

## Foundations of a Flourishing Church

*The Joy of Gospel Perseverance* (1 Thessalonians 3:6-13)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 7, 2021

### Introduction

- ❖ With the start of this new year, we began a new series through the book of 1 Thessalonians, which we're calling *Foundations of a Flourishing Church*. Now we've already covered some of the background to this letter. The Apostle Paul was writing to the church that he helped plant in Thessalonica. We learn about this in Acts 17. There we're told the church faced opposition early on, to such a degree that Paul and his associates had to move on. So for a good while, Paul didn't know if he had planted a flourishing church or not. **He was seriously worried that they were nothing but a cut-flower church – a church that looks good and looks healthy and might look that way for a short while.** But a cut-flower church will eventually wither and die having been cut off from its root.
  - So earlier he had sent Timothy to check on the Thessalonians, and now Timothy has returned with good news. They're not a cut-flower. The Thessalonians have roots that sink deep in the gospel, and they're still flourishing in spite of all their afflictions.
    - Paul is overjoyed by this news. He's so relieved. And one of the first things he does is pen a letter that we now know as 1 Thessalonians. **A letter whose central theme is the joy to be had when we see the gospel flourishing in people's lives.**
  
- ❖ And we're not just talking about when people become Christians. **There is no doubt great joy involved when someone get saved.** We join in the celebration that takes place among the angels in heaven whenever one sinner repents and is saved. That feeling of joy when someone believes in the gospel is unparalleled – save for one other reason – when someone perseveres in the gospel. **The joy we feel when people trust in the Lord and convert is only equaled by the joy we feel when they stand fast in the Lord and persevere.**
  - In my years of pastoral ministry, I've been blessed with many opportunities to see people come to Christ. To repent of their sins; trust in the gospel; and receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. Those precious moments – which every pastor wishes would occur more often – have only been matched by those moments of seeing someone, that I knew years ago as a young believer, still walking strong in the Lord to this day.
  
- ❖ **Having served in the same church for so long gives me a unique vantage point to witness these stories of perseverance.** When I was the youth director in this church – which began twenty years ago – I had in my youth group three young men were a joy to lead: Stanley Chang, Jonathan Huang, and Ken Li. **Now it gives me even greater joy to see these three men of God still walking strong in the Lord and serving in significant capacities in the life of our church.** Stanley as our current youth minister. Jonathan as a church elder the last four years. And Ken as a church deacon and the Chair of our Council last year.
  - I could name more from my days in youth ministry. It brings me joy to see them persevering in the gospel and still worshipping at HCC. Sam Liu, Jennifer Nguyen, Michael Lin, Esther Hsieh, Janine Wong, Monica Cheng, Kara Chiou. Others have returned for a season and yet moved on for various reasons. But more importantly, they're still walking with the Lord and still involved in church life somewhere.

- ❖ And if you talk to older Christian parents, they'll tell you that they were overjoyed when their children received Christ at a young age – but there is no greater joy than knowing that their adult children are still walking in the Lord to this day.
  - **This morning's text communicates both the anxiety and the exuberance that Paul felt as he reflected on the gospel perseverance of those he cared about.** Studying this is both inspiring and instructive. There are four lessons we can draw.

### **Take Seriously the Possibility of Falling Away**

- ❖ The first lesson we can draw from our text is to **take seriously the possibility of falling away**. That's the tragic outcome that worried Paul. For many days and nights, after his abrupt departure from Thessalonica, he had no idea what would become of the fledgling church. **His exuberance over Timothy's good report reflects how concerning and how real is the possibility that someone could fall away from the faith and abandon the Lord.** Listen to chapter 3:5, "*For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.*"
- ❖ Now this might be confusing for you. **Because you were taught that no one can lose their salvation.** That once saved, always saved. Didn't Paul himself teach that there is no condemnation anymore for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1)? Didn't he teach that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38-39)? **Doesn't Paul believe in the eternal security of all believers?**
  - Yes, of course he did. He believed that believers cannot lose their salvation. They are eternally secure in Christ. **But the problem is that he wasn't sure yet if the Thessalonians were truly believers.** Yes, they had made some decisions during his short stay in their city. But Paul's mission was to make disciples – not just people who make decisions. So he wasn't at peace just because they made a decision about Christ in the past. His concern is whether or not they're disciples – whether or not they're following Jesus in the present. Are they walking with him right now?
- ❖ Think about **Jesus' parable of the four soils**, which I'm sure Paul knew well. In the second soil, the seed of the gospel sprung up immediately and looked promising at first glance. But this was rocky ground with no depth of soil, so when the sun rose and scorched it, the plant, having no root, quickly withered away. It was like a cut-flower.
  - **Jesus went on to explain the parable saying that second-soil people are those who hear the word of God and immediately receive it with joy.** They make a decision. But they have no root in themselves, so when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, immediately they fall away (Mk 4:16-17).
    - That's what Paul is concerned about. He's worried the Thessalonians will fall away on account of tribulation or persecution. **He's aware that falling away is a sign that a profession of faith was merely a decision of the flesh as opposed to a revelation from the Father who is the heaven (Mt 16:17).**

