

Message #3

II Thessalonians 1:3-4

We have been seeing that one of the key themes of the Thessalonian Epistles is that the Lord Jesus Christ is coming back. Every chapter in I Thessalonians ended with that theme—1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:23. II Thessalonians is an epistle that opens with this same theme and mentions this point more than once in the Epistle—1:7, 10; 2:1.

So Paul really wanted the Thessalonians to understand that the Lord Jesus Christ is going to return and one day we will give an account to Him. Now the thing that is so impressive and so rare about this Thessalonian church is what he says he owes it in **verse 3**.

Paul begins the letter and when he says at the beginning of **verse 3** “we ought” (οφειλομεν), he uses a Greek verb that means **we owe you this, we have a debt we need to pay to you. The present tense of the verb means that Paul believed this was a continual debt he owed to these Thessalonians.** This is a very rare statement Paul makes. It is only found twice in this Thessalonian epistle **1:3** and 2:13. This word implies, as one writer said, “an exclusive personal responsibility” (Robert Thomas, *II Thessalonians*, p. 307).

The continual debt Paul and his team believed they needed to pay these Thessalonians was a debt of “**giving thanks to God always for them.**” In other words, **this Thessalonian church was so special to Paul that, as an apostle, he felt he owed this church an apostolic prayer of thanksgiving.** His thanksgiving was to “**the God**” (τω θεω), which refers to the **One and Only True God of the Bible.** There were all kinds of false gods in Thessalonica, but Paul prayed to the one true God and he believed he had a thanksgiving prayer debt for the Thessalonian church.

Now thanking God for a church is not out of the ordinary for the Apostle Paul. Paul thanked God for the Romans; he thanked God for the Corinthians; he thanked God for the Philippians and he thanked God for the Colossians. So thanking God for a church is not new. **What is new is when he says we owe you this.** This is the main point of all the clauses that flow down through **verse 10**. The payment that Paul believed he specifically owed this church was a payment to thank God for it. The key point is this:

THE LEADERS OF GOD OWED A DEBT TO THIS THESSALONIAN CHURCH TO ALWAYS THANK GOD FOR IT.

Now if ever there was a church that would be a model for what we would want our church to be, it would be a church in which an apostle ends up saying I owe you a debt to always thank God for you. If we had an apostle say about us that he owed us or was obligated before God to always thank God on our behalf, it would be a tremendous eternal testimony for our church. By the way, this was not a perfect church made up by perfect people.

So whatever ingredients this church had for generating this kind of attitude from the apostles is exactly the ingredients we want in our church.

Now there were two specific qualities that stood out to Paul for which Paul could thank God:

QUALITY #1 – Paul could thank God for their enlarged faith. **1:3a**

Now the words “faith greatly enlarged” are important. First of all, the word “enlarged” (υπεραυξανω) is a word that speaks of an increase of something that is beyond the ability to even measure (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 458). The present tense of the verb indicates that this enlarging of faith was a continual, habitual pattern.

The noun “faith” is articular, which is a reference to the specific faith of the grace system which had been taught to them by the Apostle Paul.

The people of this church believed on Jesus Christ and apparently embraced the faith system that Paul taught at a level that was far above and beyond anything Paul could measure. They wanted to be taught and they wanted to learn and they excelled in their faith growth. They were, as John Stott said, “luxuriating like a tropical plant” (*The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 143).

When Paul went to Thessalonica and preached grace in a law-focused synagogue, huge numbers of Jews and Gentiles believed on Jesus Christ and believed in the grace/faith system as opposed to the law/works system (Acts 17:1-4). From the words Paul uses here, he had never seen anything like this before.

Paul had been to Philippi, he had been to Berea, and he had been to Athens and was presently in Corinth. He was chased out of Thessalonica by a bunch of emotionally charged wicked religious Jewish leaders. When he first got to Berea, he discovered that the Jewish religious leaders were more noble-minded and were interested in the truth (Acts 17:11). But even having observed that fact, he had still not seen anything like the believers of Thessalonica. This was a faith growth that was “beyond a normal expectation.”

