

Small Group Study – 1 Thessalonians – John Morrison
Chapter Two – Evident Love

Paul begins the second chapter by telling them that his coming was not in vain. *For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. But after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi (as you know), we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.* Not vain means not empty, not lacking in substance, not useless. Both Jews and Gentiles had been telling the Thessalonian believers that they were wasting their time because the teaching that Jesus was the only way to God was the only thing they could agree on.

Part of Paul's explanation for why it wasn't in vain had to do with something they were well aware of — how mistreated he had been in Philippi. He reminds them in shorthand how he and Silas were brought to the magistrates, stripped and beaten, put in stocks and put in prison. The Thessalonians were being told by the anti-Christian partnership of Jews and Gentiles that Paul was promoting himself because he was a religious charlatan — a faker and opportunist. Paul makes a logical inference: If I was coming to get favorable personal attention, wouldn't I'd find a better system? This *Jesus-thing* sure wasn't the way to make that happen. Why continue preaching this message if Jesus really was dead and it just kept getting me in trouble?

That brings up a second point which he wants to be an example for them: He went on speaking the gospel of God in the midst of opposition. Look at verse 2: *We had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.* The Gospel — whatever that is — is his message, even in this letter to the Thessalonians, people who had already believed in Jesus. We'll see throughout the chapter that Paul speaks of "boldly speaking the Gospel." But why? Why does Paul keep going back to the gospel when they've already believed it? If they accepted that Jesus was God's one and only Son who had died for their sins and been raised from the dead and was coming back for those who believed in Him, couldn't they dispense with a focus on the gospel? See how it keeps being brought up?

Each time the word for *speaking boldly* is used in the NT, it is in the context of direct opposition or trial. It's an odd word meaning he was "all the more confident" in his speech in spite of dangerous opposition. In addition, he makes it plain that his boldness is a boldness "in God" meaning that God Himself is the source of a boldness that Paul is claiming he wouldn't otherwise have. But why would Paul stress this fact of boldness that they already know?

Look at the next use of the word gospel in verse 4: *But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts.* Here we see that the gospel which is something God entrusts to man. The authority and approval to speak for God His gospel is something the speaker must get from God, and it is something for which she or he is accountable to God. And God will examine not only our words but our motive: *is it for men's favor or God's?* This again stresses God as the origin of the message and as the One who will call for an accounting. It indirectly reminds the Thessalonians that they, too, are entrusted with the message and will one day be evaluated for whether they lived for the purpose of gaining man's approval or God's.

Look at the third use of this idea in the passage. Verse 8: *Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.*

Here Paul reminds the Thessalonians that his presence with them was not only one of words and of teaching, but of his very life. This is something which was also true about Jesus. He was not content to articulate propositions which were not fully backed up by a life that embodied truth and grace. Paul shows here that the gospel is never meant to be divorced from a lifestyle, a character, a life. What is so strong about the verse, however, is that the foundation for imparting not only "the gospel of God" but "also his very own soul (or life)" is the "fond affection" he felt for them.

I've often heard it taught that biblical love isn't a feeling but a commitment. Well, I see commitment, but here I also see a deep, passionate regard, a fondness, a sense of people being very dear to him. But if they knew these things, why tell them again? Maybe part was to refute the opposition. But may there have been more?

Look at Paul's last use of gospel in verse 9: *For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.* Here Paul reminds them that he proclaimed the gospel with hardship and faithfulness. Well, this can help stand against the claims of those who said he did it for profit. But may there be another reason why he continues to stress to these people who already have believed that he proclaimed the gospel? Before we answer that, we must also give attention to something else he did.

How did we speak?

Not only do we need to emphasize what Paul's message was (the gospel), we need to notice that he goes into great detail to tell them something else they already know: what he and Silas weren't like when they came and what they were like. In other words, while the core message of the gospel was important, he stresses that the manner he and Silas came to the Thessalonians some months earlier – was almost as important. Their character actually undergirded and affirmed the gospel.

