

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12
Isaiah 49
Psalm 103

“Sharing the Gospel and Our Souls”

October 15, 2023

Have you ever felt as though God has forgotten you?

I think that everyone feels that way at times –
even Zion, the city of God, says,

“The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.”

Those of you who have borne children will understand something of what Isaiah means:

“Can a woman forget her nursing child?”

If she forgets for even a little while, there is soon a reminder!

But the LORD says,

“Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” (v15)

God will not forget his people.

It may feel like it sometimes!

God does not promise that everything will turn out the way we want it to!

But he does promise us *himself*.

That’s why we sing Psalm 103 in response.

If Isaiah 49 uses the motherly image of the woman with her nursing child –

Psalm 103 uses the fatherly image of a father showing compassion to his children –
because “he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.”

Sing Psalm 103

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

I need to change the sermon title for you!

In the bulletin it says “Sharing the Gospel and Our Selves” –

but I need to amend that to “Sharing the Gospel and Our *Souls*.”

Because Paul is not talking about the “self” – but about the *soul*.

When Paul says in verse 8, “our own selves” – the word there is *soul*.

John Ortberg has written an excellent book called *Soul Keeping* where he objects
to the idea that “soul” simply means “self.”

“Self care” is not the same thing as “soul care.”

Think of the difference between saying:

“I must take care of myself” and

“I must take care of my soul.”

When I say “I must take care of myself!” –
the “self” stands alone – isolated – and only I can protect it.

When I say, “I must take care of my soul” –
the *soul* always stands before God – and he is my rock and my shield.

This was brought home to me as I was reading John Chrysostom’s sermon on this passage.
When Paul says “we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God
but also our own selves” –
Chrysostom – who was preaching in Greek – and so read the original Greek!! –
comments on this, “for merely to preach is not the same thing as to give the soul.”

Preaching the gospel is a great and glorious thing –
but Paul says that they were pleased to impart not only the gospel of God –
but our own souls!

How do you impart your soul to another person?!!

This has been the goal of friendship through all ages.
Aristotle referred to the highest friendship as one who is your “second soul.”
We still talk about a “soul mate” as the one who knows us best!

But greater love has no one than this – that he lays down his life for his friends –
and yes, the Greek word there is *soul*.
Greater love has no one than this – that he lay down his soul for his friends. (Jn 15:13)

When we are joined to the life of the Son of God –
when the Holy Spirit – the Third Person of the Holy Trinity –
joins us to the life of God –
then we are joined to one another as well.

And so not only do we impart to you the gospel of God –
but also, we impart to you our very souls.

Very imperfectly.
With much weakness – much frailty – and with much sin and repentance! –
we impart to you our own souls.

This is how Paul and Silas and Timothy walked among the Thessalonians.
And this is how we, as your elders, seek to walk among you.

And we need to see this in the light of Christ’s coming and ours – in verse 1:

Introduction: Christ’s Coming and Ours (v1)

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.

At the end of the passage, Paul will highlight how God calls you into his own glorious kingdom.
But he begins the section by speaking of his own “coming” to the Thessalonians.

There are lots of different words used in Greek to refer to the coming of Christ.

This word simply means “entrance” –

and so is used in Acts to refer to the “entrance” of Jesus in the days of John the Baptist.
Here Paul uses it to refer to the entrance of Paul and Silas and Timothy
as they entered Thessalonica, bringing the gospel of Jesus.

You know – you remember – how our coming to you was not in vain!

The coming of Christ – and of his gospel – has a very full meaning!

Christ came in the flesh in the incarnation –

when the Holy Spirit overshadowed the virgin Mary
and she conceived and bore a son.

Christ came and was revealed to Israel in his baptism by John.

Christ came to Jerusalem as the Son of David on Palm Sunday –

and in his death and resurrection and ascension he came to the Father!

And he will come again to judge both the living and the dead.

And in between his first coming and his last coming

he continues to come in power by his Holy Spirit to his people.

