

“Attitudes in Affliction”
2 Thessalonians 1:3-4
(Preached at Trinity, May 31, 2020)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we’ve seen, in **Verse 2** Paul invokes God’s grace and peace upon the Thessalonians. While Paul follows the typical protocol for first century letters, the emphasis on grace is purely Paul. He opened and closed his letters with expressions of grace. In the context here Paul is expressing gratitude for the grace of salvation these Christians had received from God. Paul speaks of their faith and love which were increasing and abounding, sure evidence of God’s grace at work in them.
2. Paul was filled with joy over their progress in the faith. It was only fitting for him to praise God for the riches of His grace.
3. **Verse 4** opens with the familiar “therefore.” The word here implies a logical conclusion. **Matthew 8:24 NAU** - "And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves; but Jesus Himself was asleep."
4. Paul had received report from Timothy of their faith and love which were growing and abounding. This was in the midst of powerful persecution that they were enduring. It was only right for Paul to be overjoyed.
 - A. It may be difficult for us to comprehend life under constant threat.
 - a. Conflict for God’s people as always fluctuated in intensity. We’ve been blessed to avoid the fiery trials that some of our brethren have experienced. There are many throughout the world today who live in constant danger. We may not avoid fiery persecution forever.
 - b. For the Thessalonians, persecution was all around them every day. Luke described in **Acts 17**
Acts 17:5-8 NAU - "But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. ⁶ When they did not find them, they *began* dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." ⁸ They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things."
 - B. The persecution had grown in intensity, but they were continuing to endure with great patience. It was only fitting that Paul would be proud of them.
5. This morning I want to direct your attention to the two simple elements of **Verse 4**. First, what was their attitude regarding their afflictions? Second, what was Paul’s attitude regarding their afflictions?

I. The attitude of the Thessalonians in affliction

- A. They did not see their affliction as something unexpected or abnormal
1. They had been taught well. Paul made the reality of affliction an important dimension of his teaching.
Acts 14:21-22 NAU - "After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."
 2. Paul taught what he personally experienced
 He was forced to flee from Thessalonica due to the intensity of the persecution.
 3. The Thessalonians had lived under the cloud of persecution from the moment they had believed.
1 Thessalonians 1:6-7 NAU - "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."
 4. Opposition is simply the reality of the Christian life. In our day of notorious cultural Christianity, which is but a shadow of genuine Christianity, we will often face criticism from religious folk. And in our secular culture we will be accused of being intolerant and hateful.
- B. They looked upon their affliction with an eye upon Christ
1. The word for "perseverance" in **Verse 4** is ὑπομονή - 32 times in the NT
 - a. The word refers to patient enduring, steadfastness.
 We press on because of our unshakable hope.
 Trials, patience, and hope are inseparably tied together.
Romans 5:3-4 NAU - "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope;"
Romans 8:24-25 NAU - "For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." (ὑπομονη)
 - b. Our reward is yet to come – the path to this reward is often full of suffering, yet we patiently endure because of the certainty of our hope.
Matthew 5:11-12 NAU - "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

- c. Paul wrote of the triad of Christian grace in his first letter – faith, hope, and love
1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 NAU - "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; ³ constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father,"
2. If we have an eye only upon this world it will consume us. It will swallow our perspective. We will judge everything according to the impact upon this life. We will see our earthly happiness as having the greatest value and we fear anything that might threaten it. This has been the danger during this pandemic.
3. If we have an eye upon Jesus Christ and our relationship with Him everything will be judged according to how it impacts that relationship.
- a. The Christian life is a resurrected life. In other words, we have died with Christ and have been raised with Christ. We must die before we can rise.
Galatians 2:20 NAU - "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."
- b. This is the beautiful picture we will see in baptism this morning.
Romans 6:3-5 NAU - "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection,"
- c. We must understand that the fires of affliction are key to shaping our life in Christ. This flies in the face of the prosperity Gospel preached by many. They teach that we can live a life with Christ that is void of affliction.
- d. Paul Miller has written a book called "J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Christ in Everyday Life"¹
 The book compares the Christian life with the letter "J" – In forming the letter "J" you descend on the left before you rise on the right. This is the nature of the Christian life. We must descend before we can ascend. We must look at our suffering in this life as opportunities of growth.

¹ Paul E. Miller, *J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Christ in Everyday Life*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019).

