

But then, Face to Face – 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Forced Isolation

Over the past few months, the world has been forced into isolation. People have had to stay in their homes, to wash their hands constantly, and to do their best to avoid getting sick or to pass that sickness on. When you hear about how strict it has been in places like Chile and how our link missionaries, the Haddons, have hardly left their home at all, we have had it pretty easy here in Australia. But still, many of us have felt the sting of isolation. We have been forced apart and have not been able to be with our family, friends and fellow believers in Jesus. But the restrictions in Australia are starting to relax. We can carefully visit family and friends in small numbers, children are back at school, we can go shopping, to the pub and to restaurants, and at some stage we will be able to go back to church. What I have also noticed, is that while we still have physical distancing laws in place and we are supposed to keep to the right numbers of people in a room, people just want to hug each other, to embrace, and to connect through touch once again. The longing is too great. The joy of seeing people you love too much. Lots of people just ignore the rules and physical distancing goes out the window.

Connecting

As I read today's passage, I think that some of us will connect with it. Paul and the Thessalonians had been forced apart by persecution, we are forced apart by physical distancing rules and COVID-19. The Thessalonians had pleasant memories of Paul, we may have pleasant memories of church and the people of our church. Both Paul and the Thessalonian Christians longed to see each other, Paul even prayed that Jesus would clear the way for this to happen. We are praying for a vaccine and for church to start up again. We read words, like in...

1 Thessalonians 3:6b you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.

And then there is the prayer Paul prayed, which starts with...

1 Thessalonians 3:11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

This passage and this prayer is all about being reunited after being forced apart and I think that we can connect with this passage in a way that many of us might have never connected with it before. That is because we long to be with each another, to be reunited as a church, with Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

Faith and Love

Paul starts this passage by talking about the good report he had received from Timothy. Timothy was able to tell Paul about the faith and love of the Thessalonian Christians. Now, we are not given any detail as to what this means, but if you go by what Paul teaches about faith and love, then you would expect that the Thessalonians were trusting in Jesus for their salvation and living with him as their Lord. That is what faith is all about – trusting in Jesus. Those who trust in Jesus are then supposed to live a life of love. We are called to love God and to love each other with a brotherly, caring, other-person-centred kind of love. That is part of the reason why there was such a longing for them to see one another, because they genuinely loved each other.

I wonder, do you love church? Do you genuinely miss it? I'm sure there are some people who genuinely miss the actual church services. The praying, the singing, the teaching, the ritual of church even in a service which is not very ritualistic. But did you notice that Paul wasn't talking about how they missed going to a building and doing certain things in that building together. No, what they missed was each other, the personal relationships they had with each other. Part of being in a church is investing into the relationships found in church. We can do this formally through Growth Groups, Youth Groups, Discipleship and Mentoring, but we can also do this informally through morning tea, going out together, supporting each other through good and bad times, and especially as we pray together. But all this takes an investment. We all need to work at the relationships we are supposed to have through church and we should be continuing those relationships even while we cannot physically be together.

Deep Joy

Notice too, that Paul was not just talking about reuniting just so that they can remember the good times. I have been to a couple of class reunions; both my primary school and my high school reunions. I got to see a bunch of people that I had not seen in 20 or 30 years. And both those reunions were good fun to be at. I caught up with all kinds of people and heard about what had been happening in their lives. But then, that was it. Just a basic report on their lives and there was nothing much more to say. Paul did not want to just catch up with the Thessalonians and reminisce. No, there was to be more to their meeting than that. Notice how encouraged he was by their faith. Despite persecution, they were standing firm in their trust in Jesus. This brought Paul real joy, deep joy, joy he had to thank God for. Have a look at what he says in...

1 Thessalonians 3:9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?

This joy was not just a "happy to see you" kind of joy, this joy was a strong sense of rejoicing in what God had done in the Thessalonians lives. It was a joy he wanted to share with God because God had worked in them.

I can tell you, that some of the greatest joys I have experienced is seeing people grow in their faith. People struggling through a difficult time but still clinging to Jesus. Some of the greatest heartaches I have experienced have been when I have seen people walk away from Jesus. Especially young people in whom I have invested time and love, but for one reason or another, they walk away from trusting in Jesus. Brothers and sisters, do you best to be an encouragement to each other and share in the joy of holding onto your faith as you walk together in this Christian life, encouraging each other, through all of life's trials and hardships.

Something Lacking

But then, there was another reason, a practical reason, why Paul wanted to meet with the Thessalonians face to face.