And that is what Paul means by “our coming to you” –

and especially that is *why* “out coming to you was not in vain”!

The coming of Paul and Silas and Timothy as they entered Thessalonica
was truly the coming of Christ to the Thessalonians.

I spoke with a young person recently who was deeply troubled in soul –
he wanted very much to be able to draw near to God,
but he felt like he was outside looking into the room –
and he didn’t know how to get in.

As we spoke, he calmed down and a measure of peace returned to his face.

I looked at him and said, “welcome to the room where God dwells with his people.”

This is what Paul means when he says we shared not only the gospel, but our own souls.

Our souls – as we draw near to God – become the means that God uses
to draw other people to himself.

This young man could not draw near to God by himself –

and so my soul became the vehicle that God used to draw him near.

Of course, the problem is that my soul cannot bear that weight.

Without the work of the Holy Spirit, there is no permanent change in anyone’s heart!

But notice how Paul works this out in chapter 2:

he starts with our boldness in preaching (because it is to please God who tests our hearts!);
and then he speaks of our gentleness among you – like a nursing mother (v5-8);

before concluding with our labor and toil – like a father with his children (v9-12).

1. Our Boldness in Preaching: “To Please God Who Tests Our Hearts” (v2-4)

In verses 2-4, Paul’s central point is that we speak

“not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.”

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

Ed Welch has a great book called “When People are Big – and God is Small.”

This is what happens every time we are more concerned with what others think of us than with what God thinks of us.

We start to approach situations as though what *people* think about us is what really matters.

When People are Big and God is Small – then we go along with the crowd,
and just fade into the woodwork.

When we Fear Man – we don’t love each other well.

Now fear of man can go two ways –

either we “do whatever they want” – so that they like us –

or we make a big stink to show that we don’t care what anyone thinks!

Either way, the focus is on *what they think!!*

But Paul says

² But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.

We hear about this in Acts 16.

Paul had come to Philippi and in the first few days he baptized Lydia and her household.

But then, there was a slave girl with a spirit of divination
who followed him around saying:

“These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”

¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days.

Now, you might think that this would be good advertising!

But we are told that Paul became greatly annoyed.

Why was he annoyed?

Because as Paul says in verse 3 here:

“our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive!”

What partnership has Christ with demons!?!?

Whatever this spirit of divination is up to has nothing to do with Christ!!

And so Paul commanded the spirit “in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”

And it left her.

Her owners were upset – and so they had Paul arrested and beaten.

But that night, while Paul and Silas sat in the prison “praying and singing hymns to God,
and the prisoners were listening to them”
a great earthquake shook the prison and everyone was freed from their bonds.

But rather than run away – Paul and Silas (and *all the other prisoners*)
simply stood there.

Remember what we saw as the theme of several Psalms?
“Don’t just do something – stand there!”
Stand there and sing the praises of God in the midst of your affliction!

So powerful was their song that all the other prisoners simply stood there with them.
It wasn’t the power of the music.
It wasn’t even the power of the lyrics (by themselves).

It was the power of the Word – the Lord Jesus Christ –
as preached by Paul and Silas – as sung by Paul and Silas –
as *lived* by Paul and Silas!!

And so when the jailer saw them standing there, (Acts 16:30-31)
“he fell down before Paul and Silas and he brought them out and said,
‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’
And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”

This is what it means for the gospel to come “not only in word,
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” (1 Thess 1:5)

Paul didn’t just show up and preach some plausible sermons!
He preached and he lived the gospel!

As Paul puts in verses 3-4 here:

³ For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

What do Paul and Silas and Timothy mean when they say “we have been approved by God
to be entrusted with the gospel”?

We often focus on *Paul* – because he’s the easy one!
Jesus called him directly on the Road to Damascus!
So obviously *Paul* was approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.

