

1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5 – The Family of God

A Mothers' Love

Alone in her one-room cabin high in the mountains of southern Mexico, Ines Ramirez Perez felt the pounding pains of a child insistent on entering this world... Three years earlier, she had given birth to a dead baby girl. As her labour intensified, so did her concern for this unborn child.

The sun had set hours ago. The nearest clinic was 80km away over rough roads, and her husband, her only assistant during her previous births, was drinking at a cantina. She had no phone and neither did the cantina.

So at midnight, after 12 hours of constant pain, the petite, 40-year-old mother sat down on a low wooden bench. She took several gulps from a bottle of rubbing alcohol, grabbed a 15-cm knife and began to cut... After an ordeal of about an hour, she pulled the baby out by his feet, cut the umbilical cord, and passed out.

The self-sacrificial love of a mother, is amazing! It's like God built this kind of selfless attitude into a mother's instincts. This woman already had 6 other children. But she risked her life to bring another into the world.

"I couldn't stand the pain anymore," she said. "And if my baby was going to die, then I decided I would have to die, too. But if he was going to grow up, I was going to see him grow up, and I was going to be with my child. I thought that God would save both our lives."

Well in today's passage, Paul shows the self-sacrificial love he had for the Thessalonians, and that we should have for each other. And we see three things: 1) The word of God gives birth to the Church. 2) Suffering is a family trait. 3) We love one another as the family of God.

1. The word of God gives birth to the church

Last week we saw that Paul treated the Thessalonians like his own family. Caring for them like a mother and father. But even as he does that, he shows that he was raising them to be God's children, not his. He was 'encouraging and urging them to live lives worthy of God, who calls them into his kingdom and glory.'

And here we see that God's Word gives them new birth into God's family. You know words are powerful! I still remember words that my father and mother used when disciplining me. If I did something wrong, I would be punished. But they would always come to me while I was feeling sorry. And they'd say, 'You know we don't want to punish you. We love you and want you to learn from this.' At other times I remember their words of comfort, that I was precious to them. And words of encouragement to keep working hard on something I was good at.'

A parent's words help to shape and grow a child. How much more the living and active word of God! So Paul says,

1 Thessalonians 1:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

When they heard the message of Jesus, they didn't think it was something Paul made up. They recognized that it was the voice of God. And that word implanted itself in their hearts. It made them children of God, and started shaping them to be like him.

Recently I was talking about something with a few Christians. And someone said, 'Yeah but it was Paul that said that, not Jesus.' And I reminded him that Paul didn't speak on his own authority, but said exactly what Jesus taught him to say. The Thessalonians hear Paul's words and accept them as the very word of God.

If you think about it, we can't hear Jesus' teaching without going through a human author. Jesus didn't write any books or letters. He didn't produce any creeds or doctrine. The only way we can learn his teaching is through the words of the disciples: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were all ordinary men.

Those who want to drive a wedge between Paul and Jesus have not understood what the Bible is. The Bible is the words of God in human language. It's a mystery as profound as God in the flesh! But somehow the Holy Spirit uses the language, culture and intelligence of ordinary people to convey exactly what he wants to say. It's God's Word in human words.

And as we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit convicts us that it is the very Word of God. It's not like we need commentaries and historical evidence to prove to us that the Bible is God's Word. When we read or hear it, God himself confirms that he is speaking to us. God's Word gives birth to the church and grows it to maturity. Are you letting God's Word live and work in you?

2. Suffering is a family trait

Have you ever looked at a family, and thought 'Wow, you can really see how these children are brothers and sisters!' Even cousins can look different but you often can tell their related. Well Paul says he can tell that the Thessalonians are God's children, because they were prepared to suffer for the gospel.

It's not really the family trait that we would choose is it? It would be great if Christians were known for their rugged good looks, or unmatched intelligence. You'd be able to tell I was part of the family straight away. Just kidding! But Paul says that part of being God's family is about suffering for the gospel. And he compares the church in Thessalonica to their extended family in Judea:

1 Thessalonians 2:14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews...

See if the Thessalonians thought this was something Paul made up, if they were just following Paul, then they would have given up when things got tough. But the fact that they were prepared to suffer for the gospel means they knew it was God's Word. It was God's family they were being brought into. They were no longer living for this world, but for the kingdom of God. And it's the same in each generation.

They Jews persecuted the Jewish believers. "You're changing the Law God gave to Moses". "You're worshipping a man called Jesus, that's blasphemy!" "You're accepting Gentiles even though they're not part of the chosen race!" And the Thessalonian believers were suffering the same things from their own people: "You're changing our culture! You're accepting a foreign religion. You're betraying the gods we have been worshipping for centuries! But the believers kept believing God's Word.

