

2 Thessalonians 1.1-12

Suffering in faith

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 27 November 2022

Walking Worthily [10]

Setting the scene (1-2)

One of my favourite TV programmes is called **J** *Castle*. It's about a mystery writer called Rick Castle who teams up with a detective in New York to solve murders.

Series 6 ends with a cliff-hanger: we see his car, burning in a ditch – with Castle nowhere to be found. Series 7 picks up the story two months later – Castle is found, but we have no idea what happened to him between Series 6 and Series 7.

Where did he go? What did he do?

Paul's letters are a bit like that. Thessalonians Series 1 ends with Paul giving the Christians there some final instructions – and then we don't know what happened between that and the next instalment a few months later: Thessalonians Series 2. We can make a decent guess though, as the Bible Project showed us.

There has been some encouragement – we’ll come to that in a bit – but also some ¶ challenges: from without and within:

1. ¶ Persecution and troubles – people opposing them and life being – well – a bit rubbish (to put it mildly).
2. ¶ False teachers – people claiming to have heard from Paul that Jesus has already returned and they’ve been left out.
3. ¶ Idlers and trouble-makers – people refusing to work, either on their faith or for a living.

Thessalonians Series 2 is Paul’s attempt to deal with these issues.

First, though, he sets the scene – as he does in all his letters. He begins with a strong statement of who they are: children of **God our Father**, belonging to **the Lord Jesus** (1). It’s so easy to skip this part – but Paul always begins his letters here for a reason.

Learning our identity, knowing who we are is so important – and Paul locates that identity not within but in him. Who we truly are cannot be found within our hearts or our desires or how we feel – none of those things can be trusted; they deceive with half-truths. If we want to know *the* truth about who we are – Paul begins his letters with it: we are children of our heavenly Father and we belong to Jesus. First and foremost, **that is who we are.**

Let's not skip over the opening verses thinking we're moving to what Paul *really* wanted to say, but pay attention to the way he began every single one of his letters – maybe it's important.

Growth (3-4)

¶ This is our chilli plant, a gift from my uncle Trevor. He has a bit of a chilli factory going on in their house, so when he heard we'd been having trouble trying to grow a chilli plant ourselves – and failing because we're useless at 'green' things – he very kindly gave us one of his.

We dutifully put it in the sunniest place in the house, and kept it fed and watered. For months it didn't do much. It didn't die, but it only grew one single chilli, and even that one wasn't hot. Until we went on holiday and it wasn't watered for a week.

It turns out that chilli plants need to be stressed in order to produce fruit. According to *Gardeners' World*, one guy who grows some of the UK's hottest chillies damages the plants, denies them food and water – he even shouts at them!¹ If you stress the plant too much it dies, but if you get it right you end up with a good crop of really quite hot chillies.

Unfortunately, Christians are like chilli plants. When things are easy we don't grow, we don't produce much fruit. But when we face challenges, difficulties, persecution – *that's* when we really start to grow and bear fruit, fruit that lasts.

Like his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul begins with saying thank you: **we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so** (3). This is something I am trying to learn and grow in myself. One of my strengths is being able to see how something could improve, which is extremely useful but can also make me critical and dissatisfied. So I am learning to begin like Paul: with *thankfulness*, to see and value the good in something before moving on to how it could be better.

So Paul gives thanks: for two answered prayers – things he wrote and prayed about in his first letter.

First, their **faith is growing more and more**, which he prayed for in 1 Thessalonians 3.10. The word for **growing** is the word for a plant growing: putting down roots, flowering, bearing fruit. Faith is not something you 'have' or 'don't have'. I get annoyed when I hear people say, 'I don't have faith,' or, 'I wish I had your faith.' *Everyone* has faith in something – the question is: what is your faith *in*? And is it *growing*?

Is *your* faith **growing**? Is it **growing more and more**? Or is it like our chilli plant – having the appearance of being healthy, but not producing any fruit? Friends, faith is not something you *have* it's something you *grow*. Is yours **growing**? If not – and you want to do something about it – please speak to me. The two things I love most in the world – apart from Jesus and Jess, and possibly pizza – are seeing people become disciples of Jesus, and seeing people grow as disciples of Jesus. So please say!

Second, their **love for one another is increasing**, which he prayed for in 1 Thessalonians 3.12. The word for **increasing** is more like spreading, dispersing, scattering. This random group of people, from slaves to members of high society, were learning what it means to live and love together. They weren't only loving the people like them, but *everyone* in the church family.

All this was happening in the face of **persecutions and trials** (4). They were being opposed because of their faith, their way of living, their different values. And they were facing the ordinary struggles of life. It wasn't easy for them – but they were **enduring**, facing it all with **perseverance and faith**, which is why Paul **boasts** about them – not in a prideful way but spreading the news about them far and wide so many can give thanks to God.

Paul was making a subtle point here. I would be very surprised if the Thessalonians weren't asking God *why*... why are these things happening? Why aren't things easy? God, what are you *doing*?

The answer isn't one we necessarily want to hear, but it's one Paul was willing to **boast** about: God was using all those **persecutions and trials** to grow his people. God is at work – not in making life easy for his people, but *growing* them in **faith, love, and perseverance** – in fruit that lasts.

