

Exegesis of II Thessalonians 1:3-12

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Full half a hundred times I've sobbed,
I can't go on! I can't go on!
And yet full half a hundred times
I've hushed my sobs, and gone.

My answer, if you ask me how,
May seem presumptuously odd,
But I think that what kept keeping on
When I Could not, was God.

This poem by Jane Merchant could just as easily have been written by a member of the church at Thessalonica. Despite the afflictions they suffered, these children of God hushed their sobs and continued on. Because of the persecutions, some of the people became obsessed with the idea that the Lord's coming to Judgment would take place very soon. Paul had to correct them on that item, but first he offered thanksgiving for their having remained faithful against such overwhelming opposition.

God has not promised the Christian a life free from danger. But during our lifetime our Creator and Preserver will lead us to realize that security is not the absence of danger but the presence of God no matter what the danger. This is the truth toward which Paul was directing his Thessalonian congregation.

The translation of this section is made difficult, because there is no formal break in the flow of words until the end of verse 10. Therefore, throughout this exegesis I have chosen to use the wording of the NIV, because it has done a fine job of putting into bite-size pieces a section which otherwise would have been difficult to digest in one sentence.

The congregation at Thessalonica was born in persecution (Acts 17: 1-9) and grew in spite of continued suffering (I Thess. 1:6; 2:1-4; 3: 1-3). Some of the believers there, however, seemed to be asking, "Why?" In the verses we are considering this morning Paul gives them:

A Prescription for Persecution

- I. In persecution have your heart right (vv. 3,4)
- II. In persecution have your head right (vv. 5-10)
- III. In persecution have your hands right (vv. 11, 12)

VERSE 3: "He ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing."

The plural pronoun "we" denotes Paul, Silas, and Timothy, as it did in I Thessalonians. The thanksgiving is the united expression of the writers. Paul had been very concerned about the faith of the Thessalonians (I Thess. 3:5) and had written the former letter in order to help supply what was lacking in their faith (I Thess. 3:10). Now a short time later Paul is bound to give thanks. The verb for "ought" is the word for paying a debt. Paul is saying that he owes it to this congregation to thank God always for them. The present tense of "we ought always to thank"

indicates that the feeling of personal obligation is lasting and also expresses the thought of repeated thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is of great importance in the spiritual life, particularly in the life of prayer (Phil. 4:6). Thanksgiving ought to be constant, “always,” rather than spasmodic. This thanks will be addressed to God who answers prayer in His own way and at His own time. So often Christians, however, forget to thank God for what He has done for them.

Paul was well aware of the shortcomings of the Thessalonian believers, but he did not allow their faults to blind him to their strong points. He was thrilled by the transformation that had taken place in them. He remembered what they had been before Christianity, and never forgot to thank God for what God had achieved in them. Paul would faithfully deal with their failings, but first he was eager to give praise where praise was due. Instead of criticizing, he was eager to commend. So often, we, as pastors, find it easier to criticize our members, than to commend them. Rather, let Paul’s example be our guide. Martin Luther wrote, “Satan is a chronic grumbler. The Christian ought to be a living doxology.”

Paul had two reasons for giving thanks: first, “your faith is growing more and more” and second, “the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.” The Thessalonian Christians had come to know Christ as their Savior only a few months before. It was true that from that time on they believed in God and in their Savior. Here, however, Paul is not talking about the fact of faith, but that their faith had grown. Paul occasionally used the prefix “super” in his writing. In Romans 8:37 he spoke of “super-conquerors” and here he wrote that the faith of these Christians was “super-growing.” The obvious example is that of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31ff.) which grows into a tree. Faith always grows as one comes to know more about the One in whom his faith has been placed, and certainly one comes to know the Lord better in times of difficulties.

How often isn’t it the case that Christians are perfectly willing to trust God about eternity, but the little problems of today and tomorrow seem too big to commit to the Lord. It is, of course, ridiculous to trust God about eternal things and not to trust Him about temporal things, but that is human nature. The Thessalonians were in a position where they had to place their trust in God every day, for they were in danger of their very lives. In this situation their faith grew, and that is what trials do. The storms that they endured did not destroy their faith, but rather strengthened its roots.

Not only did their faith grow, but also their love or charity. Whereas “to grow more and more” refers to an organic, inner growth, “to increase” denotes an outward expansion. It means “to overspread” as a fire or a flood covers everything in its path. Genuine Christian love will embrace every other member of the Christian group, not picking and choosing or refusing this or that person. It is one thing to trust the Lord; it is something else to show true love for the brethren. Sometimes in our churches there is little heresy, but also little Christian charity. In the Thessalonian congregation there was no exception in giving or receiving. What this means for a Christian can be learned from a study of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

The growing faith and increasing love of the Thessalonians was a direct answer to the prayers of the missionaries. In the first epistle (3:10,12) both were mentioned as matters that needed improvement. Now faith had grown to a degree beyond the writers’ hopes and love was continually increasing, overflowing its normal limits.

