

A Church Folks Can Talk About

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

An appreciative customer asked his *Domino's* Pizza delivery driver, "What's your name? I want to call your store and tell your boss what a great job you're doing."

The driver replied: "My name is Theodore Roosevelt."

"That's a very famous name," chuckled the customer.

"It should be," said the driver. "I've been delivering in this neighborhood for almost three years now."

The church in Thessalonica was making quite a name for itself in a rather brief period of time. There were problems here and there. The same adversaries that forced Paul out of the city were still oppressing the believers he left behind. They needed encouragement. A few people misinterpreted Paul's words about Christ's return. They were abandoning earthly responsibilities to simply sit and wait for Jesus to come back. They needed further grounding.

Still, all in all, Thessalonica was a strong church. It was the kind of church to which Paul enjoyed directing people's attention as an example of how churches ought to conduct themselves, but he seldom got the chance. This church's reputation preceded her. Paul loved this church. He was confident in this church. He was pleased with her progress. So, before he addressed the problems facing this community of faith, he shared a few affectionate and laudatory thoughts.

I. A Prayer of Elation (2, 3)

²We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. ³We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

A. An Exception that Proves the Rule

CARTOON:

"Oh great! Here comes Bob. I told him I'd pray for him! "Dear God, help Bob. Amen."
Reaching his hand out to Bob, "Hey, Bob, been prayin' for you!"

At least that doesn't strike close to home for any of us. We pray about everything we are asked to pray about, right? Do you keep your word every time that you assure someone else that you will pray for them or for a concern they pass along to you? Do you pick up the weekly prayer list intending to intercede for every name there, or is taking that list as much about staying in the information loop as it is about guiding your prayer time? I fear that this generation of believers has grown comfortable promising to pray whether or not we actually ever get around to praying.

When Paul said that he prays for the recipients of any of his letters, I am inclined to believe him. In this instance, he was speaking not only for himself, but also for Timothy and Silas. I know that I choose my words carefully when I am writing as part of a group. I picture Paul regularly praying for the churches and, where his knowledge was personal, for people in those churches.

Paul routinely told the recipients of his letters that he prayed for them. In fact, in only one letter did he not make such a claim. Galatians is the exception that proves the rule. Paul did not tell the Galatians that he regularly prayed for them. Galatians is Paul's most agitated epistle. The gospel of grace was being distorted there. I suspect that Paul did pray for them and, probably, *about* them, but I don't get the sense that his prayers flowed easily. Some of his most honest prayers *about* the Galatians are probably best left unrecorded. That gives me a sense of his authenticity – that he **DID** pray as he claimed, and that he did not toss about empty promises and rhetoric about prayer as do many believers today. Paul was authentically grateful for the saints in Thessalonica.

B. Dynamic Faith

Paul speaks of their “work produced by faith.” The Bible has no more articulate spokesman than Paul for the doctrine of salvation by grace and not by our works. It was James who wrote: “Faith without works is dead,” but, in his own way, Paul was just as clear on this point. He could not fathom that a faith that is not dynamic, not issuing in good works, could be remotely genuine.

Paul may have in mind here the whole gamut of activity inspired by faith. His word for “work” refers to a vocation. Faith does not only compel us to do benevolent and churchy-type things. It also awakens in us a whole new energy and ethic to bring to our jobs. It gives us a sense of calling. We do not work merely for a paycheck, upward mobility or fear of being fired. Faith calls us to work knowing we are fulfilling something God has provided for us. You may love your job. You may have your eye open for something better. But, gratitude that you have a job needs to be present regardless. We are to work as though we are serving God, regardless.

C. Unrelenting Love

Paul changes his focus to “labor prompted by love.” This word refers to “toil”, something that may be tedious and not pleasant by nature. It is actually derived from a word that pictures a slave being whipped. The word is filled with images of self-denial, personal sacrifice and something that is hard, not easy to accomplish. But, sometimes, things we would never naturally do and things that we would typically resist **BEING MADE** to do by any outward compulsion, we end up **CHOOSING** to do, because love proves to be a stronger inward compulsion. Of course, the “love” Paul has in mind has to be more than a feeling. This love is known by its actions.

A group of children are asked to define love. There are cute answers and sweet ones, but just one that precisely reflects what Paul meant when he spoke of “labor prompted by love”:

“When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love.”

