

1THESSALONIANS 1:4-6 "Even In Affliction There is Joy In The Lord"

The Thessalonian Christians were a people who loved the Lord and Paul recognizes this in his letter to them. He acknowledges their "work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (v.3)

They were active in the Kingdom of God because, first and foremost, God had bestowed His love on them and they, with thanksgiving, were reaching out with that love to those around them. This is what excited Paul. He knew that their faith was genuine. It was not some faith that worked only when they "felt" like it. They were about doing the work the Lord had called them to do.

James in his epistle touches on this when he contrasts those who say they have faith with those who demonstrate a living faith.

JAM 2:14,18-20 "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder. 20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?"

Paul was fully aware of how people will talk a good talk regarding their relationship with God, but here with the Thessalonians he didn't have to worry that these people were genuine Christians because they demonstrated the fruits of the Spirit in love.

We saw last week how they had works for God which were produced by faith. They had placed their faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and now they exercise the faith that Christ gave them by looking to Him for ways to serve unto His honor and glory.

One of the most natural things they desired to do was to share their Savior who gave them life, as they shared the greatest news this world has ever known. Their labor was prompted by love. It was not bred in selfishness but giving of self for others as the love of God was spread abroad in their hearts.

And the thing which gave them perseverance or steadfastness was the hope that their Lord would never desert them and that He would come back for them as we'll see later in this letter.

With all of the different things that were being produced in their lives Paul could say with boldness in verse 4, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,"

You see, Paul could say with confidence that God has chosen them; the inference being that He has given them life in Christ, and so Paul acknowledges that when God began a good work in them they in turn did works in keeping with their faith. One flowed from the other.

The converse is often times true. If people who claim to know God and claim to have faith in Christ have no works, which flow from a personal encounter with the living God, there is a good possibility that they do not have a living faith as James might put it, and they are still dead in their trespasses and sins.

Unfortunately, for the church of Jesus Christ, there are true believers who do not demonstrate the love and good works and the desire to do the things of God in their lives and they grieve the Holy Spirit in the process.

The good news about that is that God in His grace and mercy will not leave such a one to continue to go his own way forever without disciplining that child of His to bring him or her back into a right relationship.

This is why many Christians find themselves in dire straits in their lives and wonder why God could be so cruel, when in fact God is loving them by directing their eyes back to Him. The question is, will we repent at that point or will we continue to go our own way?

Paul praises God that these Thessalonians are seeking to go God's way. And notice what he calls them in verse 4, "Brethren beloved by God."

The word beloved comes from the Greek word *Agapao* which is the highest form of Godly love and intimates an affection from God for these people.

This is why when we put the whole verse together, "knowing brethren beloved by God, His choice of you", Paul is saying that God's choice is not a cold, calculated, unfeeling predestination

which marks off a list and dumps us into a pot with the millions of others who have been known by Him.

Rather, it shows us how God's affection has been personally placed on us as He effectually calls us into His presence, and extends the free gift of eternal life which we obtain by faith in Christ.

It's a choice God makes which is why it's a divine selection as the Greek word, *ekloge*, tells us. This is the same type of word used in Eph 1:4 when Paul records, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."

That's a love that goes way back, long before we ever thought of loving Him. And in return for this love, which the Thessalonians received from God, they love God back by loving others. And this is what God has called us to do.

You and I need to continually realize the affection God has for us, in Christ, and how He desires for us to love Him above all and have an affection for Him whereby all we want to do is to please Him continually.

Paul continues his thought of how God was working in their lives to bring them to Himself.

1TH 1:5 "because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake."

By the phrase "our gospel" Paul does not presume that it is a gospel of his own making, but rather he has made it his own by embracing the One who extended it to him, namely Christ Himself.

This gospel was not effective because Paul preached it. Notice what he says. 'It didn't come to you simply with words.' Here he refers to the word of God. He spoke the living word to them, but outside of the Spirit's power to touch their hearts with the word it would have only been foolishness to them.

And so, here Paul makes the point that he's only the instrument God uses to bring the word, but it is God's job to take the word and make it alive in a person's life.

And so the word came in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction. The power spoken of here comes from the Greek word

*dunamis* which is where we get our English word dynamite. In the context here it means force with miraculous power.

By the way, the power here is not intended to mean miraculous powers such as healings and delivering from demons and such, although this may have been part of what God was doing in the midst of the Thessalonians through Paul; rather this power in the context is speaking of the way that God used His word through the power of the Holy Spirit to miraculously change a stony heart to be receptive to God's touch.