Verse 4: “Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.”

At first we may feel that the word “boast” is unexpected coming from Paul. ‘He had stated strongly that men should not boast in the presence of God. If they must boast, they should boast in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:29-31). To boast in any other manner would be placing confidence in human effort (Phil. 3:3). It would imply that the ground for boasting was man, whereas everything we have has been received from God (1 Cor. 4:7). Nobody should boast of man (1 Cor. 3:21).

Paul does not boast of man here, rather he follows the example of Christ who said in a parable, “Well done, my good servant” (Luke 19-17). In Galatians 6:14 Paul proclaimed, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Every boast Paul made related to the cross of Christ. Paul boasted about himself, because he was a preacher of the cross (1 Cor. 15:10). He boasted of the Thessalonians, because they were triumphs of the cross, both in their conversions and in their lives since that time.

Paul has reason to boast about this church, the reason being their “perseverance and faith.” These two nouns are linked by one article, not two. Paul is suggesting that faith does not exist in a vacuum. It has to persist. If it is attacked, it has to hold its ground. “Perseverance” or “steadfastness” literally means “to remain under.” It has been described in this manner—when you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on. That is what the Thessalonians did. This was not mere passive resignation to grin and bear it in the face of difficulties, but denotes a dogged determination. Christians have burdens and cares from which they would like to free themselves. It is possible to become impatient with certain circumstances. But the person who is “steadfast” remains under his burden; he keeps carrying that load which has been given him; he adjusts himself to the situation in which he is required to live.

The members continued to believe even when to do so meant “persecutions and trials.” Both terms refer to the same difficulties, but the latter is more general and comprehensive than the former. “Persecutions” designate the hostile action of the enemies of the gospel, while “trials” relate to any of the varied pressures or painful experiences that are endured because of faith in Christ.

“We know from Pliny the Elder that it was in Thessalonica that the first Gentiles were killed in the Roman Empire, because it was the local Roman governor in that part of the county who said that every Christian had to bow before a statue of Augustus Caesar. He had been deified and statues of Caesar were erected everywhere. This provincial governor said everyone had to do obeisance, and there were some of the Christian who wouldn’t obey the edict. So they faced persecution. Indeed, as far as we know, it was in Thessalonica that someone first dreamed up that horrible way to catch Christians, by going into the devil’s temple with a cask of wine, offering it on the altar to Venus or Caesar, and then publicly taking it out into the marketplace, sprinkling all the vegetables and all the meat and other goods and announcing that it was all dedicated to the god. Anyone who bought the food and ate any of it thereby worshipped Caesar, or the heathen god. So the Christians stopped buying in the marketplace as a witness, and they immediately became marked people, and were persecuted. The first crucifixions, the first burnings, and the first persecutions of Christians began there. These Thessalonians were right in the middle of the persecutions.” (Barnhouse).

Despite these persecutions the Christians continued “to endure,” literally “to hold oneself up.” In the Christian life, faith must continue always. We must endure persecutions with steadfastness, standing unmoved under a rain of blows. We must not haul down the flag, but hold on in all persecutions. Where there are no trials in life, there are no triumphs either. This is why Paul did not hesitate to speak glowingly of the Thessalonians. To their super-growth in faith and

overflow of love was added perseverance in trials. So often that is not the case. Afflictions and trials can bring out the worst in a person, Tribulations can bring about a cantankerous spirit. But these believers deepened in their love for each other. In persecutions they had their heart right.

VERSE 5: “All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.”

Even though the heart is guarded from defection by a growing faith and an abounding love, the head may question the why of having to endure trials. Paul deals with that subject next—in persecutions have your head right.

The reason for suffering is often questioned. “It’s not fair. Why me?” Apparently some of the Thessalonians were making similar statements. Paul points out to them that “all this” (their perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials they were enduring) was evidence of God’s righteous judgment.

We are not on this earth to be popular. But if the Christian insists on dressing like the world, living like the world, talking like the world, acting like the world, it’s going to be very difficult to convince the world that we have anything better to offer than they already have in greater abundance. While a Christian will not look for persecution in order to develop and nurture a sort of martyr complex, neither will he shrink from suffering for his faith when suffering does come.

