kingdom centered. Their focus was not on being happy. Their focus was not on personal fulfillment. Their focus was not on personal comfort. Their focus was not on self-satisfaction. Their focus was not on success. Their focus was not on being appreciated like you hear so much today. This was no prosperity message, no psychological, self-help message. Their focus was clearly on the kingdom. They were living out Matthew 6:33, "Seeking first the kingdom and His righteousness and let all the other things be added in God's sovereign plan." They're consumed with the kingdom. Their concern with the kingdom. That's what he's saying.

And he's saying this, "Look, your perseverance, and your faithfulness through all of this suffering is a plain indication...or literally endeigma...is proof, is evidence of God's righteous chastening." Krisis rather than krima which he uses a little later for future, final judgment. What do you mean? What is he saying here? He's saying...Look, the fact that you're suffering is evidence, plain and clear and obvious, that God is righteously chastening you so that you may be considered worthy of the Kingdom of God for which indeed you are suffering. You're not suffering because you're bad people, you're suffering because you're Kingdom people, because you're different than the world, because you are unique, because you confront the system, because you are godly and virtuous and righteous and moral and you're antithetical to the culture. You're suffering for the Kingdom's sake and part of that suffering God is using to purge and prune and clean and chasten and cleanse to make you ready to receive the full glory of the Kingdom. That's a Kingdom view. That's a Kingdom attitude.

They were not writing books, "Why do bad things happen to good people." They weren't writing books like that. They weren't being taken to seminars and learning to forgive God. They were saying, "Look, that's fine, we don't care about this world, we know that the fact that we suffer and go through trials is the thing that God in His righteous chastening purpose uses to fit us for eternal glory." That's what he's saying. You have a plain proof that God is working on you to suit you for glory. What a wonderful church.

How do you know they were genuinely converted? I'll tell you how, they had a faith that kept increasing under trials. They had a love that kept growing under trials. They had a hope that kept enduring under trials. And they had a Kingdom attitude that never wavered under persecution. And they cared little about what happened to the physical because they knew God was using all of that as a pruning, purging, judging, chastening work to suit them for future glory. This is a church to be proud of. This is a church to be thankful for.

One little note in verse 5, "So that you may be considered worthy of the Kingdom of God." You could never really...you could never really recreate yourself to be worthy of the Kingdom of God. Here the best way to translate that would be to be declared worthy, just as in Christ you are declared righteous. So here you are declared worthy even through your suffering, through all the suffering you could possibly endure you couldn't be made righteous, right? You couldn't be made worthy of the Kingdom. But God in His mercy and grace through His purging, judging, chastening, purifying, pruning work declares you worthy for His Kingdom. And I think there the Kingdom of God looks to the future, full glorious manifestation of what is to come.

Leon Morris has written a paragraph that I cannot resist reading to you. "The New Testament does not look on suffering in quite the same way as do most modern people. To us it is in itself an evil, something to be avoided at all costs. Now while the New Testament does not gloss over this aspect of suffering, it does not lose sight either of the fact that in the good providence of God, suffering is often the means of working out God's eternal purpose. It develops in the sufferer's qualities of character. It teaches valuable lessons. Suffering is not thought of as something that may possibly be avoided by the Christian for him it is inevitable. He must live out his life and develop his Christian character in a world which is dominated by non-Christian ideas. His faith is not some fragile thing to be kept in a kind of spiritual cotton wool, insulated from all shocks. It is robust. It is to be manifested in the fires of trouble and in the furnace of affliction. And not only is it to be manifested there, but in part, at any rate, it is to be fashioned in such places. The very troubles and afflictions which the world heaps on the believer become under God the means of making him what he ought to be. Suffering, when we have come to regard it in this light is not to be thought of as evidence that God has forsaken us, but as evidence that God is with us," end quote.

So says verse 5. All this suffering that you've gone through is a plain evidence that God is with you, fitting you for glory. That's a Kingdom attitude. That's a Kingdom attitude.

You want a church that God is proud of and the Apostles would boast about? That's a church genuinely converted, an assembly of redeemed people meeting for worship and edification. A church where faith is growing under persecution because that church is a rebuke to the world around it. A church where love is flourishing as believers meet one another's needs in the difficult times. A church where hope endures everything that comes, and a church where there is little concern for what happens to us in this life, because we live with a Kingdom attitude and we know that all the difficulties are but God's means of suiting us for eternal glory. That's a church to be thankful for. That's a church to be proud of. Probably not a church to win a contemporary contest. That's the kind of church we want to be, right? Let's pray.

Father, thank You for this straightforward and helpful word to us from the pages of this beautiful letter. And even though this letter was penned nearly 2,000 years ago, it is so fresh and so rich and so alive to us this morning. Thank You that it ministered to our hearts and shall continue to do so as we are refreshed from time to time in its reading. And bless it as it goes forth and may many lives be brought to conformity to Your will and many churches begin to pursue the path that honors you. We thank You in Christ's name. Amen.

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