1 Thessalonians 3:10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

The Thessalonians may have been standing firm through hardship, they may have been trusting in Jesus and showing genuine love to one another, but there was still something lacking. Now, we are not told what it was that was lacking in their faith. It could have been information, some kind of bible knowledge that a teacher could have taught them, but then why wouldn't Timothy have taught them what they needed to know? Maybe it was something they had to experience or maybe it was something that comes with maturity and a mentor needed to help them grow in this area? Maybe it was an area of ministry, something to do with their collective faith and how they needed to work together as a church? We just don't know what it was that was lacking, but Paul wanted to see them face to face again, so that he could supply whatever it was they were lacking in.

At this point, I want to put myself in the position of Paul and his relationship with the Thessalonian church. As the Senior Minister, I have to spend time praying and thinking about Merrylands Anglican Church, and I have to say that I love this church. What I love most is the relationships I see in this church. I have seen how people who have been here for a long time really love each other and show a genuine commitment to each other. I have seen how people try to encourage each other and may even spend time discipling, praying for, and caring for each other. I have mourned over the loss of our faithful, lifelong, members of our church. And I have seen the compassion people have had for Vanessa, Sebastian, and myself. For those who have been established in this church, Merrylands Anglican can be a great place to be because it is filled with love for one another. But I wonder if Merrylands Anglican is lacking in one particular area.

I think we are good at caring for those who are strong and established in our church. But I don't think we are as good at caring for those on the fringes, those who are struggling, and those who have not made a commitment yet. We are good at the big event – at Carols, and Holiday Kids Club, but not so good at follow up and asking people the question about their relationship with God.

At times, I have spoken about my desire to see God's Kingdom grow, and I have even said that to me it is more important to see God's Kingdom grow than to see our church grow. Sometimes, people become Christians here and then move on, and that is painful, but at least we see the Kingdom growing. But I want to ask you this question, "Do you believe that if Merrylands Anglican Church grows, then God's Kingdom grows?" If you believe that, then shouldn't that mean that we should think about the growth of our church?

Right now, we are going through a challenging time. We don't even know how or when we are going to come back, but I wonder if one of our most important thoughts about how we come back is to think about how we capture the fringe person, how we help those who are struggling, how we encourage people to make a commitment for Jesus. I want to encourage us to think about whether our ministries have an evangelistic edge to them. Are we spiritually entertaining people or are we challenging them to think about their eternal destiny? If a method of ministry is not working, in that we are doing something with the hope of people becoming Christians but no one is, then should we try a different approach, a different ministry, a different way of doing things? Just about everything in Merrylands Anglican has had to stop because of COVID-19. This is the time to reassess and to think about what is lacking so that we can improve on our way back to normality.

Clearing the Way

Well, these kinds of things do not happen without God's help. Paul said that he prayed most earnestly for the Thessalonians night and day. That just means that he was constantly and consistently keeping the Thessalonians in his prayers. And just to show how constantly he prayed, Paul prayed for them in the middle of his letter.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

The first point of his prayer is the same as the first point of this passage. Paul wanted to see the Thessalonians, so he asked God the Father, and the Lord Jesus, to clear the way. As Christians we believe that God is in control of all things. That is why we can pray to him. Of course, just because God is in control and we ask him to do something for us, does not mean that God will do those things. God is still God, and we have to remember that we are not God. We cannot tell God what to do, we cannot make God do anything, and God does not need our guidance or help. But praying to God, knowing that he can do what we ask if he wishes to, is the best thing we can do. It shows our dependence on God, it shows how we rely on him, and even if we do not get what we want, it shows that we still trust that he knows what he is doing. From what we can tell, Paul did get to see the Thessalonians again, and we trust that he was able to provide whatever it was that they were lacking. We too need to pray that God will clear the way for us to get together again. So that we can physically meet and embrace each other. We are not there yet, but we can still pray about it.

Faith, Hope, and Love

Paul then prayed for the Thessalonian's faith, hope, and love. In terms of hope, Paul asked for God to prepare them for the Final Day, when God would come and allow them into his eternal presence. In terms of love, Paul prayed that their love would increase and overflow. Notice that it was not just a love for one another, not just for the established Christians in that church, but for everyone else as well. They needed to show real love to people outside of their church, love that would lead people into an eternal relationship with God. In terms of faith, Paul prayed that God would strengthen their hearts, that they would be made blameless and holy before God. It was a work of God that needed to happen in their hearts and they had to trust that God would do that work in them. Friends, these are the kinds of prayers we need to be praying. Not just that we will be able to come back to church again. Not just that we will survive COVID-19. But that God will fill us with the faith, hope, and love that only he can provide. A faith that places Jesus at the centre of our church, a hope that leads us on into eternity, and a love that is not only for one another but for every lost soul that needs to hear the message of Jesus. Let's pray.