Is love compelling you to anything that qualifies as toil, that stretches you, that calls you to deny yourself for someone else? It's nice that God has gifted His people for works of service, but do you really think that means that He only wants you engaged in activities that come easily to you? Do you doubt that there is ever an occasion for you to break a sweat? Do you doubt that there should be times when love demands that you pour yourself out to do a right or helpful thing?

D. Enduring Hope

Finally, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonian believers with an eye to their “endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” “Hope” to the Christian is never some nebulous, poorly-defined longing that things could be different. Hope is never an ill-founded desire that something good could happen. Hope welds desire to a reliable expectation. Jesus made some promises to His people when He ascended to the Father. Paramount among these is His promise that He is coming back to fully establish His Kingdom. This alone is the kind of “hope” that empowers a people to endure. Faith gives birth to work. Love gives birth to toil. Hope sustains us in both.

Paul thanked God that the Thessalonians were imminently anticipating the return of Jesus. There was no threat, no obstacle and no delay that could thwart them in their service for God.

II. A Proof of Election (4-7)

⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you ... – verse 4

A. What “Chosen” Means Here Is Hardly the Point

Honest believers differ in their understanding of how “election” or God’s “choosing” of us works. Some understand this to mean that God, before creation, exercised His sovereign prerogative to stamp some people for salvation at the exclusion of others. Some understand election to mean that while God calls many, He chooses those who are responsive to Him, knowing from before creation who was who. Feel free to thrash that out over Sunday dinner, but don’t miss Paul’s immediate intent. The Apostle was confident that these folks were for real.

Paul’s confidence in this particular bunch is evidenced by a phrase that, in his days as a Pharisee, he would never have dared to use as he does here. “Loved by God” was a term that the Jews applied only to the supremely great “Who’s Who” of their history. Moses, David and the like were “loved by God.” They also applied the term to Israel as a nation. To grant these Gentiles this status was to elevate them to greatness. They too were God’s beloved chosen. This would have infuriated the same Jews who were at the heart of the persecution in Thessalonica.

B. The Missionaries’ Proclamation of the Gospel Was Typically Remarkable verse 5a

... ⁵because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction ...

Whenever Paul’s preaching seemed successful, he gave credit to a power inherent to the Gospel. He knew that no matter how well he put sentences together, he was reliant on divine power. His acknowledgement of the Spirit’s role reflects his grasp that something of God, not of Paul, must call sinners to repent. The power to restore, to speak light to darkness and life to death is God’s.

¹When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified ... ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power. – 1 Corinthians 2:1-2, 4-5

Paul knew that neither he nor any other man wields life-changing power, and this attitude was evident in his “deep conviction.” His conviction in preaching was rooted in his calling on the Damascus Road and in his understanding that the Lord Jesus Christ had made him His Apostle to the Gentiles. If Paul’s conviction ever needed any boost, it was surely provided by the unique way Christ led him to Macedonia. Twice, the Spirit restrained Paul from pursuing his own strategy before a vision of a man from Macedonia appeared, saying, “Come and help us.”

C. The Thessalonians’ Reception of the Gospel Was Unusually Remarkable verses 5b-7

... You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia ...

Paul and Silas met strong resistance from the Jews in Thessalonica, so for others to embrace their message was risky. But, when the power of “Christ crucified” infiltrated the hearts of God’s chosen, they knew why the missionaries endured all that they endured. That they “welcomed the message with joy” is an amazing statement given the hostilities they would immediately face.

Paul commends them for imitating him, and he could do that because he knew that he was imitating Jesus. This rapid reproduction of the character of Jesus in their community, in spite of opposition, caused Paul to think of Thessalonica as a “model” for churches throughout Greece (Macedonia being the northern province of Greece and Achaia being the southern half.)

By the way, that word for “model” is *typos* from which we get the word “type”. Now, since this letter is Paul’s earliest letter to any church and, of course, since I needed a P-R word to keep the alliteration of my outline intact, I trust I’m not stretching anything to discuss, finally ...

III. A Prototype for Exemplification (8-10)

A. Proper Testimony Must “Ring Out”, not simply “Pay Out” verses 8, 9a

... ⁸The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us ...