Let's look at a chart which summarizes these few verses, 1-11, concerning the manner in which he and Silas came to them. We see Paul setting us up with a series of contrasts. Let's again read these few verses, verses 3-11. The contrasts stand out vividly:

NOT LIKE THIS	RATHER LIKE THIS
In Error	Approved by God Entrusted with the Gospel
Pleasing Men	Pleasing God
As Pretext for Greed	Gentle as a Nursing Mother Fondly Affectionate
Seeking Glory From Men — either you or any other —	Willing to Impart Our Own Lives Hard-Working Night and Day
From Deceit or Flattery	Devoutly, Uprightly, Blamelessly Exhorting, Encouraging, Imploring Like a Father with His Children

In short, Paul tells his listeners some things about himself that they already know: his message was the gospel and his method was selfless shepherding. He now wants to tell them WHY that is his message and why he behaved that way.

Why did he speak and behave this way?

In verse 12, Paul lets us know his end-purpose, his teleos for all he does. I'll begin partway through verse 11 so it makes more sense. *We were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.*

His desire is that all the Thessalonians (and we can add, all the FBC'ers), would live their lives in such a way that (1) when people see them and (2) when God sees them, that it can be said of each of us "He lives like he believes in Christ" or "She really does resemble her Savior." Paul's goal — and God's goal — is that by our behavior, we reflect how good God is.

Our manner of relating with people, how willing we are to learn patience and forgiveness when it doesn't come naturally, how ready we are to address problems of our anger or our lack of trust of God, all these say something about what we believe. If we care for people who offer nothing to us... if we enjoy God's reputation being honored, if we confess hearts often cold to His desires and instead warm to wanting to know Him primarily so He'll bless us (rather than in enjoyable appreciation for how much He already has), God will look good. We'll live lives worthy of God. (See ALSO Ephesians 5:2)

Transition

But how is that possible? Nobody who reads what Paul was like — his undying commitment to the gospel, his selflessness, his courage, his faith, his hard work — doesn't see in themselves a tremendous shortfall, a lack of similarity. Before we attempt to figure out what to do with that, let's go on with the passage, for in it we will see some keys to these difficult to answer questions such as (1) why so much stress on the gospel when I need real help in my life situation? (2) why tell them things they already know about you, especially things that I'm not much like?

You Received what God Said even in Trial

We see this in verse 13. *And for this reason, we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.* Note two things.

This simple comment is possibly the entire key to all that goes before and all that comes after. There is no single truth in the Bible more essential and foundational to a person (1) becoming a Christian or (2) laying hold of the life God has for him or her.

It is this truth — that God said it, God meant it, God will do everything He says — which is the entire key to change. This is what the Bible says is the end all and be all of faith. Paul says it this way in Romans 10: *"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God."* In other words, the key to the Thessalonians being able to follow God's purpose for their life, to "make Him look good" by the way they live, to develop the kind of character Paul says that God has been developing in him, is to believe profoundly that what it says. It involves taking a risk that God doesn't lie, that God will back it up

One of the best verses stating this truth is found in the OT. It is Numbers 23:19 and it says, *"Is God a man that He should lie or the son of a man that he should repent? Has he said and will He not do it? Or has He spoken and will He not make it good?"*

Paul's most confident answer and the answer apparently given by the church at Thessalonica was "No" and "Yes" to that question. "No," God is not a man and He will not lie. And "yes," God has said and He will do it.

Well, what does the fact that they took it as God's word have to do with whether their life will change to reflect the courage, character and purpose of living of the apostle Paul?

Look at the rest of the verse: *the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.* Here is God's signature on promises He makes: If you want to be the man or the woman or young person God desires for you to be, good news: *The Word of God will Perform the Work in You Who Believe.* Either it's true or it's a lie. That simple. But the passage doesn't end there.

You suffered for it

We see in verses 14-16 that they suffered for this word. *For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.*

It is this painful reality which is one of Paul's primary reasons for writing. It is not so much to defend his name, for his detractors hadn't even done a good job of building a case against him. It was a case which fell by its own weight. No, one of the main reasons Paul told them all those things they already knew such as what happened in Philippi, how much opposition he had in Thessalonica, how he didn't come in deceit or selfish gain, how he labored hard and proclaimed Christ steadily is because he had heard how much they were suffering and how they were struggling.