But Paul says *we*.
And he’s referring to himself and Silvanus (or Silas) and Timothy.
Acts 15:22 refers to Silas as one of the “leading men among the brothers” in Jerusalem.
Acts 15:32 adds that Silas was himself a prophet –

and prophet, by the way, does not mean someone who predicts the future –
but someone who proclaims the word of the Lord!
So Acts 15:32 says that Silas – as prophet –
“encouraged and strengthened the brothers [in Antioch] with many words.”

So Silas appears to have been ordained in the ordinary way as a prophet and teacher in Jerusalem.

And then Timothy is first mentioned in Acts 16:1-3 when Paul and Silas arrived at Lystra.
He was the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer – but his father was a Greek.
Paul was impressed with Timothy, and so he took Timothy along when they left Lystra.

So Timothy may or may not have been ordained yet.

We’ll hear later in 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6 that Timothy was ordained
by the laying on of the hands of the eldership (and that Paul was part of that eldership).
But the fact that Paul includes Silas and Timothy in this statement –
“we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel” –
encourages us to see ordination as an act of God.

When a man is set apart to the gospel ministry – he is being given as a gift to the church –
entrusted with the gospel –
and therefore called to speak –
not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

This is the hard part!

Fear of man creeps back into a pastor’s heart really easily!
I had that experience this summer.
I realized that I was not trying to please God – but just trying to please man!
I was trying to “fix” everything.
And I was worried about what everyone thought of me...

Now – this is where fear of man has an ugly backside!
Because you can turn fear of man on its head – and it’s still fear of man!

Which is better? – to be driven by what everyone thinks of you?
or to not care what everyone thinks of you?!

It’s actually the same thing.
Because the focus is still on *people*.

And – as Ed Welch puts it,
“Regarding other people, our problem is that we *need* them (for ourselves)
more than we *love* them (for the glory of God.).
The task God sets for us is to need them *less* and love them *more*,” (p19).

And this is what Paul describes in verses 5-8 as “our gentleness among you”:

2. Our Gentleness Among You: “Like a Nursing Mother” (v5-8)

⁵ *For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.*

⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸ So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own [souls] selves, because you had become very dear to us.

A faithful preacher will not flatter his congregation.

And Paul and Silas and Timothy call God as witness that they did not have a pretext for greed.

When he says “nor did we seek glory from people” –

glory probably has reference not just to “fame” – but also to financial support

(“though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ”).

Throughout his epistles Paul will highlight his own insistence on preaching the gospel without charge, even as he urges churches to make sure that their own pastors are provided for.

Paul recognizes that the laborer is worthy of his hire –

but at the same time he sees that his own calling as apostle to the Gentiles

requires him to make a sacrifice that others may not need to.

Notice the image that he uses:

“we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.”

In the modern day we speak of a “nursing mother” –

but it’s worth noting that in Greek, the word is just “nurse.”

Because in the ancient world – and until relatively recently –

it was very common for children to be nursed by someone other than their mother!

So the use of this word highlights the image of breastfeeding.

Paul and Silas and Timothy are like a nursing mother

(in our culture – that’s the way we think of this image) –

who gives of her own substance for the life of her child.

In terms of gentleness and tenderness, there is no image like it!

A nursing woman is quite literally giving of her own substance

in order to give life to another!

When Geneva was born – and Virginia lay near death in the hospital –

Virginia was unable to nurse!

And so another woman in the congregation took Geneva home and nursed her –

gave of her own substance to give life to another!

And Paul says that this is what he and Silas and Timothy have done through their preaching.

And not just through their preaching! –

⁸ So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own [souls] selves, because you had become very dear to us.

I don’t know how to say this in my own words –

so I will instead quote from a talk my wife gave in China!

Virginia said it this way:

“I said yes.... Because I thought it was what I was supposed to do – even though my first thought was – NO – this is not what I do. In fact, going to China with my husband is not what I do, not when it means leaving my children behind. God made me a woman. This much is obvious. God also made me a wife – this too is quite clear. He also made me a mother. And here I want to stop. This seems like it should be enough for me to handle. And if I think about it and be realistic – this is all I can handle – though I can’t even handle this on my own.