Thessalonica was the kind of church Paul liked to point to, but sometimes, his thunder was stolen. People were already familiar with Thessalonica. This reputation was due to the degree by which they had captured a passion for Jesus that they saw in Paul. They were not inhibited by threats. The Gospel “rang out” from there, like a resounding trumpet or echoing thunder.

“There is something tremendous about the sheer defiance of early Christianity. When all prudence would have dictated a way of life that would escape notice and so avoid danger and persecution, the Christians blazoned forth their faith. They were never ashamed to show whose they were and whom they sought to serve.” – Charles Barclay

How much should a church “pay out” to missions? 10%? 50%? Don’t fall into that trap. It’s a trick question. The only proper answer is 100% for we are not called to “support” the Lord’s mission to the world, but to embody it. The “Lord’s message rang out from” Thessalonica. A cartoon depicts a lady scolding her preacher for insisting that their church must be a more significant presence in the community. She protested: “Now pastor, how can you say our church has no outreach when our Brunswick stew sale touches hundreds?” We are not here to be known for stew or any other peripheral. We are here to be a launching point of the power of the Gospel.

Paul would use the Macedonian churches as an example in sacrificial giving to shame the more affluent and stingy Corinthians into doing better, but they did not become familiar throughout Greece because they financed foreign missions. That wasn't their strength. They became known because truth "rang out". They were a beachhead for the authentic Christian faith. True Christian zeal, that passion in Paul that reflected Christ and that they imitated ... that was their forte.

B. Proper Testimony Depicts Transformation verses 9b, 10

... They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Acts tells us that this church started largely with God-fearing Gentiles but, apparently, most of the rapid growth came from the ranks of pagan Gentiles, who "turned to God from idols." That a huge community on the Grecian mainland would turn from idols would set the peninsula abuzz with chatter. Greece was steeped in idolatry. When Paul went to Athens, he was surrounded by monuments to countless Greek deities. Local cultures were heavily influenced by pagan temple practices. Local economies were heavily invested in producing the trinkets of false religion.

Idols are dead and false, so when the Gospel is preached in power, many turn "to serve the true and living God." They also wait for the return of Jesus, Whom God raised from the dead. Of all the doctrines of Jesus, the one most foundational to a Christian's future hope is His Resurrection. If Jesus was not raised, then, it is futile to wait for Him to return. It is nuts to think that He is in heaven, interceding for us before the Father or preparing our eternal dwelling place up until that point when the Father taps Him on the shoulder and says, "It's time!" And, if Jesus is not raised, then, it is far-fetched to believe that we will ever be anything but dead after we die, for His Resurrection is the guarantee that convinces us that God can give eternal life to all of His chosen.

We serve God and we wait for Jesus to rescue us from "the coming wrath." People get utterly out-of-sorts trying to process God's wrath. His wrath seems out-of-sync with His love, but this is only because the world confuses love with indulgence. Of course, people don't allow their own love to be handcuffed like God's love is handcuffed. We would never say that our love disallows us from ever standing for anything, protecting anything or condemning whatever undermines goodness, so we should dismiss the voices of this world that try to handcuff God's love that way.

"The wrath of God is, in its deepest ground, love; love itself becomes a consuming fire to whatever is opposed to the nature of goodness." – D. A. Koch, *Pulpit Commentary*

Does it seem like the world lately is in perpetual Doomsday mode. If the current financial crisis doesn't ruin us, or a nuclear bomb doesn't destroy us, massive climate change is sure to wipe out our food supply. This past March, on a remote island close to the North Pole, the Norwegian government opened a vast underground crypt, more than 425-feet deep inside a frozen mountain, declaring it ready to receive shipments of seeds from around the world. This is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, *aka* the Doomsday vault, a deep-cold storage cavern with room to hold some 4.5 million distinct seed samples just in the event man does something silly and needs them later.

Wouldn't it be nice to believe that in this world somewhere there is a repository where God's wisdom, the virtues of faith, hope and love as well as everything else this world needs to restore peace to chaos could be found? In fact, there is such a place. That place is any church that truly grasps its divine role. Thessalonica was such a place. That church impacted the world because it was ignited by the same fire that burned in Paul. I would add that any church can be such a place. It does not have to be a perfect place, just passionate. Primitive, passionate faith can still give this world something to talk about.