

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12 (Psalm 119:137-144) – Give thanks

Can you imagine, for a moment, this scenario? You have a group of friends – friends you care about very deeply – who are going through a really difficult time. What do you do? What do you say? How do you reach out to them?

Tell them you'll pray for them.

Tell them you love them/that you're here for them.

Ask them - "What can I do to support you right now?"

Acknowledge that what they're going through is hard.

Let them talk. Listen.

This was not just a scenario for Paul (and his co-writers and co-workers, Silvanus, also known as Silas, and Timothy) at the start of 2 Thessalonians – our reading for today. This was reality. The Thessalonian Christians were experiencing ongoing persecution, initially from the Jewish community they had belonged to, angry that fellow Jews and Jewish converts had adopted a more inclusive faith, one that welcomed Gentiles, and was centred on Jesus as the Messiah. And then from the Macedonian, Greek and Roman residents of Thessalonica concerned that people were abandoning the mainstream religious practices which they believed maintained the welfare and prosperity of the city.

In Acts 17:5-9 gives us a snapshot of what they were experiencing. Members of the synagogue, “*with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces*” formed a mob, and when they couldn’t find Paul and Silas, attacked the house of another Christian convert, Jason. They dragged him and other believers before the city authorities claiming they were defying Roman authority “*saying that there is another king named Jesus*”. This kind of ongoing social threat would have had significant psychological and economic impacts on this small group of believers.

So, how does Paul comfort and support the Thessalonians in this situation? He does some of the things we mentioned earlier, but what stands out at the start of this letter is that Paul’s main response is to tell them he is thankful for them!

I am not sure this is a pastoral technique I have ever tried!

Now, obviously, Paul says this because it was part of the Greco-Roman letter writing style. First there’s the sender’s name, the receiver’s name, a short greeting, and this ‘thanksgiving’. Then you have the body of the letter, and then final instructions and a farewell. Ben Carpentier is going to be looking at the body of this letter next week, and I am doing the last section in three weeks’ time – so we are doing a short sermon series on this letter.

But Paul really leans into this thanksgiving here. Whereas in 1 Thessalonians 1 he says, “*we always give thanks to God for all of you...*”; here he says, “*we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right...*” Paul is compelled, he is saying, to give thanks for them because, as one commentator puts it, “*the merits of the Thessalonians were real*”.

And what are those merits? Firstly, that their faith is “growing abundantly”. (*This is a favourite Pauline device of attaching the prefix ‘hyper’ – so the verb for ‘growth’ becomes ‘hyper-growth’.*) Secondly, their love is also increasing. (*The verb suggests that is not only growing but that it is spreading.*) Finally, Paul is thankful that they are steadfast and faithful during persecution.

I can understand Paul being thankful for their faith. I think about our community and how wonderful it is when people are baptised, or people become members of the church or people share deeply in our small groups or in a conversation and we hear people’s stories of faith – how they have learned to trust God in the circumstances of their life and to focus on God and to step out into the love of God in new ways.

And I think about what Paul had experienced so far - on what we call his second missionary journey – some success followed by disruption in Phillipi and Thessalonica and Berea; very little success in Athens – and therefore how wonderful it was for him to hear – his records it in 1 Thessalonians 3 – that their faith was not just surviving, but thriving! 1 Thessalonians 3:9: “*How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?*”

And I can understand Paul wanting to give thanks for their growing and expanding love! After all, if you go to 1 Thessalonians 3:12 this was something he had prayed for, “*May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.*” Here he gives thanks that prayer had been answered. And why wouldn’t you! A community of believers who demonstrate love – genuine love – forgiving and faithful and self-giving love – is the most wonderful thing in the world!

But I find this idea of giving thanks, of boasting of this group of people – for the way they are enduring persecution - more challenging! Going back to our scenario of a group of friends going through a very difficult time, would they appreciate me thanking them for going through that difficult time?

It would obviously help if it was clear – as it was extremely clear for Paul – that he had and he would share their suffering. 1 Thessalonians 1; “*You know that kind of persons we proved to be among your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the world with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.*”

But what also challenges me here is that Paul does not pray that their suffering will come to an end – which is what, I confess, I would first pray – for friends I hear who are suffering.

What I then recognise within myself is an unwillingness to sit in places where the suffering is prolonged – where difficulties go on, where healing does not, will not, come, where outcome may be negative. I want to be – and I confess I want God to be – a little like Christopher Pyne “*a fixer... to fix things*”. Because these are difficult places to be in, aren’t they? To feel, as our Psalm said, “*low and despised*”; to experience, “*trouble and anguish*”.

And yet, in the rest of chapter 1, Paul makes two points; firstly, that suffering – just like faith – just like love – also grows and matures and strengthens the community of faith. Rather than being a sign we are not ‘blessed by God’; it is, verse 5, “*evidence of the righteous judgment of God...intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God.*” Secondly, that God is a God of justice and there will be judgement for the wicked.

I have been, along with others from Canberra Baptist, at the *Voices for Justice* conference this weekend. (I am heading back there after the meeting after our service this morning.) And at that event we have been hearing from Aboriginal and Pacific Islander Christian leaders about continuing to struggle for justice – because as the Psalm says, “*God is righteous and just*” – even when we do not see justice. And we have been hearing about the climate emergency – the incredibly different world we will live in 25 years from now. “*We will not be able to turn some things around,*” the panel of scientists and environmental layers said, “*But as the community of faith, our concern is what a faithful response to a faithful God looks like in this space – this difficult space – our grieving, our work, our love, our hope, our faith must continue.*”

Which is what Paul says to the Thessalonians at the end of this chapter, “*To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

You know, that hypothetical that I began the sermon with is also our reality! This Sunday we are one week away from Avalon and Seaforth Baptist experiencing what we experienced in May, so I have asked Megan Williams to come and to pray for them – to give thanks for them – and I am inviting you to sign, after the service, if you would like – these two ‘thank you’ cards that I will send to them this week.

(Prayer)