Persecution is a natural part of the Christian life (II Tim. 3:12). The Thessalonians are urged to view their steadfastness as a proof of God working in them and a guarantee that He will keep His promises concerning their future place in the kingdom. Their trials were severe, but God was sustaining them. This was the heart of the evidence. This same God who sustained them in their suffering would continue to sustain them up to and including the Day of Judgment.

Paul is speaking from personal experience. He, too, knew the sharp adversities of the Christian life and prayed to be delivered from them. But “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Cor. 12:7-10; Phil. 1:28).

The passive infinitive in this verse is a judicial term and means, not “to make worthy” or “to be worthy” but rather “to declare worthy” or “to count worthy.” The aorist tense of the verb looks forward to Judgment Day when such a verdict will be pronounced. Paul did not mean that they would be refined by suffering in a sort of earthly purgatory and, therefore, be able to stand in their own purity at the Judgment. Rather their persistent faith, sustained by grace, was a saving faith. So Paul turned the thoughts of the Thessalonians away from their suffering on this earth to their eternal joy in heaven. In Hebrews 12:2 we hear, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross. Those who have a “why” to live can bear with almost any “how.”

VERSES 6 AND 7: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.”

Paul now contrasts the blessings God will bestow on His believers with the situation of their persecutors. For the Christian the present age is a time of suffering and trial, but in the future the glory will be his. The pattern of the world is just the opposite. The ideal for the world is eat, drink and be merry now; judgment and suffering will come later. God’s righteous character in judgment assures a twofold outcome in the judgment. The persecutors will be punished and

righteousness thereby upheld. The persecuted will be relieved and thereby enjoy salvation which comes from God's righteousness.

The "relief" which Paul's readers would experience means "relief from tension" or "slackening of pressure" as one would take down a taut bow string (2 Cor. 7:5). It, thus, suggests rest, not from toil and fatigue, but from tension and suffering. This rest the readers would experience "with us"—Paul, Silas, and Timothy. They, too, knew what it meant to be under pressure as a Christian. They, too, found comfort in the prospect of sharing with the Thessalonians that rest.

All this will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels on Judgment Day. Just as in the Old Testament the presence of God was marked with fire (Exodus 3:2; 19:18; 24:17; etc.), so also now this concept of Jehovah's presence is ascribed to the returning Lord Jesus.

The role of the angels remains the same as now. They are ministering spirits sent forth to serve (Hebrews 1:14). They are the agents of the Judge. He will separate believers from the unbelievers (Matt. 25: 31-33), but it is the angels who will gather together the elect (Matt. 24:31; Mark 13:27) and the angels who will eliminate the evildoers (Matt. 13:39-42,49ff.). In order to carry out their task, the angels will have to be mighty. And they are, being angels of God's power, not their own. They are mighty only as the Lord gives them their might.

VERSE 8: "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

In the Old Testament Jehovah rendered judgment (Deut. 32:35; Psalm 94:1). Here, however, that function has been transferred to Jesus Christ in accordance with John 5:22—"The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son." The Greek word for "punishment" comes from the same root as the words "judge" and "righteous." The punishment is not to be understood in the sense of revenge, but it is well-deserved. The recipients of God's vengeance are given a double identification—"those who do not know God" and "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." The repeated article in the original makes it clear that two groups are intended.

"Those who do not know God" are those who have refused to seek more knowledge concerning the Supreme Being, a knowledge they have from nature and from their own conscience. All men have a knowledge about God available, a head knowledge, that is, but they suppress it or distort it (Rom. 1:18-32; 2:14-16). Although this knowledge reveals nothing of God's saving purpose, it is enough to condemn (Acts 14:15-17).

Knowledge about God is not to be despised. We must have both a head knowledge and a heart knowledge. The fact that we know about Him does not save. We know about many things but do not truly believe them. We know about evolution, but don't believe it. We know about Muhammed and Buddha, Vishnu and Shiva, but don't believe in them. Knowledge about a Supreme Being is not enough, we must truly seek to learn more about the one true God and truly believe in Him. Faith involves a sincere acceptance of the Gospel truth and a handing over of oneself to Him.

"Those who do not obey the gospel" are those who have rejected the good news of their salvation; those who have heard it preached, but wanted nothing to do with it. While this is an accurate portrayal of the Jews, it cannot be limited to them. It includes both Jews and Gentiles

who have heard the gospel and definitely rejected it. Upon these God will exact His righteous judgment.

VERSE 9: “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power”

Paul was not at this point restricting his thoughts to “those who trouble you” (v. 6). He is writing about all unbelievers as he has described them in verse 8. Evildoers deserve justice. The word again refers to a punishment determined by a lawful process; it is a well-deserved punishment. These unbelievers shall pay the just penalty of their sin by suffering eternal separation from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His might.

