

## Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return: What We're Thankful For

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4

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*The Lord's Day Morning*  
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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. We'll be looking at verses 3 and 4 today as we continue our way through Paul's letter. Last week we looked at Paul's greeting; today we look at the very first order of business Paul has with the Thessalonians in this congregation, which is thanksgiving. Here, in verses 3 and 4, we meet Paul's first concern — to give thanks to God. There are problems in this church, there are trials that they are facing, there are issues for him to address, but Paul is under a joyful compulsion to thank God for what God is doing in the lives of the Thessalonians. And so he does that straightway in these verses. And I'd like you to be on the lookout for three or four things.

The first thing that's very striking when you look at verse 3 is the sense of obligation that Paul feels to give thanksgiving. The second thing I want you to notice is the content of that thanksgiving — what is it that Paul gives thanks for? For knowing the right thing to be thankful for or the most important things to be thankful for, well this is surely one of the secrets to the Christian life. Third, again in verse 3, I want you to notice particularly the direction of his thanksgiving — who is he thankful to? And then finally, I want you to see in verse 4 the result of all of this. So before we read God's Word, let's pray and ask for His help and blessing.

*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we ask that You would give us an ear to understand it. By Your Spirit, open our eyes to believe it. And we pray that Your Holy Spirit would apply it to our own particular hearts and lives in the specific way that we need most this day. This is the living, active, Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword; it's able to pierce to the deepest part of our soul, to our being, and it's able to equip us for every good work. It's profitable, Lord, so make Your Word profitable to our souls today, in Jesus' name, amen.*

This is the Word of God. Hear it:

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 afflictions that you are enduring.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

What are you thankful for? You may have waked up early this morning and gone outside and felt about sixty-three degrees and been very thankful. I was. Lord, You're about a month early on this. You might have waked up and within seconds of awaking this morning you might have thought, "Lord, thank You for giving me another day. Thank You that I'm breathing and conscious, living." You may be thankful for your health. You may have friends around you who's health is not so good and it's made you aware of what a blessing it is to have a body that works and to still be well and to be able to do what you want to do, to be relatively independent. You may be thankful for your family, for your friends. You may have friends that are not as blessed in their family life as you are blessed — maybe in relation to your husband, or to your wife or to your children, or even to the circle of friends that you're with. You may be thankful for where you're located. You may have a friend who loved it here and had to move away and is having a hard time adjusting in their new place and it's made you thankful again that the Lord has called you to where He's called you. And you may say with the psalmist, "The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places." You may be thankful for your work. I think one of the things that have struck us in the last two weeks of political conventions is just how many of our fellow Americans aren't working. Millions of our fellow Americans don't have a job. And you may think to yourself, "Lord, thank You that I get to work; I get to provide for my family, put a roof over their heads, clothes on their backs, food at the table, and I get to do a job that I like and that's a blessing and I thank You, Lord." What are you thankful for?

## **PAUL'S SENSE OF OBLIGATION TO THANKSGIVING**

Our thankfulness and what we're thankful for is a major part of the Christian life and I want us to give attention to Paul's thankfulness here because he is a thankful brother. We see that through all his writings, and I want us to see what he's thankful for here, because what he's thankful for and the fact that he is thankful is very instructive for us in the living of the Christian life and so I'd like to look this morning at four things in particular. And the first thing that I want you to see is a little unusual. I want you to see Paul's sense of obligation to thanksgiving. Did you catch that in verse 3? Paul isn't just thankful for the Thessalonians, he is, and he doesn't just express thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians, which he does, Paul, in verse 3, says he is under an obligation to be thankful. Did you see his words? "We ought to give thanks to God." And then just in case you missed it, at the end of that sentence he said, "as is right." That's

a strong word — “ought” and then “as is right.” He is under a sense of obligation to be thankful. Paul is saying that it's not just that he's delighted to give thanks, or that he wants to give thanks, but that he ought to give thanks. Paul is saying that it's almost a moral requirement for him, a moral demand to give thanks.

Now that's very important. I want us to pause; I don't want us to miss that because this is something that is important for fighting discontentment in the Christian life. Discontentment flows, very often, from not having what we want to have. And very often in our minds, there grows a connection between what we don't have that we want to have and what we really believe that we ought to have. You know there gets to be a point in your life where you think, “I don't have this that I want and you know what, I really ought to have that.” And what is that? It's a growing sense of entitlement. “God hasn't given me something that I really deserve to have.” Or it can be the other way around too. We can have a growing discontentment because we have something that we don't want to have. You know there is something in our life, in our family, in our health, in our situation, in our circumstances — we didn't want it to be what way; that's not the way we planned it when we started out in life, but boy, it's been put right in the middle of our lap and we are growing in our discontentment because we didn't want that. And what starts happening is there is this growing connection between having something that we didn't want and thinking, “You know what, I really, I deserve not to have that in my life.”