So, why am I HERE? Because God created us to be more than this. He created us to need each other – to bear one another’s burdens, to build up one another towards faith and good works – to show forth his glory to all men. To show hospitality to the stranger, to care for those afflicted – to wash the feet of the saints.”

These are the things that all Christians are called to do and to be!

Yes, as pastors and elders we are called to *lead* in this!

Not only to share with you the gospel of God –
but to share with you our very souls.

But the result of this is that we should become a community that is characterized
by sharing our souls with one another!

Paul then reminds the Thessalonians of their own experience:

3. Our Labor and Toil: “Like a Father with His Children” (v9-12)

⁹ For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

We know from Acts 18 that Paul was a tentmaker –
and so his trade would be quite in demand in a port city, where there were lots of travelers.

Undoubtedly the workshop also functioned as a discipleship center.

Working with your hands would leave your mouth free to speak of the gospel of God!
Being new in town, Paul would need to make connections
with suppliers, customers, tradespeople.
And you start making disciples wherever you are!

And so he calls them as witnesses – and God also! –

¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹ For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹² we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Paul never claims to be sinless –
so undoubtedly he sometimes sinned against others!

But he still claims to be holy and righteous and blameless –
because when he sinned, he repented – and he turned away from his sin.

And here the image shifts.

In terms of their gentleness – he speaks of breastfeeding the Thessalonians
as a nursing mother.

But in terms of his labor and toil – he speaks of being like a father with his children –
exhorting each one of you – and encouraging you –
and charging you (commanding you!)

The true care of souls – the true nurture of disciples –
requires both tender nurture and exhortation!

And Paul insists that he and Silas and Timothy are entirely capable
of being *both* nurturers and exhorters.

Some people today seem to think that in order to get good nurturing,
we would need to have women serving as elders and pastors.

But that's not how Paul talks.

Certainly he uses the feminine imagery of the nursing mother!
But he says that *he* is like a nursing mother.

Paul challenges *pastors* to be more nurturing!

Think of what it means for a nursing mother to give of her substance to feed another!
Will you give of your *soul* in that way?

But also,

¹¹ For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹² we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

We keep seeing how *hope* is the central theme of 1 Thessalonians.

Again, Paul doesn't use the *word* hope here –
but the future dynamic is central!

We walk in the present in a manner worthy of God –
because God calls us into his own kingdom and glory.

It's the same theme that we saw last time – (1:10)

“how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,
and to wait for his Son from heaven,
whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come”

Now that same theme is restated in the language of God's “kingdom and glory.”

Paul had refused to seek his own glory –
because what matters is God's kingdom and glory.

And especially because God has called *you* into his own kingdom and glory!

The glorious kingdom of God is both a present reality
(because Jesus – the King sits at God's right hand!) –
and also a future reality – because the King will return!

God has called you into his own glorious kingdom –
his call is what brings you across the line from darkness into light!

But that doesn't mean that what you do is irrelevant!
That's why Paul exhorts, encourages, and charges us
“to walk in a manner worthy of God.”

After all – you have been called into his glorious kingdom!
So walk in a manner worthy of that glorious kingdom!

But notice how personal Paul gets!
We exhorted each one of you!

Certainly Paul would have been preaching to the whole congregation –
but he also exhorts them one by one.

Given my schedule right now – I actually have quite a bit of time open.
I would like to take that time to encourage you to walk in a manner worthy of God.
One of the things I did early in my ministry at MCPC was visit people at their workplace.

Jacob mentioned that to me the other day as something that he would like to see –
so I'll just say right now – if you would like for me to come to your workplace
and have lunch – or if your boss will let me hang out for an afternoon –
I'd love to do that.

It would help me know how to exhort and encourage and urge you
to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own glorious kingdom!

So let me know if you would like to do a “bring your pastor to work day”!