4. Trials come in endless variety. God has ordained suffering as a means of living the resurrected life.
Romans 8:16-17 NAU - "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*."
5. If the fires of affliction are essential to our spiritual prosperity why do we fear it so and why do we complain when it comes?

II. Second, we need to see Paul's attitude in their affliction

- A. The Thessalonians became Paul's boast
"therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God"
 1. The word refers to boasting or taking pride in something
 2. Normally, pride is something that God hates. This is because pride is usually a sinful elevation of self.
 3. God loves meekness and humility. This is one of the great marks of the Spirit's work in us. In the Gospel of Matthew we read:
Mat 5:5 - "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."
 4. People make many things their boast:
Their net worth and their many material possessions
Their physical appearance
Their accomplishments
Their families or their children
All of these are futile boasts of vanity.
- B. There are some forms of boasting that are pleasing to God
 1. It is excellent to make our boast in God
Psalms 34:2-3 NAU - "My soul will make its boast in the LORD; The humble will hear it and rejoice. ³ O magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together."
Psalms 44:8 NAU - "In God we have boasted all day long, And we will give thanks to Your name forever. "
 2. Paul uses such boasting 35 times in his letters.
In Galatians he makes his boast in the cross of Christ.
Galatians 6:14 NAU - "But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."
 3. Boasting in God is in fact essential. 2 Cor 10:17 is in the imperative
2 Corinthians 10:17 NAS - "But he who boasts, let him boast in the Lord."
Jeremiah 9:23-24 NAU - "Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD."

- C. It is good for us to boast in the works of God
1. In **Verse 2** Paul invokes the grace of God into the lives of the Thessalonians.
"Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."
 2. Then Paul turns his focus to the work of God's grace
"because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater;"
 3. Then in **Verse 4** Paul states that their perseverance in the face of persecution was a great source of joy. He spoke proudly of them to other churches. The world sees suffering as failure. Christianity sees suffering as a means of prospering in the faith.
Perseverance is a mark of God's grace.
 4. This young church was often a great source of joy for Paul.
 - a. This is not to say they did not have problems. Paul is also writing this letter to correct them. Some were living undisciplined lives.
 - b. But the vast majority of this church was demonstrating the greatness of God's grace in their lives.
 5. Paul's boast was not in himself. He wasn't seeking to draw attention to himself. And Paul's boasting was not in the Thessalonians. His boast was in God's grace in them.
G.K. Beale describes it well: "That Paul thanks God and not the readers for their faith, love and endurance shows that they contributed nothing to achieving salvation but were the object of God's unconditional, gracious action."²
 6. One of the sure evidence of genuine saving faith is how we hold up during times of affliction. The Thessalonians were abounding in faith and they were testifying to this through their perseverance.
This is the meaning of the "therefore" at the beginning of **Verse 5**
Because their faith was enlarged they were persevering in their affliction.
- D. Although God received all of the glory for their perseverance, it was good to use their steadfastness in the face of persecution as an encouragement to others.
1. This was often Paul's method
At times he directed attention to his own life, not as a form of sinful pride but as an encouragement for others to follow his example.
Philippians 3:17 NAU - "Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us."
1 Corinthians 11:1 NAU - "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ."
 2. Paul was boasting in the perseverance of the Thessalonians so that others might follow their example. Paul had a Kingdom mind. Everything had a focus on what might advance it.

² G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 182.

3. Paul also used them as an example to the Corinthian church. When Paul began taking up a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem this church was one the first to come forward.
2 Corinthians 8:1-4 NAU - "Now, brethren, we *wish to* make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, ² that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. ³ For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, *they gave* of their own accord, ⁴ begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints,"
 4. By sharing his boast with the Thessalonians Paul was also encouraging them.
- E. We must have a passion to see others growing in their faith and use every means to encourage one another.
1. This was Paul's great passion – **Verse 3**
 2. Seeing their progress in the faith brought Paul great joy. He then used them as an example for others.
 3. We should be mindful of how our perseverance in affliction encourages others.

Conclusion:

1. Seeing Christians prosper and Jesus glorified was Paul's greatest passion. Nothing brought him greater joy.
2. What is it that you are the most passionate about?
What most frequently occupies your thoughts?
What is it that you most frequently speak of?
3. These are important, searching questions.
This is something that is hard to counterfeit.
 - a. You can't make yourself desire liver and onions or raw oysters.
 - b. If Jesus Christ is not the passion of your life seek Him