May your faithfulness to God increase

The more we dwell on God, the more we realize how amazing He is. We can do this our whole life and not begin to comprehend His majesty. Imagine, Yahweh simply spoke, and the entire universe, with gigantic stars and planets came into being out of nothing. He commanded the earth to bring forth plants and it did. He commanded the earth to bring forth living creatures, and it did. This mighty God then put His hands in the dirt and made something special: human beings, in His own image, and He specially breathed life into them.

How humbled we ought to be, that all powerful God chose to create us, knowing full well what we would do and what He would have to do on our behalf. What a lesson in humility when the holy God of the universe stoops to our level; actually becomes one of us, because He loves us and is the only One who can save us from our own folly.

It is to our benefit to think about God, to read His word and consider His interaction with us. We who accept Him through His Son, Jesus Christ, will be drawn closer to Him as we do. As we are drawn closer our desire grows for that day when we will be in His presence. How blessed is the Lord, how worthy of praise!

*Who is like the Lord our God,
Who is enthroned on high,
Who humbles Himself to behold
The things that are in heaven and in the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust
And lifts the needy from the ash heap,*

 Psalm 113:5-7

In Christ’s love

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1 Thessalonians 1 (3)

As Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica, he lets them know that he thanks and praises God for them. Paul recognizes that it is the work of the Holy Spirit that has made this young church sink deep roots into the Gospel. They have quickly born the spiritual fruit of faith, hope, and love; and this is shown by how hard they are willing to work for others and their perseverance in the face of persecution.

Paul calls them brethren, which refers to brothers and sisters; a term of endearment showing how he feels about them. He holds them very close to his heart. Paul loves this church and he prays over them constantly. This is not to say he doesn’t love the other churches; he does. But in many of his other letters he had to wright to correct some serious error that had crept into the church. Thessalonica had some problems and questions, but they hadn’t affected their faith, hope, and love.

He also mentions that they are beloved by God. Although this church was doing very well, it never hurts to have a little encouragement. Remember that these Christians were undergoing a lot of hardship. It would be easy to start thinking they were doing something wrong since they faced such difficulties. But, as Jesus said, in this world we will have tribulation. Here is a good demonstration of the purpose of Christian fellowship: encouragement. Paul reenforced that what they were undergoing was part of the normal Christian life. God had not abandoned them; far from it, they were beloved by Him.

What a remarkable God we serve. When we come to Jesus, He is willing to bind us to Himself so that we are never apart from Him again. Why would God, who is absolutely complete by Himself, join Himself together with us when He has no need to? The answer is, because He loves us. He unites us to Himself because He loves us.

This fact of God loving us leads us into the last part of verse 4 which says, “*His choice of you*”. This idea of God “choosing” shows up a lot in Scripture and there are two ways to interpret it. One way says that God chose all those who would be saved long before the creation of the world. The other interpretation is that God foreknew those who would accept the faith the Holy Spirit gives to believe on Christ Jesus. Throughout Christianity, there have been those who have held to both ways of interpretation. Some hold their view very strongly and this can lead to divisions in churches.

We need to keep in mind that this is a secondary issue; it is not a salvation issue. A wise man said, in effect, John Calvin believed one way, John Wesley believed the other; we can be sure they are both in heaven. I invite you to read the Bible and determine which way you are led. Hold to your belief, but be tolerant of those who believe differently.

Here are the main things; first, we cannot claim that we had any part in gaining our own salvation.

Ephesians 2:8-9

*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

If the Holy Spirit did not give us the faith to believe on Jesus, we would not do so. And that faith is given by grace, undeserved favor; there is nothing we can do to earn it. So, if you are saved, thank God; it is from Him alone.

Secondly, we may ask why God mercifully gives us the faith we need to be saved. Again, it’s because He loves us. This is truly wonderfully freeing. God loves us entirely outside of what we do. Our actions, even our actions done in Christian faith according to God’s will, do not change God’s love for us. He can’t love us any more; He won’t love us any less. When we fail, we don’t have to go back and try to earn God’s love all over again. He loves us even when we fail. When we fail, we need to confess and repent so that sin doesn’t get in the way of our fellowship with God, but His love for us is not diminished.

In verse 5, Paul moves from the church to the Gospel. This is no problem because they are so intertwined. It is through the Gospel that the church is built. It is through the church that the Gospel is spread. They work through each other.

Paul uses the term “*our Gospel*”. Let’s consider this. Sometimes it is called the Gospel of God. It is the good news that comes from God; He is the one who conceived of it and brought it into being. Sometimes, it is called the Gospel of Christ. Jesus is the one whose work on the cross made the Gospel active and available to us. So, with God and Jesus, the Gospel is theirs; they made it and it belongs to them.

For Paul and those with him, it is their Gospel in the sense that they are the ones proclaiming it and they have also claimed the benefits of it for themselves. It is not their Gospel in the sense that they made it up. Again, how wonderful God is. He makes His Gospel available to us such that we can claim it as our own. Not that we made it up or have anything to do with its existence; but we can cling to it making it our personal means of salvation; and we can also proclaim it to others.

Importantly, Paul said “*our Gospel came to you*”. This is the great commission from Matthew 28:19. The Gospel was brought to the people of Thessalonica. The Gospel doesn’t simply float down from heaven. God has ordained that it is spread by people, either by the spoken or the written word. Paul expands on this in Romans 10:13-15.