- ❖ That principle is reaffirmed by the Apostle John in his first epistle. In **1 John 2:19**, he's describing what happened to those who abandoned the faith and left the church. He says, *"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."*
  - **Do you see how their going out from us – their falling away from Christ and the body of Christ – made it plain that they were never really a part of the body of Christ in the first place?** Because had they been of us, they would have continued with us. If they were true disciples of Christ, then they would still be walking with Christ. If they were truly saved, they would continue to be saved.
  
- ❖ **So Paul took seriously the possibility – be it however remote – that the Thessalonians could have fallen away and thus prove that their faith was as alive as a cut flower.** And we would be wise to do the same. To not be presumptuous. To not assume that we could never fall away.
  - Friends, if one day you discover that I've fallen away from Christ – that I'm no longer pastoring, no longer in the church, no longer walking with Jesus – then please love me well. Not by assuring me that "once saved, always saved". **No, love me by warning me of the dangers of falling away.** It doesn't matter how many years I've faithfully served the church or how many biblical sermons I've preached. **If I don't persevere in the gospel, then don't comfort me.** Don't assume I'm okay.
    - Jesus even warned in the Sermon on the Mount that on the final Day many will say to him, "Lord, Lord, did we not preach sermons in your name, and lead small groups in your name, and do many mighty works of ministry in your name?" And he will declare to them, *"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."* (Mt 7:22-23)

### **Look Carefully for the Marks of True Faith**

- ❖ May we never hear those words. May those words sober us to take our faith more seriously. Now if there is a possibility that those who today claim to be Christians could tomorrow fall away, then how do we know if we are genuine Christians? That's a good question and leads to the second lesson we can draw, and that's to **look carefully for the marks of true faith.**
  - Let me read v6, *"But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you."*
  
- ❖ What was the good news about? It was about their faith and love. Timothy told Paul not to worry. The temper had failed. **In spite of all their afflictions, the Thessalonians still had faith and still had love.** They were rightly believing the gospel and rightly loving one another. **Those were the marks of true faith. Every true Christian will exhibit a right belief in the gospel and a right love for God and for each other.**
  - Back in chapter 1:3, Paul said he would constantly thank God for them, remembering their *"work of faith and labor of love."* Notice he wasn't just thankful for their faith and love. **Paul was thankful for their work of faith and their labor of love.**

- ❖ Their faith and love were not mere abstract concepts. They were manifested in good works. Paul was thankful for their faith's work – their love's labor. **That's how you know if the tree is good on the inside – by the good fruit it produces.** So similarly, the marks of true faith are the works produced by your faith and the labor that results from your love.
- ❖ Now for the Thessalonians, we can get more concrete about their work of faith and labor of love because Paul identifies a specific example in another letter. **In 2 Corinthians 8, he trying to motivate the Corinthian church to give generously to a relief effort on behalf of the church in Jerusalem, and he point to the Thessalonians as an example of faith and love at work.**
  - Listen to this, *“<sup>1</sup>We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia [region including churches in Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea], <sup>2</sup>for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”*
- ❖ **So the Thessalonians produced a work of faith (a labor of love) by giving generously to a relief effort aimed at meeting the practical needs of others.** And it's not like they gave out of the abundance of their wealth. Like a billionaire giving a million dollars.
  - No, it says they were extremely poor and under a severe test of affliction themselves. **They didn't have an abundance of wealth, but they did have an abundance of joy.** *“<sup>2</sup>For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”* Paul says in v4 that they were *“begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.”*
- ❖ Now who ever heard of that? I've heard of extremely poor people begging. We see them begging for spare change. **But have you ever seen extremely poor people abounding in joy and begging for the chance to give generously to relieve the suffering of others?**
  - But this kind of work of faith – this kind of labor of love – is what you can expect when the grace of God is poured out on a people and they're saved from their sin and selfishness. Listen again to 2 Corinthians 8:1 – to what Paul says he's describing. **He wasn't just giving an example of good works – but an illustration of God's grace at work.** *“<sup>1</sup>We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.”*
- ❖ **If the grace of God has been given to you – if you possess true faith – then a mark of your genuineness is love for one another.** Someone can look at your life and witness labors of love. Where you're serving and giving to meet practical needs and to relieve real suffering. And not just out of the abundance of your wealth. But going above and beyond your means – doing so with an abundance of joy. **Because according to your faith, your security is not in money but in the Lord Jesus Christ** – who though he was rich, yet for our sake, he became poor so that we, by his poverty, might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). Only those who are rich in Christ and filled with the grace of God can carry out such labors of love.