The phrase “everlasting destruction” occurs only here in the New Testament and is exactly opposite from eternal life. The adjective denotes “age-long,” an endless period of time. This is not an annihilation but an eternal separation from the presence of God and His power. All the evidences and reminders of God’s deep love in Christ have left the unbeliever unmoved. Exclusion from the presence of the Lord is what he has been seeking all his days on this earth. That is exactly what he will have in eternity. He has cut himself off from God’s love and God judicially follows through on that decision (Rev. 22:11). This banishment from the Lord’s presence is the very essence of eternal punishment. Heaven is primarily the presence of God; hell is the loss of that presence. This is the very opposite of the joy that Paul held before the Thessalonians in I Thessalonians 4:17.

VERSE 10: “on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.”

What awaits unbelievers on Judgment Day stands in striking contrast to the destiny of the saints to be displayed when Christ returns in open glory. Two very amazing statements are contained in verse 10. First, when Christ returns He will be glorified “in” (not “by”) His saints. Christ will be glorified when it is openly displayed what He has wrought in His saints who are assembled before Him in glorified bodies and perfected in spirit. Only the grace of God can lift a sinner to the place where he becomes the means of reflecting the glory of God.

Also, believers will bring admiration to the Lord. The spectators of Christ’s coming will marvel greatly at the Lord because they will see His grace fully displayed in the completely changed lives of His people. “All” indicates that the multitude of believers will be great. The Thessalonians are not to think that the sum of believers will be only a little flock. When all of them are at last assembled, they will be a glorious gathering.

VERSE 11: “With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.”

If one’s heart is right so there is spiritual growth and if one’s heart is filled with correct doctrine, then his hands will be used properly also. It is this last thing for which Paul prays in these closing verses of the chapter—in persecution have your hands right.

The missionaries thank God for the Thessalonians. In their joint devotions they regularly pray (present tense) for them. The added IF always underscores the regularity of their prayers—they faithfully pray for their converts every day. A pastor will not satisfy himself with just preaching the message, but will take the concerns of his congregation to the Lord in prayer.

The first petition is that God “may count you worthy of his calling. This looks back to verse 5 where the thought was that of being counted worthy to enter the kingdom. Here the prayer is that God count them worthy of their calling, a calling that they have received from God at the time of their conversion (I Thess. 4:7).

This petition is connected with another petition that God “by his power may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.” “Work of faith” does not mean contributing to what is all of grace. “It has been likened to the work of a disciple, who is a learner who receives information, an observer who learns by watching the Master at work, and an apprentice who learns by actually doing the work himself. An apprenticed carpenter learns, not so much by lectures as by watching the skilled man and then trying his hand with hammer and nails all the rest of the tools. And all the while the spiritual apprentice is working, the Holy Spirit is active within” (Ward).

“Work of faith” denotes that activity which is prompted by faith. A living faith is a working faith according to James 2:17. Faith is not viewed merely as something passive, but as an active use of the power of God in fruitful services. Human effort alone would be ineffectual without God’s power. Only His power can produce God-pleasing results. Believers, then, are to be active in performing good works even in the midst of persecution. By their fruits they will show that they serve the living and true God.

VERSE 12: “We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus May be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The ultimate goal is that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ be glorified. No matter what this world brings us, even if it be afflictions and persecutions, we are to live our lives in such a way that we bring honor and glory to the Savior.

Though the troubles and sorrows of this life bother each of us, let us focus our attention on the Lord for strength. Though we have sobbed half a hundred times as the poem said earlier, what kept keeping on was God. He was by our side every step of the way. He does not want us to pack our Prescription for Persecution away in a medicine cabinet and forget about it. He wants us to use it to get our hearts, our heads, and our hands right. He wants us to remember that even though “we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22), yet “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Finally, we can conclude, as did C.F.W. Walther who wrote to his daughter Magdalene:

Do not take it amiss when also you must experience some of the troublesomeness of this life both inwardly and outwardly. This is the lot of all children of God. Since God does not want to damn us with the world but wants us to be saved, He cannot deal with us otherwise. If things always go well with us, we forget God only too easily, and we stop praying diligently and ardently to call on Him.

But if God sends us difficulty from which men cannot rescue us, He thereby compels us to seek refuge in Him. Therefore, do not think: this one or that one has it so much better; why does God let me experience so much unrest, fear, and anxiety? Ah, God cannot mean it better for us than when He often leads us into the dear school of the cross! (Walther).

Resource Materials

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