

1. A Faith which Perseveres

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Date: 05 April 2009

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[0 : 00] Now, before we turn to our passage, let's have a moment of prayer. Living God, whose gracious Holy Spirit gave us the Scriptures, we ask that that same Holy Spirit will move among us now, will open up the Word to us and lead us to the living Word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. And so to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 1. I'm calling this whole series Living Faithfully and Waiting Expectantly.

That's our general title for the whole series because that is what the book is about, living the Christian life in the light of Christ's coming. A Christian girl who was nearing the end of her school days was having a conversation with her minister.

And he was asking her what she was going to do when she left school. And she told him she had got good grades in her exams and was hoping to go to university to study law.

And after that, he said, well, I hope to go into practice, become a solicitor. And after that, he said, well, there's no bars now to intelligent girls getting on in the world.

[1 : 33] I may even become a judge. Who knows? And after that, he said, he said, well, not necessarily after that, but possibly at the same time I would love to marry and have children.

And after that, she said to him, why do you keep on saying and after that? And he replied, why are you setting your ambitions so low?

Why not consider eternity? And that's what Paul is saying to the Thessalonians and saying to us this evening, why not consider eternity?

That's why I've given the general title Living Faithfully and Waiting Expectantly. And tonight, particularly, a faith which perseveres. And a faith which will only persevere if we consider eternity. Now, two questions, two introductory matters, really coming from verses 1 and 2. Now, the first question is, what and where? What is this church and where was it?

[2 : 42] Now, you can read later on in Acts 17 of how this church was founded in Thessalonica, in Macedonia. Part of that great westward mission which began in Philippi, as the Spirit of God, Luke tells us, turned Paul and his friends from going eastward and they came westward and began that great gospel movement that was eventually going to bring the gospel to our own shores.

And it's wonderful to think of that. Paul and his friends wanted to go to Asia but the Spirit turned them westwards. Not that Asia didn't need and wouldn't get the gospel, but that the Spirit had purposes.

Purposes for you and me and for millions of others as the gospel came westward. Now, a church here was founded in this place where Paul ministered for little more than a month as far as we can make out and persecution broke out almost immediately.

And in both letters there is a sense of a church that's under pressure, a sense of the church that's up against it. So, the church is in Thessalonica, this important trade route, important trading center in Macedonia, but it's also in God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's our real identity as Christians. What's our identity as Christians? Not that we are members of St. George's Tron or whatever church we belong to or because of our background, because of where we work and where we live.

[4 : 11] The ultimate identity of a Christian is that they are in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ. And ultimately, that is all we have to offer to the world. John Wesley, famously said, asked to describe his ministry, I offered Christ to them.

Surely that's what this coming week is about. I offered Christ to them. So that's what and where. Let's see, read it later in Acts 17, the account of how the Gospel came here.

But why? Now, many of the New Testament apostles wrote more than one letter. This letter is unusual in that it seems to have been written only a few months after the first one.

We learn later on in the letter that Paul had written to them only a short time before. Now, in the first letter, you'll remember, a great deal of the emphasis is on the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ, particularly that passage in chapter 4, the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a cry of command.

And issues had arisen over the second coming. When is it going to take place? What's going to happen to those who have already gone? And also, what's its practical relevance?

[5 : 26] And there's an awful lot in this letter about the second coming and about its practical reference. You see, we need both perspectives. The practical reverence is the living faithfully.

The practical reverence is living now in the light of then, anticipating heaven, if you like, in our lives down here. But if we solely concentrate on that, that won't keep us going.

Because disillusionments, disappointments, possibly not in this country so much persecution, but certainly a great deal of opposition, we'll soon get tired, we'll soon weary, and we won't be able to keep going.

And that's why Paul points them to the time when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. On the other hand, if we are continually looking into the future without regard to the present, then we are not going to live faithfully either.

We remember what the angels said to the apostles as they watched Jesus return to heaven. You men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing into heaven?