*“Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!”*

By the way, all of us are preachers of the good news of Jesus Christ. Some are specially called to proclaim the Gospel to many. But all are called to be willing to share the Gospel in their day to day lives; with family, friends, and neighbors. Keep in mind Jesus’ definition of a neighbor.

In this verse, Paul describes how the Gospel came to the Thessalonians: by word, in power, with full conviction, and in the Holy Spirit. Notice how Paul sidesteps the actions of himself and Silas and Timothy. They are taking none of the credit for the success of the church. Be sure to always give credit to God for any success in evangelism, we are merely the vehicle He uses to accomplish His will.

The Gospel came to Thessalonica by the Holy Spirit. Remember in the account in the book of Acts, that the Holy Spirit kept the team from continuing to evangelize in Asia and instead, gave Paul a vision to go to the province of Macedonia, which is where the city of Thessalonica is. So, the Holy Spirit got them there, then He continued to work to bring people to salvation.

The Gospel came by word. Words are how we communicate most often and words are how we share the Gospel. If we don’t speak it or wright it, no one’s going to get the message. But the Holy Spirit will use our words, and most definitely the words of Scripture, to work in a person’s heart. He is the one to open the eyes and ears and understanding of the person to receive the Gospel. This is why we are responsible for sharing the Gospel, but we are not responsible for the person accepting or rejecting it.

The Gospel came to them in power; again, the action of the Holy Spirit. This may refer to supernatural acts on the part of Paul and the others. But most likely it means that their preaching of the word had a powerful effect on the listeners. Really, this is also supernatural, it is a miracle, when the word has a deep impact on the hearer; it moves them to action in the form of accepting Jesus as Saviour.

Some people are very good at oratory; they are able to move people emotionally with their words and delivery. This is not the case with Paul. He himself mentions that he was a poor speaker. This proved that when he spoke and the people were moved, it was not his speaking but the power of the Holy Spirit working in the people. Also, it was not simply an emotional moving, it was a true change of heart that brought about belief in Christ. That kind of change of heart can only come from God.

Lastly, the Gospel came to them with full conviction or in fullness. This is where the person knows that Jesus is real and that He is the only way to salvation. Even though we haven’t seen Jesus, we have complete conviction that He is who He is and the Gospel is true. The carnal man cannot understand this and will accuse us of believing in myths and fantasies; he will accuse us of ignoring reality. But once we have that conviction of the Holy Spirit, we know that the carnal man is sadly wrong about eternal truth.

As we read the Bible; as we read God’s word; we can see how the Bible is complete and proves itself over and over. We can see these things because as Christians, we have the Holy Spirit guiding us and showing us how true the Bible is.

Paul finishes the verse with “*just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake*”. During this time in history, there were many who traveled around who were philosophers. These men would give speeches and present deep ideas. If people were impressed enough, they would give them money. Additionally, there were lots of different religions at the time. These could be used to try to gain converts for money or other means of gain.

Unfortunately, there always followed on the footsteps of Paul the false teachers. We see over and over in Paul’s letters, and those of the other apostles, that false teaching has come among the churches and has to be corrected. Most of these false teachers were in it for the money. They would demand payment to teach the people what they claimed to be the “true” way to salvation.

While Paul himself says that “*a laborer is worthy of his wages*” and teaches that church leaders are to make their living from the Gospel; he means “make a living”, not “get rich in worldly treasures”. And he certainly doesn’t mean gaining money by tickling the ears of the people instead of teaching the Biblical truth. This kind of people operated during the first century; they operate today. And not only do they fleece the sheep, they turn others away from the saving grace of Jesus Christ in disgust.

Paul never asked for or accepted anything from the people he was evangelizing. He paid his own way or worked for what he received. No one could ever claim that Paul was spreading the Gospel for his own gain. What he did had to be a calling from God, there could be no other reason for him to go through all the things he went through.

Sometimes, churches would send gifts to Paul after he had moved on or been thrown out of the city. These were gifts of love that Paul had not asked for from established churches. These he would accept as care from God and it would be a blessing for those churches that gave.

It is a powerful message, that Paul was able to call attention to his own behavior while they were in Thessalonica. It is an important part of our Christian witness to be able to do the same thing. We need to daily prayerfully consider, if our behavior is Christ-like. Are we different from the world or just the same as the world with a righteous attitude? Our presentation of the Gospel will be stripped of power if our own lives don’t show the change it brings.

Prayer

Almighty God, enable us to reflect the light of our Lord Jesus. Keep us free from stains that would dull. May Jesus’ righteousness which covers us, work in our lives so that we are righteous. Let the world see in us a true follower of Jesus Christ.

We understand that this would make us kind and loving, peaceable, willing to accept being wronged without complaint; even showing goodness to the one who wrongs us. Let us be content with what You provide for us; willingly sharing blessings rather than hoarding them for ourselves.

Keep us aware of sin and always trying to avoid it, so that our visible lives will match what we say. By the power of the Holy Spirit, make our lives match the gracious words of the Gospel; make our lives reflect the beautiful words of the Bible.

We ask these things in Jesus’ name

Amen