

BEING WORTHY OF OUR CALLING RIGHT NOW

2 Thessalonians 1 (text: vv.11-12)

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Thessalonian Christians had suffered persecution. They had suffered it from as soon as the Apostle Paul had brought the Gospel to them. Not as severe as it was to be in later years of the Roman Empire, or as has been experienced by many of the Lord's people throughout history and is still today. Yet Paul still calls their sufferings persecutions and afflictions.

In second Timothy chapter 3, Paul says that "All who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." At some time in our lives people of God, in some way, we must all experience it, even if for now we in the West, most of us, live in the blessings of freedom bought by the suffering of our forefathers.

But in that we ourselves here at least in New Zealand suffer relatively little persecution, I tried to take the principles of what Paul was saying and apply those first six verses in our situation to trials and difficulties of all sorts. And we all experience those. We all experience injustice from time to time. Maybe children, you've had a spanking or been punished in some way for something that, in actual fact on that occasion at least, you didn't do. We all have failed expectations. We all have hopes that don't come to fruition. People let us down. (Never forget that you at times let others down as well.) And who knows if we here in New Zealand may not have to experience persecution some time in the future.

But the wonderful thing about the Christians in Thessalonica was that their persecution and afflictions didn't make them bitter. As a matter of fact their faith in God had grown stronger and their love for one another had grown stronger and Paul commended them for that. He praised them. He also encouraged them with the promise that one day the tables would be turned. For, as he says in verse 6, "*It is only just – it is only right – for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you.*" God is a God of justice and injustice cannot continue forever. So Paul says, "Lift up your heads and look forward to that day when Jesus comes again."

But in the meantime of course life still has to be lived, in the middle perhaps of persecutions, afflictions and trials. And to bear up, merely, under persecution even is not enough, says Paul. God wants us to and he expects us to make progress in our faith and to serve him. So, whereas in verse 3 Paul had thanked God for their faith, that it had grown stronger, that their love for one another had grown stronger, now in our text this morning he prays that they will serve and that they will prove themselves worthy of their calling through their service.

Paul had told them that the way they had responded to persecution in the past showed the work of God in their hearts. And that showed that God did count them worthy of the Kingdom, that he had accepted them. He now calls them to be faithful to their calling, to be disciples and servants in the world right now. I want to say three things about that this morning. First of all,

1. WHAT IS OUR CALLING?

Paul prays in verse 11 that God would "*fulfil every desire for goodness and every work of faith in you.*"

Every desire for goodness – what is that? In the greatest penitential Psalm, Psalm 51, David prays that God would produce in him "*truth in the innermost being;*" and, "*in the hidden*

parts, O God, would you make me to know wisdom? Create in me a clean heart and renew an upright spirit within me;" and then *"restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit."*

Everything in life begins in the heart. So Proverbs tells us to *"guard your heart, for from the heart flow the actions and outcomes of life."* And that idea is behind some of what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. Evil thoughts in God's eyes are as good as the actual sins – or as bad! But Paul is not just talking about sin, or righteousness, when he talks about every desire for goodness. He is talking about Christian service as, for example, what you read about in Philippians chapter 2 where he says in verse 2, *"Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself."* Or as he says in Galatians chapter 5, *"Do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith."*

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel is a great comfort to us. Our own catechism begins with the question, *"What is your only comfort in life and in death?"* To be a Christian is to confess that, as human beings and particularly as sinful human beings, we are weak and helpless. True faith comes to Christ as a little child. And it is only in the light of the knowledge of the gospel and of God that we can ever have any other true knowledge. That is all true.

On the other hand Paul says one time, in the old translation, *"Quit you like men, be strong."* In other words, *"Get a life. Get a life like men, grow strong."* And he says this to Christians under persecution. Even under persecution Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to pick themselves up and look outside themselves and think about doing good to others, either spiritually or physically. We need to remember that congregation. It's true, we do have genuine troubles and difficulties in life but we need to pick ourselves up out of those and start to have *desires for goodness* – moral goodness, spiritual and practical goodness, for the sake of the kingdom of God and for the good of others.