## Rejoice Greatly Over Stories of Perseverance

- ❖ Friends, if you witness this kind of love – if you see the marks of this kind of faith – whether in your life or in others, then rejoice greatly. And again I say, rejoice. That’s the third lesson we can learn from Paul’s example. We should **rejoice greatly over stories of perseverance**. If your heart is not overjoyed when you hear that a believer is still walking strong in the Lord, then I don’t think you realize how much a work of grace that is. **The same amazing grace that saved a wretch like me – is the same amazing grace that keeps me from falling back into my old wretched ways.** My point is: As much as we rejoice over stories of conversion, let’s equally rejoice over stories of perseverance.
  
- ❖ Look back at v6. Paul is overjoyed to hear that the Thessalonians still have positive memories of Paul (they don’t hold it against him that he left so abruptly), and they still have warm affection towards him, longing to see him face to face again.
  - **That attitude – coupled with their marks of truth faith – brought him so much joy.** It signaled to Paul that the Thessalonians were persevering. That news was both comforting and life-giving, considering all that he was going through.
    - Keep reading in v7, *“for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.*
  
- ❖ **Let’s recall the distress and affliction Paul was going through.** Back in chapter 2:2, he mentioned how he suffered and was shamefully treated at Philippi. From Acts 16, we learn that he was beaten, jailed, and defamed at Philippi. In Acts 17, we learn that he was persecuted and expelled from both Thessalonica and Berea. And when he arrived in Athens, he was rejected and scorned. By the time he arrived in Corinth, all the hardship was wearing thin on him. In 1 Corinthians 2:3, he admits he arrived in their city, *“in weakness and in fear and trembling.”* But now. Now that he hears the Thessalonians are walking strong in the Lord. Now Paul is comforted about them and no longer worries.
  
- ❖ But he’s more than just relieved – he’s renewed (reinvigorated). Listen to v8, *“For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.”* **What makes Paul feel alive again – what renews him – is knowing that those he cares deeply about are standing fast in the Lord.** They’re standing firm in the gospel. No matter the costs of discipleship, they’re still following Jesus. They’re endured suffering and remained steadfast to the Lord.
  - He goes on in v9 with a rhetorical question that’s bursting with joy. Listen *“<sup>9</sup>For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, <sup>10</sup>as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?”*
    - Paul is basically saying, “How can we thank God enough for you? For all the joy we feel for your sake?” **For Paul, one of the chief joys in life was to see Christians walking in faithfulness to God.**

- ❖ **Of course, as a missionary, for Paul another chief joy was seeing people respond with faith to the gospel for the first time.** In the book of Acts – which provides a narrative account of his missionary encounters with non-believers prior to conversion – there we see his exuberance when the spiritually dead come to life, when people are born again.
  - But if you're in Paul's epistles – which are usually written to churches – the joy that exudes from his letters is joy – not over conversions – but over the fact that these converts are still walking strong as disciples of Christ.
  
- ❖ Paul knows there is always the possibility of false conversion. He knows the tempter will always plot and scheme to trip us up. He knows the deceitfulness of the human heart. **He does not take it for granted that people will always persevere.** So whenever Paul hears that someone is – he will not only feel an abundance of joy but he will share that joy.
  - Paul's joy is dripping off the pages of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and the same could be said for his letter to the Philippians (1 Thess 2:20; 2 Thess 1:3-4; Phil 4:1). Which, remember, were written to churches in Macedonia that were under severe affliction and yet standing firm in the faith and performing great labors of love.
  
- ❖ So what's the takeaway for us? **Church, what I hope and pray becomes more common in our life together are intentional celebrations of God's grace in persevering our faith.** How often do you hear each other boasting – not about ourselves or our accomplishments – but about how each other? About how amazing it is that, by God's grace, this brother or sister is still walking strong in the Lord? Still willing to repent of sin, to resist temptation, to fight for holiness and press on in Christian obedience?
  - **Do we ever boast like that?** Paul does. Listen to chapter 2:19-20, *“<sup>19</sup>For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup>For you are our glory and joy.”* Or listen to 2 Thessalonians 1:4, *“Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.”*
  
- ❖ **Friends, I know it may seem counterintuitive, but there is something very healthy and God-glorifying when we boast in the perseverance of others** – as long as we recognize their perseverance as a work of God's grace. Ultimately, we're boasting in the Lord as our Protector, Preserver, and Provider.
  - That's why we're hoping to highlight more testimonies of perseverance. When we talk about sharing a testimony, we usually think of conversion testimonies, and those are important. **But in our membership meetings, we've been encouraging members to testify to God's persevering work in their lives.** We want to hear stories of how the Lord enabled you to mortify your sin; to break free from long-held sin patterns; to resist the schemes of the devil. If you know of members with such stories of gospel perseverance, please let me know. We're hoping to provide opportunities to testify in our quarterly membership meetings. Which is another reason why church members shouldn't miss a membership meeting or else you'll miss the chance to greatly rejoice with the rest of us.

