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“Make God Proud!”

A Sermon from 2 Thessalonians 1.3–10

Lee M. Fields

I love music by Alison Krauss and Union Station. In one of their recorded concerts, when Union Station is about to begin a piece, someone calls out from the crowd, “Make us proud!” This expression may sound a little strange if you have never heard it before. It is an encouragement to someone to do well. This encouragement is great—though it does put the pressure on. “What if I make a mistake? Will they be ashamed of me?” The virtue is not the seeking of praise per se; it is the seeking to please the one whose opinion we value. The more we value that person, the more encouragement is that one’s praise.

Second Thessalonians 1.3–12 is Paul’s opening prayer, in which he praises the Thessalonians for doing good under trying circumstances. From the very beginning there was trouble for them. Acts 17.1–10 describes how Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica (we do not know whether Timothy came with them or arrived later). Paul followed his typical procedure of preaching first in the synagogue. Once no longer welcome there, Paul apparently continued in his preaching in Thessalonica for a time among the Gentiles with some notable success. Soon the nonbelieving Jews became jealous and caused trouble for the believers to the point that the Christians got Paul and Silas out of Thessalonica at night and sent them on to Berea. Perhaps Timothy remained behind.

We know of at least three exchanges between Paul and his coworkers with the Thessalonians before writing 2 Thessalonians. A summary of these four exchanges between Paul and the Thessalonians will help us better understand their situation and the message Paul had for them.

1. **First Exchange: Report at Berea.** Timothy had joined Paul and Silas in Berea (Acts 17.14), probably reporting how the Thessalonian church was doing. Soon, though, the Bereans escorted Paul on to Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea (Acts 17.14).
2. **Second Exchange: Report at Athens, Silas and Timothy sent.** Upon arriving at Athens, Paul told his Berean companions to send Silas and Timothy to meet him at Athens as soon as possible (Acts 17.15). It is likely that Silas and Timothy did in fact meet Paul in Athens and reported what was going on in Thessalonica (1 Thess 3.1–2).
3. **Third Exchange: Report at place unknown, and Silas and Timothy sent with 1 Thessalonians.** Timothy returns to Paul once again, this time with a good report of Thessalonica (1 Thess 3.6), but there remained some challenges Paul had to address. What we do not know is where Paul was when Timothy came to him. So Paul sends Silas and Timothy to Thessalonica with what we call 1 Thessalonians (cf. 1 Thess 1.1). This letter was written to commend them for their faith and love and work (1 Thess 1.3). But it is also an urgent appeal to the wrong, to the wronged, and to the discouraged to treat one another with love, respect, patience, and without vindictiveness (e.g., 1 Thess 5.12–18). First Thessalonians may have been written in Athens or Corinth. If in Athens, then it is possible that Paul left alone for Corinth, as implied in Acts 18.1, at the same time that he sent Silas and Timothy with 1 Thessalonians and with instructions to meet him in Corinth.

4. **Fourth Exchange: Report at Corinth, Silas and Timothy sent with 2 Thessalonians.** When Timothy and Silas reunited with Paul at Corinth, they came with another report. Perhaps the report described the persecution in Thessalonica, which by that point had been going on for some months, and the Thessalonians' positive response to his first letter, as well as continuing confusion about Jesus's return. It is this report that prompts 2 Thessalonians.

The Thessalonians had been growing. This growth prompted their mentor, Paul, to boast about them to other churches. They had made Paul proud. More importantly they had made God proud. By looking at the opening prayer of 2 Thessalonians 1.3–12, we can learn how to make God proud—and our mentors as well.

Amazing Growth

Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 1.3: “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing” (ESV).

In his first letter, Paul had prayed for their growth in faith and love. He worried about this (3.5–7) after receiving the second report. There were two problems—a crisis of faith and limited love. Both of them stemmed from unrealistic expectations.

First, with respect to their faith, in Athens Silas and Timothy reported (as surmised from themes in 1 Thessalonians) that the Christians had internal struggles. Apparently some misunderstood Paul's teaching on Jesus's return and held the incorrect assumption that no real harm would come to them. When they found themselves under continued suffering and that some had even died, they had a crisis of faith (1 Thess 4.13–18).

People today can struggle in the same ways. Christians may be tempted to give up their faith when unemployment is prolonged, when a storm comes and they lose all they have, when health is lost, a child dies, or someone tells them their parents are bound for hell because they died by suicide.

Second, with respect to their love, other Thessalonians quit working and taking care of themselves, apparently thinking that they could just presume upon the love of their working fellow Christians to take care of them until Jesus returned (the “idle” in 1 Thess 5.14). The result was that resentment developed between some of the believers. This prompted Paul to send Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess 3.2).

Consider this: if a checkout person is rude or unfriendly, we may become annoyed, but usually by the time we are out of the store, we have forgotten about it. On the other hand, if a fellow churchgoer is rude to us, we find it really bothersome. We may brood and become angry, perhaps even sinning to the point of gossip—no small thing (Rom 1.29, and see the surrounding verses). And if a family member says something inappropriate, we may vow never to speak to them again. An unfaithful spouse is crushing!