But then the desire is never enough. We need to go on and put those thoughts into action, because Paul speaks about *"having every desire for goodness"* and also *"every work of faith."*

We are not Quietists. We are not Quakers. We do meditate, *"day and night on the law of the Lord."* But after we've meditated, says the first Psalm, we've got to get up and *"walk in the law of the Lord."* And so *"Faith"*, says Paul in Galatians, *"works through love."* Our faith is to be practical. That increased love for one another that persecution, even, had produced in the Thessalonians was a real Christian love for it reached out to their brothers and sisters. After all congregation, isn't the great Christian word for love, agape, an active love, a love that seeks to do good to the person we love? So *"do good to all men, especially to those of the household of faith."*

So as Christians therefore, Paul prays that we would have desires for goodness and that those desires not just be desires but that they be fulfilled; that they become works of faith. And he prays that those works of faith would also be fulfilled, that they would be completed. So that, just as the Lord Jesus Christ could say before he went to the cross, *"Father I have completed the work you gave me to do,"* we also may be able to say the same. Thus we become more like our father in heaven, which of course we are to do. When he had finished his great work of creation on the sixth day, he looked at it and he said *"Behold it is very good."*

Congregation, as we fulfil every desire for goodness and every work of faith so the Father will say to us, Behold, what you have done is very good. "*Well done good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.*"

That is what our calling is congregation as Christians in the world, at least so far as Paul puts it in this text. But the second question we need to ask is;

2. HOW WILL WE BE COUNTED WORTHY OF OUR CALLING?

Maybe you have noticed I've been avoiding some very important phrases in the text. Because, of course, Paul tells us that he *prayed* that God would count these Thessalonian Christians worthy of being called to desires for goodness and works of faith. Which is as much as to pray, would God put those desires for goodness in their hearts and would God move their hands and feet to work those works of faith? He also prays that God may do that "*with power*" (v.11). And the end of the whole sentence, at the end of verse 12, says it is all "*according to the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.*"

We need God's help for this. Desires for goodness do not naturally arise out of hearts that still have a bent towards evil as ours do, as we all know very well. Works of faith do not come naturally to the hands of people who still have a tendency to love themselves above everyone else, as we do. We cannot do it in our own strength. Indeed, as Paul says to the Philippians in chapter 2 verse 13, Whatever of God's will and work of his good pleasure that we may do, we are able to do it only because he has first worked it into us.

Jesus never asks us to do what he has not done himself. Just as he said, "*He who loves me is he who has my commandments and keeps them,*" so he also said "*I came to do your will O God even as it is written in your book.*" Jesus did the will of his father. But it wasn't easy. He was in constant communion with his father. We often read that he went off to pray and sometimes he prayed all night. And when it came to his supreme work and his supreme test, the supreme outworking of "*desires for goodness and act of faith*" working through love, he prayed three times in a great sweat. And he fortified himself every step of the way to the cross with the Psalms. And what are Psalms? They are prayers – prayers full of praises and promises to encourage him and strengthen him and cries for help.

As much as we grow up as Christians and get a life like men – I don't mean that in a macho way of course. Nevertheless men, people who have an aim and have a purpose in life and a work in the world, something to achieve. We cannot do it on our own for our enemies are not mere flesh and blood. They are "*spiritual powers in high places.*" And our greatest enemy is he of whom Luther said in his great hymn, "*On earth is not his equal.*"

Congregation let us pray that God would do this in us and that he would do it with power, his power, for we can do nothing spiritual in this life but that which is "*according to the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.*" As John Newton put it in his great hymn, "*'Tis grace hath brought us safe thus far, 'tis grace will bring me home.*" That is the only way we will ever be counted worthy of God to count us as having lived up to our calling. So our calling is to have "*every desire for goodness and work of faith.*" We can do it only in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly,