This is what the prophet Jeremiah refers to as God is the only One who can take that heart of stone and turn it into a heart that beats for God.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 <sup>26</sup> "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

And so, it's only a miracle that any of us are born again to a living hope in Christ Jesus as God does that work in us. But that power is to blow us out of complacency and a rejection of God into acknowledging our sin and the power to turn from sin to Christ which comes from God the Holy Spirit.

And when God the Holy Spirit gets involved in our lives and convicts of sin and directs us to the only solution to our sin problem, things happen. There's no guess work with God.

ROM 8:29-30 "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

Paul says we will experience full conviction. The way it reads in the NIV is deep conviction. But I also like the way the KJV puts it, "much assurance".

H.M. Spence writing in the Pulpit Commentary writes that, "By assurance here is meant the confidence with which Paul and his fellow-workers preached the gospel to the Thessalonians, and the fullness of conviction with which the Thessalonians received it.

Paul was confident to preach the gospel because he knew it was not his persuasive speech that brought conviction to the hearts of his hearers, but rather it was the power from God Who was at work.

When you realize that it is God who is at work then you should be confident to take His word out to the world "because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes:" (Rom.1:16) His power, not ours.

And so don't worry when you share the gospel in the form of your personal testimony or by walking someone through the gospel message. Trust that God can work in that person's life. And if they reject it, don't worry that somehow you failed, because it's not your power to change their hearts anyhow.

Give glory to God that you had an opportunity, and pray He changes their hearts, and trust that He knows what He's doing even if that person doesn't come to faith in Christ at that moment. It may have been a seed that the Lord wanted you to plant so that another Christian would share in the harvest at a later time.

One day in heaven both the sower and the reaper will get full credit for being faithful to be a witness for the Lord.

And this is what Paul was saying in the last part of verse 5, " You know how we lived among you for your sake."

The NAS puts it, "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."

Paul was always faithful to do God's work. And he could point to his own life and the lives of those with him to show how God had worked in them. They proved, if you will, that they were not out to take advantage of the Thessalonians.

In fact, they proved just the opposite by doing everything for the sake of the Thessalonians. They gave of themselves to teach the word, to counsel, to encourage, to be there in times of trouble and trials.

In other words, they spent themselves for the sake of these believers in Thessalonica. Part of the reason they did so was because of what they saw to be true; the lives of these Thessalonians showed they were chosen of God and His Spirit resided in them. They had a hunger for the things of God.

In the process of serving these believers Paul and his companions were living out their faith in Christ and notice what happens.

1TH 1:6 "You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."

"You became imitators of us and of the Lord". Paul was not boasting here about his walk with the Lord, in fact he suggests that anything worth imitating of us is only because we imitate our God who has given us the grace and strength and love to walk in His ways.

And so by imitating Paul they were imitating Christ. And this is what Paul even told the Corinthians in 1CO 11:1 "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

This is an awesome responsibility for anyone in ministry like the pastorate, because I am to be imitating my King and Lord, Jesus Christ. And through my following Him you are to see an example that you can follow.

The caution which needs to be added is that neither I nor anyone else can walk perfectly like Jesus Christ and we're prone to sin, and that is not to be imitated. But I suppose the question we might ask ourselves is, should other believers be imitating the way we walk? Am I walking in a way that pleases my Savior and brings honor to Him? Are we worth imitating?

Do we love as Christ loves? Do we have His compassion? Are we long-suffering? Do we desire to put others first? Is our will to do the will of our heavenly Father?

The list goes on and as it does we see how short we fall of the way Christ lived. And yet, in Christ, we have the power to be conformed into His image day by day as we submit to Him wholeheartedly.

And so as we reproduce ourselves by being the example to others we must be careful to produce disciples that seek to be like Christ. We don't want to produce haughtiness or self-righteousness by setting an example that say's, 'look at me.' Paul would say, look at me, but only as he directed others to look at Christ as the norm.

The other thing we need to be careful of here is not to try and produce clones of ourselves. By that I mean that no two people are exactly alike and not everyone will be given the same gifts by God.

If God has gifted you in the area of hospitality, don't try to force that gift upon someone who might have the gift of teaching, or vice versa.

