

Encouragement For Suffering Saints

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

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The believers in Thessalonica were discouraged, and they needed encouragement. So Paul wrote his second epistle to the Thessalonians only a few weeks after he had written his first epistle to them. The year is about 51AD, and the occasion was that some had come from Thessalonica to Paul to tell him they were still struggling and had problems. There were false teachers, some still weren't working and some of the problems hadn't been remedied. So Paul took pen in hand, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote his second epistle to the believers in Thessalonica.

First, I want to give you the reasons why Paul wrote these three chapters in 2 Thessalonians. They were discouraged and needed to be encouraged in their suffering. They were being persecuted—as often the church is, and many are today—so they needed to be encouraged in their suffering, chapter 1.

Second, they were confused and needed to be enlightened. They were disturbed by false teachers; some had told them that they were in the tribulation or in “the day of the Lord,” chapter 2.

Third, in chapter 3, they were disobedient. Many of them had not gotten back to work. As we saw in the first epistle, Jesus was coming soon, so why bother going to work? They quit their jobs, were out of food, so they went to someone else's house asking to eat with them and to sleep there. So Paul wrote to say that if a man doesn't work, he shouldn't eat. Paul encouraged them to get back to work and deal with problems of their daily lives.

So in chapter 1, he encourages the suffering; in chapter 2, he enlightens the confused; and in chapter 3, he exhorts the careless.

Now in chapter 1, Paul is encouraging them in their suffering. Someone has called chapter one “a prescription for persecuted saints.” Paul shares three encouragements. The first encouragement, in chapter 1, verses 1-4, is encouragement of praise. It is praise directed to God for them in Thessalonica.

Verses 1-4 say, “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy...”—Silvanus is known as Silas, and Timothy is also called Timotheus—“...to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience...”—notice that—“...and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure.”

It's clear by the end of verse 4 that they were being persecuted and going through tribulations.

These “tribulations” are not the seven years of the great tribulation, which happens after the rapture, in chapter 2, when the Antichrist is revealed. Rather these are persecutions that come from the world. The great tribulation will be from God. But as believers, we are not appointed to wrath but to obtain salvation.

In verses 1-2, we see the opening greeting or salutation starts with Paul, who we know originally was Saul of Tarsus. He was converted in Acts 9 and became the great Apostle Paul. Silvanus or Silas was Paul’s traveling companion in Acts. Timothy was the pastor to whom Paul wrote in 1st and 2nd Timothy, and he traveled with Paul as well.

Paul was writing, verse 1, “to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The phrase “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” appears in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 as “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul makes it more personal when he says “God our Father.” Paul is reminding those who are suffering that they are children of God.

Sometimes one of the best things you can do when you’re going through suffering, sorrow, pain and trouble is to remind yourself that you are His child, He is your Father and nothing can come into your life except what He allows. It must be filtered through the love of God. When everything is going wrong and crazy in your life, remind yourself, “I’m His child. He is my Father.” Not one sparrow falls to the ground that He doesn’t take notice of. And we are much more valuable to Him than many sparrows. He sees, He knows, He understands.

Then Paul wishes the Thessalonians “grace to you...”—which is God’s love poured out upon us —“...and peace...”—which is God’s peace or “shalom,” our fellowship with Him—“...from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul will often couple the names “God our Father” or “God the Father” with “the Lord Jesus Christ.” The church at Thessalonica is in “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” So grace and peace come from “God our Father” and from “the Lord Jesus Christ.”

You ask, “Well, what’s the significance?” Jesus Christ is coequal with God the Father. This verse is implying, but clear, that Jesus Christ is equal to God the Father in His essence. One God, three Persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. They are all coequal in their essence. So Jesus Christ is God the Son coupled with God the Father.

Then beginning in verse 3, Paul makes the statement, “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren.” It’s interesting that Paul doesn’t thank them; he thanks God. This is a very subtle but important point. Instead of praising or complimenting them directly, Paul lets them know that he is thankful to God for them. This is very important.

Sometimes we can actually do a disfavor to people by telling them how wonderful they are, how great they are, how amazing they are, because there is a danger they can be filled with pride. The human body is very sensitive; if you pat it on the back, the head swells. We want to be complimentary and encouraging to people, but we need to be careful.