[6 : 35] You've got a job to do. And the job is to take the gospel into Judea, Samaria, and to the furthest parts of the earth. And that is still the message to us. And you'll notice this is not a gospel of good works.

Grace, says Paul in verse 2. This is the gospel of the grace of God, the overflowing generosity of God, which leads to peace. And that's what Paul and his companions are saying to the Thessalonians.

So let's look now at verses 3 to 12. I want to look at them in three sections. First of all, verses 3 to 4, which is thanking God for his faithfulness.

As Paul begins the letter, he thanks God for his faithfulness. Now notice the word steadfastness in verse 4. We ought to boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions.

Now, how were they able to be steadfast? How were they able to persevere? Not because they gritted their teeth. Not because they summoned up their own human reserves.

[7 : 47] No, it was by God's faithfulness. So primarily, he is thanking God for his faithfulness. His faithfulness that enables his people to persevere. Now that's the connection there.

It's not simply the people's faith. It's God's faithfulness. And that's still the case for us because the life of faith is a struggle. And if we depend on our own energies, if we depend on our own enthusiasms, then we're going to fall.

We're going to be disappointed. So, Paul says, he thanks God. And first of all, he thanks God for your faith and your love.

Now, the point about faith and love is they're not static things. We're not doled out a dose of faith and a dose of love, which then has to do us for the rest of our days.

They are growing things. It's not a possession to be kept under wraps, rather like the parable of the talents. The way of faith is to be tested so that it will grow.

[8 : 51] You see, a Sunday school faith is great for the Sunday school. But it's not very great if you're middle-aged and if you've grown up in other respects. Indeed, one of the sad things about so many of our churches is to find people who in their own businesses and their own personal lives and their own work, their own professions, are showing every sign of progressing, every sign of growing, every sign of diligence, but their faith remains a Sunday school faith.

The faith needs to grow and love also needs to grow. Because the love that God puts in us is not our own natural love.

It's His love flowing through us. So faith and love are not static qualities. You sometimes hear people saying, I wish I had your faith, as if faith were some kind of quality that some people had and others didn't.

Both faith and love are gifts of the grace of God help us to grow. The other thing in these verses is Paul's use of the word boast. Therefore we boast about you.

Now boasting is not normally regarded as an attractive quality, is it? But notice exactly what Paul is saying. Or let's begin by noticing what he's not saying.

[10:09] He's not saying, you're a great bunch and you're a great credit to me. I really built well in Thessalonica. I really must have done well when I was with you, the way you are growing.

No. He is saying, he is thanking God for his grace that enabled that faith and love to grow.

Therefore we are ourselves boast about your steadfastness, your perseverance, your faith in all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

This is bringing out the best in them. This is bringing out Christ in them. So he's boasting not about what they have achieved, not about what he has achieved, rather he's boasting in the grace of God. The modern hymn says, I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom, but I will boast in Jesus Christ and in his resurrection. That's what Paul is saying here.

So this first section then, thanking God for the faith and love of the Thessalonians, which is a result of the Spirit of God, of the love of Christ flowing through them.

[11:17] Then he moves on in verses 5 to 10 where he praises God that he's going to judge the world. He praises God that he will judge the world.

Now this seems rather strange to us to praise God for judgment. Look back at some of the Psalms. Isn't it what Psalm 98 says? Praise the Lord, rejoice.

Rivers, clap your hands. because the Lord comes to judge the earth, rejoicing that one day this mixture of good and evil, one day this earth which is under the curse and under futility, that God will judge it and bring in a world that is righteous, a new creation, a new heaven and earth where there is righteousness.

And Paul says, what you are suffering is evidence, strange evidence perhaps at first sight, it's evidence that God is working in you.

You see, if we endure hardships, they're not pleasant in themselves and no one but a masochist is going to boast and rejoice in sufferings. So why does the Bible tell us to rejoice in sufferings?

[12:31] Not for their own sake, but rather that God is at work among us, that we belong to Him and He is doing everything that is needed to bring His sons and daughters to glory.

