

Lesson 26

Growth and Unity

This is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the word of God, which also works effectively in you who believe, 1 Thessalonians 2.13.

Introduction

Reading through Acts and thinking about Luke's account of churches being established throughout Asia Minor and Europe is exciting. In these stories we see the steadfastness, perseverance, and faith of Paul and his companions. It seems they faced trouble wherever they went. Their love for Christ and His church is inspiring. These stories should also speak to us today as we think about the persons who walked away from paganism and embraced the *gospel of God*.

Imagine starting from nothing spiritually and embracing a totally different lifestyle. Imagine the reaction of your family as you began to proclaim your faith and trust for eternal salvation through a Jewish Man who was rejected by His people and ultimately crucified. Imagine your emotions and thoughts as *for the first time*, you began to experience being socially ostracized, held in suspicion, and even mistreated by other people and the governing authorities. Our first-century brothers and sisters knew firsthand what Jesus meant when he said:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me, John 15.18-21.

All these factors would have had a great impact on the believers... *for the good*. Times of stress and pressure can drive a group of people toward unity and spiritual growth as they come together under a common cause. As we look at the New Testament church, this story repeated itself in many places. Places like Corinth, Philippi, Berea, and Ephesus come to mind. Another great example is the church in Thessalonica.

The Church in Thessalonica

Establishment

The Acts account provides details of Paul's establishing the church in this city, Acts 17.1-10. This was part of his second missionary journey. Acts 17.4 provides details of large numbers being converted: *And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women*. This resulted in unbelieving Jews attempting to drive Paul and his companions from the city. They incited a mob who claimed Paul had committed crimes against the Roman empire. When they could not find Paul, they dragged Jason and a few others before the city officials. Luke provides the details:

But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus, Acts 17.5-7.

The city officials required Jason and the others to post a bond and then dispersed the mob. The last thing they needed was a threat to the peace and the lack of Roman intervention that the city enjoyed. Paul and Silas were sent away in the middle of the night, Acts 17.10.

Growth and Unity

A look at First and Second Thessalonians reveals how these Christians grew spiritually under difficult circumstances. They:

- Walked *in a manner worthy of God*, 1 Thessalonians 2.12; 4.1.
- Received apostolic teaching as *the word of God*, 1 Thessalonians 2.13.
- Demonstrated *faith and love*, 1 Thessalonians 3.6.
- Possessed *love for one another and for all*, 1 Thessalonians 3.12.
- Practiced *brotherly love*, 1 Thessalonians 4.9.
- Had a faith that was *growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing*, 2 Thessalonians 1.3.
- Were *steadfast and faithful* in all the persecutions and afflictions they were enduring, 2 Thessalonians 1.4.

What We Can Learn

Spiritual growth is multi-dimensional.

Devotion to Growth

We must be committed to individual growth in the acquisition of knowledge from the word of God, remaining faithful, and possessing moral purity. We must come to view Jesus as the Lord of our life and His word as the instrument that guides our transformation. Is the word of God *at work in you*, 1 Thessalonians 2.13c?

Maturing Together

Christians mature together simultaneously with one another. In the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians, Paul mentions their *work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*, 1.3. As we work together as a spiritual family, we can draw off the energy of one another and present a strong and unified front against Satan. We are stronger together than we are individually. Simply put, we are a team. We are committed to reaching every goal *together*. This will involve help, encouragement, and exhortation - all for the purpose of spiritual growth.

Exhort one another every day, Hebrews 3.13. Why **every** day? Because the enemy attacks every day. We live in a world filled with lies. Satan’s message can be conveyed subconsciously through social media, the

entertainment world, and the news media. We need to be constantly saying things to one another that keep each other believing. We all need to hear how Jesus and His way is better than what the world is peddling. We need to understand that *we will die without good spiritual friends*.

Shared Experience

Christians grow stronger through shared experiences. In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul mentions the sufferings Christians faced as they began their transition from living as a pagan to Christ.

For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved - so as always to fill up the measure of their sins, 1 Thessalonians 2.14-16.

Later, in 2 Thessalonians 1, Paul spoke of their suffering in present tense (1.5) and called on them to move forward in trust that God would *repay with affliction those who afflict you and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us...*, 1.6-7a.

When we go through shared conflict and tumult, there is a certain bonding that occurs. But this doesn't just occur in negative and unpleasant circumstances. Growth also occurs when Christians share life together. There is great value in Christian families raising their kids together, traveling together, studying together, and growing old with each other. Christianity is a shared pursuit, not an individual endeavor.

What This Looks Like Locally

Collectively, the church works together in encouraging spiritual growth from the youngest to the oldest of ages:

- *Children's Bible classes*. From the youngest age, your children have a weekly opportunity to grow together through a devotional led by various brothers and sisters in the church. There is value in hearing a Bible-centered lesson and singing together.
- *Adult Bible classes* provide rich opportunities to grow in knowledge of Scripture and related topics.
- *Special occasions* where a **guest speaker** is invited to speak on a special topic or theme. The benefits of hearing biblical teaching from differing perspectives should not be dismissed.
- *Regular times of preaching, singing, and worship*. While our focus in our weekly service is on God, one of the most significant effects is our individual and collective spiritual growth.
- *Small group studies and get togethers*. These types of gatherings are especially effective as they tend to be less formal and often occur outside of the church building. Settings like this allow people to feel more comfortable in sharing what is going on in their life.

Individually, the local church family should be busy being part of the many differing efforts that fit inside the parameters of spiritual growth and encouragement. Men and women's retreats; teen outings; home classes; singings; potlucks; eating out together; and various get togethers are important *and should be*

encouraged and participated in by everyone where applicable. Again, these occasions ultimately center around the very spiritual purpose of encouragement, togetherness, and maintaining unity.

Spiritual growth does not only take place in a classical learning environment revolving around knowledge. It also involves building camaraderie, trust, and friendships in the social arena as well. *And all who believed were together and had all things in common. . . . And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, Acts 2.44, 46.*

For Thought and Reflection

1. Think back to your start as a Christian. How important were other believers in your early growth and development? Where would you be today had you not had them in your life?
2. What do you find inspiring about the birth and establishment of the church at Thessalonica?
3. In what ways does Paul point out the spiritual growth of the Thessalonian Christians? How is this impressive in light of the difficulties they faced?
4. What are some things you are doing to increase your commitment to personal spiritual growth?
5. What are some things you can do to exhort others every day?
6. What are some of the shared experiences you have had with others inside your local church family that has contributed to your spiritual growth?
7. How valuable to you is the spiritual family where you attend? How strong is your involvement with the family outside of the church building? How can it be improved?

8. What are some individual works you can come up with or participate in that could contribute to your own personal growth or the growth of others?