When I was a young preacher and people would say, "Oh, your sermon was wonderful!" I would say, "Yeah, it was awesome; wasn't it? Thank you very much. I am amazing." It was one of the constant battles I had to face. But it wasn't me who was doing it, so I very much appreciate when people say, "I thank God for you," or "I thank God for that message" or "I thank God for the Word we're getting at Revival." It's a blessing to know you are being used by God, but you're just His instrument. You're like a straw. You're not the substance. God is giving you the Word, but to Him be the glory.

But on the other hand, we can sometimes neglect encouraging people, and thus they become discouraged. So where is the balance in the middle? Letting them know that you thank God for them. By God's grace they are being used in your life to be a blessing to you.

So Paul was very tactful and balanced in the way he approached this. He prayed for them.

Another point in this verse is that they were not a perfect church. Yet Paul focused not on their vices; he focused on their virtues. Sometimes we get so nitpicky with people about all the things they do wrong. This can happen in a marriage. Instead we need to be thankful to God for our spouse. Look at the good qualities God has put in their life, and express that thanksgiving to God.

What was Paul thankful for in verses 3-4? He was thankful for three things. Number one, he was thankful that their faith was growing. "We are bound..."—which means "we owe a debt"—"...to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly." The words "grows exceedingly" is a picture of a mighty, oak tree. Whenever the wind blows on oak trees, their roots go deeper into the soil to become stronger. Someone said, "Today's mighty oak was yesterday's little nut that held its ground." I like that.

The Christian needs to do the same thing. When the wind of adversity, trials and suffering comes your way, you need to get your roots deeper into God, into His Word and rely and trust more on the Holy Spirit. Then your faith will grow "like a tree planted by the rivers of water... whose leaf also shall not wither," Psalm 1:3.

So the Thessalonians had a faith that was growing exceedingly. Picture a large, strong, mighty oak tree. But some Christians are like tumbleweeds. Instead of being rooted, they roll and are "carried about with every wind of doctrine."

Now this faith that is growing exceedingly is not salvation faith. When you initially trusted Jesus and believed on Him for salvation, it didn't take a lot of faith. It just took the object of your faith being correct. You needed a little faith in a great Savior. D. L. Moody said, "A little faith will take your soul to heaven."

But Paul is talking about a second kind of faith here. It is sanctifying faith. There is saving faith and there is sanctifying faith. Once you become a Christian by believing in Jesus Christ, you then trust Him every day of your life, come what may. That is sanctifying faith. No matter what comes into your life—sunshine or sorrows—you are trusting Jesus, holding onto Jesus, looking

to Jesus, you're grounded in Jesus. It is a growing, sanctifying, gradually-growing faith.

There are a lot of Christians who are saved, who are going to heaven, but they're not having heaven on earth. They're not experiencing the joy of the Lord. It's because they're not growing in their faith. They're not growing in their trust. They're not putting their confidence in God. "Have faith in God" and grow.

Jesus rebuked His disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 8:26. He said, "Oh, you of little faith." He was asking them why they doubted, why these fears arose in their hearts.

God asks the same things of us: "Am I not your Father? Am I not in control of your life? Do you not know that I care about you? Nothing happens to you but what I allow."

So Paul encourages the Thessalonians by saying, "I thank God that your faith is growing." They are learning daily to trust more in Jesus Christ.

Back in 1 Thessalonians 3:10, Paul said that he was "night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith." So Paul prayed that they would have an ever increasing, growing faith.

Trials and suffering are allowed by God to strengthen our faith. They are food for our faith. This is one of the chief ways that God grows us as believers. By suffering. Without suffering, there is no growing faith.

So we need to feed on God's Word and submit to God's will.

The second thing Paul was thankful for was that their love was abounding, verse 3. So their faith was growing and their love was abounding. "The love..."—or "charity" in the King James translation—"...of every one of you all abounds toward each other."

Here's another word picture. The first was growing, as in a plant or tree. The tree's roots go deep and are strong through the storms of life. The second word picture is abounding. It's a picture of a river. This imagery is that of a mighty river overflowing its banks. It's not drying up; it's overflowing. And it's overflowing in a good way, not in a destructive way. The blessings of your love are overflowing to others.