## Pray Intently That We All Arrive Blameless Before the Throne

- ❖ Now in the remainder of our passage, Paul offers up a prayer for the recipients of his letter. He does this quite often in his letters. As we read this prayer, there is one instructive lesson that we can apply to our own prayer lives, individually and corporately. We should **pray intently that we all arrive blameless before the throne of God**. Listen to Paul's prayer in v11, "*Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you.*"
- ❖ **So the first thing Paul prays for is an opportunity to return to Thessalonica, to see the believers face to face and to supply whatever is lacking in their faith.** That is, to finish whatever discipleship lessons he left off when his stay was abruptly cut short.
  - When he says, "May God direct our way to you", it literally means to make our way straight. To clear the path. To remove any impediments. Earlier in chapter 2:18, he said he tried again and again to get back to Thessalonica but Satan hindered him. So Paul recognizes that the hindrances in his travel plans are not merely the result of bad weather or bad luck. **He realized there were spiritual forces involved, so he resorted to the most powerful of spiritual weapons – prayer.**
- ❖ **Friends, just as an aside, I want you to know that I've been praying something similar – that God would direct my way to you.** Like Paul, I've been praying most earnestly night and day that I may see you face to face. We've been separated by this pandemic for so long, and it's not been good for our spiritual health. **I don't think it's a stretch to say that there are spiritual forces involved – in that the tempter is hoping to prolong this pandemic to test our resolve and tempt us to fall away.** So I've been praying – and I encourage you to pray – for God to bring a quick end to this pandemic. To clear the path and remove any impediments from us reuniting and seeing each other face to face again.
- ❖ Now Paul goes on, in v12, to pray that the Lord will make the Thessalonians "*increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.*" **That's a prayer for their love – not simply to increase – but to abound beyond all limits, to be exceedingly great and overflowing towards those inside and outside the church.**
  - Why is Paul praying for their love to overflow in this way? Because it's the mark of truth faith – faith that enables you to arrive blameless before the throne of God. Listen to v13, "[May you increase and abound in love] *so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*"
- ❖ As we've noted, one of the major themes of 1 Thessalonians is the second coming of Christ. Every chapter ends with a stress on Jesus' return. Which is why Paul is so deeply concerned for the spiritual health and progress of the Thessalonian church. He knows that Christ is coming to judge the quick and the dead. **So Paul hopes to return to Thessalonica before Christ returns.** He wants to make sure they're prepared – that they're rooted and established in the faith – before Christ comes to bring a final reckoning.

- ❖ Friends, I hoped we share in Paul's deep concern. **What will motivate us to care more deeply that people we care about will persevere in the faith – is the belief that time is of the essence.** That Christ is coming, and we have no idea when. So we should always be ready – and helping the ones we care about be ready.
  - And the most effective way we do that is by praying for each other. **Prayer is often the difference that explains why one person persevered while the other fell away.** I find it fascinating that prayer was all that separated Peter from Judas. Both were disciples of Jesus who ended up betraying their Lord. The circumstances were different, but the guilt was the same and so was their remorse (Lk 22:62; Mt 27:3-4).
  
- ❖ And yet only Peter reached repentance. Only Peter was restored and persevered in his faith. Why? **Because Jesus prayed for him.** Listen to **Luke 22:31-32** where the Lord predicted Simon Peter's betrayal. *“<sup>31</sup>Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, <sup>32</sup>but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”*
  - **That's why Peter persevered and Judas didn't.** We give Peter too much credit to assume it's because he was more godly or has better morals than Judas. No, It has nothing to do with Peter. **It was because he was prayed for.** Jesus prayed that Peter's faith may not fail. And in his sovereign will – for reasons only he knows – he didn't pray the same for Judas. And that made the difference.
  
- ❖ Friends, this is why we pray. **This is why we should pray intently for all of us arrive blameless before the throne of God.** I encourage you to incorporate this kind of request into your prayer life. Pray for yourself; pray for your loved ones; pray for each other – **pray that our faith may not fail.** That we finish the race and keep the faith. Ask Jesus to pray over you the same prayer he prayed over Peter. As our Great High Priest, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Heb 7:25).