It is expected that any who believe on Jesus Christ will grow in their faith, but this group grew more and faster than any group Paul had ever seen. These Thessalonians got it. They embraced it and they grew faster and larger than anything they had ever seen.

These believers immediately embraced the faith system at a level far above and beyond anything Paul had ever experienced. They wanted to know the Word of God; they wanted to know grace theology and they wanted to know biblical prophecy. They were so committed to this objective that Paul said, “I owe this church a debt in that I must always thank God for this church.”

Now when we initially go to any church, people basically look the same. They seem to do the same kind of things. But it doesn't take long until you begin to see who truly loves the Word of God and who doesn't. You quickly learn who is after truth and who isn't.

The thing about this Thessalonian church was that the whole church was on the same page.

The whole church loved the Word, they loved the grace/faith system and Paul had never seen anything quite like it. This is why he said, “we have a debt we owe to you and that is to continually thank God for you.”

Our faith should be a growing and blossoming faith all of our lives. We should be trusting God more and more the older we get. We should want more and more of the Word of God because faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Our faith should be increasing, not decreasing. We should be more stable and less fickle.

QUALITY #2 – Paul could thank God for their growing love. **1:3b**

The second thing that stood out to Paul about this church was the fact that they had a growing love for each other in the church. This had been a real concern for Paul (I Thess. 3:12). When people in a church are under fire, they can begin to implode from within and Paul was concerned that these believers stick together.

In fact, the pronoun “another” (αλληλους) means another of the same kind. So Paul spotted a real high level of true biblical love in this church for one another. The members of this Thessalonian church developed a love for each other that just kept blossoming. It kept growing and growing and growing.

Bishop Joseph Lightfoot, of the 1800’s, in Liverpool, England, who was a tremendous Greek grammarian and writer, said that the difference between the “enlarging” and the “growing” is that the enlarging has to do with the internal, organic growth as of a tree and the “growing” has to do with the expansive external character such as a flood irrigating of the land” (*Notes*, p. 98).

Now Paul grammatically points out that this growing love was within “each one” of them. So apparently every person in this church loved the Word of God and loved each other. Keep in mind that there was a real hodge-podge of people in this church. Some were people of social importance and reputation and some weren’t (Acts 17:4). In fact, some of the women of this church were leading women of the city. But social status did not matter to these Thessalonians. The men and women who comprised this church loved the Word of God and they loved each other. It was real and genuine.

Now Paul had been around many different churches and when you are around a church you have normal average expectations. But this church was way above and beyond the norm. To Paul, this was a very exceptional church.

In fact, in **verse 4** Paul says we are so impressed with these qualities that “we ourselves” proudly boast about what we have seen God do in your lives to all of the churches of God. The present tense of the verb “speak proudly” means that they continually went to one church after another and told the people how proud they were of the Thessalonian church.

The word “proud” (ενκαυχασμαι) is a present, middle infinitive that means to continually take pride in something in and of yourself (*Ibid.*, p. 155). Everywhere Paul went, he took great pride in this Thessalonian church. This church loved the Lord and loved the Word and loved each other and Paul was proud of this church.

I think one of the things we need to do is to be willing to set aside our own pride and be proud of someone else. We need to be proud of those who are going someplace for God. We should not be jealous of someone who is blossoming and growing and being greatly used by God; we should be proud of them and we should tell them that.

One of the things that made Lewis Sperry Chafer so powerful was his ability to recognize other men of God who were more skilled and knowledgeable than he was and to get them to teach men in ministry. For example, Dr. Chafer recognized the theological depth of W. H. Griffith Thomas, he recognized the grammatical genius of a man like A. C. Gaebelien or a Charles Fienberg. He was not afraid to want them because they were more skilled in a field than he was. We need to get back to that mindset. We need to be proud of each other and what God has given them and done with them.

When is the last time you went to someone you knew God was developing and using and told them, “I thank God for you. I am so proud of the way you have done something for God”? When is the last time you told someone, “I thank God for the grace that I see developing in your life”? “You are blossoming in the grace of God and you are getting out of the rigid O.T. legalism.” If Paul did this for the Thessalonians, we ought to do it for each other.