The danger in suffering is that it can make us self-absorbed and bitter. Have you ever known someone who goes through suffering who becomes bitter instead of better? Instead of making them, it breaks them. There is a saying that says, "The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay." So the issue is not the problem; two people can go through the same trial, but one gets hardened and one melts. Trials can either make you better or bitter; it all depends on how you respond to your problems.

One of the keys of life is going through bitter experiences. And we all go through bitter experiences. We can come out of them better or bitter. Because we are broken, we should

depend on God, rely upon His grace and get grounded in His Word. God makes us; He doesn't break us or destroy us. He's making us better believers.

So suffering, mixed with faith in God, and reliance upon His grace will produce the love of God overflowing out of our hearts to others around us.

Think about the fact that God fits you for service through suffering. You want to be a blessing? Then you have to be broken. Wheat has to be crushed before it can be made into bread. Incense has to be thrown on the fire before its odors are set free. Roses give off a beautiful fragrance, but if you take petals off a rose and crush them in your hand and take a whiff, its fragrance flows even stronger.

And many times God crushes us. Then He opens His hand and lets the fragrance flow. It's the fragrance of Christ. So if we look to the Lord in our sorrows, then we can look to others in love. It overflows from our lives. How important that is.

The third reason Paul was thankful is in verse 4. He was thankful that their patience was increasing. Their love was overflowing, their faith was growing and their patience was increasing. "We ourselves boast..."—which literally means "speak proudly"—"...of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith..."—Paul couples patience with faith—"...in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure."

"Persecutions" are from a hostile, unbelieving world. They come from the outside. "Tribulations" is a general word for any trouble. It means to be "thrashed" or "beaten." So it means we're suffering on the inside with what could be an eternal, emotional or spiritual suffering.

Notice he says, "that you endure." That phrase is in the present, continuous tense. So it means you are presently enduring all these sufferings and tribulation.

The word "patience" here I think would be better translated "perseverance," or even better "steadfast endurance." The word "patience," in our modern English, gives us a negative connotation. In my hippy days, it would have meant that a person is "mellow." Nothing bothers him. He's just not all there. In the Bible, patience is perseverance or steadfast endurance. The imagery of that is of a wind blowing against you, and you have to lean into the wind to make progress against it when you walk. It's the idea that you keep on going; you don't throw in the towel.

So it starts with a growing faith, then becomes an overflowing love and then an increasing patience in the midst of your suffering.

In Romans 5:3 Paul says, "We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance." In James 1:3, it says, "...knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

You've heard the old adage that if you pray for patience, trials come. "Lord, I didn't pray for

trials; I prayed for patience!" There is no shortcut. "Never mind, Lord; I don't want patience."

How can you be steadfastly enduring if there's nothing to endure? How can you be patient if there's nothing to be patient with? So God tests our faith. A faith that isn't tested cannot be trusted.

Would you trust a bridge that has never been tested? I knew a guy years ago who built an airplane in his garage. He wanted to fly it. I thought he was crazy. He asked, "Do you want to come with me?"

"No, I'll let you fly it."

So your faith must be tested and tried through suffering. And God sanctifies us, prepares us and makes us more Christ-like through suffering and adversity. So don't be discouraged in your suffering. Notice that your faith will grow, your love will overflow and your patience will increase, if you look to God and trust Him and get grounded in His Word.

The second thing Paul did to encourage the Thessalonians is through the promise of the coming again of Christ, in verses 5-10, which is the crux of this chapter. This is called the eschatological portion, the prophetic portion that projects out to the coming again of Jesus Christ. All three chapters of 2 Thessalonians, like all five chapters of 1 Thessalonians, have a reference to the coming again of the Lord.

First, going back to verse 4, Paul says that he thanks God "for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure..."—then starting in verse 5—"...which is manifest evidence..."—or "a plain indication"—"...of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us..."—I like that—"...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels." So Paul is telling them not to be discouraged, because Jesus is coming back in power and glory.