Now how do you fight that? You fight it with gratitude. You fight it with thanksgiving. The apostle Paul had more reasons to complain than anybody in this room, and yet he puts a priority on thanksgiving. And he provides us a way to fight discontentment by acknowledging the Lord. “Lord, whatever good things you've brought into my life, I did not deserve it. It was Your gift, and therefore I'm under obligation to be thankful to You.” And my friends, that is a strategic weapon in the living of the Christian life because all of us, at some time or another, in some way or another, fight the fight of discontentment. We're single and we want to be married; we're married and we're childless and we want to have children; we're married and we have children but we don't want the children we have; we'd like someone else to take care of our parent, please, right now. And it goes on. And we all fight the fight of discontentment.

How do you fight it? You've got to fight it with real, honest-to-goodness Gospel gratitude. And if you don't sense with Paul that you're under an obligation to be thankful to God because every good gift that you have comes from the Father of lights, the heavenly Father, who's given you something you don't deserve. So instead of thinking about what you don't have that you want and what you do have that you don't want, you think about the real, concrete, tangible blessings that God has given you and you cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving; you live under a sense of obligation to gratitude. And I don't mean a grudging obligation like, “Oh, I have to be grateful,” I mean a sense of, “It would be wrong for me not to be grateful given what God has done for me.” Because Satan wants to

convince you that God is stingy and He's parsimonious in handing out His blessing and He has left you considerable short of what you deserve. How do you fight that? You fight that with exactly what Paul does here — a sense of obligation to express gratitude to God. That's the first thing that I want you to see. Paul is under this happy, this joyful sense of obligation to show thankfulness, to express thanksgiving, to give praise to God, to show gratitude to God for what He's done here. And that's so important for us in the living of the Christian life.

## **THE CONTENT OF PAUL'S THANKSGIVING**

The second thing I want you to see is this, again in verse 3. And that's the content of Paul's thanksgiving. What is it that Paul is thankful for? Look with me; it's in the second half of verse 3. We ought to give thanks to God because “your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.” What Paul is thankful for here is the evidence of Christian graces in the Christians in the Thessalonian church. And not just the evidence of Christian graces, but the fact that they're actually growing, their maturing in those Christian graces.

And in particular, notice he thanks God for two things — they are growing in faith and they are increasing in love. He thanks God for growing faith and increasing love. Isn't it interesting that Jesus talked about both of those things on the night that He was betrayed in the Upper Room with His disciples? He talked with His disciples about faith, about believing - “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.” And He talked to them about love — “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you, so also love one another.” He talks about faith and love. And Paul, if you look back to 1Thessalonians chapter 3, 11 or 12 or 13, right in there, the prayer that he prays for the Thessalonians in the earlier letter is a prayer that they would increase in faith and love. And here he is giving thanks for their increasing faith and love.

Now this is very important. What are we thankful for? We may be thankful for health and life or job and family, or when we look at our children we may be, we may be very, very interested in their academic pursuits and success and thankful for that or their athletic success or their social success or their physical attractiveness or even their material success when they get out of their studies and start doing well, but are we really concerned about the evidences of graces in their souls? You know, if you were given the choice of having a godly child who wasn't the best student, wasn't the best athlete, wasn't the most popular, didn't end up being the most financially successful, wasn't the most attractive, but she, he was godly, filled with faith, growing in love, what would you say to the Lord? What's your priority? What do you really care about? What are you really thankful for? You see, what Paul is thankful for is actually guiding us to the right priorities here. He looks out in this congregation and he says, “Lord, they're

growing in trust in You! They're trusting Your promises, they're believing Your Gospel, they're trusting the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of all their trials and afflictions! They have faith — praise God! Thank You Lord that that's happening!"

And then he sees how they're loving one another. And don't you love the phrase that he uses? He says, "The love of every one of you for one another." This whole congregation is manifesting love to one another. All of them are involved in loving everybody else. Doesn't that make a pastor's heart happy? Because all the time pastors see people that are overlooked and forgotten and on the edges. Paul's saying, "Every single one of you is showing love to everybody else," and it makes Paul's heart sing with thanksgiving, but it also points us to our priority. Is that what we really want? Is that what we really want for ourselves and does it express it in our prayers? "Lord, our child may not be first in the class, he may not be best in sports, he may not be the president of the right sorority or fraternity, he may not be the wealthiest when he or she graduates, but she loves the Lord, he trusts in God, he loves the brothers and sisters in Christ, he's growing in grace. Thank You, Lord, because that will never ever be over; it can never ever be taken away. It is the work that You're doing." You see, the very things that Paul is thankful for points us to what we ought to be thankful for. What are we thankful for? We're thankful for faith and love - Christian graces that God is working in the hearts of His people of this congregation.