That's the biblical theology of suffering. Surely God is working to bring about salvation for His people and for an opposition and judgment for those who oppose that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.

Once again, it's not, you'd better suffer or you're jolly well not going to be allowed into the kingdom. Rather, it's saying that your steadfastness in suffering is showing that Christ is in you.

Like that day in Oxford, that March day in Oxford when Ridley and Latimer about to be burned at the stake for their faith showed how genuine that was.

Play up, play up and play the man, Master Ridley, said Latimer, and today we will light by God's grace a candle in England that shall never be put out. That's an example of being counted worthy, surely.

[13:41] And now he turns to the climax of the story. Basically he's saying the part of the story you're in is one that's marked by suffering, one that's marked by pressure, one that's marked by danger.

But, the climax of the story, verse 7, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. Now this is one of the passages in the New Testament where the apostles draw on the language of the prophets.

The prophets talk about the day of the Lord, the day of the Lord that will come and the whole of the earth, the whole of the cosmos will be transformed. The wicked will be judged and God's people will be vindicated.

Now this is not just the various judgments that happen in history, this is the judgment on history. In Cornhill last term we've been looking at the book of Revelation and we've noticed how the judgments in history anticipate the final judgment on history.

Throughout history God is judging. Throughout history God is working his purpose out. But one day when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven that will be the judgment on history the poet Milton says, when at the world's last session the dreadful judge in middle air will spread his throne.

[15:04] That awesome scene you read about in Revelation 20 I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it from whose face heaven and the earth fled away. The climax to which the whole story is moving.

Read sometime the words of our Lord which are in Matthew 24 Mark 13 and Luke 21 that's Matthew 24 Mark 13 and Luke 21 sometimes called the Olivet Discourse sometimes called the Little Apocalypse where he points to his coming to the Son of Man coming in clouds and great glory. That's what Paul is speaking about here. The trouble is the church on the whole has had a rather bad record of treating this great doctrine of the coming again.

Notice by the way the New Testament tends to say the coming not the second coming because these two great comings are seen as part of one process. On the one hand we've had detailed timetables worked out about exactly the sequence of events that will lead up to the coming of Christ.

Most recently in the popular Left Behind series by Tim LaHaye which has caused so much confusion to many people and I have no doubt the film will cause even greater confusion.

[16:27] The trouble about all these things is they are dogmatic about many passages in Revelation for example whose meaning is disputed and they simply ignore alternative viewpoints they ignore the way the Bible uses language and so on and the other problem is they're much more interested in the events leading up to the coming than the actual coming itself.

It almost seems an anticlimax after all those exciting events that are going to happen. That's probably not the problem of most of us in the British Church today.

We don't spend all our time talking about the events that will lead up to the coming we just don't talk about it at all. We're not particularly worried about whether it's pre-millennial or a-millennial or post-millennial.

Well, someone has said most British Christians are pan-millennialists they think it will all pan out all right in the long run. And that's very much so many people's views of the coming of Christ a rather vague distant event in the future but it's far far more than that.

This is the time when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven. Think of the phrase Jesus is Lord. It's a statement when it's made now it's a statement of faith isn't it?

[17:49] Not obvious if you look around at the world if you look at your own life if you look into your own heart it's not at all obvious that Jesus is Lord. But surely what Paul is saying here is that this statement of faith is one day going to be a reality.

And when we say Jesus is Lord what do we mean? We mean he is going to have the last word. We mean that when he judges the living and the dead that is the judgment there will be no judgment after it there will be no review this is the final judgment he will have the last word and this phrase in flaming fire surely recalls an earlier passages in scripture we go our way back to Exodus 19 when God spoke some of his first words and gave the commandments and so on the same God speaking now and back in Daniel Daniel chapter 7 the fiery throne of God to which the son of man comes in the clouds of heaven and especially I think Paul is thinking of Isaiah 66 verse 15 the Lord will come with fire and his chariots like the whirlwind he will rebuke with flames of fire so you see this is not a new and strange and esoteric doctrine this is the whole of a biblical teaching indeed the very first mention of the second coming in the whole Bible surely is