Paul had gotten a report from Timothy of some of the things the Greeks and maybe some European Jews had been doing to them and how it included maybe even murder. What he does is indirectly strengthen them as they see that they too were sharing in the sufferings of Christ, just as Paul will go on to tell the Philippians later in 3:10: *"More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."*

Paul provides (by sharing with them his own life) the foundation for how they will successfully make it through their deep struggles now. Rather than just telling them to "buck it up," he gently reminds them that what they are going through has been happening long before them and will continue to happen after they are long gone. It is a difficult message, but it's a good message: it challenges people to the more that God can do with and through them which far exceeds the expectations for themselves that they ever would have had. Like Isaiah 55:9 *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."* It is not unlike the simple, well-known and often forgotten truth that God has purposes much richer, deeper and more useful than merely removing us from the struggle we are in. He wants to build in us a patient, expectant faith. It is a little like what God the Father does in Jeremiah when he gets discouraged and complains to the Lord how hard it is to rough it out alone. God's response is not like Aunt Mary's comforting chocolate chip cookies and milk. Rather, He tells Jeremiah, "If you run with the footmen and fall down, how will you run with the horses?" It's like the Marines: to get good fighters, they raise the bar rather than lower it.

You have become our joy and glory

Let's finish with Paul's brief close to the chapter. It is brief, it is gentle, it is friendly but it is not light and insignificant. Reading verses 17-20: *But we, brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while-- in person, not in spirit-- were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. For we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, more than once-- and yet Satan thwarted us. For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.*

First, we miss you because you are a joy

Many times we are tempted to supply people with answers. They are in a difficulty and we want it to go away. But it won't for them. It continues to ache. Sometimes all we have to offer to them is our enjoyment of them, our desire to be together. So it is with Paul.

He doesn't tell them these things because he must explain or solve something. He just acknowledges that Satan has successfully blocked them from fellowship together and how much he looks forward to the day soon approaching when that will no longer be the case. I don't see indifference or denial but biblical confidence — *it's like Peter walking on water*. He wasn't living in denial; he was focusing on Someone who is even more real than the fact that water is wet and people sink in it. So it is here with Paul: He remembers to them for himself and for them that when (not if) Jesus returns, the degree to which they held fast to Christ will accrue in God's accounting to Paul's glory, Paul's reward.

When Christ comes, you'll be our crown

Your life of faith is a cause for celebration to the persons who led you to faith in Christ and who shaped you as a Christ-follower – a disciple. Paul here is recognizing *almost as if he can see it coming* that when Christ returns, those we tell the gospel to and those who believe or grow in part because of our example and encouragement, will be for us a cause of joy.

The image is of us meeting Christ in the air (we'll see 4:17 later), rejoicing to be counted among the number of Christians, on our way to eternal glory, and seeing the people we led to faith and built up. When we see them, it will be like an endorsement that all we suffered here was worth it... look at the life that was changed! Paul says that will be one of his greatest sources of joy in that day.

I'm glad that my mom kept pressing us towards all she knew of God with a real, visible sincerity. I'm thankful that the fellow who shared the gospel with me in my dorm and the lady who encouraged me about my prayers did so when I was 19. I'm glad that I had a man teach me how to study the Bible. I so appreciate the Sunday school teachers who deepened my grasp of God's Word and my love for Him and the teaching pastors like Mark who have instructed me in the Word and been a genuine example of Christ and the elders like Bob Harriman who kept pointing to Christ while loving and caring for the flock. And it is cool to think that when we are on our way up in the air, my life will be for all of them a source of joy and an addition to their crown.

QUESTIONS

1. When you have been afflicted, how have you maintained confidence in God?
2. What are the most challenging parts of being spiritual "mothers and fathers" as Paul did in 2:7-12 and as those who influenced you did?
3. What steps do you think others can take to increase their confidence in the Word of God? What steps did you have to take?