Now, as I've mentioned before, we should all be willing to practice those things we may not be gifted in. You may not have the gift of an evangelist, but we should all be evangelizing. You may not have the gift of hospitality, but we should all practice hospitality when the occasion arises.

The apostles may not have shared the gospel exactly like their Master, but they did imitate our Lord's passion and desire to extend the truth in love. Their maturity in the Lord was without question, but their attitude was like John the Baptist's, "I must decrease and Christ must increase."

The more Christ increases in your lives the more others will want to imitate you as they see Him in you. If they don't see Him, they won't look to you as an example. Or if they do, they may be following an example which will not honor Christ.

Paul was blessed out of his socks that these Thessalonians desired to imitate him, but he gives the glory to God. Verse 6 also gives us a glimpse of the commitment these Christians had in Thessalonica. "...in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."

These were not fair weather Christians. They meant business because they counted the cost as they understood what it cost Christ to redeem them from the penalty of their sins.

Many are willing to imitate Jesus as it applies to the niceties of life. Others, however, are not willing to imitate Jesus as it applies to suffering or tribulation. And yet Christ's life was full of suffering and tribulation and persecution. Peter addresses the reality of suffering for the sake of Christ in his first epistle.

1PE 4:12-14,19 "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ,

you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 19 So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."

This is what separates the men from the boys. Whenever times get tough or it becomes inconvenient to be a Christian there will be those who bail out or simply back off from going any further. But no one ever said it would be easy to be a Christian. And those few who have were lying.

Now, I'm gonna be real honest with you. I did not become a Christian so that I could suffer. Suffering was the last thing I had on my mind when I came to believe on Christ. But, I will tell you this. My attitude changed. And I'll tell you why. When I found out how Jesus suffered for me, to pay for the penalty of my sin so that I would not suffer for all of eternity separated from Him in hell, I gladly accepted whatever His will would be for me.

But, He didn't leave me to myself when the trials and tribulations came any more than He left these Thessalonians to themselves.

The Thessalonian Christians received the word in much tribulation, but they received it with the joy of the Holy Spirit, or as the NIV puts it, "you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.", or inspired by the Holy Spirit.

These people were mocked for their faith, they lost their jobs for their faith because they wouldn't compromise their Lord. They were scorned and ostracized simply because they chose life in Christ.

But they accepted it willingly because God gave them a joy which only God can give. And they accepted it by faith. You see when you and I encounter trials in life, we can either submit to our old selves, which dealt with it in a fleshly way, or we can submit to Christ and His Spirit and walk through it in His power.

This is where the joy comes from. It doesn't come from the trial itself. It comes from knowing that our God is with us through the trial.

And often times God will keep us in trial until we begin to learn to rest in Him and rely on His word and be obedient. He didn't save us to keep us in bondage. He set us free from sin to have fellowship with Him.



Unfortunately, we sometimes choose fellowship with the world instead of drawing close to God. Things don't go right and some Christians turn to drink, or they turn to anger, or they walk away from God instead of realizing that they need to be running to God.

They have lost sight of the fact that the joy they were looking for was a joy that doesn't last. Maybe it's a joy that they feel is found in things, faster cars, bigger houses, more money, and they soon realize that even if they've achieved these things it doesn't produce the real joy that only God can give.

You see the things of this world can be taken away. And if that's where your joy resides then it too can be taken away. But, the joy that these Thessalonians had didn't come from anything that could be taken away.

Their joy was found solely in God and His salvation for them. That cannot be taken away from a child of God who has placed his faith in Christ.

And if you understand that then you too can receive the word of God and the things of God even in much tribulation. The tribulation and hard times may not make you joyful, but trusting in and obeying the God of the universe who says, "nothing can separate us from the love of Christ", can.

Listen to me, please catch this and accept it by faith and with thanksgiving, because this is where our joy finds its source. It's found in the books of Habakkuk and Isaiah.

HAB 3:17-19 "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. 19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights."

ISA 61:10 "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

He is our joy, not our circumstances, not things, not the ways of this world. He and He alone is our joy. Don't go through life trying to second guess God, and don't go through life trying to help

Him out by doing it your own way. Trust in the God of your salvation and delight in the life He's given you in His Son, and with thankful hearts serve Him and love Him and live in the joy and power of His Spirit.

If it's a joy that seems to have alluded you, pray for His Spirit to give you that joy and to live a life dedicated solely to His honor and glory as you look to the Savior who joyfully gave His life for you to bring you to Himself, never to leave you or forsake you.