Glory (5-10)

Friends, let's **grow**. That's the **Г** first of three Gs in this morning's sermon. The second is **Г glory**. To the Corinthians Paul wrote **Г: our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all** (2 Corinthians 4.17).

It's not that Paul was minimising how hard things can be – but helping us see them from God's perspective. That's what he does in the next section of this morning's passage.

Г Can anyone tell me what this is? Some white blood cells? Something from a coral reef or the deep sea? Or perhaps the first signs of alien life? Let's see... **Г**... it is a humble pepper.²

That first picture was hard to identify because it was so close. We needed to zoom out to see the full picture.

First, Paul helps them see that facing **persecutions and trials** (4) doesn't mean all this Jesus stuff is wrong – but the exact opposite. **All this is evidence**, he says (5). The *fact* they are **suffering** is **evidence** they are being like Jesus – who suffered even to death on the cross. The *way* they are **suffering** – with **perseverance and faith** (4) – is **evidence** God is at work within them.

Second, Paul zooms out to help them see the full picture – to see time from God's perspective. Hold on to the truth that **God is just**, Paul says, **and he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled** (6-7). God's perfect justice *will* be done – he *will* have the final word and put right every wrong, and give his people rest at last.

Third, this isn't necessarily going to happen soon. Paul is fully zoomed out here – he's talking about the end of days, the day of the Lord, the final moment of judgement when **Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire** (7). Think of Moses encountering God in the **burning bush** (Exodus 3.2), God leading his people by a **pillar of fire** (Exodus 13.21) – **blazing fire** is a symbol of God's presence and his power.

The full picture of persecutions and trials is that:

1. they provide evidence of God at work growing his people;
2. they are not the final word – God’s justice *will* come;
3. they will be with us for a while – until Jesus returns.

And so we hit verses 8 and 9 – verses that make most of us start to squirm. And if they don’t make you squirm – they should! The simple fact is: in a moral universe, sin cannot go unpunished. But this isn’t a vindictive thing. God is not a petulant brat, he is holy and just – the word **punish** is a judicial word, referring to the sentence for a crime, giving someone what they deserve.

There are consequences for those who ignore the way God reveals himself to us in creation and through the Bible, and for those who *do* listen but **do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus** (8).

Have a look at verse 9 with me:

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

1 Thessalonians 1.9 (NIV)

For Paul the ultimate tragedy is being **shut out from the presence of the Lord** – like Adam and Eve being sent away from God’s presence in the Garden of Eden.

The penalty for those who turn away and reject God, is to be given what they want: life without God, darkness, away from the light and life and love that are found only in God.

What that will look like and how it will happen, Paul does not speculate, and neither should we. One mistake when talking about God’s punishment and hell is to spend too much time on it, sometimes even revelling in the threat to others. The other mistake is the opposite: to pretend it isn’t real.

The *right* way to think about God’s righteous punishment is where Paul goes next: for God’s **holy people**, for **those who have believed**, there is not punishment but **glory** (10).

Did you notice how Paul says Jesus will be **glorified in his holy people** (10)? That’s us! His people are called to be like mirrors, reflecting Jesus, becoming like him – which means becoming who we are is not about self-expression but Jesus-reflection.

That’s how we – God’s children – glorify Jesus: by being like him, more and more – even in our sufferings.

Grace (11-12)

Our first two Gs this morning were **grow** and **glory**; the third is **grace** – and it's where we come in to land.

Does all this growing in faith, love, endurance and perseverance happen by our hard work, or by God working within us?

Yes.

Back in verse 5 Paul says **you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering**. He picks that same language up in verse 11: **we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling**.

Ultimately all this is something God does – **by his power** (11); our part is to join in, working hard, making every effort. It's a virtuous circle: God working within us, us working out the life he gives. He transforms us from the inside out: conversion happens once when we become a Christian, and then every day as God renews us from the inside-out – from what we **desire** to our **every deed** (11).

Sometimes that transformation is painful, even hugely costly – but ultimately it means **our Lord Jesus** is **glorified** in us (12) – and that is a *Very Good Thing*.

We can't do that in our own strength, and we can't ever be good enough to make ourselves worthy of all God has done for us – it is all an undeserved gift.

Suffering in faith, then, means God's people grow, it ends in God's glory, and is only possible by God's grace.

Persecutions and trials are the soil God uses and redeems to make his people grow in perseverance and faith.

One day God will right every wrong, bring his perfect justice, give his people rest, and all will see his glory.

God gives us his grace to help us live out the life he gives, so we might reflect Jesus more fully each and every day.

I'm going to use these final two verses as a prayer for all of us:

I pray for us:

That our God may make us worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition our every desire for goodness and our every deed prompted by faith.

I pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in us, and us in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

from 1 Thessalonians 1.11-12 (NIV)

Amen.

¹ 'Matt Simpson of [Simpson's Seeds](https://www.gardenersworld.com/how-to-grow-plants/how-to-grow-peppers-and-chillies) has grown some of the UK's hottest chillies, named 'Katie' and 'Lucy' after his daughters. He's employed some unusual tricks to increase the heat of his fruits.' <https://www.gardenersworld.com/how-to-grow-plants/how-to-grow-peppers-and-chillies> – retrieved 27 November 2022.

² Pepper photography from the Metro. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/07/24/can-guess-close-ups-everyday-objects-actually-10451238> - retrieve 27 November 2022.