It seems a fact of human nature that those who are closest to us are the ones who can hurt us the most. Why is this? Probably it is because we have higher expectations of those nearest to us. This may explain the strife among the Thessalonians. It was one thing to be persecuted by unbelievers; it was another to have brothers and sisters cause additional grief. So, Paul had prayed for the Thessalonians to grow in love.

By the way, by *love* (*agapē*) Paul does not mean a warm, fuzzy feeling. *Agapē* is a choice to act in the best interest of another. It may involve acting *in spite of* feelings.

In 2 Thessalonians 1.3–4, we read that Paul's prayers had been answered: the Thessalonians were indeed growing. With respect to their faith, Paul does not use the simple word *increase*, but *hyper-increase*.¹ Paul uses a different word to describe the growth of their love, which can mean “increase,” but can also mean “exceeding.”² Both verbs express an ongoing growth.³ It is not that the Thessalonians had arrived, but they were, we might say, growing by leaps and bounds. They had amazing growth.

1. *Auxánein* and *hyperauxánein*, respectively; the latter is used only here in the New Testament.

2. *Pleonázein*; see Exod 16.23 and Num 3.46, in which the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, uses this word.

3. The verbs are present tense indicatives, which indicate here the continued growth they were making.

Amazing Growth in Difficulties

Sometimes it is not the deed itself that is so special, but the circumstances under which it is done: the young soldier's wife, who faithfully remains married to her severely wounded husband returned from war; the husband who for years faithfully and patiently cares for his wife with Alzheimer's disease; the Christian who gets fired for refusing to do things at work that are shady or even illegal.

In 2 Thessalonians 1.4 we read, "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" (ESV).

The Thessalonians demonstrated amazing growth in faith and love. These are great things. What makes them even more praiseworthy is that they were growing in faith and love under difficult circumstances.

As noted earlier, the Thessalonian believers—along with Paul—were persecuted almost from the beginning and the oppression apparently increased during the weeks that Paul was there. Once Paul left, though, the persecution did not stop. The length of time from Paul's arrival in Thessalonica to the writing of 2 Thessalonians is most likely several months.

It was while the Thessalonians were undergoing constant persecution that they showed their amazing growth. Paul had complimented them on their faith and love and hope in his first letter (1 Thess 1.3). But there was room for improvement (1 Thess 3.10, 12). One commentator suggests that after hearing the praise they may have humbly claimed not to be worthy of it.⁴ In 2 Thessalonians 1.3 Paul writes that in fact his praise of them to other Christians and to God is deserved, especially in view of the times.

When we are under stress from trying times, especially if we are suffering for the cause of Christ, we may find it hard to endure. In our culture, characterized by an acute sense of fairness and by an expectation of instant gratification, we can quickly lose ground in faith and love. If our acts of love do not result in sufficient reciprocation, we may soon give up showing love for people. We need to follow the example of the Thessalonians. Let us make God proud by growing in faith and love even in—especially in—times of trial and disappointment. It may not be easy, and it may happen in spite of how we feel, but growth during trials magnifies our virtue.

Amazing Growth in Difficulties in View of Future Reward

Paul encourages further growth in difficulties by reminding the Thessalonians of two rewards in the future: punishment of the wicked and rest for the faithful. We will treat both, but spend more time on the first, because the current culture in the United States may cause us to read this wrongly.

The punishment of the wicked is introduced in verses 5–6 and given more detail in verses 8–9:

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you . . . in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (ESV).

Second Thessalonians 1.3–12 is all one sentence in Greek.⁵ The clauses and phrases after "we ought always to be praying" in verse 3 are not parallel, but are all subordinated. Sorting out the relationships can be a challenge. To make the passage easier to understand, modern versions tend to divide it up into smaller sentences. Many (e.g., NIV and ESV) actually begin a new paragraph at verse 5. Yet they indicate a connection to the previous by introducing the paragraph using *all this* or *this*. The Thessalonians encountered

4. Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (TNTC; Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 116.

5. Published editions of the Greek New Testament start a new sentence at v. 11 (NA²⁷, NA²⁸, UBS⁴, SBLGNT, Scrivener, Robinson/Pierpont, Tischendorf). However, v. 11 begins with a relative clause introduced by a preposition that seems simply to have the force of result. See Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 232.

all this persecution, but never stopped growing in faith and love. It is the combination of these that is the proof or demonstration that God's judgment on all the persecutors is righteous.

To modern Western ears, this sounds harsh and unworthy of the God of love. But as Leon Morris points out,

such objections usually emanate from the comfortable. It is a matter of history that those who are passing through suffering for the Lord's sake do not, as a rule, despise the prospect of final blessedness. This is not the whole of the gospel, but it is an authentic part of it and we are not wise to overlook it.⁶

It is a mistake for God's people to expect no tribulation on earth. Jesus himself had said that "God sends rain on the just and the unjust" (Matt 5.45), teaching us that natural calamities are common to all. Furthermore, Jesus also predicted that those who follow him would receive pain (Matt 10.22). Paul taught this as part of his founding teaching to the churches (Acts 14.22) and in fact in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians he reminded them that he had always taught that they should expect suffering for their faith (1 Thess 3.4–5).