## **THE DIRECTION OF PAUL'S THANKSGIVING**

Third, and again it's in verse 3; don't miss it. I want you to see the direction of Paul's thanksgiving. Notice he doesn't say, "Thessalonians, I want to thank you that you are increasing in faith and growing in love. He says, "I thank God that you are growing in faith and love." Notice the language of verse 3. "We ought to give thanks to God for you." The direction of the thanks is to God. It's a thankfulness for what God is doing in the Thessalonians but the thankfulness is being expressed to God. This is so important because it makes it clear that Paul knows that growing in faith and love in your life is the result of God's work in you; you didn't build that. You didn't build your faith; He did. He's the author and finisher of your faith. You're a loving person — you didn't create that love in you; His love created that love in you. Your faith and your love, and it really is your faith and your love, has its origin in the work of the Holy Spirit by grace growing you in faith and love. And so it's your faith and love but the credit goes to Him. And so there's Paul giving thanks to God for your faith and love. And that means that our attitude is consistently going to be, when the evidences of God's grace is there in our life, we're going to say, "God gets all the credit. He gets all the praise." Don't you love Augustine's prayer? He says, "Lord, whatever good there is in me is due to You, the rest is my fault." That was Augustine's prayer. "Lord, whatever good there is in me is due to You, the rest is my fault." That's the attitude that's going to pervade us individually and as a congregation. And so I want us to see the direction of the thanksgiving.

## PERSEVERING IN PERSECUTIONS AND ENDURING AFFLICTIONS

So Paul has a sense of obligation to thanksgiving, he has a specific content of thanksgiving, he's thankful for growth in faith and love, and he has a direction for this thanksgiving. Now what's the result of this growing faith and love in the Thessalonian church? This is the fourth thing I want you to see and it's in verse 4. Look at what Paul says. "Therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God, so I'm not only thankful for you, I'm bragging about you." And then he says, "What's the result then? What's your growing faith and your increasing love led to? Your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring." Isn't that interesting? Their growing faith and their increasing love have enabled them to persevere in persecutions and to endure affliction. Isn't that interesting?

You know, the older I grow, the more important perseverance and endurance is to me. There was an article in *The Economist* sometime in the last week looking at America's wars and it was comparing the duration of America's wars and it had a very interesting graph. We have been at war for one hundred and twelve months. It's the longest war in America's history and the most expensive war. And as a nation, you know what? We're tired and our armed forces are tired of war. Well, if you live to be a Christian of eighty years of age, you've got to persevere for more than eight hundred and fifty months. And the apostle Paul is saying to the Thessalonians and to you and me, "I'm in the business of building Christians who can persevere for a thousand months or more. They keep on going; they don't quit; they don't stop believing; they don't stop loving; they don't stop growing; they don't fall away; they don't reject the Lord. I'm building them for the long haul." And the apostle Paul is looking at this Thessalonian church that's already experiencing persecution and affliction and he's saying, "You're clinging to Christ! You're holding onto Jesus! You're still trusting Him! You're going through these persecutions! You're not giving up, you're not turning back, you're not rejecting Jesus!" And it leads Paul to give thanks because he wants to see believers endure.

Maybe you've been watching the news but in the last forty-eight, seventy-two hours, there has been a lot of noise about the release of an Iranian Christian pastor, Youcef Nadarkhani. He was imprisoned three years ago, charged with apostasy — ceasing to be a Muslim and becoming a Christian — and then charged with evangelizing Muslims, sharing the Gospel with Muslims. And he was thrown in jail and he was charged and he was tried and he was convicted and he was sentenced to death and it's been working its way up through the Iranian courts and he's been released. But at several points along the way he has literally had Iranian judges say to him, "If you will deny Christ, I will release you and drop the charges. There will be no more legal repercussions. You will not die. You will not face the death penalty." And the good pastor has refused to

deny Jesus. And there's no doubt that the apostle Paul new some people in the Thessalonian church like that.

My friends, we ourselves must be ready for that, to give the good word of testimony, to refuse to deny our faith, because there is more and more pressure, even here, on you, to deny your Lord, to deny His Word, to deny what you believe. And how do you fight that? With increasing faith and love and with thankfulness. All of these things leads Paul to express gratitude. Are you grateful or are you entitled? Are you thankful or are you complaining? And what are you thankful for? Are you thankful for the things that will last forever or the things that will be gone in a matter of months? Paul has taught us much in these words of thanksgiving. May the Lord bring them home to our souls. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, we thank You. We wouldn't believe if You hadn't opened our hearts to believe, We wouldn't love one another if You hadn't loved us, and we will not continue in the faith if You don't hold us in the palm of Your hand. Our endurance is due to You, our love is due to You, our faith is due to You. Grant, O God, that we would increase in our trust of You and Your Word and in our love for one another and endure to the end, in Jesus' name, amen.*

Now let's express our thanksgiving to God using Psalm 116 and we'll find that in number 637.

There is no doubt that it was the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in the apostle Paul's life that was the source of His gratitude. So if we're going to be thankful, we need the grace of the Lord. Receive His benediction. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

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