Verse 8, "...in flaming fire [He'll] taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day..."—that is, "the day of the Second Coming"—"...to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed."

Even after my years of study of this chapter, there are several sections that are a challenge to interpret. But the gist of what he is saying is that you should be encouraged, because Jesus Christ is coming back, and two things are going to happen. Number one, the saints will be rewarded with the kingdom of God; they are going to dwell in the kingdom of God forever. Number two, the sinners, the unbelievers, will be punished. There is reward for the righteous and retribution for the wicked.

This is a subject we don't like, because we don't like something that is negative. But the idea of judgment is in the Bible. Jesus described in His own words how the wicked will perish: ("Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched....There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Jesus talked about hell more than anyone else.

So in our text, Paul talks about encouragement through reward, verse 5, and the retribution, verses 6-10.

In verses 5-6, Paul says, "...which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you."

God's judgments, verses 5 and 6, are righteous. God's retribution on the wicked is righteous. God can only do what is right. You may shake your puny, little fist at God and say, "God, that's not fair!" I'd be careful if I were you. By the simple fact that He is God—He's been here longer than anyone else—He literally can do whatever He wants. No one can say that what God does is not fair, is not right. Who are you to accuse God of being unrighteous?

In our limited perspective and understanding, we think that God is not right, God's not fair and we're mad at God. But everything that God does is righteous and perfect. "The Lord is righteous in all His ways," Psalm 145:17. It's actually impossible for Him to violate His own nature, because He is holy. The number one characteristic of God's nature is His holiness and righteousness.

So God will judge the wicked, who are persecuting the righteous, and Paul is encouraging the Thessalonian believers that retribution will come.

But until that time, verse 5, the fact that they are persecuted is a manifest token of God's righteous judgment on their behalf, and they are also counted worthy to inherit the kingdom of God, for which they also are suffering. 2 Timothy 2:12 says, "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him." If we suffer as believers for the sake of Christ, we will also reign with Him. In Romans 8:18 Paul says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

So the Bible holds out as encouragement to the people of God that we're headed for glory. Suffering now? Yes. But this world is not our home; we're just passing through. Sometimes we forget about heaven, and all we think about is earth. It's good to be practical, but it's also good to be eternal in our perspective. Your life "is [but] a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away." So we need to keep an eternal perspective. We will be rewarded, but we may have to bear the cross along the way. Then we will wear the crown. Jesus said we will reign with Him in glory.

Notice the retribution of the wicked, in verses 6-10. This is a heavy passage about God's coming in judgment upon the wicked. "...since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you." So those who are unbelievers and persecuting the believers

God will recompense with tribulation.

Verse 7, "...and to give you who are troubled..."—he's talking to the believers—"...rest with us..."—resting with the Lord—"...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels."

Verses 6-10 are a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. We'll build on that point in chapter 2. These verses are not referencing the rapture, when Jesus comes in the clouds, the dead in Christ are resurrected and the living in Christ are raptured "to meet the Lord in the air." Rather this is seven years later, when we come back with Jesus in the Second Coming, Revelation 19, and He comes back not to pay for sin but to bring punishment for sin. "His eyes [will be] like a flame of fire" and "His feet [will be] like fine brass," the metal of judgment. "Out of his mouth [will go] a sharp two-edged sword." So He's coming back to judge the wicked and give retribution on behalf of the righteous. So verse 7 doesn't reference the rapture but the Second Coming.

Notice the description of the Second Coming, in verse 8: "in flaming fire." Remember that in Revelation 1:14, it says, "His eyes [will be] like a flame of fire." Then back to verse 8, "...taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." That is a description of the unbeliever, the non-Christian, the unsaved. They do not know God, and the contrast is that believers know God. Unbelievers do not believe the good news of the Gospel of Jesus; the believer trusted and believed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Then notice in verse 9 who shall be punished: the wicked who don't know God and don't obey the Gospel. It says, "These shall be punished with everlasting..."—or "eternal"—"...destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power." This is teaching destruction, not annihilation, of the wicked by being separated from God for eternity. This is the only place in the New Testament where "punished with everlasting destruction" appears.

The opposite is true of Christians. We will be with the Lord, we will see Him face-to-face and we will see, share in and experience His glory.