It is not wrong to long for relief from the ravages of the pain of human existence, including that caused by persecutors. This is the cry of the martyrs (Rev 6.9–11). All creation longs for the setting aright of sin (Rom 8.22). The punishment of the persecutors of God's people demonstrates that his judgment is indeed righteous and their punishment deserved.

Of course, this longing is not all there is to our earthly life in our ministry to the lost of humanity. Were it not for God's gift of forgiveness accomplished through the cross, we too would be objects of God's wrath. Our task is to warn our fellow creatures of the coming wrath, not to exult in their destruction. But for those who choose to persist in stubborn unbelief, there will be a day of reckoning. We long for the end of all enmity with God. But this does not happen until the final judgment. Until then, Paul encourages his readers to persevere through the hardship, no matter how long it lasts. In the end, God's justice will prevail.

There comes down to us the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp, a man at least eighty-six years old when arrested in the middle of the second century for being a Christian. The Romans tried to induce Polycarp to say that Caesar is lord. First there was cajoling. Then threatening with beasts. Finally, when the proconsul threatens with burning by fire, Polycarp responds,

You threaten with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, for you see, you are indeed ignorant of the fire of future judgment and of eternal punishment kept for the ungodly. But why are you slow? Bring on what you wish!⁷

I find myself thinking of the Christians around the world today who suffer for their faith. The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention reports that more Christians have died for their faith in the twentieth century than in all the previous nineteen centuries combined. They report 171,000 martyrs in 2005 alone.⁸ I wonder if I would have the faith that they do under their circumstances. I pray so.

In any case, for the faithful, those who have put their faith in Jesus as not only Savior but also as Lord (Acts 2.36), the longing for the day when all creation is finally and completely brought under his dominion is natural and right (Heb 2.8–9; cf. Phil 1.28).

The second half of the reward is rest. In 2 Thessalonians 1.7 and 10 Paul writes, "[A]nd to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. . . . [W]hen he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed" (ESV).

Paul reminds them of the positive side of the reward: rest—an end to all the persecutions and afflictions and pain. The rest is not promised for now, but for when Jesus returns. Sometimes I cringe a little, when I hear

6. Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 119.

7. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 11.

8. <http://erlc.com/issues/quick-facts/persecution/>, accessed March 17, 2014.

churches wooing the lost to come to Jesus, so that all their sad marriages will become happy, their problem children will become fixed, and their finances will become sound. It is true that following biblical principles will in general tend to make life better. But we live in a fallen world. To expect or demand rest now is to set up ourselves for a crisis of faith.

However, there is a rest that is coming. When Jesus returns and that rest begins, prepare to be amazed! Paul quoted Isaiah 64.4 to the Corinthians, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2.9 ESV).

And with Paul we cry, “Maranatha!” Our Lord, come!

Amazing Growth in Difficulties in View of Future Reward and Present Worthiness

The benefits of growth in faith and love in difficulties are not limited to the future. There is present benefit as well. This thought introduced in verse 5 is renewed in verse 11: “. . . that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. . . . To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power” (2 Thess 1.5, 11 ESV).

I used to listen to a daily radio broadcast called “Gateway to Joy” by Elisabeth Elliot, the famed missionary to the Huaorani (or Auca) Indians. She suffered the death of her first husband, Jim Elliot, by the very tribesmen whom he sought to evangelize. Afterward, she and others went to the Huaorani and endured primitive conditions to evangelize them. Later her second husband also died. She endured a great deal of hardship. Yet, her broadcasts were always deeply profound, biblical, and challenging. I have often remarked, “I’d like to be as mature as Elisabeth Elliot; I’m just not so sure I want to go through what she had to go through to get there.”

That is what Paul means. Though it can be difficult to see in the midst of suffering, Paul’s prayer is that God may consider⁹ us worthy of the calling, namely the calling to salvation (1 Thess 2.12). Paul does not take time to fully explain these benefits, but he couples God’s considering us worthy with his empowering Christians to moral living.

There is a saying in sports, “Nothing succeeds like success, and nothing fails like failure.” The same is true in Christian living. Unchecked sin leads to a weakening of our faith. But victories over sin lead to a strengthening of our faith. Victories won during times of difficulty help us grow even more. Growing in these times is the hyper-growth for which Paul was praising the Thessalonians both to God and to other Christians.

Conclusion

I remember reading the parable of the talents when I was a child. The refrain, “Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master,”¹⁰ made me think. Wouldn’t it be amazing to see Jesus face-to-face and hear him say, “Well done! You have made me proud”? We can!

Let us make proud those who teach and mentor and fellowship with us by our hyper-increase in faith and abundance of love, not only how we behave, but how we speak and even think with respect to others. Let us grow all the more in difficult times. Let us look forward to heaven as our place of ultimate rest, not expecting unrealistic blessing on earth. Let us have confidence now of being made worthy of the gospel. Let us “make God proud!”

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9. Scholars debate about whether the verb *axioún* means “to consider worthy” or “to make worthy.”

10. Matt 25.23