3. WHY SHOULD WE WALK WORTHY OF OUR CALLING?

It's a bit of an insolent question really. The almighty God has called us and he's called us by the death of his Son to be his own. There can be no greater honour in all the universe than

that, surely. Nor greater mercy or grace. "*Even now,*" says John, "*we are the children of God.*" But God's grace is great and he gives us many other incentives as well and in our text that "*the name of our Lord Jesus Christ be glorified in you and you in him.*"

When Paul says that – that "*the name of our Lord Jesus Christ be glorified,*" he means, of course, that Jesus Christ himself be glorified. We choose names for our children simply as a handle. We choose a name that sounds nice to us but that's not the Bible way. In the Bible a name means something, it tells us about the person and especially so for our Lord Jesus Christ.

- He is Lord, our Lord and the Lord of the whole world.
- He is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of David who came as a man in fulfilment of all the promises to Israel that God would send a Saviour to save his people from their sins.
- He is Christ. He was anointed by God to be the only Saviour. There's no other saviour. There's no other whom God has or will send. As we'll sing in a minute, "*There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.*"

Now it's true, people of God, we look forward to a great day when he "*will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire and be glorified in his saints and be marvelled at among all who have believed.*" But why not glorify one who is as great as this right now?! It's not just our calling for the final day, when he brings the kingdom in fullness. It's our calling now. "*Whatever you do*" says Paul, "*whether it be in word or in deed, whether you even just eat and drink, do it all to the glory of God.*" So Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, and by extension he prayed for us, that God may "*count us worthy of our calling and fulfil our every desire for goodness and work of faith with power in order that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ be glorified in us*" in this life. "*That we,*" as one writer put it, "*and our lives would be such a bright and shining testimony to the reality of our salvation that Christ would be seen by the world to be the wonderful Being that he really is*" (Morris).

But there's more. Paul prays that **we** "*be glorified in him*" by our living in him. What does it mean that we be glorified in him? I'm not sure really but perhaps it's something like this? Paul, in verse 4 of this chapter, spoke very proudly of the Thessalonians because even under persecution their faith in Christ had grown stronger and their love for one another had grown stronger. There's nothing more attractive in this world than somebody who is really Christ-like. That in itself surely is a glory to that person, isn't it? And that people like that are looked to by other Christians as examples, even as we are exhorted to look to the Lord Jesus Christ as an example, and we're exhorted in Hebrews 11 to look to the OT saints, and to Paul; and in Hebrews 13 we're exhorted to look to those "*who lead us to Christ,*" to follow their example. Could there be a greater honour in this life? – to be thought by fellow Christians, without pride and perhaps probably without even being aware of it really, to be an example of godliness and Christ-likeness? Could we be more useful? – for other Christians and therefore for Christ and for God? A person like that would be glorified simply because of and in their living fellowship with Jesus Christ.

This morning we are going to remember, in that special way of the Lord's Supper, the death of our Saviour. This bread and wine on the table are emblems of his grace *par excellence*. They are symbols of his fulfilled *desires for goodness and work of faith*. Yes even Jesus' work was a work of faith. He was able to do it because he kept before his eyes the joy set before him. And he did it the same way he calls us to do it, by prayer and praises in the

prayers of the Psalms. So he was, and he will be, rewarded with a great people and great glory and great honour.

That, congregation, we will share in. Let us pray for one another. We set up our church address list as a prayer list. Use it so that we pray for one another that we all may walk worthy of this calling to glorify our Lord Jesus Christ now, in this life, and ourselves be glorified in him in this life, by our desires for goodness and work of faith.

We need to pray for each other for this because we can only do it by God's power. We can only do it by God's grace. But that way we can do it, even as God did in the Thessalonians. "*For he who called you is faithful and he will do it*" in you.

Amen.

John Rogers, Reformed Church of the North Shore, 8th February, 2004