Paul shows that suffering and opposition is part of being a Christian. He's not worried that the Thessalonians were suffering. He's worried that they don't understand suffering is part of following Jesus:

1 Thessalonians 3:2-4 *We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³ so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. ⁴ In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.*

Do you believe that the message of Jesus is God's good news for the world? Then you will be ready to suffer for it. Now we don't suffer persecution like they did. But we have a subtle yet strong pressure not to talk about Jesus. What does the world say to us? "You're believing myths invented 2000 years ago. How foolish!" "You're worshipping an invisible sky-fairy." "You're homophobic and repressed and arrogant." And we know if we say anything our relationships might suffer. So we keep quiet.

But we are called to suffer for the gospel. We have to be brave and stand up for Jesus. For Jesus is real. He really lived and died and rose again as the Lord of everything. And he is the only hope to save us from the selfishness and sin, and destruction of this world. Now is a time where it's easier than ever to invite people to church. Will you show you are part of God's family and be open about your faith?

As our friends and family see that we are willing to be ridiculed or rejected for this message, it will make them think: 'Maybe there is something to this gospel'

Now Paul comforts the Thessalonians that God will judge those who are attacking them. He actually writes some very harsh words against the Jews. And as you read this it sounds like he really hates Jews. But that's not the case. Paul was a Jew. And in Romans he writes with sorrow, longing for his fellow Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah.¹ But here he's reflecting on the way the Jews consistently rejected God's prophets, and now God's Son himself. And not only that, they were trying to stop the Apostles preaching so that others could be saved.

Imagine you were at the beach, and there were people swimming between the flags. And the lifeguards were watching closely to see if anyone was in trouble. Then you see out in the deep water a swimmer struggling and waving to be saved. And as a lifeguard paddles out to save them, someone throws themselves at the lifeguard and pulls them under water so they can't rescue the swimmer. Imagine how angry you would be at that person who is stopping someone else from being saved!

That's what the Jews who opposed Paul were doing. Jesus is the *only* lifeguard to rescue sinners from drowning in their sin. And the Jews were opposing God by stopping the Apostles from sharing this life-saving message. In v. 15 it says, it was the Jews...

1 Thessalonians 2:15-16 *...who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone ¹⁶ in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.*

Paul is not saying that they should feel hatred toward the Jews. In fact, he writes elsewhere not to take revenge.² But he comforts them that those who attack them and oppose the gospel will be judged by God. You don't need to take revenge because it's God's job to avenge.

¹ Romans 9:1-4

² Romans 12:17-21

All they need to know is that suffering for the gospel is part of family life, so they really are part of God's family. Which leads us to the last point:

3. We love one another as the family of God.

Finally, in these last few verses Paul had an intense longing to see the Thessalonian church. The NIV says Paul and the others were 'orphaned' from the church. That's a bit of an over-translation and most versions say, 'We were torn away...'. But this word is actually where we get the English word orphan from. He feels like he's been torn away from his family.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-18 But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.

It's an amazing passage that shows just how connected Paul is to the Thessalonians. This is a really challenging passage for us as Westerners. We've felt a bit more strongly how horrible it is not to see our church family through the Coronavirus. But generally, we are pretty individualistic. We like to see our family but if we don't see them very often it's not the end of the world. But Paul feels like he's torn in two because he had to leave them. And he tries to see them, again and again, but Satan hindered them.

In this way, Eastern cultures are a lot closer to God's plan for the church. They are collective cultures, where your wellbeing and identity is tied up with your family and community. And Paul, is even more loving and connected to them, because the love of Jesus flows through him.

In fact, he says that his hope and joy in heaven is bound up in their faith.

1 Thessalonians 2:19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.

When he stands before Jesus on the final day, what will be his pride and joy? Not his missionary journeys, or achievements, or sufferings. But it will be the Thessalonians. Their faith will be like a crown of gold, shining on his head.

This is really challenging for us. What are we really concerned about? What do we really hope for? Is it mainly our own wellbeing? Or only our children? And even if it's our children, is it just with their physical health, or earthly security? Or is it about our brothers and sisters in Christ, and their spiritual health? Are you dying to find out how other members of our church are going? And not just physically, but spiritually.

Dear family of God. What is your hope and joy before our Lord Jesus? It will not be your work achievements. It will not be your house or car. It will not be how successful your children are. It will be the people you have brought to Christ. Or the people you have encouraged to stick with Jesus and grow in him. It is the children or brothers and sisters you have prayed for to mature in Christ.

We are the people of God. The Word of God has made us part of his family, and now works in us, to suffer for Christ. And it transforms us to love our family in Christ deeply as we wait to enjoy eternity with them.