Genesis 3 verse 15 the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent of course there is nothing about the details or who the descendant is or when it will happen it is all there this is God appearing on earth to reign the reality of judgment the reality of hell and of heaven let me give you some words from the last battle when Aslan appears in great glory and the creatures all meet him the creatures came rushing on their eyes brighter and brighter as they drew near but as they came right up to Aslan one or other of two things happened to each of them they all looked straight in his face I don't think they had any choice about that and when some looked the expression of their faces changed terrible it was fear and hatred and all the creatures who looked at Aslan in that way swerved to their right his left and disappeared into the huge black shadow on his left hand side that's those who do not believe but the others looked in the face of Aslan and loved him although they were afraid at the same time you see all the creatures face Aslan with fear some face him with still unrepentant and hostile hearts they disappear that's the reality of judgment for believers it's a glorious future not only to see Christ but to be like him when he comes verse 10 on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled among all who have believed notice notice that

Christ has transformed or will transform on that day his flawed lukewarm often unattractive church into his glorious bride that's kind of teaching we really need to need to focus on the bible's idea of the coming of Christ and of the world to come is not some kind of disembodied existence in a shadow land read the end of the last battle if you doubt me and of course if you disagree with me you'll disagree with him as well but that's as may be it's a glorious country it's a deeper country we will be transformed we will be like Christ we will lose all the signs of human fallibility some of us may even get our hair back and all of us will be beautiful that is what the prospect is being like Christ because as John says when we see him we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is but notice how that happened the end of verse 10 because our testimony to you was believed how are these people how are any of us going to stand there on that great day and look at Christ look him in the eye with fear certainly but also with love because our testimony was believed it is the preaching of the gospel and the accepting of Christ who comes to us in the gospel that has caused those people to be transformed and so

Paul rejoices in coming judgment and finally in verses 11 and 12 Paul prays for God's power and as he does always in this letter he keeps on turning from the future prospect to the present situation all of this is intensely practical we can live faithfully because we are waiting expectantly and again the emphasis is on growth to this end we always pray for you that God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power now you'll notice that when he comes we will be like him but surely the point of these verses is that increasingly we will become like him day by day make you worthy of his calling we'll never be perfectly worthy of his calling on earth we'll be flawed we'll be sinful we'll get it wrong right to the end of the journey but nevertheless

[23 : 51] Paul is praying that God will give us his strength give the Thessalonians his strength give us his strength so that we'll continue and may fulfill every resolve for good now when you come across the word good in the Bible it's not just simply a vague word this is the creation word in Genesis 1 and 2 when God says something or someone is good that means they fulfill the purpose for which they were created when we are transformed when we are truly like Christ we will truly fulfill that purpose but day by day as we travel towards his likeness Paul is praying that we will have strength that's the first thing and the second thing in verse 12 is the honour of the name of Jesus so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you when Christ returns his name will be honoured every knee will bow every tongue will confess but now he wants the Thessalonians he wants us day by day to glorify to honour the name of Jesus so that when people look at us they're not put off

Jesus they're not turned away from the Lord Jesus Christ by our sinfulness may be glorified in you and you in him see once again we come back to what I said at the beginning the words of Wesley I offered Christ to them so both diligence now and looking for then considering eternity because the more firmly we believe that Christ will one day wind up the affairs of this world and usher in a better one the more urgent it is that we engage in all lawful and worthy activities until he returns Amen let's pray God our Father we pray that as Christ has come to us in his holy word he may now come to us as we meet around his table that as we have fed on

Christ in his word we may feed on him by faith and that day by day the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in us and us in him according to his grace we ask this in his name Amen Now in a moment we're going to gather around the table of the Lord and we're going to be singing the communion hymn Behold the Lamb which will appear on the screen up there before the communion we're going to sing the first three verses and then after it we're going to sing the last verse that's verses one to three before the communion of the communion that's done