There were primarily two specific areas of pride for Paul:

Pride Area #1 - Paul was proud that the people persevered and maintained their faith in the midst of persecutions . **1:4a**

Now we learned from the first letter to the Thessalonians that there were some “faint-hearted” people and some “weak” people in the church (I Thess. 5:14). Certainly physical and verbal attack can potentially cause some to back away. This did not happen here. The Thessalonians kept progressing even in the face of “persecutions.”

Carefully observe here is that the noun “persecutions” is plural . So there were multiple instances in which these believers were being persecuted. Now the word “persecute” (διωγμοις) speaks of an eager, intense persecution that comes in rapid speed (*Ibid.*, p. 119). This church was hit with one attack after another that came at them from different angles.

When you are being persecuted by someone, the natural tendency is to run; to resign; to quit. But instead of doing that, these believers persevered. As Thomas Constable of Dallas Seminary said, “The Thessalonians did not react to discomfort the way many Christians do, by running away from their uncomfortable situations” (*II Thessalonians*, Bible Knowledge Commentary, p. 715).

They actually persevered.

Now the word “persevere” (υπομονη) means to patiently endure and remain as opposed to run (*Ibid.*, p. 462). We know that the grace faith system Paul preached really angered the rigid, legalistic Jews who were dedicated to O.T. Law and traditions. In fact, this is why those Jews wanted to kill Paul.

They were jealous of the fact that his preaching and teaching went against the grain of their theology (Acts 17:5). Many of these Jews were lashing out against the believers. Jason, whose home Paul and his team had stayed in, had been hauled into court and actually had to pay a fine in order not to go to jail or worse (Acts 17:6-9).

These Thessalonians broke away from religious traditions and legalism. They did not observe the special religious day holidays; they did not observe the dietary codes or the religious rules invented by men and as a result they were coming under great persecution. But those believers would not budge. They would not quit. They would not leave. They stayed focused on truth.

In the midst of the persecution, these believers refused to run and they stuck to their faith system of theology. They were not only putting up with this, they were growing in their faith in the midst of this. No wonder Paul was so proud of this church.

Some people are willing to trust God for eternity and for salvation, but they are not willing to trust God for problems pertaining to daily life and earthly survival. This Thessalonian church was different. They trusted God for salvation and survival. Their faith actually grew as they went through difficulties. Paul was proud of that fact.

Pride Area #2 - Paul was proud that the people persevered and maintained faith in the afflictions they endured. **1:4b**

Again, carefully observe is that the noun “afflictions” is plural. So these “afflictions” didn’t just happen one time. These afflictions happened multiple times.

Now the word “afflictions” means that they were under great pressure. The religious people of Thessalonica were putting great pressure on these grace believers. **The difference between “persecution” and “affliction” is that persecution seems to be more physical and verbal and the affliction seems to be more emotional.**

People were putting great emotional pressure and strain on these Thessalonians. They were coming under great attack because they departed from the legalistic system of religion and embraced grace.

But no matter what the pressure, they would not budge. They stuck to their faith. That word “endure” means that they held up under the pressure. They stayed focused on loving the Lord and loving the Word and loving grace.

They were growing more and more even in spite of all of these things. They loved the Lord and they loved the Word and nothing could shake them from that focus.

One of the real advantages of persecution and affliction is that it can produce a greater level of trust and confidence in the Lord.

Paul was so proud of this church that he bragged about it everywhere he went. He said we have a debt we owe these Thessalonians and the debt is to always thank God for them.

We will have many different experiences in life as a believer. We will have high moments and low moments. We will have good times and bad times. These are the moments in which we may grow. We may develop or decline. We may become bitter or better.

May I be a little personal and pastoral here? I have pastored three churches and I must say, in all of the churches I have been a minister of, I am the proudest of TCBC. The commitment that the people of this church have to understanding God's Word is at a very unusual level. We have aggressively taken the Word of God out from this pulpit to Michigan, the United States and to the world. Our stand for grace and for Jesus Christ against religious legalism and denominationalism is a front line stand. We have assaulted false religions and continue to defend the faith and the truth. Many of you have stood your ground and have supported this ministry and have actually grown and developed all the way through the process. I want you to know that I thank God for each and every one of you. Thank you for your faithfulness, your love and your support.