So we see the contrast between the unbeliever, separated from God for all eternity from His glory, and the believer, who will be in the presence of God and His glory forever.

I was meditating on being with the Lord face-to-face this week. It was something I've known for years, but the reality just hit me. We will actually be with God undisturbed—no sin, no sickness, no sorrow, no death—face-to-face with Jesus Christ for eternity. Isn't that amazing?

I remember as a baby Christian the first time I sang the stanza of John Newton's Amazing Grace:

"When we've been there ten thousand years,

Bright shining as the sun,

We've no less days to sing God's praise

Than when we'd first begun."

So the wicked are those who reject the Gospel and are separated from God, and the righteous are in the presence of God. The wicked are separated from His glory, and the righteous are in His presence, seeing His glory for all eternity.

So do you choose everlasting destruction, or everlasting life?

Then verse 10 says, "...when He comes, in that Day..."—this is the Second Coming—"... to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed." In the Day of the Second Coming, we will be glorifying Christ, and people will admire Christ in the believers. It doesn't say that we will be admired, but people will admire Christ in us. Romans 8:19 is a parallel to verse 10, which is known as "the revealing of the sons of God." It says, "For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God." It means that when Jesus comes back, the whole world will see Him and will know that He is the Savior, the Redeemer and is God. And the church will come back with Jesus. But for those who reject Jesus, reject the Gospel, it will be a radical event. And the Second Coming will happen.

In a way of encouragement, Jesus will right all wrongs when He returns. Sometimes there isn't justice in this world. Wicked criminals get away with crimes. People can be abused and not get retribution. But someday Jesus Christ will come again, and "All things [will be] naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

Where verse 10 says that "He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe," it means that people will see the church. That means that you and me, in glorified bodies, will come back with Jesus. People will see the church and know that Christianity was true, and that Jesus did come again, as He said. That person who told me about Jesus is now coming back with Jesus, riding a white horse. It's going to blow the unbelievers' minds. So the bride of Christ will be a demonstration, a trophy of God's grace, of God's love and of God's mercy. How marvelous that is.

The third thing that Paul does to encourage the Thessalonians, verses 11-12, is through prayer. "Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you..."—or "declare you"—"... worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

The believers have a future reward—we're going to heaven—but what we need to do right now, in the present, is that we need to pray. And Paul prayed for two things. They actually were an indication of the priority of Paul's prayer. In verse 11, he prayed that they would have a worthy

walk, and he prayed in verse 12 that they would be wonderful witnesses to His glory.

Verse 11 says, “We also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling.” “Count you worthy” means “enable you to live a life worthy of His call.” You’re not earning worthiness, but you’re displaying your salvation. The Thessalonians were living in a way that was consistent with their redemption; it was an expression of their salvation. It was a worthy walk.

Verse 11 continues, “...and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power.” The New Living translation renders verse 11, “So we keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call.” And how do we do that? Through His power, the end of verse 11. It’s through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 12 says that you are a witness to Him. “...that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him.” We live in a way that is worthy, so we are a good witness, and Jesus is glorified in us and we in Him.

The last part of verse 12 says, “...according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” So, again, we see grace that comes “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Jonathan Edwards said, “Grace is but glory begun and glory is but grace perfected.” It’s interesting that Paul opened chapter 1, verse 2, with grace, and he ends the chapter, verse 12, with grace and glory.

I want you to see that the dominant theme of this chapter is glory. In verse 7, Jesus is coming in glory; in verses 8-9, those who reject Jesus will be excluded from His glory; in verse 10, Jesus will be glorified in His people; and in verse 12, our supreme purpose is to live for His glory. It is only by His grace and by His power that we can live for His glory. So what begins in grace ends in glory.

What do you value? I struggle with that just like you. I value everything going smoothly. (Don’t you hate it when your car won’t start?!) I value that nothing ever bad happens—nothing ever blows up, nothing ever spills, nothing ever breaks.

Or do you want to learn patience? Do you want to grow in faith? Do you want to have a love that overflows? Then you have to suffer. God fits us for service through suffering. If you want to be a blessing to others, you first have to bleed.